

The Circus is in Town: Literary Festivals and the Mapping of Cultural Heritage¹

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The word 'festival' has been subjected to considerable inflationary pressure in the last decade. But while the term now seems to grace any event from a school fete to celebrations on a global scale it is also true that the proliferation of festivals goes far beyond linguistic hyperbole and has profoundly affected cultural life in the late twentieth century. If festivals, true to their ritualistic origins, still imply the notion of celebration (Schofield), we should perhaps stop our revelling for a moment to consider what we actually *do* when we celebrate, and what the *object* of our celebrations may be. In the case of literary festivals, is it writing itself, or those who produce it, the writers? Is it perhaps a vague sense of group identity, cultural belonging or imagined community? Is the celebration firmly anchored to a location which lends the events a physical grounding, or are notions of literary heritage and literary community purely conceptual? Are *readers* part of what is being celebrated, are they the celebrants or merely accidental by-standers? What is the role of other participants in literary exchanges: publishers, publicists, critics, reviewers, literary scholars? Is the very notion of celebration perhaps a mere marketing tool masking very different forms of tribal rites: scapegoating, hero worship, sacrifice, verbal jousting and other modes of ritual hostility, scripted performance, vilification, flagellation, catharsis?

One of the outstanding features of literary celebrations is the antagonisms they bring out, against the events themselves or against, and between, the various stakeholders in literature as a cultural institution. Writers are frequently accused of rudeness, insincerity, lack of generosity, or of indulging in 'outsize ego trip[s]' (Barbara Page, Starke 42). Audiences are ridiculed as naive, ignorant, complacent, or, worst of all, middle-aged, middle-class and predominantly female. They are the 'Mrs Knox' (Davis 114), 'Mrs Middle Oz' (Kiley 801), the 'ladies from Camberwell', or the 'blue-rinse set' that festival organisers love to disparage almost as much as they love taking their money. Writers' festivals have been described as 'cultural peep-shows' (O'Donnell 263) or 'exercises in voyeurism' ('In the Flesh'), likened to 'mock-heroic ritual[s]' (Indyk 38) and said to obey 'the shrink-

1. This paper presents early thoughts on an ARC-funded study of literary festivals. My thanks to my co-researchers David McCooey, Kate Manteit, Andrew Hassam and Sneja Gunew for exchange of information and opinions.

wrapped requirement of cultural hypermarket tourism' (O'Donnell 274). To Thea Astley they are 'one of those situations Hitler didn't invent but should have' (Goldsworthy 14). To Mark Davis, they serve a 'blinker, gatekeeping literary culture' (Davis 138); to Peter Craven, they have become 'commerce-driven, middlebrow publishers' fest[s]' (Starke 42). They represent the market-oriented, popularising part of the book industry many academics profess to hate. They also provide ideal occasions for academic-bashing. 'English should be abandoned as a silly course, and all the professors should be put out of a job', proclaimed V. S. Naipaul at Hay-on-Wye in 1996 ('Diary'). Back in 1982 Elizabeth Riddell noted the merciful absence at Adelaide Writers' Week of 'the many academics who do such a splendid job destroying the pleasures of literature' (Starke 170). Other professionals attached to the literary industry do not fare much better: 'There was much talk amongst the scribblers', reported Linley Bagshaw from Adelaide in 1988, 'of the criminal stupidity of reviewers, the soulless ignorance of editors, the utter mendacity of publishers and the supreme indifference of agents' (Starke 40).

