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THE CULTURAL CRINGE

THE Australian Broadcasting Commission has a Sunday pro-
gramme, designed to cajole a mildly Sabbatharianist bit of the vitia, called 'Incongruity'. Paired musical performances are
broadcast, one by an Australian, one by an overseas executant,
but with the names and nationalities withheld until the end of
the programme. The listener is supposed to guess which is the
Australian and which the alien performer. The idea is that quite
often he guesses wrong or gives it up because, strange to say, the
local lad proves to be no worse than the foreigner. This unex-
pected discovery is intended to inspire a nice glow of patriotic
satisfaction.

I am not jeering at the A.B.C. for its quaint idea. The pro-
gramme's designer has rightly diagnosed a disease of the Austra-
lian mind and is applying a sensible curative treatment. The
dismaying circumstance is that such a treatment should be ne-
cessary, or even possible; that in any nation, there should be an
assumption that the domestic cultural product will be worse
than the imported article.

The devil of it is that the assumption will often be correct.
The numbers are against us, and an invisible quantitative in-
feriority easily looks like a qualitative weakness, under the most
favourable circumstances—and our circumstances are not favour-
able. We cannot shelter from invidious comparisons behind
the barrier of a separate language; we have no long-established or
interestingly different cultural tradition to give security and dis-
tinction to its interpreters; and the centrifugal pull of the great
cultural metropolises works against us. Above our writers—and
other artists—doms the intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon cul-
ture. Such a situation almost inevitably produces the charac-
teristic Australian Cultural Cringe—appearing either as the
Cringe Direct, or as the Cringe Inverted, in the attitude of the
Hilatant Blatherskite, the God's Own Country and I'm-a-better
man-than-you-are Australian Boor.

The Cringe mainly appears in an inability to escape needless
comparisons. The Australian reader, more or less consciously,
hedges and hesitates, asking himself 'Yes, but what would a cul-
tivated Englishman think of this?' No writer can communicate
confidently to a reader with the 'Yes, but' habit; and this parti-
cular demand is curiously crippling to critical judgment. Con-
fronted by Purphy, we grow uncertain. We fail to recognise the

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extraordinarily original structure of his novel because we are wondering whether perhaps an Englishman might not find it too complex and self-conscious. No one worries about the structural deficiencies of Moby Dick. We do not fully savour the meaty individualism of Melville's style because we are wondering whether perhaps his egotistic verbosity is not too Australianly crude; but we accept the egotistic verbosity of Borrow as part of his quality.

But the dangers of the comparative approach go deeper than this. The Australian writer normally frames his communication for the Australian reader. He assumes certain mutual preknowledge, a responsiveness to certain symbols, even the ability to hear the caesure of a phrase in the right way. Once the reader's mind begins to be nagged by the thought of how an Englishman might feel about this, he loses the fine edge of his Australian responsiveness. It is absurd to feel apologetic towards Such Is Life, or Coonardoo or Melbourne Odes because they would not seem quite right to an English reader; it is part of their distinctive virtue that no Englishman can fully understand them.

I once read a criticism which began from the question 'What would a French classicist think of Macbeth?' The analysis was discerningly conducted and had a certain paradoxical interest: but it could not escape an effect of comic irrelevance.

A second effect of the Cringe has been the estrangement of the Australian Intellectual. Australian life, let us agree, has an atmosphere of often dismaying crudity. I do not know if our cultural crust is proportionately any thinner than that of other Anglo-Saxon communities; but to the intellectual it seems thinner because, in a small community, there is not enough of it to provide for the individual a protective insulation. Hence, even more than most intellectuals, he feels a sense of exposure. This is made much worse by the intrusion of that deadly habit of English comparisons. There is a certain type of Australian intellectual who is forever sidling up to the cultivated Englishman, insinuating: 'I, of course, am not like these other crude Australians; I understand how you must feel about them; I should be spiritually more at home in Oxford or Bloomsbury.'

It is not the critical attitude of the intellectual that is harmful; that could be a healthy, even creative, influence, if the criticism were felt to come from within, if the critic had a sense of identification with his subject, if his irritation came from a sense of shared shame rather than a disdainful separation. It is his refusal to participate, the arch of his indifferent eye-brows, which exerts the chilling and stultifying influence.

