



Antigone Kefala

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INTERVIEW

- EP: Antigone, what are your ideas about the practice of ASAL conferences by which writers as well as academics are invited to take part?
- AK: This is the first ASAL conference I've attended. I was part of the ACLALS conference in Sitges, Spain in 1984, where there were a number of writers present. The writer Desmond O'Grady, who lives in Rome, told us about another conference he'd been to, where writers read on the first evening. After they had read, the Chairman got up and said, "and now that is over we can get down to the real business of the conference!" We all thought that very funny.
- EP: It sounds like something from Parody Night.
- AK: I think it is most important that there should be a continuous interchange between writers and academics. It makes a great difference. Even being physically aware of a person takes away certain minor misunderstandings and gives one another view of the author. I've also felt, for a very long time, in relation to what is termed "migrant" writing, "ethnic" writing, or whatever, that unless there is critical analysis, or a critical placing of books within a context, most people actually refuse to accept the texts. The fact that one approaches English from a totally different point of view, or expresses things which are not common within that culture, automatically keeps one outside the cultural field. So to a certain extent you need literary critics and academic writers to create some sort of bridge between the books and readers generally, to make them equally acceptable with other books written within Australia. For example, Sneja Gunew, from Deakin University, has done an enormous job both in analysing and in arguing very passionately about migrant writing, and also in creating a critical framework in which all this can be considered as an on-going part of the whole literary scene. So I think it is important that literary analysis and criticism take place in contexts in which writer and critic can come to a closer understanding. One doesn't write in a vacuum. One is always dependent on other books, and on the general analysis of the culture around one, to actually grow oneself.

EP: There seem to be very few readers who spontaneously go to a bookshop and buy a book without knowing anything about it. Do you feel that we seldom read without a context of others' opinions?

AK: This is terrible really! What we need are many contexts, and the more of them the better. I was listening to Katharine Brisbane recently discussing the context in which theatre is reviewed today. She was explaining that the current technicalities involved in reviewing for newspapers have taken away from the reviewer actual contact with the paper with other journalists and editors and with the reviewer itself. The reviewer 'phones through the text to the paper. This alters the nature of the process, of the context in which the review is created, it isolates it.

I feel it is the same with bookshops. We used to go and look for books, discover things we hadn't seen before, or look for books that perhaps we'd only just heard about. But now you find nothing except the very obvious books and the same ones are found everywhere.

EP: Do you think that one of the problems is the distribution of books?

AK: As a writer I feel that the poor and erratic distribution of books is rather terrible. If we take even *Alexia*, about which I feel rather protective, it has had very few sales. It was published by John Ferguson and distributed through Angus and Robertson. It has sold very few copies, and yet you cannot find it in a bookshop. You have to order it if you want a copy.

EP: That's especially regrettable, because *Alexia* is a book that meets several markets: it's an excellent children's book as well as a complex and fascinating book for adults.

AK: Well, it seems to have totally missed out on distribution to both markets!

EP: Another problem about bad distribution, surely, is that it prevents our correct perception of what is being written and what is really part of the contemporary literary scene?

AK: But of course! When, for example, Elizabeth Harrower's books were reprinted by Angus and Robertson in a classical edition they didn't even appear in their catalogues.

EP: Her work is greatly admired by everyone who knows it well, but her work is much less in the public eye than that of many other Australian writers.

