THE BOUNDARIES OF THE AUDIENCE

John McLaren

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I

In The Unbearable Lightness of Being Milan Kundera writes that we all need people regard us, to confirm the sense of of our own being. He singles out the tireless host who needs the regard of many familiar eyes, dreamers who can conjure up eyes that are absent, lovers who constantly need the eye of their beloved, and writers who must have the regard of an infinite number of anonymous eyes, a public. For writers in a migrant society the search for a public is crucial. Those who have been driven into exile have left their public behind. Those who are born into a new society are cut off from both the indigenous and the foreign communities which generated the language and traditions they share with their audience. The act of writing in a new land transgresses the boundaries of the old tradition and so defines its audience as a new community.

It is appropriate that we should talk of boundaries in the year which has seen one boundary of oppression crossed by the authorities in the Tienanmein Square massacres, and others brought down by the unrest in the Soviet marches and the breaching of the Berlin Wall. Nation states draw boundaries to define both the frontiers of their interests and the limits of their kin, their own kind of people. But these frontiers and limits are constantly challenged and subverted by cultural and

linguistic as well as political changes. Authors play a critical part in this dialectic as they define their audience and have their audience redefined for them.

The countries of the southern and eastern Pacific rim are to a greater or lesser degree migrant societies, whose people by definition have crossed boundaries. In trying to find their audience, the writers from these countries are at the same time writing across boundaries and transgressing the boundaries between themselves and their audience.

The situation of the migrant writeris captured perfectly in the opening sequence of Joseph Skvorecky's The Engineer of Human Souls. Daniel Smiricki, the narrator, is, like the author, an emigre Czech novelist. At the beginning of the novel he stands at the window of a classroom in Ontario, looking out at the "windy Canadian landscape" and thinking of "the many wonderful things I have seen in this country of cities with no past" (p.4). Behind him, an English-speaking girl is plagiarising a students' key to Edgar Alan Poe's despairing study of the failure of tradition in a new land where Daniel feels "utterly and dangerously wonderful". The ovel oscilliates betwen the wonder and the emptiness of this new land and memories of the horrors and beauties of the European history in which the land and its people remain implicated.

Skvorecky's novel is about the attempt of its narrator, Daniel Smiricki, to find an audience to replace the one taken from him by Hitler and Stalin. He wants a lover to need him, people to listen to him, readers to pay attention to his books. One student falls in love with him, but he knows the affair will be fleeting. The emigre community is too absorbed in the past to

pay heed either to him or his books, and his students are too absorbed in their present to attend to the fiction he presents to them. Their indifference, incomprehension or hostility only serve to increase his alienation. He is unable to cross the boundary into their lives, even into the life of Irene Swensson, his lover. Yet, in the theatre of his mind which the novel presents to us, he does cross the boundaries between his own past and present, and between the lives of all those he has known, so that all become both actors and audience in the same drama of love and hate, good and evil, which has formed the history of his times.

The novel juxtaposes four different times. The narrator and his students inhabit a continuous present. When he leaves them he enters the past perfect of an emigre community whose intrigues and paranoia, in which he is a somewhat disengaged participant, keep alive a time which is essentially finished.. Through letters he receives from former colleagues in Czechoslovakia or in other countries to which they have migrated, he lives in a past continuous, a past which goes on living and making demands into the present. Finally, in his own memories of schooldays, the war, and postwar hopes and betrayals, he enters into the past definite which constitutes the essence of his being, a time which is irrecoverable but which has made the truths and values by which he continues to live.

Skvorecky's narrator encompasses in his person the experience both of the subjugated minority who have lived consecutively under German and Russian occupation, and of the migrant re-establishing himself in a new land. His students, by contrast, are the successors of this European experience, the generation

which has inherited a future while losing a past. Smiricki despairs both of the fate of his own countrymen under a tyranny justified by an ideology of lies, and at the innocence of Canadians willingly embracing ideologies which conceal the nature of their own freedom and of the world they inhabit.