Thinking of this type of Australian Intellectual, I am a little uneasy about my phrase 'Cultural Cringe'; it is so much the kind of misdeed which he delights to taunt at the Australian mob. I hope
I have made it clear that my use of the phrase is not essentially unsympathetic, and that I regard the denaturalised Intellectual as the Cringe's unhappy victim. If any of the breed use my phrase for his own contemptuous purposes, my curse be upon him. May crudely-Dinkum Assates spit in his beer, and gremilins split his eves to be preciously aggumilated indefinitely.

The Australian writer is affected by the Cringe because it misses the responsiveness of his audience, and because its influence on the intellectual deprives the writer of a sympathetically critical atmosphere. Nor can he entirely escape its direct impact. There is a significant phrase in Henry Handel Richardson's text, 'When Young'. When she found herself stuck in a passage of Richard Mahony which would not come right, she remarked to her husband, 'How did I ever dare to write. Maurice Guest—a poor, little colonial like me? Our sympathies go out to her pathetic victim of the Cringe. For observe that the Henry Handel Richardson who had written Maurice Guest was not the raw girl encompassed by the limitations of the Kilmore Post Office and a Philistine mother. She had already behind her the years in Munich and a days-to-days connubium with a husband steeped in the European literary tradition. Her cultural experience was probably richer than that of such contemporary novelists as Wells or Bennett. It was primarily the simple damnatio of being an Australian which made her feel limited. Justified, you may think, by the tone of Australian site, with its isolation and existentially material emphasis? Examine the evidence fairly and closely, and I think you will agree that Henry Handel Richardson's Australian background was a shade richer in cultural influence than the dingy shop-cum-study Housekeeper’s Room-cum-sordid Grammar School which incensed Wells, or than the Five Towns of the eighteen-eighties.

By both temperament and circumstance, Henry Handel Richardson was peculiarly susceptible to the influence of the Cringe, but no Australian writer, unless he is dangerously incentivistic, can wholly escape it; he may fight it down or disguise it with a veneer of toughness, but it must weaken his confidence and sag at his integrity.

It is not so much our limitations of size, youth and isolation which create the problem as the derivativeness of our culture; and it takes more difficult forms than the Cringe. The writer is particularly affected by our colonial situation because of the nature of his medium. The painter is in some measure housed by the traditional evolution of his art, the musician must consider the particular combinations of sound which the contemporary civilised ear can accept; but ultimately paint is always paint, a piano everywhere a piano. Language has no such ultimate physical existence; it is in its essence merely what generations of
usage have made it. The three symbols m-a-a create the image of a male human being only because venerable English tradition has so decreed. The Australian writer cannot cease to be English even if he wants to. The nightingale does not sing under Aus-

tralian skies: but he still sings in the literate Australian mind. It may thus become the symbol which runs naturally to the tip of the writer's pen: but he dare not use it because it has no or-
ganic relation with the Australian life he is interpreting.

The Jindyworobaks are entirely reasonable when they protest against the alien symbolisms used by O'Hodd, Brennan or Mc-

Crac: but the difficulty is not simply solved. A Jindyworobak writer uses the image 'galah-breasted dawn.' The picture is both

fresh and accurate, and has a sense of immediacy because it comes
direct from the writer's environment: and yet somehow it doesn't

quite come off. The trouble is that we—unhappy Cringers—are
too aware of the processes in its creation. We can't feel the writer

meaning: No, I protest one of the images which English lan-
guage tradition is tumescent into my mind; I must have some-
thing Australian: ah, yes— What the phrase has gained in im-
nediacy, it has lost in spontaneity. You have some measure of

* The complexity of the problems of a colonial culture when you

reflect that the last sentence I have written is not so sonorous

as it sounds.

I should not, of course, suggest that the Australian image can

never be spontaneously achieved; one need not go beyond Stew-
r* Ned Kelly to disprove such an assumption. On the other

hand, the distracting influence of the English tradition is not

restricted to merely linguistic difficulties. It confines the least

cringing Australian writer at half-a-dozen points.

What is the cure for our disease? There is no short-cut to the

gradual process of national growth—which are already begin-

ing to have their effect. The most important development of

the last twenty years in Australian writing has been the pro-
gress made in the art of being self-conscious ourselves. If I

have thought this article worth writing, it is because I believe

that progress will quicken when we articulately recognise two

facts: that the Cringe is a wonky enemy to our cultural develop-

ment that our isolation, and that the opposite of the Cringe is

not the Srat, but a relaxed erectness of carlage.

A FOUR-PAGE editorial, specially written for the tenth

anniversary issue, has been held over because of the pre-

sumption on the editor's part—most unreasonably—of im-

likely. If time and opportunity permit, a revised letter will be

sent to subscribers later.