

## NOEL MACAINSH REPLIES:

Dear Judith Wright,

Thank you for the honour of your response to the articles in *LINO* (Vol. 6, No. 1, 1978). You touch on matters that are indeed broad and deep, certainly more than could be embraced here. In this regard, I look forward to your address to the teachers of English, to be published in *Australian Literary Studies*.

I am a little unsure when you address me collectively, along with my colleagues, as I imagine that they cherish their individuality just as tenaciously as do the writers; in fact some of them *are* writers, even virtuoso practitioners of the divided self; though for all I know they may not see themselves as divided. I do not know. I will merely comment for myself.

I sympathise with you in your experience in the schools. Much the same experience can be had in university classes; there are students who seem to be ruled by expediency, though this by no means precludes them from being perceptive and doing good work; they simply have a scale of values in which poetry is not so important. I imagine that mixed motives operate in all fields, and that this is not a bad thing, being preferable to the extremes of either a pure instrumentalism or an unworldly absorption in the 'thing-in-itself.'

It is interesting that you should view the dualism of 'pure' and expedient poetry as having been encouraged by the "present structure and assumptions of the teaching of literature." My own inquiry has led me to see this dualism as a function of the historical development of literary autonomy, within the broader development of society, of which the teaching approach too is but a part. If the defects you discern in the teaching process are really a prime factor in the decline of the audience for poetry, then Australian teachers alone cannot be to blame, for a similar decline is to be found in other advanced industrial societies. I have attempted to explore this theme of autonomy in a number of articles, the most recent being on your 'mandarin,' Christopher Brennan. He is extraordinarily significant here since he assimilated the central tendency towards poetic autonomy in Europe, and reflected on it more explicitly than has any other Australian writer, doing his absolute best to be both a law unto himself and nationally important.

Brennan's claim to autonomy is representative, I believe, of the subsequent main tendency of both Australian poetry and criticism. These two have reflected and complemented each other; hence my remarks about the association of the poets with the universities; an association in which you yourself have played such a distinguished role. These two factors, along with other literary institutions, including publishers, reviewers, editors, government boards and the schools, have operated as a system that has contributed much to the definition of our culture.

But, as you have pointed out in your writings, a change has occurred in the audience. I see this as hardly due to the effect of teaching alone, nor due to the decline of reading-culture in the home, or to competition from audio-visual media, or to the vast increase of competing printed material, though all of these factors are no doubt quite significant. Rather, the decline in the audience appears to me to be due essentially to a deep-going change in the general context of these things, that is in the nature of society, greatly intensified in the last decade or so, and now proceeding rapidly apace under the pressure of enforced rationalisation of the productive process. This change, towards greatly increased complexity, proliferating a multiplicity of viewpoints, a plurality of life-styles, situations and possibilities, is a further development of the inherently dynamic, innovative, anti-traditional character of our industrial society. Such a society no longer needs or finds credible an official literary establishment with its generalised claims to interpretation of national life and traditions. Gradually, such an establishment becomes an anachronism, appears alien, arbitrary, presumptuous and even comically mystifying when it in effect decries analysis of what it is saying but nevertheless claims special regard for the way that it is saying it. Too much of this could lead to the downfall of the reading-classes. Yet what other position is possible when all particular, non-innocuous content, the conservation cause or whatever, is immediately categorised, not as above the fray, but as factional among a plurality of competing interests, and made to choose its lot in the hurly-burly of the democratic process? 'Content' belongs to the politicians; the poet is left holding the pure form, "poetry as such." A general, national consciousness, in which a particular body of texts is virtually raised to official legitimacy as the record of our literary heritage and its interpretation belongs to a simpler past. What the sociologists call a crisis of legitimation has come upon this concept. No doubt it will run on for some time yet, but the steam has gone out of it.

Along with this change in society, observers have remarked also on the emergence of a new type of typical character-structure, open to alternatives and re-adjustments, whose behaviour is not so much opposed to tradition as indifferent to it, free to use it or ignore it. The traditional orientation, on the other hand, measures the present against a high and honoured cultural past, against what A.D. Hope calls *die unbegreiflich hohen Werke*, and comprehends what is new as an unfortunate falling-away, as though, now past the cultural heights, we were sliding down the slippery slope into mass perdition.

I think there is some poetic justice in what has overtaken our poetry. Earlier, Brennan, Norman Lindsay, McCrae, Slessor, Hope and others were proud to announce that an interest in literature was tantamount to no interest at all in ordinary mortals and their concerns. I have been asked by students and others why the metaphors and similes, the referential and interpretive schemata of these writers are predominantly pre-industrial, medieval, renaissance, oriental, Italian, Greek, Tartarian, and so on. I have been asked why, in the leading poets of our canon, there is such disdain of

science, technology; why there is hatred of the common man and of the modern intellect; why there is so little sense of the real world; why there is a restorational tendency in these writers, why there is such a hotch-potch of creaky evolutionary philosophy, and so on. Even with your 'pure' John Shaw Neilson, I have been asked why his poetry shows such affinities with the *fin-de-siècle* successors to the Pre-Raphaelites.

There may well have been good reasons for all of this. I think there were. And I think the pursuit of this understanding will do more to establish a continuing relevance for these writers, and others, than will any exclusive insistence on their "poetry as such," on their special 'magic,' and so on. Their unique and irreducible features are best likely to be preserved in this way, that is in the process of our reflection on the historical context of their original and subsequent reception, rather than on a basis of assuming 'unspoiled' reception by an ahistorical reader, such as the 'de-schooled' child you suggest in your other writings. I notice that when Neilson declares "Away with the homage to Reason!" you are moved to explain what kind of 'reason' you take Neilson to have meant. Surely the truth is that, for the kind of poetry you appear to have most in mind, criticism is absolutely essential to ensure that it has any appreciable degree of reception and recognition at all. Indeed, it seems to me that at times the work is virtually made by the critic, and that the claim by the poet to absolute priority and independence for his text, as well as for his free, creative spirit as against the dead-headed academic, is a convenient fiction connived in as one of the rules by which the traditional game is played. This claim to supreme importance is matched by the misery of the poet's actual impotence.

Without the background of a society that gives meaning to his essentially conservative, traditionalist aesthetic, the poet wanders into an eccentric position, seeking legitimation but finding it, like your James Baxter, only in passing acceptance by unstable, non-representative groupings. The poet turns to the State, asking for its recognition, that it force his fellow-citizens to divert their tax-contributions into State-administered educational, publishing, promotional grants and pension schemes, on behalf of a poetry that this same citizenry does not read. It already has its own 'oral' or 'performance' poets, such as Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, a host of writers for rock-groups, and so on, for all of whom it provides freely and handsomely. But to the literary establishment, these people are invisible.

This phenomenon, as I see it, should not be met with dismay and rejection, as being simply proof of a new barbarism, but should be confronted as a challenge to our understanding; for there is a great deal to do in testing the reality of our impressions and finding out what actually is the case out there, with a view to discovering new possibilities of expression, and how we can foster, develop and evaluate them. Hence my emphasis on the new disciplines I mentioned. I do not think that they are parasitic on a primary body of literature, as you may fear, drawing nourishment while the host dies, but are intelligent creations in their own right, partnering new creation.

Younger writers already sense this; they have nothing to lose and can move easily in exploring a new world of art and reality; they are already part of it. The possible role of the academic in facilitating this process is obvious. The older writer who has already accomplished much may however experience burdens of reflection and decision that would never have come upon him in times of slower change. I trust that Cassandra will long outlast the evil she foresees, and will prophesy anew.

Yours sincerely

Noel Macainsh

(Peter Abotomy has also been invited to reply.)

