The Boeotian Strain

Les Murray

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Abstract
In his collection Living in a Calm Country, published in 1975, Peter Porter has a poem which I propose to read to you today as the basis of my talk. This poem would have been written sometime in 1974, and interestingly, at about the same time, I was writing a poem on a similar theme, and containing the same key concept, that of the Boeotian strain in Australian culture. What occurred was a sort of coincidental and unwitting literary conversation between Peter and myself. This is a surprisingly common phenomenon; things that are in the air are frequently picked up by more than one mind at around the same time.
In his collection *Living in a Calm Country*, published in 1975, Peter Porter has a poem which I propose to read to you today as the basis of my talk. This poem would have been written sometime in 1974, and interestingly, at about the same time, I was writing a poem on a similar theme, and containing the same key concept, that of the Boeotian strain in Australian culture. What occurred was a sort of coincidental and unwitting literary conversation between Peter and myself. This is a surprisingly common phenomenon; things that are in the air are frequently picked up by more than one mind at around the same time. Edison and Swan inventing the electric light almost simultaneously in America and England is just one of a host of examples. I should also mention that this talk is an expanded version of an essay I wrote and which will be appearing in *Australian Poems in Perspective*, edited by Peter Elkin, to be published soon by the University of Queensland Press. At the end of the talk, I will read you my own poem on the Boeotian strain, to illustrate the dialogue we were unwittingly having at opposite ends of the earth. Peter’s poem analyses the matter, while mine celebrates it. But here is Peter’s poem:

**ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN’S HESIOD**

For 5p at a village fête I bought
Old Homer-Lucan who popped Keats’s eyes,
Print smaller than the Book of Common Prayer
But Swinburne at the front, whose judgement is
Always immaculate. I’ll never read a tenth
Of it in what life I have left to me
But I did look at *The Georgics*, as he calls
*The Works and Days*, and there I saw, not quite
The view from Darien but something strange
And balking – Australia, my own country
And its edgy managers – in the picture of
Euboean husbandry, terse family feuds
And the minds of gods tangential to the earth.

Like a Taree smallholder splitting logs
And philosophizing on his dangling billies,
The poet mixes hard agrarian instances
With sour sucks to his brother. Chapman, too,
That perpetual motion poetry machine,
Grinds up the classics like bone meal from
The abbatoirs. And the same blunt patriotism,
A long-winded, emphatic, kelpie yapping
About our land, our time, our fate, our strange
And singular way of moons and showers, lakes
Filling oddly – yes, Australians are Boeotians,
Hard as headlands, and, to be fair, with days
As robust as the Scythian wind on stone.

To teach your grandmother to suck eggs
Is a textbook possibility in New South Wales
Or outside Ascra. And such a genealogy too!
The Age of Iron is here, but oh the memories
Of Gold – pioneers preaching to the stringybarks,
Boring the land to death with verses and with
Mental Homes. ‘Care-flying ease’ and ‘Gift-devouring kings’ become the Sonata of the Shotgun
And Europe’s Entropy; for ‘the axle-trec, the quern,
The hard, fate-fostered man’ you choose among
The hand castrator, kerosene in honey tins
And mystic cattlemen: the Land of City States
Greets Australia in a farmer’s gods.

Hesiod’s father, caught in a miserable village,
Not helped by magic names like Helicon,
Sailed to improve his fortunes, and so did
All our fathers – in turn, their descendants
Lacked initiative, other than the doctors' daughters
Who tripped to England. Rough-nosed Hesiod
Was sure of his property to a slip-rail –
Had there been grants, he'd have farmed all
Summer and spent winter in Corinth
At the Creative Writing Class. Chapman, too,
Would vie with Steiner for the Pentecostal
Silver Tongue. Some of us feel at home nowhere,
Others in one generation fuse with the land.

I salute him then, the blunt old Greek whose way
Of life was as cunning as organic. His poet
Followers still make me feel déraciné
Within myself. One day they're on the campus,
The next in wide hats at a branding or
Sheep drenching, not actually performing
But looking the part and getting instances
For odes that bruse the blood. And history,
So interior a science it almost seems
Like true religion – who would have thought
Australia was the point of all that craft
Of politics in Europe? The apogee, it seems,
Is where your audience and its aspirations are.