- AK: She is a good friend of mine, and not exactly a recluse!
- EP: How do you yourself balance a private and public life to allow time for writing?
- AK: As very much a newcomer to the literary scene I have not had many calls on my public life. Perhaps it is only since Sneja Gunew has made my work known that people have begun to want to know a little more about it and have begun to approach me to make public appearances. So I didn't have to resist at all. I was a totally private person.
- EP: As a writer, do you find contact with the literary scene stimulating, or do you prefer that it doesn't take too much of your time?
- AK: The academic, analytic context, and the literary scene generally, are two different things. Within the analytic context, if I can call it that, I think I would like to keep my contact to a minimum, because critical analysis involves matters which are very close to one. If I hear people analysing writers, I tend to put myself in the position of the writer rather than of the critic, and it becomes a rather disturbing and difficult experience. It is interesting, while it lasts, but I would not want it to go on too long. Perhaps every six months or so — or once a year!
- EP: Is it helpful to know that your work is widely read — does your writing respond to what's called feed-back?
- AK: Well, I actually get very little feed-back, I was interested to hear someone the other day talking about "the image of your readers." I actually don't know who my readers are! This is what I was analysing in a paper I have just written which was to be published by Hale and Iremonger, but which I believe is not going to now. It is autobiographical material, analysing one's approach to writing, and things of that nature.
- EP: What will you do with this piece now?
- AK: I don't know. But I was pleased to write the paper.
- EP: Can you tell me something about it?
- AK: The book itself was to be edited by Rosemary Dobson, and about twelve women writers were to be represented. I was the only migrant writer involved. We were invited to write a paper about our approach to writing, what it means to write, what are the difficulties . . . there were very wide possibilities in the idea. So in my case, I worked on it for a very long time, because so many things were involved in the analysis. The title of my paper is "Towards a Language." Partly because I have changed so many languages. It was an interesting exercise from my point

of view. To a certain extent one remains for a long time with certain static assumptions which may have been made twenty years ago, and which haven't changed. So I had now to look very carefully at my own assumptions. When one begins to write as I have done, in a language which is not intrinsically my own, and which I try to know very well in order to write it, my experience is that you remain outside any sort of literary flow within the country for a very long time. This automatically gives you a place outside the literary scene, and alters you as well to a certain extent. There is a constant *lack* of interchange between what you are producing and what other people are producing, in an immediate way. What is obviously good for me now, although it has come rather late, yet it will alter what I write, is that I feel now that I may also be one of the voices that can define, to a certain extent, the landscape in which all of us are living. Obviously this will add more responsibility because I am now writing in a more public sphere. Before one was just shouting to oneself!

EP: And you feel this will be reflected in your work?

AK: Yes, yes! At least to a certain extent. I have always written about the past, because I need an enormous distance between myself and events. What I have been writing here was mostly about New Zealand. Now I shall be writing about Australia, because twenty-five years have gone, and the writing has had time to accumulate. Most of my writing has been done here in Australia, however, and I am positive that the entire landscape has come through the writing in terms of the light, in terms of the landscape itself, and in terms of a more open attitude. At least I hope so.

EP: I have a slightly different question, but one which interests me very much and to which I get different answers from different writers. When you write "I" in a poem, how much does that "I" reflect yourself — or your selves?

AK: Sneja Gunew has actually done an analysis of my poetry which looks at this. It is a very interesting question, and it is a very ambivalent sort of thing. I use the "I" as a device in lots of instances. First, I constantly look for immediacy — stylistic immediacy. I have a resistance to using the third person. I always find that kind of distancing, somehow, for me, alters the text. So I would use "I", probably in most instances when it has nothing to do with me and nothing to do with my experiences,

or even with my “selves”, whatever they are. It can be a group “I”, it can be . . . whatever! To a certain extent, I assume, as with all writers, that one is inventing the thing.

EP: It seems that what is happening now and very rapidly is that the multicultural writer has simply become part of contemporary Australian writing. Do you feel this? Do you feel this means that the multicultural writer has perhaps been too much absorbed?

AK: I would say that there has been an improvement in the response to writers from different backgrounds. The mere fact that Dimitris Tsaloumas and I have been invited to ASAL is significant. This would not have happened five or ten years ago. But I would have to question that there has been a great deal of change. In my position as Multicultural Arts Officer with the Australia Council I am working constantly at the very basis of the field, and from this base the view is a bleak one. In fact, there is very little absorption of multicultural writing going on, seriously speaking. Just consider the great number of people writing from migrant backgrounds, in English and in other languages, who actually have no outlet at all, and whose voice is very seldom heard, even as a curiosity, by the larger group. I would say there has been some progress, but very little.

