1997

Private lives, public voices: a study of Australian autobiography

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PRIVATE LIVES: PUBLIC VOICES:

A STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

PhD

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

EDWARD HILLS M.A. (Hons)

Department of English

1997
DECLARATION

I certify that this dissertation does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Five of the chapters (in modified form) have been accepted for publication in various academic journals and should appear during the course of 1997.

Chapter One - “Poets and Historians”
Journal of Australian Studies
University of Queensland.

Chapter Four - “Whose Place is This?” (Sally Morgan)
Journal of Commonwealth Literature
University of Hull, U.K.

Chapter Six - “Babylon” (Judah Waten)
Span
University of Waigato, N.Z.

Chapter Seven - “La Maison Onirique” (David Malouf)
Meridian
La Trobe University.

Chapter Nine - “The Dream Garden” (Dorothy Hewett)
Kunapipi
University of Aarhus, Denmark.

Signed: ________________________________

Edward R. Hills 1st July 1997
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor James Wieland and Dr. Paul Sharrad for all the time and effort that each has put into helping me develop, modify and articulate the ideas contained within this dissertation.
This thesis explores the notion that autobiography is an inherently ambivalent form in which personal quests for selfhood interact with and participate in broader historical narratives embodying tensions and contradictions that lie deep within the mythic life of the culture. Although autobiography represents a conscious effort to negotiate a unique voice out of the multiplicity of ideologies that constitutes subjectivity, it can also be seen as a mediated palimpsest in which individual expressions of difference concerning origins and identity are inextricably bound up with historically determined and largely unconscious narratives centring on national provenance.

The similarity of plot, character, motif and image that underlies each of the personal stories in this study of Australian autobiography suggests that each can be read as an individualised variation on the wider cultural themes of exclusion and homecoming, belonging and loss that characterise mainstream white European depictions of Australian geo-mythic space. The dominance of childhood stories that embody the double vision of Australia as both paradise and purgatory suggest a literary tradition in which notions of loss and failure are central to an understanding of national character. The motif of the traumatised exile searching for a lost and unattainable home in the golden valleys of an imaginary childhood is an essentially European and Romantic discourse in which the pain of exclusion is
counterbalanced by the Edenic possibilities of transcendency and homecoming. This search for an unattainable national space in the myth of a prelapsarian childhood may provide comforting anodynes for the trauma of exile but it also produces orthodox narratives which depoliticise the individual by transmuting the interested actions of everyday life into the disinterested powerlessness of essential childhood.

However, since autobiography is revelatory and confessional in nature and often positions the protagonist as a victim in stories about difference, powerlessness and injustice, the form has radical, subversive and oppositional possibilities. The secret stories of convicts, homosexuals, migrants, Aborigines, artists and women represent an unauthorised and covert history which, by exposing the dominant cultural forces that suppress and silence minorities, open up the secret country of the untold past. These forms of autobiography in which positionality and agency drive the narration can result in the foregrounding of subjects who consciously and actively speak out against the official storytelling strategies of the dominant community. The interpolation of these unspeakable voices into the mainstream can produce hybrids in which fresh identities emerge out of an essentially conservative medium.