'The colt, and mule, and horn-retorted steer' –
A good iambic line to paraphrase.
Long storms have blanched the million bones
Of the Aegean, and as many hurricanes
Will abrade the headstones of my native land:
Sparrows acclimatize but I still seek
The permanently upright city where
Speech is nature and plants conceive in pots,
Where one escapes from what one is and who
One was, where home is just a postmark
And country wisdom clings to calendars,
The opposite of a sunburned truth-teller's
World, haunted by precepts and the Pleiades.

Now, this is perhaps too dense a poem to read aloud effectively,
because so many of its references on the page need to be looked at,
savouréd and considered before they yield their full flavour. It is
what I call a page-poem, rather than one adapted to reading aloud, but apart from maybe projecting it on a screen, that was about the only way I had of presenting it to you.

Hesiod's dates are not precisely known, but some time in the eighth century before Christ, so the tradition goes, a youth of that name, son of an immigrant farmer from the Greek colonies in Asia Minor, was guarding his father’s flocks on the side of the sacred mountain Helikon, in rural Boeotia. The mountain had probably been a holy place since long before the Aeolian Greeks trekked down from the north with their shaggy cattle and their Indo-European sky gods. Perhaps the most potent magical site on the mountain was the spring named Hippokrene, the Horse’s Fountain, supposed to have been set flowing by a touch of Pegasus’ hoof, but probably a ritual spot long before the flying horse and his heroic Greek rider were heard of. It may have been a mother-goddess site; springs with names alluding to a horseshoe or hoof often are. This would explain the compensating presence nearby of an altar dedicated to the father god Zeus. Somewhere near this altar and spring, that is to say, in a place where the two religious principles were in balance, the young Hesiod had a vision in which the Muses, immortal maidens begotten by Zeus upon Memory, gave him a staff of flowering laurel, breathed a ‘godly voice’ into him and commanded him to make poems.

Real or metaphorical – and many poets have had similar visionary inductions into their craft – the experience led to the creation of two long poem cycles, the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*. These poems are second only to the two great Homeric epics in the number of progeny they have generated and the cultural influence they have had. The *Theogony* is the source of much of our knowledge of Greek religion and this alone makes it one of the great historic resources of the Western mind, a sublime marble quarry of imagery and myth for well over two thousand years. The *Works and Days*, in turn, stands at the beginning of a long literary succession, coming down through Theocritus and Virgil and the high vernacular poetry of the Middle Ages to Wordsworth and Frost and a hundred more in modern times; most recently, in
Australia, it surfaces in David Campbell's own *Works and Days* and Geoffrey Lehmann's *Ross' Poems*.

Hesiod was the earliest poet in Western literature to write in the first person about his own concerns — this was not the dramatic first person of reported speech. He was also the originator of many themes, notably that of the successive Ages of Man, the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Iron Age and so on. He was the first poet to praise the heroism and dignity of labour, as distinct from war. In these two latter themes alone, he can perhaps be seen as the ultimate and most ancient progenitor of socialism. In a much wider sense, the works of Hesiod stand on one side of a rift that runs through the whole of Western culture, a fundamental tension that for convenience we may call the war between Athens and Boeotia. Peter Porter's superb poem is concerned with this rift at once on a cultural level and on a personal level.

What is at issue are two contrasting models of civilization between which Western man has vacillated; he has now drawn the rest of mankind into the quarrel and resolving this tension may be the most urgent task facing the world in modern times. In the past, Athens, the urbanizing, fashion-conscious principle removed from and usually insensitive to natural, cyclic views of the world, has won out time and again, though the successes of Boeotia have been far from negligible. Now, there are senses in which we may say that the old perennial struggle is coming to a head, with Australia finding herself, very much to her surprise, to be one of the places in which some sort of synthesis might at last be achieved. If this is to happen here, though, we will need to clear our heads of many remnant colonial obeisances and look at things clearly and straight. Let us start by looking at the origins of the struggle, in their artistic dimension.