The novel is thus both post-modern and post-colonial. It represents the contemporary situation where no meaning remains except what we construct for ourselves, but it also captures the predicament of Europeans stranded in a society without a past from which to construct their meanings. The closest it comes to a resolution of its dilemmas is in the choice the narrator seems to make for the unconsidered life rather than the attempt to find meaning. As he contemplates the historic failure of the Prague Spring of 1968, and his own divided loyalties to the countries of his birth and his adoption, he reflects that

> Meaning is a compulsive neurosis. It is only when the neurosis goes away, or when we are cured of it, that we can live.
>
> And go on doing everything we did before. For the fun, the delight of it. (p.534)

Yet this moment of balance is immediately disturbed by the final episodes of the novel, which contrast the disillusion and death of the companions of his youthful hopes with the stolid satisfaction of Lojza, the one who endures and prospers without ever comprehending what is happening around him. The novel is too full of human cruelty and courage, of the futility of death and the absurdity of love, to allow the reader to escape from its demand that we make sense from it. The answer it suggests is not life, but the paradoxes of love and art which alone make

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life sustainable.

II

At the other end of the Pacific, James Baxter's work confronts similar dilemmas. As a white New Zealander he feels alienated from the land, while the fact of his forebears' migration has separated him from their European roots. He is left with his own individual needs and desires which, lacking any sacred or traditional structure to contain them, can only drive him apart from the social and physical environment he desperately wants to possess. His work thus becomes a lifelong drive to construct the community he lacks, to find the unity that history has denied him.

Baxter's insistence that his life and poetry are one involves the academic commentator in a a grave danger. The poet was generally hostile to universities, which he believed contributed to the fragmentation of humanity by separating words from action, thought from feeling. He left a quite explicit warning, 'To Any Young Man who Hears my Verses Read in a Lecture Room:

When some cheese-headed ladder-climber reads
A poem of mine from the rostrum,
Don't listen. That girl in her jersey and beads,
Second row from the front, has the original nostrum

I blundered through nine hundred parties and ninety-eight
pubs
In search of. The words are a totem

Erected long after for scholars and yobs

Who'd make, if they could, a bicycle seat of my scrotum.

(p.265; 1963)

Despite, or perhaps because of, his seriousness as a poet, he believed his words were less important than work, play and love as means of breaking the social barriers which separate people from each other and from the land which surrounds them. As poet, he identifies with the cocksman and the drunkard. with people like Fitz who drives the spiggot home in the barrel with mallet blows that make the town shudder, terrified that giving free rein to pleasure will destroy both respectability and prosperity, fearing

That the drunk man would be king,

That the meticulous sorrow
Of spinsters with small zip purses
Would be disregarded by drunken coalmen
Pissing against the hedge,

That daughters would go down singing in droves
To the oil tankers and open their white legs
- - -

That the black bones of Dionysus
Buried under the Fire Assurance Building
Had sprouted a million wild green vines
Cracking the pavements and the gravestones--

(p.375;Selected,p.78; 1966)

He imagines a revolution which would be as much sensual as economic, dedicated to Dionysus, Father Lenin and the Virgin Mary. The poetry joins the speaker and his companions in a single community outside the boundaries of the past and of the fears which bind the present.

III

In 1958, Baxter, who had already joined Alcoholics Anonymous, embraced the Catholic faith, which thereafter provides a centre of stability in his poetry. This stability arises not from a denial but from an acceptance of his inner torments, which in turn leads him to an identification with the outcasts of society and a rejection of the respectable. Inn 'Pig Island Letters (1963, published 1966, pp.276-85; Selected, p.60-69) he traces this progress in a kind of spiritual autobiography which examines both the inner and the outer impulses which have led him to the church.

In these poems Baxter traces the dilemmas of responsibility and integrity in his personal life, where by satisfying his social obligations and becoming a successful "family man" he denies his other self, the

> Convict self, incorrigible, scarred
> With what the bottle and the sex games taught,
> The black triangle, the whips of sin.

Neither self can be complete without the other, for

> The first gets all his meat from the skull-faced twin,
> Sharpening a dagger out of a spoon,
> Struggling to speak through the gags of a poem:

(p.282; Selected, pp.65-66; 1963)

The poet's work will be complete only when "both make a third", but poetry alone cannot do this. The sequence concludes with the poet lost in Dante's dark wood, searching for a Beatrice, and finally entrusting himself with other outcasts to the mercy of Mary, perceived as hostess of the inn at Nazareth.

This sequence makes more concrete the central concerns of Baxter's work: on the one hand, the search for a a just and peaceful society, and on the other the resolution of his own need to give and receive love. Both these quests can be seen as an attempt to escape the pain of division, but the unity the poet seeks can ultimately be found only in death. In his later poems, the universal love which notionally provides this kind of unity in life tends to take the form of an all-embracing phallic love.

