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On Proud Irish, Clumsy Saxons, and Provincial Englishmen: Henry Handel Richardson's cultural knowledge and tolerance.

Introduction

Henry Handel Richardson was a writer who could claim a broad range of personal experience and intellectual contact with important cultures of her time. She had both English and Irish roots, a certain Latin element was present, too; she was well read and demonstrated a cultural open-mindedness while growing up in Australia; she studied and lived in Germany for a decade, translated Danish and Norwegian books and visited Scandinavia; she learned French and Italian[1]. All that was a good precondition for shaping a cosmopolitan mindset. However, Henry Handel Richardson added particular characteristics to this disposition such as curiosity, self-criticism, tolerance, the gift of sharp observation, and the capacity of critical evaluation. In her novels – from *Maurice Guest, The Getting of Wisdom*, even more so in her trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony,* and still in her final book *The Young Cosima* –, Richardson as a writer makes ample use of all that, although in different degrees and ways. It is undeniable that Richardson's relation to German culture had a somewhat privileged place among her other cultural interests. Nevertheless, these relations are far from being unbalanced or partial, neither are they uncritical. She had spent formative years in Germany, living in Leipzig, Straßburg[2], and Munich – "the ten most impressionable years of my life", as she put it[3]. She was fluent in speaking and reading the language – an advantage and a capacity not many other writers and intellectuals from the English-speaking world of the time possessed[4]. HHR was a keen observer of manifestations of culture[5] and mentality – but

[1] Henry Handel Richardson took French lessons while living in Strasbourg in 1898 (MWY: 144); in 1901 she learned Italian (MWY: 147).

[2] Straßburg, the capital of Alsace-Lorraine, had been part of the newly founded *Deutsches Kaiserreich* since 1871 before it reverted as Strasbourg to France after World War I.

[3] Letter to Paul Solanges, 26 February 1911. In: LETTERS, Vol. I, 1874-1915: 98.

[4] ibid: 99.

she was not blind to other phenomena she knew from her everyday life in Germany. Even political events mattered to her although they rarely surface in her literary writings.

The interest I would like to focus on is Henry Handel Richardson's literary rendering of her rich cultural experience. How was she able to immerse herself in other cultures? How could she do it to such an extent that she produced characters who were not just credible and authentic in a realistic sense but who revealed a deeper, more complex truth of the culture in question? How could she develop, from a strongly subjective perspective, ideas that went far beyond a mere factual, descriptive nature? Having outlined this I would like to focus on some literary examples and the techniques she used to make her cultural knowledge productive in her novels.

The Great Gift of Conceiving Convincing Literary Characters

In the course of her career, Henry Handel Richardson became an increasingly shy and reclusive writer who did not like to comment on her books. There are just a few thoughts on her writings we can find in *Myself When Young*[6] and a late article in the renowned American literary journal *Virginia Quarterly Review* from summer 1940[7]. Not to forget the more sporadic and very personal ideas Richardson exchanged in her correspondence with Paul Solange, the French translator of her debut novel *Maurice Guest*[8]. However, I would claim that in her literary writings, from time to time, Henry Handel Richardson allows us to take a glimpse into her poetics, as in a key episode from *The Getting of Wisdom,* her wonderful coming-of-age-novel. This novel was praised by H.G. Wells[9] and Doris Lessing[10] alike and is not just a classic of Australian school literature but a book about Richardson's literary art as well – especially when it comes to questions of imagination, fiction and truth.

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5 „…for three or four nights every week found us at the theatre. And it was not to be wondered at, when one looks back on the rich and varied fare the German theatres of that date provided." (MWY: 120; see also MWY: 108)

6 MWY: 70; 103; 124/125.

7 "Some Notes on My Books", In: *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Summer 1940.

