



Alec Derwent Hope

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Alec Derwent Hope (1907–2000)

Even after his death, A.D. Hope seems doomed to be haunted by his notorious review of Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* in which he used the phrase "pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge". It was quoted by Geoffrey Dutton in his obituary, and has been referred to again and again since the review appeared in 1955. Yet no critic of his reference to White's prose style—a reference which was related to one particular passage in the novel—mentioned that, after commenting on many aspects of *The Tree of Man*, Hope declared White to be a genius.

Why is it that only his negative view is quoted? That says more about the nature of Australian criticism and reviewing than about the ambivalence of Hope's critics. Hope reacted against the search for the Great Australian Novel which assumed that the proper subject matter was the working class struggle in country and city life. Despite his reservations about *The Tree of Man*, he recognised White's break with the entrenched tradition of social realism, and his success in representing historical aspects of Australian life by placing them *sub specie aeternitatis*. The "extraordinary behind the ordinary" was as much a preoccupation of Hope as it was of White. It's a pity that White's extreme sensitivity to criticism kept them apart all their lives.

Hope's description of the Jindyworobaks as "the Boy Scout School of poetry" (in 1941); his attack on Max Harris's *The Vegetative Eye* as "a guide to all the more fashionable literary enthusiasms of the last thirty years" (1953); his reference in "A Letter from Rome" (1958 – 1962) to Australian poets' preference for the "packhorse and the sliprail and the spur"; and even the line in "Australia" (1939) which describes "A nation without songs, architecture, history", together reveal a persistent scepticism about the value of his country's literary achievements.

Despite Hope's reputation for critical ferocity, and for conservatism and respect for literary tradition, he was both generous in his support and promotion of young writers, and radical in his use of unfashionable literary modes of discourse, such as the ode, the epistle, the narrative and didactic poem. His argument for the preservation of traditional literary forms uses (well ahead of its time) a metaphor drawn from ecology. If, the argument goes, the "great forms" (such as the epic) disappear, "the remaining forms proliferate and hypertrophy and display increasing eccentricity and lack of control". In a word, a rain forest can turn into a desert. That argument, in itself, demonstrates Hope's talent in applying his vast scholarship, both in languages and literature, by reviving traditions from within, where verse forms are both preserved and rejuvenated by contemporary reference and

idiom and sharp witty adaptations of mythological and classical subject matter.

Yet, ambivalence about his achievement remains, as David Brooks reminds us:

One could well understand some hesitation in calling A.D. Hope—or any other, for that matter—Australia’s greatest poet. Such hierarchies are invidious and almost always subjective. But there could be little dispute that he is one of Australia’s finest, if most contentious ones, with deep and complex relations to Australian culture—a poet both before and after his time, whose influence has been catalytic as well as sometimes retardative, whose criticism has nurtured as much as it has cautioned or repressed.

The critical dilemma so honestly advanced in this passage is helpful in trying to evaluate the legacy of Hope’s long literary life, which began, by his own account, when he was 8 years old, and continued until he was in his 80s. There are some curious features in this life. He was 48 when his first book, *The Wandering Islands* (1955), was published, but many of the most important poems in it had appeared already and had been circulated among friends. During his appointment as a Senior Lecturer in Language in the English Department of the University of Melbourne (1945), where I was a junior tutor, we were entertained by his facility for dashing off occasional verses, often inspired by lengthy sessions in local pubs and an extraordinary number of drinking parties.

While at Oxford (from 1929 to 1931), he made only one short visit abroad—to Brittany, Paris and Rouen. It was not until 1958 that he returned to Europe, and experienced, for the first time, the historical and mythological sites he had made the subject of his writing for the previous 30 years. He said, “Living is merely writing at second-hand. Nothing seems quite real unless it is turned into words”. In “A Letter from Rome”, he records the experience of retrieving, from the modern noisy city, the ancient civilisation he had so long carried in his imagination.

His appointment as Professor of English to Canberra University College in 1951 marked a new phase in his life. In the 16 years he spent in that post, he established a lively and productive department, which I joined as a temporary lecturer in 1954 on my return from Oxford. Hope balanced his academic life and his own writing, both in poetry and criticism, with energy and enthusiasm. Despite his sense of himself as a poet first of all, his contribution to the academic life of the College (which, in 1960, became part of the School of General Studies at the ANU) was continuous and of great value to all who worked in it. The parties, of course, continued,

enriched by the presence of David Campbell, Rosemary and Alec Dobson, and many young poets and writers.

At about the same time, he began travelling and lecturing in Europe, the United States, and England. He made frequent visits to Sydney, and students in Australian Literature benefited greatly from his occasional lectures and informal seminars. By then, many saw him as venerable, but students had no difficulty in questioning him, though some in hearing him, as he did them. But it didn't matter much whether the question he answered was precisely the one that had been asked, because the answer gave them a glimpse of his abundant knowledge, and the unexpected and stimulating use he made of it.

It is easy to see why critics are still uncertain about how to value his immense productivity. He was out of tune with the directions poetry was taking in his lifetime, and, in that, but possibly only in that, he and James McAuley shared common ground. That their names were, and still are, linked implies a closeness that did not exist, and was, and continues to be, disadvantageous to the understanding of both.

Hope mounted a very solid argument in support of traditional verse forms, not simply on ecological grounds, but for musical reasons. He found the constraints of rhyme and metre a stimulus to his writing because the interaction between the fixed stanza and rhyme scheme and the poet's own language creates the fluctuating tonal effects which do not derive from words alone. He did not experiment with free verse until quite late, and when he did, critics hailed his liberation from the prison of traditional forms, though I'm inclined to think that his best work was done within their constraints, where the readers' metrical expectations are so often surprised by tonal variations.

Hope's early poetry was praised for the same reason that his early reviews were rejected—they were considered not just outspoken but outrageous. His critical writing ranges widely across his many interests—philosophy, anthropology, mythology, art and music—all these underpinned by an extraordinary facility with languages (much more in reading than in speaking). His essays are those of a poet, not an academic. They are arresting and provocative, but would not satisfy a strict logician. He frequently argues by analogy in both prose and verse—a device which in poetry is as respectable as simile and metaphor. His essays are informed by the insights, speculations, and imaginative power of the poet, and stand beside the critical prose of other poets from Sir Philip Sidney onwards.

Much has been said about what seem to some his obsessions—with sex and women. He was a romantic, afflicted with the agonies and ecstasies that word has come to imply, and much of his forcefulness and wit (in the

17th century sense) comes from the expression of strong emotion in controlled forms and measures.

It seems neither possible nor necessary to give him a ranking among Australian poets, nor to worry about the seeming contradictions in his work. They are common to serious writers, and that he came late to Australian subject matter does not need to reignite the old argument about who is qualified to enter the Australian pantheon. He once wrote, "The writer's chief task, the expression of his individual vision, has been complicated and distorted by a task which is strictly irrelevant, the task of not being himself, but of being in some way typically Australian." We can't very well expect our poets, musicians and artists to be world travellers if we ask them to write within our cultural boundaries. In any case, his poetic status will be decided by later generations. His influence, however, will live on in the people who knew him and those poets to whom he was both friend and guide.

Leonie J. Kramer