The metaphor that has most persistently been applied to literary festivals is that of the circus, and not only because many of them take place under canvas. In 1976 Max Harris referred to Adelaide Writers' Week as 'a two-ring circus of old horses performing old tricks, and young jugglers, dropping their balls to a delighted wagging of puppy tails' (Starke 41). More recently, Robert Dessaix, also in Adelaide, complained that writers these days have to 'figure skate', become 'acrobats, cabaret artists' in order to market their wares (Hall). As always, Les Murray can be relied on to provide the most colourful invective, describing Adelaide's 'tatty circus tent' as 'a stinking, mephitic colossus of calico flatulence', 'the colour of cow's diarrhoea' (Starke 198). At the inaugural Byron Bay festival in 1997, the metaphor seemed to have literalised in the form of a circus trapeze on the festival site, to the delight of many commentators who gave their fantasy free rein: 'On the veranda of the restaurant we ponder the chances of getting Bob Ellis to do a triple pike. David Malouf on the high wire. Helen Garner in sequined frock on the back of a shetland pony. Ah, the festival is but young' (Condon).² As these samples demonstrate, commentary on literary festivals is predominantly offered in impressionistic, gossipy, opinionated modes. With some exceptions (see Goldsworthy, Garner, Indyk, O'Donnell), there has been surprisingly little analysis of this increasingly important cultural phenomenon, though many agree that festivals and similar events are in the process of changing the ways both writers and readers experience their roles as literary producers and consumers.

Festivals or celebrations occasioned by literary heritage are by no means recent phenomena. Stratford-upon-Avon has staged a regular festival to celebrate the birth of Shakespeare since the late eighteenth century. The literary festival as we know it today, with an emphasis on living writers and a more broadly based agenda, in most cases started off as an appendage to a larger festival of the arts. The Edinburgh Festival, which kicked off in 1947, has been a model for a number

2. The Byron Bay Beach Club, site of the festival, is also the home of a circus school, hence the trapeze.

of similar arts and literary festivals throughout the world. In Australia, the inaugural Writers' Week was organised as part of the Adelaide Festival of the Arts in 1960. Interestingly, the first writers' weeks were just that, occasions for Australian *writers* to get together to discuss the business of being a writer; *readers* were not invited to take part in the deliberations. As early as 1964, however, the reading public started to flock to the sessions, to the extent that the organisers had to take special measures to keep them out. In 1966 some sessions were advertised as 'Writers Only' events, and it was suggested that at least published writers should be the only ones permitted to ask questions (Starke 162–3). Since then, the complaint that what started as a seminar for writers has turned into entertainment for the general public has been raised on several occasions, but to little avail: Writers' Week, and the numerous festivals it has inspired, have been given over to the market-place. The pressing question is no longer how to keep the public out, but how to make the events sufficiently inclusive to attract groups for whom literature, in the traditional sense, holds little appeal: youth, readers of popular fiction and non-literary genres, film and television audiences. Along with a broadening appeal across age and class has come a shift from a national to a global focus: the larger festivals today market themselves as international, and compete to secure the biggest international 'names' for their events. The last two decades have seen major writers' festivals established in all the capital cities of Australia; most of them, unlike Adelaide, as annual events. The Melbourne Writers' Festival, in particular, is now vying with Adelaide for status as the major national and international event, and Sydney, which was recreated in a different format in 1998, aspires to a similar status. At the same time, a greater diversification is currently under way: a number of regional centres are organising smaller festivals specifically marketed as focussing on national or even local writers and writing, and special interest groups are setting up festivals with a niche market appeal: the Young Writers' Festival in Newcastle, the National Festival of Poetry, festivals of childrens' writing, bush poetry, science fiction, food writing, and so on.

In his keynote address to the 1998 ASAL conference, 'Australian literature and the public sphere', Graeme Turner discussed 'the difficulty of translating traditional formations of the literary into the discourses of the mass media' (Turner 1). In particular, he referred to the growing gap between academic criticism and the language used to debate literature in the public sphere. Literary festivals complicate this opposition, demonstrating that neither the academic nor the public discourse on literature is single and univocal, and that the gap between competing registers are just as likely to appear within the public or the academic sphere as between them.

Festivals put on stage the opposition between aesthetic and commercial ways of talking about literature. As Clifford Geertz has argued, the Western world has since the late eighteenth century favoured a metalanguage about art and culture in which 'authenticity', 'creativity' and 'uniqueness' are privileged, a metalanguage often openly hostile to any consideration of art as industry and commerce, or to the idea of bureaucratic interference in artistic production (Mercer 13–14). Until