From the time of its rise in the sixth century B.C., urban-minded, slave-holding Athens was always scornful of rural, traditional-minded, predominantly smallholding Boeotia. The Boeotians, living to the north-west of Attica, were held to be rude, boorish and stupid, their country swampy and cheerless, their arts
old-fashioned and tedious. The conflict went deeper than mere rivalry between Aeolian and Ionian Greeks; Athens and Thebes, the chief city of Boeotia, were competitors and occasionally enemies. Even the great Boeotian poet Pindar, honoured all over the Greek-speaking world for his eulogies of victors in the Pythian and Olympic Games, fell foul of this enmity. When he wrote his famous lines in praise of Athens:

O thou shining, violet-crowned, most-worthy-of-song
bulwark of Hellas, glorious Athens, city of the gods,

his own city-state of Thebes imposed a fine on him.

Above and beyond its artistic dimension, the rivalry may have threatened Athens more seriously than we now realize. The vehemence of Athenian scorn at least is suggestive. Later, Athenian dominance as an educational and cultural centre, particularly during Roman times, may have caused the disappearance of works that might otherwise have revealed a more brilliant Boeotian tradition than that which we can now trace. There is evidence that a specifically Boeotian style of poetry, called by that name, may have existed in Homeric times and later. Some elements in the Iliad, especially, may be Boeotian. The famous catalogue of ships is a case in point. The catalogue seems to be a typically Boeotian device. Athenians count, we may say, while Boeotians list and name. The distinction makes for a profound difference in cultures that follow one model or the other. Similarly, the description of the shield of Achilles may be a Boeotian element in the Iliad, and if it is, that too is significant, as this description is the earliest piece of artistic criticism extant.

For all the scorn heaped on Boeotia by progressive Athens, two of the three greatest and most influential poets of classical Greece came from there: both Hesiod and Pindar were Boeotians, as was the woman poet Corinna. The third great name, of course, is that of Homer, who may not have been one person at all. After Boeotia, we would have to look to Alexandria for a comparable cradle of poets and poetic modes. By contrast, the only great
Athenian poets were dramatists. Athens’ glory lay in her drama, her philosophers and her political theorists. All of these are urban and, in our expanded sense, typically ‘Athenian’ pursuits. Boeotia, in her perennial incarnations, replaces theatre with dance or pageant – or sport; philosophy she subordinates to religion and precept, and in politics, she habitually prefers daimon to demos. Mistrustful of Athens’ vaunted democracy – which, after all, involved only a minority of voters living on the labour of a large slave population – she clings to older ideas of the importance of family and the display of individual human quality under stress. If aristocracy is her besetting vice, that of Athens is probably abstraction. Each has its price, artistically, and it may be that poetry, of all but the dramatic sort, is ultimately a Boeotian art. It often has that appearance, when seen against our modern, increasingly Platonist metropolis. Drama, on the other hand, seems to be an almost wholly Athenian art. Conflict and resolution take the place, in a crowded urban milieu, of the Boeotian interest in celebration and commemoration, modes that perennially appear in spacious, dignified cultures.

Again, if aristocracy is a besetting vice of Boeotian culture, at least in the broadest sense – and we should remember that the purest Boeotian art we possess, the Hesiodic poems, does not arise from an aristocratic milieu, but rather from a world of small landowners – the parallel vice of Atheno-Alexandrian art is elitism. We have been mesmerized during the last few centuries by evolutionary ideas that contrast ‘primitive’ with advanced, progressive with stagnant, dynamic with decadent – the basic metaphor has been stretched many ways. It has taken the Second World War and the decolonization after that of much of the world to reveal the iniquities perpetrated by Western cultures, using these sorts of ideas as their cover and justification, on traditional cultures. We are beginning to be conscious of a nexus of thinking and of oppression here that extends all the way from personal to international relations and goes far beyond the bounds of art. In terms of our polarity, Athens has recently oppressed Boeotia on a
world scale and has caused the creation all over the world of more or less Westernized native elites, which often enthusiastically continue the oppression – China is one of the few nations in which this tendency has been successfully resisted. Elsewhere, Athens has once again overborne Boeotia on the same old basis as that used in Classical times and has once again made herself the ally and preceptress of Rome, that is to say, of imperialist force.

