In Dialogue with A.D. Hope
Dialogue Three: Politics & Poetics of Australian Literature

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[Hope was largely responsible for the inclusion of Australian Literature as a separate subject of study in universities. Yet his role in debates on modernism in the Australian context was controversial and he remains one of the main figures who fought for a particular kind of poetry that he saw some modernist methods, experiments, and theories destroying. Dialogue Three aims to hear his side of the story as Hope has become, in many circles, the embodiment of what is euphemistically called 'the dead white male,' a title attributed to him long before his actual death in July 2000. Is it the case that Hope's opposition to 'free verse' or his view that men and women know separate metaphysical worldviews or his poetic focus upon European philosophical and literary traditions are sexist, obsolete, or reactionary?

See Dialogue One for details of the following exchange.]

ADH: Jim McAuley came to live with us for some time after the last World War broke out. Harold Stewart visited us quite often. They were close friends and I met them quite often in the City. We used to take coffee in the morning and talk together, but neither of them was in the army at that time—what do you call it when all the young men can't have—?

AM: Conscription.

ADH: Well, that came in. They were naturally taken in. They were the right age and were pulled off the ordinary army thing for quite a while as part of a special research section in Melbourne and that is where the famous Malley hoax took place.

AM: Can we hear the background to the Ern Malley hoax?

ADH: I was very much in that background. I was preparing a hoax of my own at the time and wrote and told the two of them. I think they rang me up from Sydney and they said, "Hold your hounds" and told me they had something special going on. So, I dropped mine. They kept me informed and only came into it when they made the thing public to a number of the press: they got to spread rumours that there was a hoax going on. This brought all the reporters in Australia to find out something about it.

AM: And what was the Ern Malley Hoax? Could you tell us about it?

ADH: Yes, they invented a poet called Ern Malley. They wrote all his poems in one afternoon and messed the papers about, matured them as though they had been published a couple of years, and they combined all the trendy poetry devices including surrealism and a bit of...

AM: Avant-garde? Unconsciousness? Stream of consciousness?

ADH: Yes, all that sort of thing. Including picking up a report from the Schooner Prevention in New Guinea: they incorporated a few sentences into one of these poems just verbatim. It was directed against that new trendy magazine started by Max Harris—Angry Penguins—it was called—you could tell the sort of thing it was by that sort of title. They [Harris and followers] fell lock, stock and barrel because Harold Stewart allowed two issues of Angry Penguins before the truth that the poet was imaginary was allowed to surface. The first one published this marvellous discovery of this wonderful modern poet. The second contained Max Harris's self-congratulation on and enthusiastic critical
ADH: It went world-wide and it was about that time they decided that I was probably the culprit.

AM: You probably were involved at some level given your anti-modernist stance against free verse?

ADH: No, I had nothing to do with it, except that I sat in the background and laughed, but I got a great respect for professional journalists in those days; they nearly really wore me down. Of course we were weak; they kept on asking quite innocent questions to which I would pass the truth. When they put them together, they were getting closer and closer to me. So they remained convinced I was just stalling, so, when it came out of course, they were disappointed; I never saw them again.

AM: Was Max Harris upset?

ADH: Ah! Delighted! The publicity was wonderful for him. Of course, he fought back and said, "These are just a couple of academic poets who for once...."

AM: "Have written something worthwhile"?

ADH: But I have been going on without any resolution since.

AM: We are going to move on to talk about Australian poetry. One of the accusations that you have had directed at you is that you don't write about Australia, you are not writing about kangaroos and the out back flora, fauna, etc., etc. Would you like to make a comment on that?

ADH: That was an accusation that was occasionally made when I was a good deal younger. I do think I made one comment on that. As far as I was concerned, I didn't talk about those things, but the Australian background was always in my mind and the images that came up were drawn ultimately from my Australian background. I had no other at that time, and that is part of the reason why I don't talk very much about my childhood. These were where most of these images were absorbed and became part of the background.

AM: So it's the atmosphere, the nuances, the feelings of the poems that are in fact Australian?

ADH: Yes. But, as I sat at home, I wrote more and more about Australia, quite explicitly about the country I lived in and I never hear these accusations these days. I never paid much attention to them.

AM: Well, Rosemary Dobson also has the same accusations made against her: that she draws on painters and the European tradition, rather than, if you like, creating a new mythology or drawing from the ancient Australian mythology.

ADH: I know Rosemary very well. We've talked about this occasionally, mainly as a joke. People who talk like that don't know what they are talking about and one of the jokes in return is: Paradise Lost is one of the most English of all poems; it's not original. I got this from C.S. Lewis. One of the most English of all poems, but it doesn't deal explicitly with English countryside.

AM: Well, that's probably the point. Did you ever get tempted to draw on Australian Aboriginal mythology? Has it ever interested you?