quite recently, this aesthetic discourse was taught in schools and universities, and dominated academic writing about literature. With the introduction of literary theory, cultural studies and cultural policy research this has now changed, and the present generation of academics are more likely to talk about literature in its social, economic, philosophical and cultural contexts, and to criticise as elitist and politically naive the language of their older colleagues. The aesthetic, however, is still high on the agenda of literary festivals, where the discourse is spoken by some academic dissenters and many writers, but primarily by journalists, reviewers and members of the audience. They represent the public sphere in which, according to Graeme Turner, the 'commonsense, traditional definition of literature', 'elitist and mystificatory as it may be, ha[s] fully established its authority and legitimacy' (7). On the other hand, the industrial or commercial parts of the literary enterprise, which may include publishers, funding bodies, marketing personnel, cultural policy makers and the tourism industry, cannot but consider the economic basis of cultural production. Paradoxically, then, this results in the theorising academy finding common ground with the most market-driven parts of the industry, while the objects of their intellectual and financial investments speak as if literature had nothing to do with either academic analysis or commercial interests. Another paradox is that the traditional, aesthetic discourse about art, with its disdain for the market-place, has been found to be a powerful marketing device, so that readers and writers flock to literary festivals, pay and are paid, to discuss literature as an antidote to a world in which 'value' is measured in purely monetary terms.³

Colin Mercer quotes a policy document's description of cultural development as 'a post-industrial mode of wealth creation' (9); the tourism industry uses the concept of 'value adding' when referring to how the cultural product can be enhanced by cultural tourism packaging (Dixon-Ward and Atwell 64). The idea of the festival 'adding value' to the book appeals to many participants. Publishers, book-sellers and writers embrace festivals as opportunities to market and sell more books, but many festival patrons would also endorse the idea of the performance somehow adding to the literary experience. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some consider the event to be of greater value than literature itself, a substitute for reading. But to those who hold the literary product to be of unique value, never to be replaced and never to be translated into monetary terms, the discourse of value-adding is offensive. The cult of 'bigness' which frequently attaches itself to the organisation of festivals, similarly has the power to antagonise those for whom literary value cannot be quantified. When in 1996 I asked Peter Florence, organiser of the Hay-on-Wye festival, how he was going to mark the following year's tenth anniversary of the event, he answered: 'I'll make it the biggest ever. I'll get ten Nobel prize winners' (Ommundsen). Interestingly, organisers of some festivals have now learnt to capitalise on public reaction against festival megalomania:

3. Some festivals (Sydney, Adelaide) offer most sessions free of charge to the public, others (Melbourne) charge a fee for all events.

by advertising their events as small and community-based, by promising that international big names will *not* be in attendance, they adopt a kind of anti-marketing marketing strategy which works particularly well in the area of cultural tourism.

Recent studies warn that by refusing to cooperate and to speak each other's language, the various stake-holders in the field of culture risk alienating their most likely allies. 'Knowledge workers,' Graeme Turner concludes, 'need to understand and use the public sphere better' (12). According to Leo Schofield, festivals cannot be left in the care of those who speak of the arts in purely aesthetic terms: 'the need for a business-like approach to the arts becomes essential when it comes to festivals which are brief, exhilarating moments in a city's cultural life' (8). On the other hand, Schofield argues that market-driven events not only make little cultural sense, they are also bad for business: 'To be successful, to have a long-term future, a festival must first and foremost reflect the character of its host city. It should also meet the needs of the citizens and visitors, challenge their habits and confront their assumptions' (8). The idea that a festival needs to be firmly anchored in its host location and community was a dominant message put across at the Festival and Events Conference organised in Melbourne in June 1999. But what exactly is the home community for literature? Is it a community based on physical location, or is the 'literary community' a different thing altogether, a particular kind of imagined community which may have a regional, national or even global focus? It could be argued that festivals play an important role in the *constitution* of such communities: by bringing together, in one location, people with similar interests, festivals have the capacity to forge a village atmosphere out of activities that are by nature solitary pursuits. The impact of this creation of a group identity at festivals should not be underestimated. I remember a moment at another festival, the Port Fairy Folk Festival in March 1996, when a performer said that he was suddenly struck by the realisation that here he was, in a huge tent with thousands of people he didn't know, and who didn't know one another, but one thing united them: not a single one of them had voted for the Liberal Party in the recent federal election. To judge by the response, he may well have been right. In the context of literature, the question of who belongs to the literary community, and who is excluded, has frequently been raised. Mark Davis, among others, refers to the jealous, gate-keeping mentality of the Australian literary community, and observers of literary festivals frequently comment on the strict social demarcations between the 'in' crowd, those who are invited to exclusive parties and get to rub shoulders with the literary celebrities, and the rest, who pay for the privilege of peeping in.