Within Western culture itself, it is possible that not only the oppressive use of contrasts such as modern versus old-fashioned or cultivated versus rude, but even the very notion of such polarities may ultimately derive from the submerged and almost forgotten conflict between Athens and Boeotia in early Classical times. Again, the ultimate coercive success of the Athenian model may be said to have been confirmed and greatly strengthened by Rome. We may say, altering the adage, that when Rome conquered Greece, she was herself conquered not by Greece but by Athens. Always, predominantly, Rome accepted Athenian and Alexandrian biases and standards and added themes of her own to them. The contrast between metropolitan and provincial is a case in point; this was only an implicit element in the older, decentralized Greek culture. It was only with the conquest of that world by Alexander the Great and the establishment of so-called Hellenistic civilization in the East that coterie art became the norm, with Kallimachos of Alexandria writing ‘I hate everything public’. Horace’s Odi profanum vulgus has its origin here. Rome also greatly narrowed the field of ‘high’ culture and continued that removal of high art out of the purview of the great mass of the people which has been a recurrent curse in subsequent Western cultures. In Classical Greece, art was a matter of public performance and concern; since Roman times, it has persistently tended to become a luxury product, a matter for coteries and high society. The disappearance of the older Plautine tradition of popular drama and the relegation of the popular audience to the circus and the racecourse is a case in point. Rome is the great exaggerator of Hellenic tendencies; she is Athens without proportion.
Before Ausonius, almost the single notable exception to what we have been saying is Virgil, who worked his way, as it were, backwards through Arcadian art — an Athenian style evolved to deal with Boeotian material in an emasculated way — in his Theocritean *Ecologues* to the pure Boeotian mode of his *Georgics* and thence to the epic. This is a fruitful path, which has been followed many times since. Present-day conservationists and urban drop-outs often follow it, turning to the country for romantic, basically Arcadian reasons and discovering harder Boeotian truths there. The distinction between the Boeotian and the idyllic Arcadian pastoral strands in our tradition might be the subject of another complete lecture — for now, I would only point to the relative artificiality of the Theocritean idyll as compared with the *Works and Days*. A similar comparison might be made between, say, Milton's *Lycidas* and Langland's ploughman. In Australia, interestingly, the idyll itself has only tended to be successful when it is Boeotian in flavour; here, the comparison might be drawn between Norman Lindsay's invocations of Pan plus nymphs and the verse of Banjo Patterson. Getting back to the point, though, we might say that because of the atypical nature of Virgil's works, Dante's invocation of him was appropriate and not culturally disruptive in the Middle Ages — a period in which the highest Boeotian civilization in Western history flourished. Classical allusion, when passed through a Virgilian filter, did not interfere with Dante's deeply Boeotian purpose of creating a vernacular poetry capable of handling sublime matters.

The revival of Classical learning on a large scale, the so-called renaissance, was of course and by contrast deeply disruptive. It coincided with and aided the centralizing of power in royal courts and the end of the old decentralized life of Europe. Athens always tends to capture ruling classes when they become estranged from their territorial bases of power, and the urban merchant classes, cut off from the land from which their forebears probably fled, naturally confuse eminence with excellence and ape their betters. In Europe, the great autochthonous arts and fresh beginnings of
the Middle Ages were dismissed as 'Gothic' and replaced by self-conscious Roman-Athenian revivals, which eventually generated new high styles that remained dominant until that muddled upsurge we call the Romantic Revival. This last, of course, was not so much a Boeotian revival as a confused eruption of Boeotian and other elements, which the dominant classicizing styles had threatened to refine, or snub, out of existence. The Romantic period has not yet ended, of course, though it has become repetitive, decadent and sometimes actively violent. It has placed a number of cultural, as well as literal, bombs in our luggage. Boeotia, made desperate and driven to seek strange allies, becomes Nazi Germany, or present-day Cambodia, or some of the more fanatically anti-Western (but still irretrievably Westernizing) of the new African states.