ADH: It would have been foolish, I thought, because I didn't know enough about it. Others went into it thoroughly and drew on Aboriginal background. Ideas and scenery and so on and they knew what they were talking about. I was not tempted to and didn't have my roots in that sort of thing.

AM: All the anthologies of your poetry always include your poem "Australia" (1939), and it seems to always appear as the one you wrote about Australia if you like...

ADH: ...I might begin by saying that, at that time, everybody was writing a poem called 'Australia' or generally that's what it was about. The poem, of course, was written soon after I returned to Australia in a very gloomy mood having not done well abroad and coming to a
ADH: I have two answers to that. One is that that's how it was like at the time: it was a miserable country to come back to and everything seemed to be going downhill and, secondly, it was a very different country from what it is now. People who attack me for this by talking about Australia as I see it now and not Australia as it was then. And, of course, the usual young man's savagery—of course, he's unhappy, too. I wish I could forget all about it and erase it from the book, but once you've done a thing you've done it.

AM: I'll never mention it again! Judith Wright wrote a poem to you in Answers and talks about really what I was discussing before, that maybe the writing of Australian poetry should come from within the land and I think she was doing it quite facetiously, but she wrote this poem along the lines of ecology and the greenery of Australia and the deserts that would create new things and you replied with your lovely humour and concern and agreement and I would like you to respond to her poem again, reading the poem you wrote to her.

ADH: Oh, yes! Judith, again, a person I know very well now and knew very well at the time. I think the poem explains itself without having to read hers first.

AM: Yes, I think so!

ADH: [Alec Hope reads the poem addressed to Judith Wright indicating that the response requires no further commentary]

AM: I want you now to turn to Rosemary Dobson's exchange with you about Pausanias. You both shared an interest in Pausanias' description of Greece and, I think, you had something in common that you have a great love of the ideas that go back to earlier civilisations.

ADH: We discovered in conversation that we had both been reading Pausanias' tour of Greece or description of Greece—second century, A.D., I think. He was looking back on a similar arranged past that we had been assimilating to writing poems—various passages in the book—in his book. I was using the older version of Sir James [Frazer] and shared the modern version of Peter Levy which was more readable, I think, but we both were doing the thing and, suddenly, I had a thought I think, and we both had the thought almost simultaneously: Why not make a bit of money out of this? The ABC at that time was doing these Sunday night broadcasts which went on for three hours, so we put a script together and it has been played again several times over the A.B.C....

AM: And you had this exchange over a footnote, which Rosemary Dobson found in the Description of Greece. And it concerned the dancers who were on their way to some ceremony and they purified themselves in a spring with pigs, and then she finishes the poem by saying, "I take that spring for mine." And you responded...

ADH: My response was also taken from the Bible about the burning bush and also the motto of the Presbyterian church in which I was brought up. But what I think of most is that they should survive down to our century, and come once more alive.

AM: I like that. The other Australian poets at the moment; well, let's talk about the ones you knew well—Stewart, David Campbell; James McAuley—do you have stories? ...Are there any particular poems of theirs that stay with you or that you particularly like?

ADH: I like so many; it's really impossible to understand that. There's no particular poem that I can pick out among those, except that Harold Stewart for many years has been working on a huge poem "By the Walls of Chioto" close to where he lives still. It's an extremely learned poem. He sent me a copy; I'm only just managing to get through the notes for this. It's loaded, but I think it is a great poem in its own right. It's hardly known in Australia and it's an extremely learned poem. I mention that by itself because, as I said, a poem is great in its own right not simply because I like it, and I'm gradually getting to know it properly. I think I would make the same remark about James McAuley's—sometimes called an epoch poem—about the Spanish and Basque explorers in the Pacific. I've forgotten the title now. Anyway, that doesn't matter. It's not an epic poem, although it adopts the epic manner and, as you read it, you can see it turning into a purely spiritual poem and there's no great action in it, as an epic usually has. But, again, for its greatness and its profundity, I particularly like it.

AM: I thought we might talk a little today about your erotic poetry, much of which has not been published and, of course, it falls into different kinds of sections. You write it for all
ADH: Yes, that's true. Let's go ahead on that!

AM: Well, perhaps you could talk about the different kinds of erotic poetry that you have written.

ADH: Oh, yes! There's what I call the dirty joke kind that men are apt to indulge in as soon as the ladies retire from the table. What they talk about I can only speculate.

AM: You should ask them.

ADH: I think I'm not fond enough of either kind of anecdote just for the sake of making sexual jokes. They're all right in their way and some poems have simply that sort of interest for me. I think more are based on satire. It's an easy way to attack something to turn it into erotic terms to make it look ridiculous. I've written quite a number of poems of that sort, and there are what you might call poems that are often quite seriously dealing with love in fairly definite terms.

AM: Like Teaser Rams (1991)?

ADH: Yes, and quite serious a poem It was an actual story told to me by one of the teachers in the trades school I used to work at. He came across with it and I... just transposed it into the character who holds his own in the story.

