

The Writer and Society

I have been asked to deliver four lectures, of which this is the first, on Australian literature. The scope and choice of subject within that field was left to me. I am going to talk to you about eight contemporary novelists — Vance Palmer, Frank Dalby Davison, Katharine Prichard, Kylie Tennant, Leonard Mann, Xavier Herbert, Miles Franklin, and Brent of Bin Bin — whose books are, or should be, easily obtainable and I hope are already known to you. My reasons are these. I am a novelist. Set a thief as the proverb goes. And whether I'm a good or bad novelist I have had practical experience of the art and come before you not only as a critic — there is no scale for measuring critics, we are only critics because we say we are — but as a journey man. If experience teaches, which of course is open to argument, I should have some understanding. There is a wider reason for concentrating my attention upon the contemporary novel. It is, I think, the nearest point of contact between any lecturer in Australian literature and his audience. Australian literature has not been hitherto much regarded as a field of study and Australian books have had a very haphazard history. They have had to take publication where and how they could get it and, except in comparatively few instances, there has not been either the general interest or the financial backing to keep them in print. So the lamentable truth is that anything beyond the radius of a few years has become a rarity, almost, you might say a literary curiosity, and few people, even with the best will in the world, have the opportunity to read it. The Commonwealth Literary Fund is doing an inestimable service in rescuing, or at least planning to rescue, some of the important books by subsidizing new editions. In the meantime it is difficult for lecturer and audience to find common ground. I have no[the] least desire to come to you as a teacher or to turn these lectures into handouts, but I do want to talk to you about this present and living subject of the novel — which is the image of our shared lives — and seek your co-operation in understanding.

I have been invited here because I am a writer. I am not a professional lecturer — as you've probably already noticed — and such scholarship as I can lay claim to is in another field. So before I begin the main job of discussing the work of today's two writers — Vance Palmer and Frank

Davison — I should like to make a few remarks about writing in general and the attitude of the writer to society and of society to the writer.

By writer I mean creative writer as distinct from the commercial author and the journalist. A journalist may also be a writer and a writer may be forced from time to time to make excursions into journalism to earn, or try to earn, some money. But the two functions are distinct. The journalist writes for a reason exterior to his subject matter. He writes on a subject assigned to him, and he writes to please or instruct. In his daily work he has to be content with the ephemeral, to produce quickly and regularly and to avert his interest from yesterday's theme to today's. It's a job.

Journalism is a bad school for creative writing because it all too easily builds up a frame of mind that makes the very special effort required for creative writing, impossible.

A creative writer's interest is concentrated within his work. He keeps his eye on the ball not on its probable destination. His attitude to his work is subjective not objective. The inevitable paradox is that an audience is nevertheless far more necessary to him than it is to the journalist. Unless his work reaches an audience it fails. Writing is communication and however good it may be in an abstract sense it fails unless it is read. It takes the reader to consummate the work of the writer. There are people who delight to fill their draws with manuscripts but never seek publication. They may tell you with pride that writing itself is sufficient pleasure and they don't want either advertisement or profit from it. The question however is not one of advertisement or profit — of which there is little — but of communication. It is as unnatural to write and refuse readers as it would be to wear eyeshades continually because it was sufficient satisfaction to have eyes without using them. Writing is a medium for conveying ideas or images and not in itself an end. People who tell you they want to write are therefore also suspect. To write should never be thought of as an intransitive verb. A writer wants to write because he has the urgent need of communicating something to his fellows. He is primarily interested in the most perfect and complete rendering of theme, idea or image and this absorbs his whole attention whilst he is at work upon it but having completed it he has an equally urgent interest in sharing it by finding readers. The measure of a journalist's success is, by and large, the money he can earn. The editor is his middleman and it is the editor's job to decide what the public wants and to pay in proportion to the man who produces it. The measure of the creative writer's success