Within our civilization, we repeatedly see a pattern of autonomous, distinctive art at the beginning of each people's cultural history, followed by the importation and imposition of the general Romano-Athenian cultural inheritance. In some cases, the native tradition will live on more or less vigorously at the level of folk art, with idiosyncratic works of strongly 'popular' flavour surfacing from time to time within the purlieus of the 'high' culture. Sometimes the native art, and the Boeotian order that it carries, will prove resistant. In the Gaelic-speaking world of Ireland and Scotland, it took the effective destruction of the native language to break the stubbornly Boeotian cultural preferences of the people. Again, in each of the newly conquered and newly settled countries of the New World, the same pattern is repeated. Each New World people gets, as it were, a short period of anarchic, makeshift cultural independence in which to produce its Chaucers and Langlands and its literary and artistic Gothic cathedrals, or at least the foundations for them. With the consolidation of an elite of the European sort in the country, and the establishment of the kind of educational and cultural set-up that goes with that, the period of distinctiveness normally comes to an end, or at least becomes embattled. If the new country is lucky, it will produce distinctive
figures of themes during its ‘Boeotian’ phase whose influence is powerful enough to modify the form that ‘Athenian’ civilization takes there when it is brought in. Whitman, a deeply Boeotian poet, is an example of such a figure. The tradition he founded is still productive and part of the reason for our being able to speak of a distinctive American poetry. In Australia, we did not get a comparable figure among our early poets, but instead we got a distinctive rurally-based popular tradition, as articulated through folksong, through the literary ballads of the Nineties, and through a number of writers in this century. Most notable, perhaps, was the attempt of the Jindyworobak school of the forties to integrate two of the great autonomous traditions of Australia, the rural-popular and the Aboriginal. At best, these fruitions of distinctiveness, these new departures full of idiosyncrasy and character, are the treasures of nationality and are among the few justifications there can be for the existence of nations and separate peoples. Athens is lasting, but Boeotia is ever-new, continually recreated, always writing afresh about the sacred places and the generations of men and the gods.

Written from the vantage of Peter Porter’s personally necessary and long-maintained exile in London, his poem is a work of high importance as a cultural document, as well as being vivid and lively. However, I suspect that its argument will be widely resented, or evaded, in Australia. The judgement that it passes on Australian culture is precisely the one that many home-grown Athenians have been at pains to deny or deplore. And yet, in any sense broad enough to admit the great majority of Australians, our culture is still in its Boeotian phase and any distinctiveness we possess is still firmly anchored in the bush. However, we may resent the fact, too, we are seen almost universally in this light by others, and are held to our stereotypes with affection and scorn. Colonially obedient in so many ways, yet we fail to heed the metropolis when it tells us to be ourselves. Perhaps the fact that the advice often comes in the form of a dismissal may make us reluctant to take it.
Porter's poem is an ode with a flexible but never sloppy three-beat line, set out in six thirteen-line verse-paragraphs. It is not metrically complex or highly wrought; although he is a profound student of music and opera, Peter Porter does not usually seek after musical effects or dense interweavings of sound in his verse, though the construction of his poems often follows a quasi-musical logic. In most of his work, he will establish his metrical base early in a poem and then stick with it right to the end. He is clearly more interested in phrase and reference, in the poetry of what is said. He once worked in advertising – not entirely a bad training for a poet – and perhaps this sharpened his appreciation of phrase-making and succinct formulations. More than any other poet now writing, I think his work has the metropolitan tone, at once intellectual and colloquial, at home with rapid shifts of level, sudden deflations and witty juxtapositions. A Porter poem often works by heaping up a crucible-full of arcane and stylish references (he has the true urban and Athenian appreciation of style and of shifting stylistic resonances, developed to a very high degree of discrimination) and heating it with sheer intelligence, till a clear drop of unforgettable imagery or wisdom, most often elegaic, flows out. As I have said elsewhere, Porter is one of the best writers of last lines in the business.