By using the form of the verse letter in these and other poems, Baxter reduces his ostensible audience to one like spirit. The general reader is placed in the position of an eavesdropper listening to one side of a conversation of two. The speaker can explain his inner history free from the solipsisms of public posturing, while the reader is invited to identify with the privileged correspondent. This breaks the barrier between reader and writer, giving the poet a public role from which contemporary society largely excludes him. The poetry is particularly subversive because it disarms criticism in advance, inviting its readers to become participants in the dialogue, able to argue with its conclusions but not to reject its stance. We become part of the alternative community which implicitly judges our own wider society.

IV

In 1968 Baxter suddenly left his home and family and went to live in Jerusalem, a Maori settlement and Catholic mission on the Wanganui river in the North Island. Here, released from the obligations of a single relationship and the responsibility of his own family, he was free to extend his benevolence to the whole of world. His poems portray him living like the desert saints, rejoicing in his unkempt hair and beard and his infestations of fleas, lice and crabs, expiating his guilt by scourging and by hard physical labour in the garden. writing lovingly to his wife, yet trying at the same time to square his moral accounts with the other women who have opened for him and with the children he has had by them:

I think of my two illegitimate children

And how they will judge me when they come of age;
Unfit, I grant it--yet what can a man do

Who is trying to make a wall to shelter beans
But cut the sods and lay them straight;

And what can a man do who is saddled with a woman
But love her whatever way he can

- - - I laugh

Remembering the women used no rubber plugs or pills
Because they wanted to have my children.

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(p.470; Selected, p.139; 1969)

Although formally his allegiance was to the Christian God of the Trinity, Baxter not only credits this God with extending His love to all His creatures but also envisages Him as incorporating in His being the qualities of all gods. The gods he mentions include the Buddha in whom many of Baxter's young companions, his son Hoani among them, found comfort, and the ancient gods of the Maoris. In one poem, in fact, he explicitly describes how, finding the church shut, he knelt instead before a statue of Te Whaea, the Maori goddess of origins, akin to Cybele the European earth mother. Through her he sees that

- - -

The dark light shines

Wherever the humble have opened a door for it.

(p.565; Selected, p.176; 1972)

In Jerusalem, Baxter's extended his sense of community to include the Maoris, who enter his poetry both as characters and through their language. He increasingly uses Maori names and phrases in the body of the poems, and as titles of poems he writes to his wife, for his own funeral, and in praise of the spirit of the place, the Taniwa. This seems to bring him to a stage of contentment where he can contemplate pain, tragedy and death with equanimity. There is a new balance in the aptly-titled 'Autumn Testament' and in the series of sestinas he wrote in the last year of his life. The cyclic form of the sestina, with its six line-endings recurring in constant variety, and the connotations of these endings--stars, friends, rise, grieve, water, road, light--offer the sense of a life rounded and completed and now being handed on as a gift to his friends.

Baxter has been able to find this peace because these friends have finally offered him the community he has spent his life seeking. The nuns and priests, the refugees from gaol and asylum, the student drop-outs, the Maori children and their mothers, who populate Jerusalem, give him what he needs both as a poet and as a man--the assurance that he will always enjoy the eyes of both lovers and audience. They break for him the boundaries both of the past and of his own self, enabling him to constructs an Eden of the spirit on the furthest edge of the world. This Eden is justified by the sufferings of Christ and the femine trinity of Cybele, Greek goddess of love, Te Whaea, engendering spirit of the Maori, and Mary, mother of god. Their unity breaks the boundaries between the old world and the new, and between the two spheres of secular and divine love.

V

Closest to Baxter of the three remaining writers I wish to consider s is Dorothy Hewett, yet in several ways she has moved in the reverse direction. Whereas Baxter starts from the stance of outsider and finishes with community, Hewett commences her writing career with a commitment to achieving a socialist community and finishes as a passionate individualist. She is like Baxter however in her commitment to freedom and her recognition that true freedom is impossible in a society which ignores the oppressions on which it is based.

