

Cultural Daily

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Support for Literature in Australia? Spectacular Fail

Robert Wood · Wednesday, April 15th, 2015

Recently the Australian arts sector has been focused on grant applications. Everyone I spoke with from curators to editors to program managers to artists themselves was determined to get their expressions of interest for six-year funding in to the Australia Council by 3 March. This is simply the first step in a long bureaucratic process that will determine what our cultural landscape will look like in the medium term.

What was striking to me was the divergence in the monetary amounts people were asking for. Of the people I spoke with, galleries and visual arts organisations were asking for millions of dollars, literary ones mere thousands. This should come as no surprise given the overheads of certain institutions and the culture industry weight attached to different forms, but to see such a clear juxtaposition was somewhat shocking. The proposed total annual funding for literature from the Australia Council is \$800,000 and the minimum one can ask for is \$75,000. This means 10 organisations, at most, will receive money. This includes publications, festivals, national bodies and a whole host of others. At the time of closing 418 organisations had applied. It is surely a competitive pool and friends became foes in the lead up to the submission of applications. The process is reminiscent of how shark embryos eat other shark embryos in utero in a sort of saltwater Hunger Games.

It is true that the Australia Council, and other funding bodies, seem to prefer spectacle to all other forms and hence literature falls by the wayside. For example Perth Festival spent \$5.6m on the public theatre display known as the Giants this year and there is [\\$32m of annual funding for opera alone](#). This is a political decision. Steve Dow wrote in [The Monthly](#) shortly after the 2014 Federal Budget that the Coalition had obviously privileged Australian Ballet and Opera Australia. Their most prominent champions have been [Julie Bishop](#) and [George Brandis](#).

Opera is of course [undergoing its own review](#). This however is not an argument against opera or ballet or theatre or dance or galleries. I appreciate them all and have drawn great sustenance from the spectacular arts at various times. It is though an argument for literature.

Quite simply literature needs more funding. The Australian literary community must, of course, take some of the blame. We have failed, for far too long, to articulate the benefit of our art to the community. There is the wrong perception that it only takes a pen and paper, or computer, and time to write a book and that the literary economy is oriented around this commodity. Thus, the labour in literature has been assumed to be cheap. This affects writers as well as administrators, publishers, editors, designers, printers and others, and, is reflected in the funding opportunities that

are available. That it is so closely tied to the book, supported by the new \$2m council for the book, reinforces a narrow idea of the literary economy.

Poetry is, of course, at the pointy end. Poetry is the literature of literature. This is not only in the sense that it is crafted language distinct from ordinary speech, the crystallisation of thought, but also in the sense of marginalised and marginal in systemic ways (economic, political, cultural). If we needed proof of this we can see poetry's limited funding opportunities and its exemption from prizes, including [the Stella](#). Australia does not have a Poet Laureate, our major cultural institutions do not have poets-in-residence and we refuse willfully to take poetry into the daily life of Australia. But if the benefits of opera are self-evident then so too are those of poetry. Surely there are more poets, closeted or not, than there are opera singers, which may paradoxically be part of the problem. The amount of money put aside for literature, and poetry in particular, would be as comic as *The Barber of Seville* if it weren't so tragic.

If we can be clear that literature needs more funding, we might want to ask: where should the money come from? Wheresoever will the Australia Council find the money to double, at least, what literature gets? Where, in other words, would we find an extra 5 cents per person? I do not think the arts should cannibalize themselves. We should not rob librettists to pay haiku-istas. We are not sharks afterall.

It hasn't always been like this and it's not like this in other places. One need only sight federal budgets under Holt, Gorton and Whitlam and The European Parliament's document [Financing the Arts and Culture in the European Union](#) (see especially [pages 28 and 51 of this report](#)). We could look not only to the past and other countries for solutions but to our own common sense – we do not need nostalgia or a cultural cringe to steer us in the right direction.

If one wants to keep revenue the same then more funding for literature must come from somewhere else. There are many places to look. Why, for example, should the government contribute so much to multinational corporate mining projects? Why should we spend money on foreign military apparel? Why do we need constant road upgrades? We might not even need to ask these questions if we chose to increase revenue. Why not an optional poetry levy? Why not a literature tax on those who earn more than \$1m? Why not an unsustainable good tax? Why not setting the fines for the destruction of sacred sites and sensitive ecologies so low? Why not an affirmative action policy for poets paid for by politicians themselves – do former premiers really need the publicly subsidised largesse of drivers and offices upon retirement when they already have sizable superannuation payouts?

Literature in Australia, and poetry in particular, needs to be taken seriously. The current set of preferences is inimical to a poetic life. Without poetry, and art, we lead enervated lives robbed of meaning and the ability to examine problems in different ways. Poetry, moreover, deserves a place at the cultural table because of its role as the research and development wing of language. Poetry's benefit is [essentially metaphoric](#). Despite the turn to the meta metonymic in contemporary conceptual work, critics from [avant garde](#) to [conservative](#) agree that poetry means we do not always need direct address. Sometimes it is to our benefit if we do not call a spade a spade, a pipe a pipe, a rose a rose. Sometimes it is also necessary. In this case though we can be clear in keeping the state, including its politicians and arts bureaucrats, accountable because they are largely responsible for the available opportunities for cultural life in Australia. Without a way of supporting poetry we are in danger of failing as a nation precisely because it means we limit our options to think.

Image: Iconic Sydney Opera House during Vivid Sydney 2013 (Photo courtesy Wikimedia)

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