is in the depth and width of his communication. This does not mean only sales though sales are one index. He may have next to no sales and in consequence no royalties. I know a writer who boasts that she gets her royalties in postage stamps. But he may, notwithstanding have touched a few minds very deeply. There are books, like Tom Collins' "Such is Life", which was for years practically unprocurable in the book shops and is only available today in abridged form, that nevertheless have continued to penetrate and leaven the national consciousness. There are books that live because they have had a very vivid effect on a few people and others that live because they have appealed moderately to a great many people. There are books that have a short lived popularity and others that make their way very slowly but persistently. All these achieve communication and the tortoise may in the long run beat the hare. Some books naturally have few readers, there are only a few minds open to their particular appeal. If they can reach those few, however, their success is as complete as that of a book selling 100,000 copies in the first six months. Communication is success.

The writer in Australia has had many artificial obstacles to contend with in his efforts to communicate. The economic structure provides a number of them. With a small population there is not a sufficient demand for books to keep a large number of publishers in production. Publishers have not the surplus capital to put into books whose financial success they doubt or which are likely to be slow sellers. On the whole they prefer to handle proved successes from overseas. They fear the prejudice which certainly exists but not as strongly as some people believe, against the home grown article. The latest English and American best sellers are usually easier to get than local works and most readers take the line of least resistance. Book publishing and selling are like any other business. Those that practise them know more about profits than about literary values. That's a truism not a criticism.

When a nation colonises it cannot take its literature with it like a bag of seed potatoes, and immediately raise a crop of books in the new soil at the old standard. The arts evolve slowly in a new habitat. For many years after the colonization of Australia there was no appreciable body of Australian literature, of any sort of literature produced in Australia, so the habit of looking overseas for reading matter grew up and still, in some degree, persists. Because of commercial doubts and this habit Australian books generally have a hard struggle to find their audience. Two of the writers of whose work I shall talk to you during this series, were discussing

this point. One complained bitterly that local writers had reputation without readers, that the situation was perverse and that perhaps it was our own fault, that we were barking up the wrong tree. The other was heard to mutter into his pipe: "Only tree we have. Better keep on barking".

The writer is a full citizen and the obligation on him of taking part in affairs is if anything a little greater than for other men because he has a means of communication and the power of binding and loosing thought and emotion. In its nature propaganda — that great force in undermining confidence — cannot enter into creative writing and so it remains an undefiled channel of communication between man and woman. This may sound like the truism it is. But there are still a good many people who think that writers live in ivory towers. We don't even use them as holiday resorts. In a crisis you can observe for yourself how many writers become pamphleteers and imagine how many others fill the censor's w[aste] p[aper] b[asket].

These rather sketchy reflections will, I hope, do something to put the creative writer before you in his place in society — a man for whom there is no economic niche, who lives by some other avocation or, more often, by odd jobs, for whose work there is an implicit but often not an explicit demand, but who for some inexplicable inward necessity goes on barking.

There is also the relationship of the writer to writing. Creative writing is a commentary on living, it makes life comprehensible and manageable by packing it into an image, by putting in the round what is scattered and broken. It attempts to fuse men and circumstance, it synthesises the raw material of life, by passing it through the fire of an imagination, into something which can be readily assimilated by the minds and imaginations of other men. To put it rawly, a process of digestion takes place in which the creative imagination acts as gastric juice.

Why people write I do not know. To the best of my knowledge there is no such thing as inspiration. That's a stage property. There is something comparable, on the mental level to muscle-sense, an accumulation of habit passing over from the conscious to the sub-conscious and acting automatically as instinct but there is no divine fire descending from above, no unearned increments. Writing is hard and concentrated work. There are creative states of mind when most common place events or sights alight with a sort of exciting ping on the receptive surface, and there are long dreary uncreative periods when nothing takes shape within the mind.

The pleasures of writing are the pleasures that attach to the functioning of any ability, its pains those that arise from failure, obstruction or frustration in any activity. At its best it is rather like being in love.