At first sight, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Hesiod' seems more discursive than is usual in Porter's work, and it is more relaxed on the surface – until you notice that not a word in it is superfluous. It carefully matches up epithets from Hesiod's Works and Days, often in quotes, with strongly flavoured bits of Australian vernacular culture, and all the matchings are dead right. As far as the lore is concerned, the reference to kerosene in honey tins is a bit worrying: up home, it was mostly honey in kerosene tins. But let that pass. The poem is deeply Australian in many other ways, too. There is, for example, the reticence that prefers to say 'within myself', where another culture might speak frankly and, we fear, gaseously about the soul, the spirit, etc. And there is the way it catches, with just the right harsh image about 'kelpie yap-
ping’, all the features of Boeotian art and tradition here that so grate on the sensibilities of our respectable Athenians. Advocates of an Athenian metropolitan model for Australian culture often point to the facts of demography, as if our habit of crowding into the cities didn’t need, and instinctively seek, a strong corrective. We may be highly urbanized etc., but the society still has as it were a rural muse. And wilfully to go against the grain of the culture we have, instead of trying to enrich and develop it, immediately alienates one from the broad mass of the people, and this is one cause of the frequent raucousness of Australian avant-gardes. One can put oneself in the position of a Patrick White, at once enormously privileged and deeply disaffected, refusing compassion to all but a few freakish elements of the society. Or one may turn to making trendy populist gestures in which the people rightly do not believe. The fact is that ‘high’ Western art is now in a crisis and can no longer offer any useful paradigms for humane living. Luckily for us, the decay involved is an imported thing, and merely something to which a certain class feels it owes an allegiance. There is a very hard implicit suggestion for such people contained at once in the last two lines of the poem and in the autobiographical facts that underlie and inform the poem as a whole: this is the suggestion that Athenians do not really belong in Australia and might as well follow Porter’s own example of self-exile. Nowadays, the direction of such exile would likely be more often America than London.

Above all of the poem’s many felicities, though, it is its cultural relevance that makes it fascinating and, in the critical sense, enormously productive. Once it raises the part-historical, part-metaphorical conflict between Athens and Boeotia, and identifies Australian culture as essentially Boeotian, its radiance, to use Aquinas’s term, spreads out in all directions and illuminates all sorts of things beyond those explicitly mentioned in the text. One even begins to notice the ultimate non-urbanity of works we had thought were secure classics of high Athenian art here. Slessor, for example, can suddenly be seen as a poet whose work followed the
classic Virgilian progression from willed Athenian literariness slowly but surely towards a profoundly Boeotian achievement, culminating in the great funeral ode, ‘Five Bells’ and in the democratic funerary commemoration of ‘Beach Burial’. He is a city poet, but not, we begin to see, a metropolitan one. Rather, his work at once constitutes and points to the possibility of a kind of urban art appropriate to Australia, with her wide, scattered, half-Boeotian garden cities, and to modes of literature that might yet help us to counterbalance other, dangerously cosmopolitan, imports. All this becomes a little ironic, when we remember Slessor’s strong concern, and the concern of that whole Vision school of Lindsayite Arcadians, to oust the bush from what they considered to be its excessive pre-eminence in our literature. What they ultimately achieved was to extend the range of a strongly unitary culture when it needed extending.

Whether the pre-eminence of the ballads and other vernacular poetry was excessive at one time or not, it is true that these sorts of writing remain the core of whatever specifically Australian poetry the nation’s people still value and refer to. And it is here, with the position of the people to whom Athens perenially offers nothing and whom she disdains as hoi polloi, the Ockers, ‘your average suburban yobbos’ and the like, that I have to begin to fight against Peter’s poem, or rather against its untimely, if personally valid and honest conclusion. I cannot believe in that ‘permanently upright city’ of willed disengagement from the past and unending personal development. And even if I could, surely now would be the worst possible time to go seeking it, at least among the literal metropolises of Europe. Peter says all this, however, in the phrase ‘Europe’s Entropy’, implying that an almost Old Testament fear of the wicked metropolis still felt by some Australians is merely a theme of ours, a convention one can subscribe to or not.