AM: What about a poem Against Dildos [from the Notebooks] How would you characterise that one?

ADH: That is more like playing with the whole idea of literary erotic poems in the past. The so-called Irish ballad. It is of the same sort—making fun—and was also making a serious point about what classical people did themselves: making fun of the gods in those terms. And that technique was quite common. I was simply following up a tradition there. The poem "Against Dildos" was an attempt to write a seventeenth-century matter after writing a poem, a love poem, along much the same lines, and turning it upside down; I wanted to see if I could put it across. I said I had dug up an erotic poem from the seventeenth century. I didn't get away with it: Bob Brissenden knew the seventeenth century very well—spotted the mistakes in verbiage and the wrong accent, the wrong vocabulary, very quickly. The only other thing I would say, in general, I didn't think it was any different from any other kind of poetry; it's just poetry.

AM: It's just poetry, yes.

ADH: There's a lingering disapproval—nobody pays much attention to it these days, but there is a lingering in the name itself—this disapproval hanging over from the Victorian days and so on.

AM: You said before that sometimes it is a good means of satirising something. I think perhaps the poem Censorship [from the Notebooks] is a good example of that and I thought you might like to read it.

ADH: You don't mind going into this session.

AM: I don't think anybody would mind. As you said, people don't worry about that sort of thing these days.

ADH: I shouldn't think so! This arose from the fact that I had been invited to replace my predecessor in the English Department over there as a censor. He recommended it and I was approached and thought it over and hadn't thought much about it all, except that I thought that censorship was rather silly—it didn't reach its proposed ends—it never saved the dirty minders from continuing being dirty minders. They had their own resources, and the people reading books which would contain either four-letter words or erotic scenes, specifically intending to arouse people—it seemed to me to be again a strange sort of protection if reading these things corrupted people, who should be the most corrupted but the censors themselves.

AM: Your erotic poetry: it has the serious satirical intention as well. Of course, erotic poetry has been used way back in time, and Shakespeare, of course, was one of its main proponents.

ADH: There's plenty written. There's one thing, of course, about erotic poetry we haven't mentioned: the fact that love is a serious business, but that making love is sometimes comic in many of its aspects and the two traditions have always gone on side by side. The most erotic poem I know is one of Chaucer's, a very serious and beautiful description of
ADH: I doubt it. They do not know enough.

AM: Yes, and quite serious a poem. It was an actual story told to me by one of the...
AM: But I suppose no one can really decide what the difference is? You always have that repetitive argument about conditioning versus innate qualities, but how does one ever reach an answer? Is it reachable?

ADH: You profess your argument between nature and nurture. It still goes on and it never can be completed, I think. But there is one thing—I feel it has a metaphysical basis—It sees the world under a species of its own, that is the Latin phrase, and I think that there is an essential difference between men and women in which you might call a metaphysical outcome on the world based on their different kind of experience and the kind of creatures they are, and one result of my collection of material has two interesting things in it, of all the great women poets, and there have been great women poets, none rose to the very top. Often one may burst out at some time or another, sometimes quite amazingly loud, because of some tragic or upsetting or even a number of exhilarating things.

AM: Do you think women’s natures are such that they will require a very intense period of suffering in order to become poets—was that what you discovered in your research?—whereas men don’t?

ADH: Roughly. Goethe, when he was well on in life, wrote a series of marvellous lyrics, a lot of them are even, in fact, written by one of his girlfriends—she even wrote him poetry all her life—and a curious thing happened when she became friendly with Goethe, she came to write like Goethe. The other thing that I noticed was that, on the whole, the best women poets liked poetry in a quite different way from men. They have—I really believe they are poetesses and men poets—I don’t like the word ‘poetess’: it seems it requires the deprecatory meaning; it is always very simple even in periods when the language of poetry was elaborate and so on; and always comes straight from personal feelings. And then, when women tried to write like men, they didn’t get very far: a gross example, of course, is a contemporary of Pope, whose book was highly praised including Pope himself who praised it. She wrote of the same sort of themes, one exception being that she wrote about the difficulty of being accepted as a poet if you were a woman, and the minute she dies, you didn’t hear any more. You still can’t get her collected work.

AM: Do you think that maybe, that since the Enlightenment, the value that is placed on rationalism over personal feeling may be a reason, apart from obvious influences caused patriarchies?

ADH: Maybe an element, but, on the other hand, things are so different now re the position of women. They enter all the arts and enter the professions of sciences and some of them have risen to the top of their professions: Madame Cune, for instance, in radiology. I think the greatest woman poet in Russia, for instance, was Akhatova and she’s followed by a brilliant series of younger women. There is no difference between them and the men. I think there is just a matter of time before women have found their own language.

AM: Do you think men will start to try and write like women?

ADH: I doubt it. They do not know enough.