

# James Ley

I am here today in my capacity as a literary critic, and more specifically as a public critic. Though I have had some dealings with the world of academia over the years, most of my work has taken the form of cultural journalism — essays and book reviews predominantly — written for various newspapers and literary publications. The position I occupy with the ecosystem of Australian literature is thus precarious and relatively minor; the nature of my work is distinctly unglamorous.

I do nevertheless believe that the kind of criticism I write contributes in its own small way to the general health of the literary culture, that it performs a necessary function. Criticism is an essential activity, in my view, because the meaning of literary work is never self-evident, nor is it fixed. The contexts in which a work might be understood are always changing and can never be taken for granted. By its very nature, the act of interpretation cannot be pre-emptive. The very first demand a work of literature makes upon its readers is that they open themselves to the aesthetic experience of that work, engage with its specific view of the world, try to understand and reflect upon the ideas it seeks to convey, whatever these may be.

There is, in this sense, something inherently outward-looking about the critical act. As a mode of occasional writing, it always starts from a point at which the perspective of the critic has been provisionally suspended. His initial concern is not what he thinks, but what someone else thinks. And he is no less interested in how they think. Critics fail at their task most conspicuously, it seems to me, when they neglect this primary duty to interpret, when they abrogate their responsibility to approach the work on its own terms, when the necessary attentiveness is not in evidence and they lapse into mere prejudice — which is to say, when they quite literally pre-judge.

This is not to suggest that any given act of literary criticism will escape the limitations or personal biases of the critic, or that it will transcend the cultural myopia of its particular time and place. Exercising one's judgement is an unavoidable part of the critical process — in fact, the word 'critic' is derived from the Greek *kritikos*, meaning 'to judge'. What I am suggesting is that judgements are secondary and, in certain respects, less significant than the process of arriving at them. I am suggesting that criticism is best understood as a practice, rather than a theory. Its importance resides in its necessary element of pragmatism, which acknowledges the fact that a literary culture is a living entity that can only sustain itself through a process of constant renewal, a willingness to strive towards new understandings, an openness to new connections and external influences. Traditions must evolve; established notions of value can endure only to the extent that they resist ossification and face the future. The job of criticism, as I see it, is to engage with this ongoing process, bring the arguments and ideas that are latent in literature to a degree of explicitness. It does this by taking the solitary experience of reading and making it communal. The public critical discussion, which I take to include all attempts to articulate some kind of response to a work of literature — whether the response is that of an amateur reader or a professional critic, a journalist or an academic — is not extraneous or external to the evolving literary culture, but an intrinsic part of its development.

For these reasons, I am inclined to reject the common characterisation of literary critics as cultural

arbiters or 'gatekeepers', who are supposedly seeking to impose their values and interpretations, and who are assumed to be interfering with the otherwise natural and unproblematic relationship between writers and readers. I think critics are better characterised in a way that is more or less antithetical to this view — a way that is, not surprisingly, rather more positive. I prefer to see criticism as a natural and indeed inevitable extension of a substantive interest in literature. Critics do not divide writer from reader; they collapse the distinction, insist that these identities are not separate, but entwined and complementary. They are themselves writers, whose work is a modest contribution to the corpus of literature, and the nature of that contribution is to be visible and (one hopes) articulate readers.

Australian culture has long been haunted by the twin spectres of insularity and parochialism, but there are some indications that it is outgrowing the inferiority complex that comes with being a relatively young nation with a colonial past. Our literary culture at the present time is notable for its energy and confidence. The local poetry scene is particularly robust. We are currently enjoying something of a renaissance in Indigenous writing, as any number of talented First Nations authors are stepping forward to claim their rightful place at the centre of the national imagination. There is also a welcome process of diversification going on. Australian writers from many different cultural backgrounds are finding their voices and testifying to their experiences, writing works that are beginning to reflect the true richness of our multicultural immigrant society. These developments are supported by a lively array of literary journals, old and new, and a no less lively publishing industry, in which the creative impetus comes overwhelmingly from small independent publishers, who have come to set the cultural agenda precisely because they are willing to take risks. It perhaps goes without saying that this activity is sustained almost entirely in defiance of commercial imperatives.