Fair enough. So let’s come at it another way. One of the few Athenian features that has ‘taken’ in Australian society has to do with the image of the artist. In Boeotia, he is a craftsman, with some remnant of priestly dignity. In Athens, nowadays, he is an
intellectual, a member of a class for which entropy and the corrosive analysis of value are principles of life. Or he is a Bohemian, a licensed buffoon, a disruptive element expected by Platonists of all persuasions to threaten the public order, usually pretty harmlessly, and to generate new styles of behaviour and adornment. Just as Romano-Athenian art, in its decay, tends towards excessive satire (Rome's only distinctive contribution to literature), towards Dada and the absurd and the ultimate scrambling of all values, so our modern Athenian artists are subtly encouraged to abandon the Works and cultivate the Life, and the Death, as a performance. The metropolis can offer the fierce excitements of entropy, but no real cure for the decays it continually exposes. And even the virtues of its faults now seem to be disappearing. With Marcel Duchamp in the early years of this century, we reached the era of the Avant-Garde. As the American critic Clement Greenberg points out, it was at this stage that the sense of shock and outrage felt by the public at the appearance of new styles of art ceased to be a by-product of real novelty and became the object of much new art. Newness became a set of 'looks', of gestures, and the appearance of artistic innovation became an effect, and came within the range of uninspired calculation. In poetry as in many other arts, the pursuit of real or pretended novelty of course alienated the broad reading public which had existed for it in the 19th century, and delivered us into the doubtful shelter of coteries and universities. In such surroundings, a quasi-politicised avant-garde has recently flourished in Australia, and at one time consciously tried to take over the whole centre-stage of Australian literature. It failed to do so because its products were simply not good enough; the modernist rituals could be seen as repetitive, cyclic and derivative, and the practitioners, with one or two exceptions, lacked the necessary talent or even intelligence. A few years ago, the metropolis could still offer intense intellectual satisfaction in artistic form, but now the age of the great intellectual aerialists seems to have almost passed away. With W. H Auden dead, Porter himself is one of the few really first-rate intellectual poets left. As
the older European values crumble away, Europe’s artists begin, often, to look simple-minded and lacking in subtlety; under socialist influence, many are making self-consciously ‘proletarian’ gestures and trying, often clumsily, to express attitudes that we have been articulating and refining for generations in the New World.

Perhaps I am being simple-minded myself, in seeming to confuse Porter’s upright city with any literal metropolis. The ideal city is ultimately in the mind, and is glimpsed in the art a person produces. This makes Peter’s position a lonely one – and, in fact, many passages in the poem give us a sense of loneliness, of isolation sought and accepted. This may be how it has to be. To shift our paralel just a bit, Athens can’t be restored, as a city of art, in Hellenistic times. Still less during a period of barbarian irruptions. There is wisdom in Australia’s Boeotian ness; it may be a good sheet-anchor for us during the period of collapse of many of our parent cultures – many, because not all of our culture derives from Europe, just as not all Australians are of European descent. Some, the black Australians, have been here for tens of thousands of years and their culture is a Boeotian resource of immeasurable value for us all. Again, the idea of our deliberately remaining Boeotian is full of exciting possibilities. It would be something, indeed, to break with Western culture by not taking, even now, the characteristic second step into alienation, into elitism and the relegation of all places except one or two urban centres to the sterile status of provincial no-man’s-land largely deprived of any art or any creative self-confidence. This is what is at stake. The centre of Athens isn’t the Panthenon, but the Agora, the chatty, educative market-place – but the centre of Boeotia is every place held sacred by any Boeotian. Interestingly, we have admitted this as a definite principle in the case of the Aborigines. This may be a brake on our denying the principle outright as regards our other constituent cultures. Perhaps in saying that we are still Boeotian in the essentials of our culture, Peter’s poem has put its finger on a real if subterranean reluctance to take that second and fatal Western step. And this despite the fact that our education system is
Athenian from top to bottom and generates a terrific pressure in favour of the centralizing metropolitan pattern of culture.