While much of Hewett's early poetry is explicitly political, its politics are based on her anger at the refusal of the powerful to allow people to realize the freedom offered by a new

society in a new land. At first, Hewett follows tradition by setting the free spirit of bushmen like the legendary Clancy against the money-grubbers who destroy the countryside for their own selfish purposes. Yet her attitude is ambivalent, as she recognizes that the acts of settlement have both destroyed the land and bound us to it. 'Legend of the Green Country' (A Tremendous World, pp.8-15; Windmill Country, pp.50-58; 61-64). begins with an allusion to Eliot's 'Waste Land': "September is the spring month, bringing tides". These tides however have an opposite significance to the sad lilacs of Eliot's northern April. They represent nature as a dangerous but vital force.

. . . swilling green in the harbour mouth,
A dangerous month . . .

But while nature cleans the coast the speaker, a shop-keeper's daughter, turns back to the desolation of an inland where

. . . the ring of the till
Is profit and loss,

and

The windmill head hangs, broken-necked, flapping like a great
plain turkey
As the wind rises . . . (p.8)

The waste-land of this poem is not merely a spiritual desert, a symbol of human inadequacy, but the product of human greed, Yet the land, waste as it is, is the product of the work of her forerunners, it holds their spirit. The speaker cannot come to terms with this past by rejecting it, but only by acknowledging both its love and its grief.

At the time she was writing this poem, Hewett believed that the international communist movement was only instrument capable of freeing Australia's land and people from expoitation. Doctrinaire politics, however, contradicted her sense of the human, and eventually led her to reject all ideologies in favour of the personal. While her poetry accepts that all experience is mediated by words, she refuses to allow her words to be determined by any external formulation. She makes this stance explicit in 'The Hidden Journey', the final poem of her first collection. This poem, first published in Overland in 1967, declares her decisive break with Stalinist communism. (Windmill Country, pp.71-75) It is an account of the poet's journeys and meetings in Russia. It is neither simple anti-communist tract nor personal confession, but works by contrasting images of the strength of the people with the hollowness of the public facade. She recognizes the vitality of hope and its subsequent denial. The phrase, "Look, there is nothing at all behind those monstrous roses / In the gilded frame, nothing at all" is simultaneously a condemnation of the kitsch which, aesthetically and politically, pushes aside the truth, and an image of the atmosphere of suspicion which interprets the most harmless ornament as an instrument of surveillance. The poem condemns Stalinism not simply for its tyrany but because of its total inadequacy to the human lives the poet encounters.

But if the Russians she meets implicitly condemn their own system, they also raise doubts in the poet about her country. Their repeated remarks, "We Russians are a tragic people"; "We Russians have soul . . . Have you a soul in your country?" suggest both what their system is unable to comprehend and what

is lacking in Australia. In both countries the failure of imagination and courage produces oppression. Australia may never have experienced tyranny of the kind known in Russia, but it has the same bleak oppression of the spirit.

'The Hidden Journey' describes a personal experience, but it is addressed to the public of those who shared her commitments. Discussing the blinkers that she had willingly adopted, she remarks,

> I went back to my commonplaces on street corners.
>
> We are all guilty, ignorance was inexcusable. (pp.71-72)

By publishing the poem in Overland, Hewett expressly addressed all the comrades who had shared the street corners. She achieved her ambition of getting their attention. Overland was beseiged with protest mail, and in its next issue carried Vio Williams' verse answer, 'The Decisive Journey', a eulogy to the people of the Soviet Union which, unlike Hewett's poem, relies on generalisations and received truth rather than on a personal reconstruction of experience.

Although Hewett's later poetry becomes more and more personal, she increasingly expresses the personal in universal terms. Her second collection, Rapunzel in Suburbia, recreates the gothic myth of Rapunzel in terms of contemporary suburban practice. The poems from Alice in Wormland can be read as the poet's attempt to make her escape from Rapunzel's tower without sacrificing either her sexual or her social identity. The Alice and Nim poems reconstruct the histories of the green country as myth. Rather than the tightly controlled verse narrative of the earlier poems, they juxtapose fragmentary images of dream and action to suggest a narrative, but leave the readers to supply

their own construction. Nim is both Alice's dream creation and the external forcesof sexuality and society which she cannot control. She herself is the girl of the green country, still dreaming of a garden of Eden, but this must now be constructed in her own life before it can have any external reality. The public world of the earlier poems is now completely private.