Simon Clews, manager of the Melbourne Writers' Festival, in a recent issue of *Australian Book Review* offers a caricatured, but nevertheless telling image of a particular festival and its community. Reporting on the oldest literary festival in England, the Cheltenham Festival of Literature, he writes: 'By reputation, the British town of Cheltenham is the final resting place of the Empire's retired majors and their good lady wives. In reality, it's nowhere near as left wing as that' (20). The aim, of course, behind Clew's references to colonial tweeds, tight-lipped xeno-

phobia' and cappuccino made out of instant coffee and microwaved milk, is to demonstrate that Australian festivals (especially his own) reflect a more sophisticated, more up to date cultural scene than their British equivalents. Implicitly, he is also countering similar criticism against his own event. Making allowances for the polemical nature of the argument, our research suggests that there is a degree of truth in what he says: the organisers of Australian festivals are keen to counter the common criticism that their events cater for conservative notions of what constitutes a literary culture, and for audiences unwilling to have their tastes and preconceptions challenged. They go to considerable efforts to introduce into their programs youth and other marginal cultures, popular writing, controversial topics (admittedly characterised by Mark Davis as 'obligatory 'grunge' and 'ethnic' ghettos' (138)). Moreover, a process of *differentiation* is currently under way, whereby each festival seeks to distinguish itself, not only from stuffy 'old world' events, but also from one another. Thus, Adelaide emphasises its informal, relaxed atmosphere, Melbourne its cosmopolitan sophistication and Sydney its orientation towards the cultural diversity of the city itself and its affinity with Asian-Pacific and Aboriginal influences often overlooked by a Euro-centric national culture. Other festivals stress regional culture, many by making the city/bush opposition explicit and marketing themselves as country festivals, bush festivals and so on.

I want to conclude by briefly considering literary events as festivals with a difference, a challenge to dominant notions of cultural heritage and cultural mapping. Festivals devoted to other art forms offer their audience 'the real thing' – dance, theatre, film, opera, music, visual art – as experienced also outside the festival context. Literary events, by contrast, consist mainly of by-products: interviews, round-table discussions, audience participation. With the exception of readings, these staples of the festival menu are adjuncts to the 'normal' literary experience, they do not replace it. One might speculate that 'word-fests' (as they are sometimes called) do more than simply celebrate a particular art form: they also exist to create, or reaffirm, a cultural community whose interests are not adequately served by the media (television in particular) as the dominant arenas for public debate. Literary festivals also have a less tangible relationship to their physical site. 'The very best festivals', writes Leo Schofield, 'are non-transferable. Their nature, character, atmosphere and content work only in the city for which they were designed' (8). I have argued above that festival organisers are keen to promote the 'local flavour' of their particular event. But how, then, do we account for events such as the Writers' Train, a highly mobile feast which took writers to numerous locations in outback Queensland? Even more surprising, perhaps, are the annual Bloomsday celebrations, which recreate Joyce's Dublin in pubs, cemeteries, libraries and brothels all over the world. In this instance, it is the text of *Ulysses* that gives life to the city, not the other way around. A recent example of how literary festivals can reshape conventional thinking about location, community and audience participation was the Word Festival, a large umbrella event comprising performances at various locations throughout the city of London. An important part of the festival, however, took place somewhere in cyberspace. The

festival's internet site did not just contain the program, messages about the sponsors and invitations to send in comments about events and writers, it also featured maps of London, which could be navigated, eventually leading to literary destinations in the shape of extracts from texts (re)creating the particular location in words (The Word). By rethinking the very notion of the literary event, the Word constituted a community bound by neither time nor space but at the same time retaining the notion of physical proximity through audience interaction and the focus on a particular geographical and cultural location, London. The cyber festival may not be everyone's idea of a writers' festival, but it neatly encapsulates an aspiration shared by most literary festivals: to be at once village fair and travelling circus.

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