A nation, a people, is always of more value to the rest of mankind if it remains itself – where else are new ideas and new models for living to come from, if not from idiosyncratic human variety on a scale large enough to command attention? It may just be reserved for us to bring off the long-needed reconciliation of Athens with Boeotia and create that lasting organic country where urban and rural no longer imply a conflict, and where one discovers ever more richly what one is and where one stands and how to grow from there without loss or the denial of others. But our ultimate choices in this will be made by deep movements in the life and mind of our people, and may in fact be made irrevocably before anyone detects what road has been taken. Some years ago, before Peter Porter’s very candid and generous reconciliation with his homeland, in an interview he said: ‘I’ve kept my Australian passport; I don’t quite know why’. Pindar of Kynoskephalai (literally, Dog-heads – perhaps not a bad equivalent for post-war Brisbane, the city Peter left to go to London) also travelled far from home for professional reasons; he paid his fine, too, for praising a splendid city that deserved praise, and likewise never renounced his Theban citizenship. However hard I may have presumed to argue with the last eight lines of Peter’s poem, it is nevertheless one of the central works in our literature, on a par with the very finest poems we have to show. Its wider significance goes well beyond our place and time.

So much for the conversation, and the argument, in prose. The poem with which I promised to conclude this talk is one entitled ‘The Returnees’, which I first published in Poetry Australia in 1975 but which was written towards the end of 1974. I hope it will cast some further light on the matters we have been discussing. Amongst the many things it celebrates, if we look at it retrospectively, is my profound agreement with Porter’s naughty thesis.
THE RETURNEE

As we were rowing to the lakes
our oars were blunt and steady wings

the tanbark-coloured water was
a gruel of pollen: more coming down
hinted strange futures to our cells

the far hills ancient under it
the corn flats black-green under heat
were cut in an antique grainy gold

it was the light of Boeotian art

bestowing tourbillions that drowned
the dusty light we had used up
pulling the distance to us, we
were conscious of a lifelong sound

on everything, that low fly-humming
melismatic untedious endless
note that a drone-pipe-plus-chants or

(shielding our eyes, rocking the river)

a ballad – some ballads – catch, the one
some paintings and many yarners summon
the ground-note here of unsnubbing art

cicadas were in it, and that Gothic
towering of crystals in the trees
Jock Neilson cutting a distant log

still hearing, we saw a snake ahead
winding, being his own schnorkel

as slant in the swimming highlights, only
his head betrayed him, leading two
ripples and a scaled-down swirl. We edged
closer, were defied and breathed at.
A migrant, perhaps? A pioneer?
or had a kookaburra dropped

him, missing the organ-busting ground
and even the flat of the drinking-ground?

Touching the oars and riding, we
kept up with the blunt, heat-tasting head
debating its life, and sparing it

which is the good of Athens. Where
the rotted milk-wharf took the sun
flint-hard on top, dappling below

(remembered children danced up there
spinning their partners, the bright steel cans

a way of life. But a way of life.)

the snake rose like a Viking ship
signed mud with a scattering flourish and
was into the wale of potato ground

like a whip withdrawn. We punt ed off.

Oar-leather jumping in spaced kicks
against the swivel-screw of rowlocks
we hauled the slow bush headlands near

drinking beer, and talking a bit

such friendliness shone into us, such
dry complex cheer, insouciant calm

out of everything, the brain-shaped trees,
the wrinkling middle gleam, the still
indifferently well-wooded hills, it was
like rowing to meet your very best
passionately casual and dead friends
and feast with them on a little island

or an angel leaning down to one
queueing on the Day, to ask

What was the best throw that you did?

that note, raised to the pitch of tears:
tower of joking, star of skill,
gate of sardonyx and worn gold

Black men and Rosenberg and I
have beliefs in common, I exclaimed

and you were agreeing that Mao Tse-tung
had somehow come to Dunsinane –

Any more heightening and it would
have been a test, but the centre we
had stirred stopped down again, one notch
to happiness, and we were let dip
our points in the wide stopped water and
reclaim our motion. Bloodwood trees

round there were in such a froth of bloom
that honey dripped on shale and gummed
blady-grass in wigwams and ant-towns

sweetness, infusing, followed us
Reality is somebody’s, you said
with a new and wryly balanced smile

we’re country, and Western, I replied.