In her most recent work the poet seems to have come a full circle and returned to the house of her childhood which is now also the end of the journey through mythology. In response to her own question, "What have we found here?", she replies

nothing to take away
our tenancy is lost
no covenant or seal
no footsteps in the frost
a fragile sheiter
and a voyager
ephemeral and real
the house remains

(Tremendous World, p.99)

The poet finds her home only by accepting herself as perpetual voyager or migrant, crossing all boundaries and making all experience her own. This figure offers an alternative to the destroyers who, like the ideologues of her youth, the tyrants of her present, or the money-changers of her fore-runners, attempt to possess life by reducing it to their own pattern. In creating this figure, however, she separates herself from any audience except those who are prepared to follow her on the difficult

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journey.

VI

While Baxter and Hewett both clearly locate themselves in particular landscapes, Shelton Lea's work could be situated anywhere in contemporary urban society. His work reveals a strong awareness of politics, but his main quest is to escape from the distorting violence of society into the paradise which will give his readers the space to live with their own emotional truth.

Shelton Lea dropped out of formal society at the age of 12, and since then has supported himself through odd jobs, crime and poetry (Interview with Michael Sharkey Southerly, vol.XLXIX, no.4, 1988, 560-580). He has been successful on the poetry reading circuit, where poems dependent on a succession of strong images create an immediate reaction from the audience. Where their response is not to his liking, he harangues them. The poetry is, however, more complex than appears at first hearing. The images continue to elicit the same emotional response they do when heard, but when considered on the page they call forth further questions about the nature of our emotions and their social consequences. They force us to face the truths that we have known about ourselves.

Lea says that his poems are about time, and that poetry itself is the last defence of the irrational. He refuses to write about his inner landscape, taking his poetry instead from the people he runs into, in pubs, in lodgings, on the road: the

people who have constituted his life. By telling their story,, he offers his audience keys to their own lives.

The first of Lea's Paradise Poems demonstrates the way he uses his poems to recapture the moment of delight from the flux and interruptions of time. It opens with the simple statement:

it's not often that a man can get to see the dawn
and take the day as being lived in full.

The poem then laments

how much the dream of life is interrupted
. . .
how many moments, when thoughts should turn to love
do we let our soul squander its passion
in meaningless affrays
of wonder
. . .

(p.9) While the poet regrets the "squandered passion" which robs us of time, and the "dreamless concrete suburbs" which imprison our lives, its images still insist that there is an alternative as they remind us of the dreams, trees, and singing birds we deny ourselves.

VII

Finally, in Janet Turner Hospital's work, we find a novelist writing about protagonists who have already passed one border and are now compelled to break through the boundaries of another person in order to find themselves a home. In Charades, a voluptuously enchanting female insinuates herself into the life

of a physics professor whom she uses to take her across the boundaries of our perception into the elusive understandings of physics, and to allow her to remake her own past and discover her real father and the nature of the childhood which continues to live in her present. The central character, Charade Ryan, is, like the speaker of Shelton Lea's poems, concerned to find permanent truth in the flux of time.

The novel is built around the idea of escape. Charade's mother, the fecund Bea Ryan, escapes from constricting morality into the freedom of the Queensland rain forest. Verity Ahskenazy escapes from the Nazis to the new world of Australia, and then to the freedom of university and the comfort of love. However, none of these refuges proves sufficient, so that eventually she is driven back into herself and madness. She takes the holocaust with her, so that it eventually destroys those around her, particularly her lover, Nicholas. Charade, by tracing the clues to her life from Australia to Canada to the USA and back, escapes from the prison of her mysterious origins.. By breaking into the life of Nicholas's son, Koenig, she forces him out of the prison of his guilt for his broken marriage to Rachel, another victim of the holocaust. She understands her aunt Kay's feeling of entrapment within the circling figures of the prayer circle, the playground and her own nightmares. By breaking out of Australia, by breaking into the loves of others, she frees herself from the continuing enchantment and enclosure of the past. By returning to Australia, she establishes a possibility of a future freedom which she is able to offer to the others with whose lives she is involved.

VIII

These five writers all find themselves in a world where traditional standards have generated a violent society which has alienated its members from each other and their enironmeent. In their work, each of them is searching for the stable point on which to build a free life. Since the form of the novel presents a history to be read privately, the novelists conduct their search through protagonists who build their freedom within their narrative. This narrative in turn offers its readers a story to add to their individual histories, to the narratives by which they construct themselves. Poetry, however, remains a form of public address, and these three poets have all used their work to construct their audience as an ideal community in which they share a freedom with their readers. They all break down the barriers of the European past so that they and their readers may be at home in the world.

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