8 The correspondence is part of a three-volume collection Clive Probyn and Bruce Steel published during the past years.

9 See LETTERS I: 150/151.

10 Doris Lessing: *Time Bites: Views and Reviews*. London: Fourth Estate, 2004/ New York: Harper Collins, 2004: 134-137.

It might not be by chance that this autobiographically-tinged novel came into being as a sort of distraction from Richardson's intensive work on *Maurice Guest*. Furthermore, she put weight on it in framing the chapters with Nietzsche quotations. The beginning of the chapter in question is about the relationship of lying and telling the truth. Here, young Laura is struggling for her place in the Presbyterian Ladies' College of Melbourne. After several setbacks, she finds a means to attract the undivided attention of her friends by storytelling. In the aftermath of a disappointing stay at the home of a reverend – a man who attracts much interest among the young female college community –, she makes up an account of herself and the man, and things which, actually, did not happen. With her embellishments, Laura satisfies week after week her friends' hunger for events and delicacies of a supposed love relation with the elderly clergyman. As a result, she finds herself at the hub of popular interest:

> Fictitious details crowded thick and fast upon her – a regular hotchpotch; she had only to stretch out her hand and seize what she needed. It was simpler than the five-times multiplication-table and did not need to be learned. But, all the same, she was not idle: she polished away at her flimflams, bringing them nearer and nearer probability, never, thanks to her sound memory, contradicting herself or making a slip, and always be able to begin again from the beginning.
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> Such initial scepticism as may have lurked in her hearers was soon got the better of. For, crass realists though these young colonials were, and bluntly as they faced facts, they were none the less as hungry for romance as the most insatiable novel-reader. Romance in any guise was hailed by them, and swallowed uncritically, though it was no more permitted to interfere with the practical conduct of their lives than it is in the case of just the novel-reader, who puts untruth and unreality from him when he lays his book aside. – Another and weightier reason was, their slower brains could not conceive the possibility of such extraordinarily detailed lying as that to which Laura now subjected them. Its very elaboration stood for its truth" (GW; 148/49)

Then, one day, the eagerly woven thread of the yarn is cruelly cut off: One of her fellow students finds out about the true nature of her relationship – which, actually, came to nothing. As they suddenly measure Laura's account against crude reality, the entire cohort of once so willing listeners turns against her, feels betrayed and cheated on, and calls her a liar - the archetypical reproach against all storytellers since earliest times. Again, Laura has to face unpopularity and punishment, but she does not give up her extraordinary gift for imaginative writing. This is a proof that storytelling is something essential in her life – as it

used to be one of Henry Handel Richardson's preferred childhood activities, too[11] - not just something to idle the day away or to fulfil a plain purpose.

In terms of poetics, one might say that the pleasures of providing captivating stories for others precedes a simple realistic demand. Nevertheless, the story itself becomes reality, something that plays a vital part in Laura's life, granting her attention and acceptance within the community. Even more, she takes her comrades with her on a flight of imagined possibilities, involves them in the playfulness of narrative entanglements. We get only a vague idea of the exact nature of Laura's tales. However, they were certainly not about an angel-like young girl and a knight on a white horse as her listeners would not have believed it. Thus, we are in the realm of the storyteller who is fully indebted to the idea of her story and the truthful rendering of the characters within. This kind of truth is a literary one. Why is the emphasis on the inner truth of the make-belief so important? I think, in the case of an author like Henry Handel Richardson, it shows us that no other exterior demands control her storytelling. In other words, the story becomes the real thing in its own right due to its inner truth and the resulting acceptance by the reader. Laura's story – and this I would like to enlarge to the author as well – is strongly related to reality but does not intend to replace it. What we are witnessing is the process of generating literary truth, and as active readers, we are participating in this process.

In an article on Henry Handel Richardson's relationship with Germany, Michael Ackland scrutinizes the topic in great detail and regrets a supposed lack of an historically correct, realistic picture of Leipzig and the Wilhelmine Kaiserreich in *Maurice Guest*.[12] He himself produces a great deal of historical facts and argues from the height of moral retrospection, but seems to ignore the particularities of Henry Handel Richardson's literary truth-generating. Despite the fact that we occasionally do find hinting references to exterior historical events in Richardson's writings[13], we are foremost confronted with a deeper, inner

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[11] Henry Handel Richardson remembers that being at Chiltern, at the early age of six, she was fascinated by making up stories of her own: "It was here that, no new books coming in, I took to making up stories for myself. To the accompaniment of a ball bounced against a wall." (MWY: 18)

[12] Michael Ackland: "Henry Handel Richardson's Years in Wilhelmine Germany: The 'most cultured land in Europe'?" In: *English Literature in Transition. 1880-1920.* Volume 48, Number 2. ELT Press, 2005: 147-163.

[13] Although rare and rather subtle, Henry Handel Richardson's political critique is traceable in her writings. One example from the novel *Maurice Guest* would be the opening scene in chapter 6, book I, when Maurice meets the American Ephie Cayhill for the first time. The young woman is struggling with a pile of notes, a compilation of the German violinist and composer Heinrich Ernst Kayser (1815-1888), which is being blown along the street by a fierce wind. Maurice comes to the spot to help Ephie collecting the whirling pages. The humour of the scene lies in the pun of the words *Kayser* and *Kaiser*, the latter stands for the German

truth. This truth reveals itself in the superb talent of the author's creation of literary characters. This extraordinary gift is at the very core of all her novels. She provide us with both genuine, psychologically elaborated main characters and strong minor ones, such as Heinz Krafft, or the music teacher, Master Schwarz in *Maurice Guest.* In doing so, she renders a credible cast and, at the same time, brings important aspects of late 19th century German culture close to her readers.[14] At other moments, she refers repeatedly to the special gift of even ordinary Saxons for music.[15] Now, one should take into account that *Maurice Guest* was written thirty years after German unification, which came into being in the aftermath of the war of 1870/71 between France and Prussia under the dominance of the latter. Historically, the Kingdom of Saxony with its interest in commerce and the arts and its rather weak army differed a great deal from Prussia. More than once in history, it became the victim of the military ambitions of its mighty neighbour. In granting a certain benevolent backwardness and lack of modern civilization to the Saxons while emphasizing their interest in the arts and especially music, HHR pays attention to such differences. She makes it clear that the united Germany of the 1880s and 1890s was not as uniform as the propaganda of the time would have wished the new *Reich* to be.

At the time of the publication of *Maurice Guest,* the stars of the literary scene in England were Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells. They provided a realistic,

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emperor of the time. "It's my Kayser," she explained with a quick, upward glance, adding the next minute with a fresh ripple of laughter: "He's all to pieces." (MG: 85) In putting the words into the mouth of a young woman who grew up within the democratic system of America, Henry Handel Richardson makes, no doubt, fun of the contemporary cult of the *Kaiser* in Germany. Another example can be found in Schilsky's chauvinist insults against Maurice, the Englishman, and the misogynist tirades against Louise, the Australian. These passages reflect the growing tensions between Germany under the Kaiser and the British Empire as well as the dominating opinions against female emancipation in German society at the end of the 19th century.

[14] In chapter 5, Book III, Richardson writes about a meeting between Maurice and his German music teacher Schwarz. Being unsure about his artistic potential, Maurice wants to know the master's opinion on his play and talent. Unfortunately, the surprised Schwarz, much absorbed in his own problems, does not at all appreciate Maurice's initiative. Consequently, the encounter turns into an ultimate disaster. Although abundant in suspense and humour, this passage excels foremost in its art of characterization. The discourse of the would-be genius Schwarz, failed and embittered, who selfishly eats his Berliners in front of Maurice, is one of those passages of successful character depiction providing a broader meaning. Thus, the personality of Schwarz presents much more than a musical oddball. It shows the disappointment of an entire generation which can no longer claim an unchallenged mastery of music and usurp the status of genius of the elders.

[15] „They were indeed a queer mixture, these Saxons. Ugly, stumpy, clumsy, and lacking in all the graces, they were yet the most musical of people. Music seemed to run in their blood: the very servants talked it as we English talk cricket or horse-racing. And it certainly was in the air. For Leipzig possessed an opera-house then second to none, and one of the finest concert-halls in Europe." (MWY: 102/103)

fact-ridden, moralistic type of literature, a slightly modernised version of Victorian models. But, why should a young author from Australia, feeling more at home on the continent than in England, write in the same mould? And, why should she do things with regard to German culture she hardly did with regard to other cultures? It seems misleading to measure Henry Handel Richardson's writings against such celebrated English authors. Her extraordinary gift lies foremost in her credible rendering of complex characters with a remarkable psychological insight.

The emphasis on character and psychology, although inspired by naturalism, does not altogether belong to the 19th century or to Victorian times. It brings us much closer to Modernism, a fact, often neglected by critics who relied on the common notion of labeling Richardson's novels naturalistic.[16] In fact, her literary practice reminds one of Virginia Woolf's famous dictum that "about December, 1910, human character changed."[17] For Woolf, it seemed no longer possible to write in the moral and realistic mode of the past century. Henry Handel Richardson has been practising her new style of writing with psychologically motivated characters full of complexity years before Virginia Woolf postulated her own interest in character as genuinely modernist. Since Richardson was mainly concerned with character, John George Robertson is quite right in saying that *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is not a novel about Australia as such - as *Maurice Guest* is not a novel about Leipzig either.[18] So what was the author's intention? Why did she succeed in drawing, more often than not, remarkable characters bigger than life and, in doing so,

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[16] John George Robertson categorized *Maurice Guest* as "the greatest English naturalistic novel, the end and summary of the movement of which it is a part". (MWY, 163). No matter how flattering this judgement had been at its time, in the following years it dictated a mode of reading which largely ignored the novel's expressive, even modernist features. No doubt, Henry Handel Richardson's debut novel is far more than „…a kind of mosaic of influences“ (MWY, 166) - something which should not come as a surprise for such a well and widely read author. Composition and structure, character and syntax are elements that do go beyond naturalist art. For Robertson the academic, judging from the perspective of the 1928/29, it might have been difficult, perhaps impossible, to situate his wife's writings in the heterogeneous literary scene of the day. Another aspect worth taking into consideration is the fact that Robertson tries hard to include Richardson's oeuvre into the English literary tradition thus looking rather for similarities than differences. The reason for this effort might be the intention to enhance Richardson's reputation throughout England, the place she lived at and published her books.

[17] "And now I will hazard a second assertion, which is more disreputable perhaps, to the effect that in or about December, 1910, human character changed." Virginia Woolf: "Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown". In: *The Captain's Death Bed.* London: The Hogarth Press 1981: 91.

[18] „… thus *Richard Mahony* has not become the novel of colonisation which many would have liked to see it become, any more than the earlier novel became a ‚musical‘ novel. *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is the history of Richard Mahony, not of the land in which it is placed." J.G. Robertson: "The Art of Henry Handel Richardson". In: MWY: 180.

succeed in drawing a credible picture of life itself? First, Richardson, far from being a reliable chronicler of Leipzig in the sense of the realistic English authors mentioned above, does not ignore the realities of the Wilhelmine city in which she dwelled for nearly three-and-a-half years. She produces a literary truth about the cosmos of a group of international music students, their interaction among each other, and with (some) people of the Saxon city. It is the credibility of her characters that allows us access to a more complex and deeper truth of that time. It is the characters of the English-speaking community, the Germans in general, andthe Saxons in particular all open up a deeper understanding of the mentality and intellectual framework of the time.

No Us-and-Them-Thinking

About the time when the novel *Maurice Guest* found its way to the readers of the English-speaking world, another authoress from „Down Under“, Katherine Mansfield, sojourned in Germany. It was not a decision of her own to go to this northern country but rather that of Annie Beauchamp, her New Zealand-based mother. She saw Germany as a suitable refuge for her daughter who, unexpectedly, had become pregnant. The concerned mother might have been influenced by someone from the English branch of the Beauchamp family or perhaps by the experience of Elizabeth von Arnim, the later Countess Russel.[19] In her first marriage, Elizabeth had been living for almost 15 years with her husband, Graf Henning August von Arnim-Schlagenthin, a respectable German noble man, at an estate in Pomerania. However, Katherine's mother did not send her daughter to that Prussian province but preferred a remote place in Bavaria. Katherine Mansfield compiled the impressions from her stay in the Bavarian spa of Bad Wörrishofen in her first collection of short prose under the title *In a German Pension* (1911). Although it was the outpouring of a then rather inexperienced writer, who later forbade any new edition of these early literary attempts, it seems still fitting for a comparison. In Mansfield's critical, sometimes satirical sketches such as "Mrs Fischer", readers are permanently confronted with a thinking in terms

[19] Claire Tomalin: *Katherine Mansfield. A Secret Life.* Penguin Books, 1988: 67-71.

of 'Us' and 'Them'[20], 'Us' meaning the English, which Mansfield took as a standard she was part of. 'Them' were those alien, inexplicable Germans with such strange attitudes as discussing stomach functions at the table and their unpleasant, unjustified display of supposed cultural superiority.

What did other, more Germanophile English writers of the time think about the matter? First, there were not that many since rivalry between the *Kaiserreich* and the British Empire was well under way. The times of Thomas Carlyle's and George Eliot's intellectual sympathies for German culture were gone. One of the few informed was D.H. Lawrence, who knew Germany first hand from his travels and thanks to his Alsatian wife, Frida von Richthoffen. For him, Germany was a "Land of steel and ordered civilization". Nevertheless, she might easily turn into something already known to the Romans: a "[…] mysterious, half-dark land of the north, bristling with gloomy forests, resounding to the cry of the wild geese and swans, the land of the bear and the stork, the *Drachen* and the *Greifen*."[21] Lawrence emphasizes Germany's economic power, her mysterious landscapes and legendary past in opposition to a supposed hopelessly philistine England.

Edward Morgan Forster, like Hugh Walpole two years later, had spent some time as a tutor at Elizabeth von Arnim's Pomeranian estate in 1905. There he got a lasting impression of German culture. For him Germany served as an inspiration for the two opposed families, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, in his novel *Howard's End* (1910). Indeed, the entire novel, Forster's first real literary success, is based on that oppositional structure. No matter how critical or sympathetic his comments and literary entanglements might be, the binary opposition of 'us' and 'them' is undeniably present.

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[20] 'What complaint are you suffering from? You look exceedingly healthy!'

I smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

'Ah, that is so strange about you English. You do not seem to enjoy discussing the functions of the body. As well speak of a railway train and refuse to mention the engine. How can we hope to understand anybody, knowing nothing of their stomachs? In my husband's most severe illness - the poultices -'

She dipped a piece of sugar in her coffee and watched it dissolve.

'Yet a young friend of mine who travelled to England for the funeral of his brother told me that women wore bodices in public restaurants no waiter could help looking into as he handed the soup.'

'But only German waiters,' I said. 'English ones look over the top of your head.'

'There,' she cried, 'now you see your dependence on Germany. Not even an efficient waiter you can have by yourselves.'

'But I prefer them to look over your head.'

'And that proves that you must be ashamed of your bodice.' (K. Mansfield, *Collected Stories:* 699)

[21] See: „Germans and English" In: D.H. Lawrence: *Phoenix II. Uncollected, Unpublished, and Other Prose Works.* Eds. W. Roberts and H.T. Moore. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978: 245.

In Henry Handel Richardson's early writings the opposition of 'us' and 'them' is not given. On the one hand, she wrote from within a cosmopolitan environment in Leipzig; on the other hand, she found herself in a cultural situation, which might be best described in terms of 'in between' due to the mentality triangle of her Australian origin, her English upbringing, and her strong European interests. Thus, Richardson did not exclusively cling to the standard of English literature, which she certainly had. In terms of identity construction, there was no necessity for her of forming a binary opposition to another culture. This allowed her a greater intellectual freedom, the possibility of negotiating between different cultures and, last but not least, a greater objectivity.

How productive this rejection of binary opposition could be, Henry Handel Richardson proved at her best in the Australian trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. There, in the second book *The Way Home* (1925) Richard Mahony has to admit that his expectations about going back to England and settling down there were an illusion. Willy-nilly, he has to assume that he has become another man while living in Australia. He can no longer maintain his original notion of brutish colonials vs. gentlemanlike English.

> „*Civis Britannicus sum* – that knowledge should have been enough for him. Instead of which, burning to prove his citizenship, he had chased back, with, in his heart, the pent-up feeling of his long, long absence. He laughed did he now recall his exultation with which he has descried the outlines of the English coast. "Out there," he had seen this old country through the rose-red spectacles of youthful memory. Now he knew that the thrill he had experienced on again beholding it – his pleasure in its radiant greenness – was the sum total of his satisfaction he would ever get from it. No sooner ashore – […] – than he had felt himself alien and outsider. England had no welcome for her homing sons, or any need of them: their places were long since filled." (FRM, Book II/Part I/Chapter 8: 416)

Struggling with himself and laying his thoughts open to his wife Mary, he finally calls his far-away place of living "his home". In Richardson's dealing with questions of origin, belonging, and home, there is something provisional, something dynamic, which is deeply rooted in human nature – as well as the wish to be stable, to be settled. Both sides are in permanent competition and create a productive instability, a restlessness, which allows a complex and contradictory picture of human nature.

Stereotyping

Years before the renowned US-American journalist Walter Lippmann (1889-1974) introduced the notion of stereotypes[22], Henry Handel Richardson made ample literary use of this means of culturally prefabricated characterization, which precedes a deeper rational apprehension. In all of her works, she characterizes persons or groups of persons with already well-known features when it comes to having a first idea of their origin and culture. There is Maurice Guest, the provincial Englishman, who sees a successful musical career as a means to escape from the lower middle class mediocracy of his origins.[23] There is the Irishman who, from time to time, surfaces in the character of Richard Mahony[24], and there are the ordinary Saxons who all seem to excel in matters of music as Henry Handel Richardson characterizes them repeatedly in *Maurice Guest*[25] and elsewhere. No matter how striking such a stereotyped characterization might be, it is never her last word. Richardson always adds a further detail, additional information, another perspective.

Walter Lippmann, who studied together with T.S. Eliot and was an assistant of the philosopher George Santayana, sees the benefit of using stereotypes in several ways. Most importantly, for me, it seems that he understood them as a means to catch and focus attention within a world of detail and chaos and to see them as a home, a means of defence against change and of defining belonging.[26] According to Lippmann, the negative aspects of stereotyped thinking, such as providing incomplete, perhaps superficial notions of a characterized person or group, could be balanced if one keeps in mind that these features and descriptions are just stereotypes needing permanent correction and modification. The

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[22] Walter Lippmann: *Public Opinion.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922.

[23] MG, Chapter 2, Book I.

[24] Richardson makes, time and again, use of stereotyped Irish features of Mahony in order to characterize him: “Just the Irish way of getting at a thing backwards!” (FRM, Book II/ Part 1/Chapter 2: 372) When Mahony thinks that he lacks ambition Richardson refers to “Irish fluidity” (FRM, Book II, Part 3/Chapter 7: 555), and when he considers suicide, she refers to “his black Irish pride” (FRM, Book III, Part I2/Chapter 9: 738).