EP: Is part of this due to the economic problem: that publishers like a safe name if they are going to publish at all?

AK: It is more complex. Every one wants to be preoccupied with the same “powerful texts” — in inverted commas! No one is concerned with other directions that may be equally interesting or that may become equally powerful later. Everyone goes for an already perceived powerfulness, both in intellectual terms and in terms of the literary product. There is not enough curiosity. Many people are not interested to actually look at something out of the usual, even in order to broaden their view.

EP: We are too dazzled by what is happening in the limelight?

AK: I think that is so at present.

EP: Surely the Brisbane based journal *OUTRIDER* is doing something to stimulate interest in other aspects of contemporary Australian writing?

AK: Well, I hope so. I hear that it sells well and that people are buying it, and that it goes into libraries. I think it takes a while to see the impact of a journal. From my point of view, the greatest change has been the emergence of the younger genera-

tion, migrant children born in Australia, who are now entering University and tertiary teaching and who are looking at themselves and their own backgrounds, and trying to come to an acceptance of themselves and what it means to have a migrant background. They are also helping us to find a voice. There is a lot of intellectual energy within the universities and other institutions and these young people are a part of it. This too will help to bring about some kind of change and a new look at migrant writing. I feel that, culturally speaking, Australians should go out and grab everything there is in this country and allow it an existence in our literature. And in our other arts. Obviously you have to have classifications and evaluations, but I am speaking from the basic position. I feel that there is such an enormous amount of talent that has come into the country. Some of it was already operating elsewhere and has come ready made, as it were, bringing different aesthetic views which are very interesting. And even though we may come to blows in some areas, I am sure that all this can only give more complexity and another view of Australia. For instance, the paper given by the American girl at ASAL, on the explorers, I found it terribly interesting because I am positive that an Australian would not have looked at the explorers from her point of view. The outsider's view is always interesting. Not that this means it is more valuable than the inside one, but it is *another* one. It constantly changes one's view of oneself, and of the landscape, and of the country and what it means.

EP: An openness to difference is the only way to keep a culture alive?

AK: Yes, yes!

EP: An Australian writer, reading *Alexia*, for example, might be influenced by it to write something that is quite different. So the real effect of migrant literature will be imperceptible and never able to be estimated? Dimitris Tsaloumas's work is being listened to very carefully now and is bound to have an influence on Australian poetry, but this influence will probably not be traceable.

AK: Yes, but we don't want to be traceable in that sense.

EP: Would you like to think that the different voices from other countries will remain perpetually distinguishable in Australia? For example, we sometimes make efforts to talk about a distinctive Irish Catholic voice in Australian literature.

AK: I think it's an impossibility. The transformation is a continuous one, and for us, the people who are going through this transformation, there is no static position. I have been transformed by the landscape, by the literature, by the approach to life, by the language of Australia. I'm definitely not the person who came in 1959! Of course not. And there is no going back. There is no static position, at any rate, not for anyone who writes and develops. Even someone like Dimitris, who has written so much in Greek, he is not static within a language that he brought out of Greece, or in the type of writing that he has done here. And that kind of writing he could not have done in Greece, I'm positive, because it is of a totally different texture.

EP: Are you writing poetry at the moment?

AK: The last few years have been transitional ones for me, after the deaths of my parents who have always been my background. My mother, in particular, was always my first reader. My life is going through a reappraisal and is changing in many ways. What I'm doing now is revising poems that were written some time ago, and I'm also working on some prose. But probably a new beginning in poetry will come within a few years. It will take a new direction.

EP: So the project you were doing for Rosemary Dobson as editor came at an opportune time?

AK: Yes. It is a pity it seems to be lost, because some interesting women were writing for it: Dorothy Green, Dorothy Hewett, Fay Zwicky . . .