Faced with this wealth of creativity, it is hard not to feel that we still lack a critical culture equal to the task of assessing and articulating its full significance, interpreting it in the light of existing Australian literary traditions, and positioning it in the wider context of world literature. The reasons for this are complicated, not easily summarised. They are partly institutional, and partly to do with the intellectual climate more broadly, which has come to place an inordinate value on expressiveness and personal testimony, to treat authenticity as the ultimate arbiter of meaning.

The definition of criticism I have been advocating here takes a different view. It sees the value of criticism in the fact that its origins are responsive rather than expressive. It is a practice that seeks not to foreclose meaning, but to open lines of communication. At the risk of generalising, I think that one of the reasons Australian poetry is animated by such diffuse energies at the present time is that our poets tend to be critically engaged, something that would appear to be less true of our proliferating memoirists and novelists. Poets tend to be highly conscious of the history of their genre, appreciative of its formal innovations, alert to its definitive arguments and to the mercurial power of influence. This kind of critical receptiveness suggests creative possibilities. It takes categories that seem to be static and rigid and puts them in motion. In doing so, it reveals the extent to which literature has the ability to convey very different experiences, transmit ideas across cultural boundaries. Criticism is in this sense fundamental. After all, the most important thing for any book is that it be read.

## James Ley

我今天以文学批评家的身份出席，其实要说的更具体的话，是以公共批评家的身份出席。虽然这么多年来我也多多少少跟学术界有来往，但是我的作品主要是以文化新闻的形式呈现，也就是为报纸和文学作品撰写文章和书评。因此，我在澳大利亚文学界中的地位是属于较不稳定、较不显眼的，而我的作品的性质也较为平淡、不刺激。

可是，我相信我所撰写的评论和提出的批评却对文学界的整体有着积极正面的作用，虽然不显眼，但却也起到必要的作用。我认为批评是一种必要、不可少的活动，因为文学作品的含义并非显而易见，也并非只有一种理解方式。大环境的不断改变容许人们用不同的角度去诠释一件文学作品。对作品的解读与诠释是事先无法决定的。阅读文学作品时，读者从一开始就必须愿意从审美的角度去体验作品，努力体验作品的世界观，沉思并尝试明白作品想表达的任何观点。

因此，从这个角度来说，艺术批评本身是很开放的。作为一种特殊场合的写作形式，文学评论的惯例是首先不从批评家本身的视角出发。批评家最先关注的并非他自己的观点，而是别人的想法和感受，因为他确实很在乎别人的想法。我认为批评家往往会忽略他们的首要任务，也就是要诠释作品，这一点是他们失败的主要原因。当批评家未尽职责，当他们没有按照作品本身对其加以诠释，没有仔细评判作品本身，而是直接大谈自己对作品的偏见，当他们先入为主地论断一件作品时，他们就失败了。

这并不是说文学批评不应该包含批评家本身的个人偏见或局限性，或是文学批评能超越当下的时空背景。在进行批评的过程中，批评家一定要运用判断力，这是无可避免的。事实上，英文的“批评家”一词 critic 就是源自于希腊语 kritikos，意即“判断”。我想要提出的观点是，最终做出的判断其实是次要的，从某方面来说，“最终做出的判断”并没有“做出判断的过程”来的重要。我想说的是，将文学批评视为一项实践、一种行为，比将其视为一种学说要更好。文学批评的重要性在于它的务实性，也就是说批评家承认文学文化是活的，如果文学文化要持续发展下去，就必须不断更新，批评家必须愿意努力得出新的理解，必须愿意考虑新的关联性和外部影响力。传统必须随着时代进步，固定的价值观只有通过抗拒石化和面对未来才能继续存留。我认为文学批评这项工作就需要参与这个持续不断的过程，加以阐明文学作品中蕴含的观念和主张。要达到这个目的，就必须把个人阅读活动从一个人独自从事的活动转变成集体的活动。人对文学作品的反应所做出的描述——无论是一般读者或是专业书评，无论是记者或是学者——我认为都算是公开文学评论的不同形式，而公开文学评论并非独立于生生不息的文学文化，而是文学文化发展的核心部分之一。

