

‘At home in more than one place’

Cosmopolitanism in the work of Shirley Hazzard

by Brigitta Olubas

In October 2009, Shirley Hazzard spoke at the New York launch of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*. Hazzard read from *People in Glass Houses*, her early collection of satirical stories about the UN bureaucracy. Her appearance serves to remind Australian readers that Hazzard continues to occupy a defining, if somewhat attenuated, place within the expansive field of what Nicholas Jose described in 2008, on taking up the annual Harvard Chair of Australian Studies, as ‘writing that engage[s] us with the international arena from the Australian perspective’. Jose went on to cite Hazzard’s most recent novel, *The Great Fire* (2003), as part of ‘a range of material which Americans would not necessarily think of as Australian’.

Even among the significant cohort of Australian writers who have lived and worked in the United States in recent decades, Hazzard occupies a unique position, particularly in the way her work has delineated a writerly sensibility that finds its location, as well as its most receptive audience, unconfined by national borders and paradigms. Internationally, she is one of the great writers of movement, passage, transposition and transit. Her novels trace the fate of a series of young expatriate female protagonists in the geographical and emotional vistas opening up after World War II, but before the social upheavals of feminism. They take her readers into moral territory that is at once utterly sure and breached at every turn, with the certainties of romance forms tested by human vulnerability and the often brutal social and political canvas of modern life.

Born in Sydney in 1931, Hazzard has lived in New York since 1951, taking up US citizenship, in a political rather than a nationalistic gesture, after the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974. Since the early 1960s she has published four novels: *The Evening of the Holiday* (1966), *The Bay of Noon* (1970), *The Transit of Venus* (1980) and *The Great Fire*; two collections of stories: *Cliffs of Fall and Other Stories* (1963) and *People in Glass Houses* (1967); two monographs on the United Nations: *Defeat of An Ideal: A Study of the Self-Destruction of the United Nations* (1973) and *Countenance of Truth: The United Nations and the Waldheim Case* (1990); a memoir of her friend Graham Greene: *Greene on Capri: A Memoir*

(2000); and, most recently, a collection of her own and her late husband Francis Steegmuller’s occasional writings on Naples: *The Ancient Shore: Dispatches From Naples* (2008). Her literary fiction has received many major literary awards, both in Australia and the United States, such as the 2003 US National Book Award and the 2004 Miles Franklin Award; and *The Bay of Noon* was recently longlisted for the Lost Man Booker Prize. Hazzard has delivered several important public addresses, including the 1984 ABC Boyer Lectures (which were published in 1985 as *Coming of Age in Australia*).

Throughout her career, Hazzard has crafted a consistently cosmopolitan perspective, arguing that ‘it is a privilege – to be at home in more than one place’, and refuting the designation ‘expatriate’: ‘I’m not even sure which country I’d be an expatriate of.’ Within this internationalist scope, Australian nationality is conferred by virtue of birth and childhood habitation, but also more contingently by way of invitation, courtesy and the somewhat unpredictable protocols of literary acknowledgment, annotation and acceptance, as Hazzard noted to the ABC’s Kerry O’Brien in the wake of the Miles Franklin award: ‘I thought this was also very generous to include me in that way but, of course, Australia was the first fifteen years of my life and you are already Australian for life by doing that.’

Australian references frame her writing career to date, from her first publication – the 1961 short story ‘Woollahra Road’, which appeared in *The New Yorker* – to the Miles Franklin Award four decades later. Extracts from her Boyer Lectures were included in the 2003 ABC Radio National anthology, ‘Defining Australia: History and Identity’, and her work continues to sell well here. Despite this ongoing and prominent participation in the literary and cultural present, Hazzard is nonetheless persistently read by her Australian critics and reviewers as a writer from another time and place, situated somewhere beyond the press and ambit of contemporary Australia. Peter Pierce claimed in his review of *The Transit of Venus* that it was a ‘radically old-fashioned’ work, and the sometimes negative public reception of her 1984 Boyer Lectures argued that her account of Australia was uninformed about contemporary culture (despite her pub-

lication several years earlier, in *The New Yorker*, of a detailed and affirmative account of the cultural renaissance she considered to have taken place after the election of the Whitlam government in 1972). More recently, reviews of *The Great Fire* have also drawn on this trope of archaism, albeit not always pejoratively. Brenda Niall, for instance, observed wryly that '[r]eading this novel in 2004, Australians (and New Zealanders, too) may feel that Hazzard's satiric glances at antipodean provincialism are outdated, forgetting that the Sydney of Exley's boyhood, from which he escaped to pre-war Italy, was the 1930s' (*ABR*, February 2004).

It is a mistake, however, to take Hazzard's account of Australia and Australians at face value. Throughout her writing, national identifications are themselves emphatically and satirically iconographic (as Niall observed), not realist. Rather than looking to the nation for the explicit context from which her work emerges, we are directed to the broad and cosmopolitan web of humanist inheritance, which she has defined as a fundamental 'principle' of Western culture that has enabled its most tangible and enduring products:

Humanism set the dignity and singularity of a man or woman above abstractions and inventions. Through generations of the world's fratricidal convulsions, it supplied the fragile continuity of individual civilization. It offered hospitality to thought and art.

Hazzard's fiction invokes humanism's principles through the dense morality that underscores its intricate plotting. The material forms of humanism are to be found in her striking use of allusion and the at times oblique quotation worked carefully into the voices of characters and narrator alike. These qualities combine to create novels of great stylistic elegance and narrative complexity, the storylines of which are nonetheless utterly (and for some critics frustratingly) familiar through popular and conventional forms such as fairytale and romance.

Humanism, moreover, provides an internationalist optic in Hazzard's political writings, trenchant and meticulously researched critiques of UN policy and practice that might at first seem to sit oddly alongside her refined fiction. These works have received much less attention, although they have been reviewed – and rebuked – by leading international figures such as former United Nations Under-Secretary-General Sir Brian Urquhart, an index of the degree of interest this work has received. Her UN writings present two substantial arguments: firstly, that the US government's McCarthyist policies had indelible effects on the UN's structure from its inception, inhibiting the effective prosecution of its international responsibilities; secondly, that this structure itself facilitated the covering up of Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim's Austrian Nazi Party affiliations (Hazzard was the first writer to air these claims publicly, in articles dating from 1980). Her argument is that the core failures of the United Nations derive from the structural

preference for parochial over international public interest, constituting a failure of the UN's internationalist charter. It is here that the connection between Hazzard's political writing and her literary fiction becomes apparent, in the conviction that the ethical drive of the modern world must find its compass in the expanded geography and cultural mobility of the cosmopolitan; it enables the very possibility of female agency in the novels while working to define the limits of national political influence. In this way, the comment from *The Transit of Venus's* heroine, Caro Bell, that 'London is our achievement. Our career for the time being', must be read not simply as an ironic comment on the social and imaginative disproportions of the colonialist globe, but also as a literal landmark within the mobile and cosmopolitan geography of late modernity.

This sense of the cosmopolitan moreover provides us with a way of thinking about the unstable sense of time and place that characterises Hazzard's fiction. While *The Great Fire* is set in the immediate postwar period, it takes up, in a complex way, the changing historical forms of global commerce and capital through the doubled modes of allegory and satire, creating a series of rhetorical reversals that displace readers from their secure footing in the present day. This is signalled not only by its 'out-of-date' Australian references, as noted by her reviewers, but also by its densely textured invocation of works of art, in particular, paintings by Vermeer. The novel's explicitly and minutely detailed postwar setting is allegorically peopled by scenes and figures from Vermeer's seventeenth-century Dutch interiors; his ubiquitous returned soldiers and young women, unencumbered by family in the form of parents or children, unmistakably condensed in the two central characters, are figures that breach the stability of the domestic world they inhabit with the threat and possibility of difference.

In a related move, the satiric intent behind the impossible and retrograde figures of Barry and Melba Driscoll signals the historic shift that has been experienced since the moment of their ascendancy in the mid-twentieth century, and through which we, as twenty-first century readers, encounter the historical past. Further, the speed of modern global communications – a defining feature of the contemporary world – is not so much nostalgically absent from the novel as it is referenced obliquely, but insistently, through the agonising slowness of letters and ships, and the fixed spatiality of the maps that define the novel's displaced and attenuated action, so that the novel's lovers are kept apart not only by social convention (the heroine is very young, the hero a much older public figure) but also by the vastness of a world where space has not yet collapsed. *The Great Fire's* cosmopolitanism and the forms of cultural mobility it engenders work to draw its readers to encounter the contemporary world from a different perspective – not the other way around.

Hazzard's most recent publication, *The Ancient Shore: Dispatches from Naples*, has been received internationally with unanimous, if muted, praise. What is perhaps unexpected in the reviews of this work, grounded as it is in Hazzard's long association, at once erudite and intimate, with Naples, is the almost ubiquitous reference to her Australian background. They remind us that this is the writing not only of a sometime resident of the Italian city but also of a traveller whose journey, like all journeys, began somewhere specific. While *The Ancient Shore* presents Hazzard's Australian beginnings in terms that are familiar, if not always welcome, to her Australian readers – 'a remote, philistine country in those years, and very much a male country, dominated by a defiant masculinity that repudiated the arts' – it also binds that Australian beginning into the web of literature and reading that opens out into the world as 'a form of pilgrimage'.

The essays depict a city through the lens of travel and displacement, an encounter with monumentality that unpacks and reworks our sense of time and place. In this context, reading and travel appear as interconnected modes of imaginative displacement, with the shared experience of the journey worked through a detailed web of literary and personal memories, bringing humility, contingency and fragility into an account nonetheless dense with cultural authority. Hazzard's erudition is no surprise to readers familiar with her allusive prose; the unexpected dimension of these writings, perhaps, is the vulnerability that is everywhere evident. She writes compellingly of the ways in which we seek our own undoing in the upheavals of literal and metaphorical journeys: 'by definition a leap through the looking glass disturbs one's own self-image, and I had to learn something of my own ignorance. Intimacy with another country is ripened by pleasures but also by loneliness and error.'

These dimensions of travel are formative; despite Hazzard's suggestion that 'one is already Australian for life' by living for the first decade and a half in this country, we encounter a youthful self encountering a world that is itself being made and forever marked by that spectacle:

[T]he convulsion of the Second World War was just subsiding, there was civil war in China. All Asia was in a state of seething change. When one is young, one accepts that backdrop, engrossed in one's own impressions and events, in one's own destiny. Those years and experiences have haunted me, with their accidental revelations.

Throughout this collection, a tellingly literary displacement floods the vistas that Hazzard proffers, rendering them fleeting and intense. Imagined sites join remembered places, with travel itself enacted through maps and poems, forms that are dense with apprehension, plans, dreams.

In these essays, there is indeterminacy, even insecurity, with every enterprise marked by delay, dif-

ficulty and interruption. In the face of accident, arrival at a destination takes on a certain solemnity ('consecration', 'revelation') that brings in turn humility:

In those lines there is still the ancient nature of pilgrimage: the difficulty, the long yearning; the constancy, the consummation. Arrival as an achievement that cannot be denied – arrival with all its consequences of transformations, encounters, self-knowledge, exposures, disappointments.

Hazzard's encounter with Naples is fused with literate experience; reading provides preparation and generates both knowledge and expectation. In the face of nationality as a fact, a right of birth and habitation, she posits the familiarity of an Italy known through reading: 'For the historian Burckhardt, the vitality of rich civilization was, even for foreigners, a homecoming: "It was ours by right of admiration."' Receptivity to place, and openness to the long familiar, generate a palpable response, the 'nearly human expectation' with which a destination awaits us:

I, too, have visited other centuries ... It is women, more usually, who bear such emblems into other times – as last summer at the port of Capri, a trio of handsome matrilarchs who stepped ashore from Catanzaro, gold and silver lace over their coiled hair and on their dresses of rosso antico that swept the ground. By their festive costume they honored the great occasion of travel: Their restraint, among the modern hubbub, was a form of authority, a stately humility before the wonders of this world.

If, on our travels, we are not precisely surprised by such apparitions, such enchantments, it is because we always dreamed we might see them.

The traveler equipped with even one introduction arrives with a card to play, a possible clue to the mystery. Yet those who have never experienced solitude in a strange and complex place – never arrived in the unknown without credentials, without introductions to the right people, or the wrong ones – have missed an exigent luxury. Never to have made the lonely walk along the Seine or Lugarno, or passed those austere evenings on which all the world but oneself has destination and companion, is perhaps never to have felt the full presence of the unfamiliar. It is thus one achieves a slow, indelible intimacy with place, learning to match its moods with one's own. At such time it is as if a destination had awaited us with nearly human expectation and with an exquisite blend of receptivity and detachment.

The moment comes: we intersect a history, a long existence, offering our fresh discovery as regeneration.

The *Ancient Shore* essays return Hazzard's readers to the mobile, expectant protagonists of her novels: selves formed in the moment of arrival, in the vertiginous sense that comes with the loss of one's bearings, the moment of apprehension of otherness. ■

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