EP: Perhaps some journal will take up the project and publish the pieces as a sequence that could possibly be collected together later?

AK: Yes, it is a pity to lose it.

EP: Do you do much reviewing yourself?

AK: Very little, because it takes me a long time to write a review. I usually try to work at the office for a while and save money, and then apply for leave of absence so that I can do some writing. But I cannot find much time for reviewing — I think my last review was for *Aspect* some three years ago.

EP: What do you yourself hope for from a reviewer?

AK: Let me say that what everyone hopes is that the reviewer will be understanding and actually like one's work. Also that the reviewer will be able to discuss it in a serious manner and place it in some context. That is, analyse it in some manner. A good

critic is actually quite important to a writer, and helps you to see a text in different ways. As for my stuff, I have usually had good reviews, but they have been of a generalized nature. What they usually say is, “here is a poet writing a prose work, it’s about migrants, she comes from overseas, and so on.” No one actually treats the books thematically, and I would think that I wrote about quite abstract issues, really, to a certain extent. So I feel that my books can be analysed and form part of an intellectual argument. But very few critics have ever done that — apart from Judith Brett who wrote a study of *The Island*, and perhaps one or two other critics.

EP: Is that also the case with the poetry?

AK: Yes. John Tranter did some interesting analysis of the language of *The Alien* some time ago. There has been little else of a serious critical nature.

EP: And that is something you actively look for?

AK: For sure, yes! I’m still hopeful, however.

EP: As a writer, have you any suggestions as to how an ASAL conference might be more helpful to a writer?

AK: For a reading, as you know, a convenient room with sound is desired. The readings should be in an environment conducive to asking questions of the reader. I myself was very interested to meet people and hear their opinions, especially within a group of people who read a great deal and are obviously critical of texts. I felt I should have been reading some fairly substantial poems, because this was the type of audience that was here. But obviously the “after hours” reading doesn’t at all lend itself to that, and everyone is looking for very light entertainment! So my suggestion would be that if you want to give importance to the writer, you could make the readings part of the actual proceedings, like the afternoon period that was allocated in this year’s programme. Perhaps it is not necessary to have any one writer read as long as thirty-five minutes. Twenty minutes is long enough probably, and then people can ask questions.

EP: One last question! Following your comment earlier about those migrant voices that are very seldom heard, although a great deal is being written, what do you think of the idea of encouraging all migrant writers to publish in dual language editions? Macedonian and English, Italian and English, and so on?

AK: I think that dual language editions are excellent — although they would be easier to achieve in poetry, in terms of length, but

would be more difficult with prose. A bi-lingual edition of a novel will be defeating in terms of costs and length. However, monolingual editions are very good too, that is, translations of local writing, but there are great difficulties connected with the whole issue. At the basis of the whole thing is the fact that Australia, historically, has not been involved in translating, but has relied on translations done elsewhere in the English speaking world — England, America, Canada and so on. Translators — literary translators — are a special breed, the creative re-creation of a text in another language is a very subtle skill, and unless there is a climate, a need, training and evaluation for such skills, it is difficult to find them. In Australia we are at the very beginning of such a development. To be able to match a text with a translator is very difficult — there must be a stylistic affinity, as well as affinity with the essence of a work, otherwise the new text, even though in correct English will lose the character, power, subtlety, rhythms of the original. I know for instance that Gio Andreoni, an Italo/Australian writer, who writes in Italian, has found it very difficult to find a translator that will do justice to his text.

There needs to be a massive change in attitude by the market, by publishers, by everyone. All countries, and I speak specifically of Europe, because I am more familiar with things there, have to translate a great deal and constantly to maintain contact with other literatures, knowledge or aesthetics, so translating is an on going part of cultural life, but here we are at the beginning.

This interview with Elizabeth Perkins took place at James Cook University on 10 July 1986. Antigone Kefala was in Townsville to attend the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature.