

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Literature in Australia: Adding Value

Robert Wood · Wednesday, October 21st, 2015

In Australia of late, there has been a conversation around arts funding and merit. It seems though that people in the literary bureaucratic establishment are so entrained in the current environment that they are unable to think through new possibilities. The first point to make is that literature receives very little funding from the federal government. This claim that it is ‘very little’ is as a proportion of the annual arts budget within the federal government budget. Arts funding on the whole is at a higher percentage compared to the US, but there is no sizeable private philanthropic contribution. Yet compared to a great many European countries it is sorely lacking. One need also compare it to what money is currently spent on and not only other places. Australia spends a great deal of money on roads, for example, especially in marginal and rural electorates. According to the [Department of Infrastructure and Transport](#) ‘The total amount of funding for road-related expenditure by the Australian, state, territory and local Governments in 2008–09 was \$15.8 billion.’

How much is the money in literature though? These organisations received the following from the Australia Council with the decision date being between 2008 and the present:

- Overland: \$533,811
- Australian Book Review: \$949,473
- Giramondo: \$306,300
- Mascara: \$41,657
- Puncher & Wattman: \$169,150
- Peril: \$38,685
- John Leonard: \$27,000
- Fremantle Press: \$348,220

The distribution of this money is not consistent and the grants are for different lengths of time. However one looks at it though these are pitiful sums of money when one considers national debt, GDP, surpluses, defence spending. Our priorities are, in other words, wrong. All of these amounts are less than the median Sydney home price. But what is remarkable is that even if you speak openly about the amount of money received, recipients are often defensive, as if they need to explain their value rather than simply assert that the money is not enough. This question of value though confuses the economic with the aesthetic.

By contrast some large arts organisations received (according to decision date of November 18 2011):

- Australian Ballet: \$22,434,051
- Adelaide Symphony: \$26,252,521
- Qld Symphony: \$29,201,422
- Sydney Symphony: \$42,666,195
- Tasmanian Symph: \$24,740,409
- WA Symphony: \$26,975,692

To be sure, these grants may be for multiple years of operation, but no literary organisation would receive even a tenth of one of these individual grants. The question might be: why not? And why can't we imagine what a large organisation dedicated to literature could do with this kind of money? There could be a Wheeler Centre in every capital city; there could be a National Poets House; there could be regular international writing residencies; and visitors to our shores beyond the middlebrow stars of yesterday at populist festivals. One might even make a living freelancing. One might even imagine that those not invested in official verse culture make a living too.

Or even if the amount stayed the same, why can't the government provide a one off lump sum instead? From which an investment return could be garnered as annual operating costs. For example, if *Overland* had been given its \$533,811 as a single grant in 2008, it could have invested that money at a reasonable rate of return (8% p.a.) and made \$42,705 *per annum in perpetuity*. No handout necessary, no grant writing, just fund management. Right now though it is less than autonomous and relies on government funding for the foreseeable future. So much for sit down money, so much for economic self awareness.

The issue for literary organisations are that there is no current conversation around the creation of wealth, and instead it is easy to become concerned with the smokescreen of value (both artistic merit and monetary worth). To highlight how much funding an organisation receives is seen as an attack. Surely organisations should be proud of what they accomplish with so little money. And gaining a grant in the first place is also a worthwhile achievement. But what needs to change is the entire economy of exchange. This means, quite simply, not only an increase in funding but how that funding is managed. Endowments are necessary at a great many institutions, including literary journals, for they allow one to be insulated in a different way from the question of where the money is coming from. They simply provide a more certain platform from which one can get on and do the important work.

That so many organisations currently rely either on an institutional affiliation (*Overland* at Victoria University for example) or private voluntary labour implies that we knowingly undervalue our labour. And that does a disservice to everyone. It also provides a false basis from which to understand the costs of the industry and that means we negotiate from a position of weakness not strength. Only monkeys fight over peanuts. And that, surely, needs to change.

*The source for these funding amounts is the [Australia Council Grants List](#).

Top photo by Cristian Baron.

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