[25] Richardson, with her extended description of the Fürst family in *Maurice Guest*, pays once more tribute to the musicals talents of ordinary Saxons. “In this hardworking, careworn woman, who was seldom to be seen but in petticoat, bedjacket, and heelless, felt shoes; who, her whole life long, had been little better than a domestic servant, there existed a devotion to art which had never wavered. It would have seemed to her contrary to nature that Franz should be anything but a musician, and it was also quite in the order of things that they were poor. Two younger boys, who were still at school, gave up all their leisure time to music – they had never in their lives tumbled round a football or swung a bat – and Franz believed the elder would prove a skilful violinist. Of the little girls, one had a pure voice and a good ear, and was to be a singer – for before this Juggernaut, prejudice went down. Had anyone suggested to Frau Fürst that her daughter should be a clerk, even a teacher, she would have flung up hands of horror; but music! – that was a different matter. (MG: Chapter 5: 75)

[26] Walter Lippmann: *Die öffentliche Meinung.* In: Bochumer Studien zur Publizistik- und Kommunikations-wissenschaft. Hg. Heinz-Dietrich Fischer, Bd. 63. Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer. Bochum, 1990: 69-72.

positive function of stereotypes, providing a feeling of belonging and mental comforting, matches with the provisional situation most of Richardson's characters - expatriates, exiles, colonials - find themselves in. Nevertheless, their longing for identity, home and stability cannot entirely be based on such prefabricated assumptions. It needs the confrontation with the reality of circumstances that corrects and humanizes them, which is exactlywhat happens in Richardson's novels.

In her writings, Henry Handel Richardson repeatedly provides us with stereotypes just to elaborate them the next moment, to nuance and modify them, or, simply, to prove them altogether wrong. Thus, she destabilises her readers, alienates them from their prefabricated patterns of thinking, which, too willingly, they have accepted as an inherent part of their pre-stabilised mental world and comfort. Within the course of her stories, Richardson humanises abstract stereotypes by an elaborated literary playfulness. It is this playfulness, together with her refined technique of sliding perspectives, which gives her writings a lively, dramatic quality. However, the stereotyped patterns we find in her novels should never be taken at face value. She rather practises a psychological erosion of them – be it with the young Englishman, Maurice Guest and his romantic ideal of music, or be it with the very complex character of Richard Mahony and his mental decline. In Richardson's application and correction of stereotyped features of character lies a further strength of her literary mastering of an unstable, provisional in-betweenness. This seems another successful way of enhancing the cultural credibility of her characters. Stating this, it might be justified to see Henry Handel Richardson's *Australianness* foremost in her literary handling of characters and situations within a provisional, dynamic world, full of change, chance, and the unpredictable.

Henry Handel Richardson had numerous encounters with several countries and cultures throughout her life – be it within the circle of her family, during her travels and studies in Europe and beyond, or throughout her later life in England. Much of this has informed her novels. No matter whether she writes about Irish, English, or German characters, her descriptions are free from cheap prejudice, full of humanity, and often tinged with humour. When it comes to Irish features, Richardson draws on family memories. The English are often depicted in comparison to their colonial brothers and sisters in Australia. Here Richardson

explores a broad range of types and nuances. In the creation of German characters, one detects a sensibility towards changes in the political landscape of the *Kaiserreich* but also a fair treatment of German culture. Even in times of growing political tensions, Henry Handel Richardson did not participate in the rough and ready condemnation of everything German. An example might be her lifelong sympathy for the music of Richard Wagner.

One reason for Richardson's captivating literary presentation of ethnic and cultural aspects in all their ramifications is her special gift of rendering credible characters based on precise observation. She knows how to generate literary truth by means of her protagonists, how to make use of minute but telling details of cultural relevance. Another reason can be seen in her literary practice of a multi-perspective and contextual embedding of her characters, which avoids simplification and superficiality. Biographical issues such as Richardson's family background, her open-minded upbringing in Australia as well as her feeling of attraction towards several cultures come also into play. All this allows her freedom of judgement and the role of an unbiased arbitrator. The result is a complex and sympathetic view on her own and other cultures, which is both critical and tolerant at the same time.

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