有鉴于此，虽然今天很多人将文学批评家视为文化仲裁者或是文化“守门员”，我个人却不同意这个时下流行的见解。他们认为文学批评家试图将他们的观点和价值观加诸于他人，并干扰作家和读者之间看似自然、正常的关系。但是我却认为应该以跟这种观念恰好相反的方式去理解文学批评家，应该以一种比较积极的方式去描述他们。我选择将文学批评视为人对文学怀有浓厚兴趣时所衍生出的自然和必然的行为。文学批评家并不会拆散作家和读者，而是拉近、消除两者间的距离，强调创作和欣赏其实是密不可分、相辅相成的。文学批评家本身也是作家，他们的作品成了文学文库的一小部分。从他们作品的性质来看，批评家也就是善于公开发表言论的读者。

长久以来，人们都担心澳大利亚的文化会对世事保持偏狭的态度。但是如今迹象均表明澳洲虽然建国时间不长，自身也背负着曾是殖民地的历史，但澳大利亚文化却已经摆脱了它原本的自卑情结。澳大利亚现今享有的文学文化极具活力和自信。澳大利亚的诗学创作尤其热络。许多才华洋溢的澳大利亚原住民作家纷纷头角峥嵘，投身于原本就该有他们一席之地的澳大利亚文坛，这使得我们现在有幸身处于一场原住民文学的文艺复兴。澳大利亚文坛也变得日益多元化。来自许多不同文化背景的澳大利亚作家开始用他们的声音描绘自己的经历，越来越多文学作品都积极地反映出澳大利亚多元文化社会的丰富多彩。

澳大利亚文坛的这些发展还得到了各种新旧文学期刊以及澳洲活跃的出版业所支持。小型独立出版商愿意承担商业风险，大力支持新兴文学创作，它们的支持对文坛的发展举足轻重。其实出版商对新兴文学的支持并不符合商业利益最大化的原则，这点也许大家早已意识到了。

面对如此丰富多彩的文学创作，我们不难看出现有的文学批评文化尚未能够充分地评断和阐述这些文学创作的重要性，尚未能够根据目前澳大利亚的文学传统加以诠释这些作品，尚未能够将这些文学创作与当今世界文学做合适的对比。澳大利亚现有的文学批评文化之所以无法做到这些事，其原因相当复杂，无法简而言之。一方面是制度上的问题，一方面是当今广大社会中文学风气的问题；当今的文学风气过分强调表达力和个人经历的价值，并将真实性视为对文学作品做出最终解释的依据。

我今天想在这里主张的文学批评具有不同的含义。我的观点是，批评的价值在于它以“回应”而非“表达”为出发点。文学批评的目的并非对作品的含义盖棺定论，而是要邀请大家彼此沟通交流。或许我这么说会有一竿子打翻一船人的嫌疑，但是我认为今天澳大利亚的诗学艺术之所以能发挥如此强大的影响力，原因就是澳大利亚的诗人大都愿意参与文学批评；而澳大利亚的众多回忆录作家和小说家却相对来说甚少做出这类型的参与。诗人往往特别留意诗歌体裁的历史，特别体会诗的形式方面的创新，特别关注诗的不同定义以及诗能发挥强大的影响力。如果文学家愿意接受批评，往往就能有更大的创作潜能。愿意接受文学批评意味着能把看似僵硬、一成不变的条条框框加以调整改变；如此一来，文学作品就能表达各种不同的体验，在传达思想方面不受文化界线的约束。在这个意义上来说，文学批评是非常基本的。毕竟对任何一本书或文学作品来说，最重要的是有人阅读它。