

## PASSPORTS TO THE PAST

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DOMINIQUE HECQ

*How strange it is, to be standing leaning against the current of time.*

W. G. Sebald

*Only the grass stands up to mark the dancing ring ...*

Judith Wright

If the past is a foreign country, then we are all exiles shipwrecked in the present. Our fate is fraught with risks. We need only think of *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, *The Transit of Venus*, *The Commandant*, and *A Fringe of Leaves*. Then turn our thoughts to *Remembering Babylon* and *The Secret River*. Different spaces—temporal, geographical, political, and textual—different risks.

'The past is a foreign country' are the first words from *the Go-Between*, a British novel I read when I was sixteen, marooned in my father's house somewhere in the Belgian countryside. And the idea that we are all shipwrecked exiles is supported by the late Edward Said who saw exile as the twentieth century's quintessential experience. Over twenty years ago, Said published an essay titled 'Reflections on Exile' in which he states that we have become accustomed to thinking of the modern period as spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement. Modern Western culture, he adds, is largely the work of exiles, émigrés, and refugees. At the same time, exile has become the 'fetish' of intellectuals.

A few years later and on a metonymic par with Said, Salman Rushdie wrote in his introduction to Günter Grass' *On Writing and Politics* that migration uses 'one of the richest metaphors of our age':

The very word metaphor, with its roots in Greek words for *bearing across* describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants—borne-across humans—are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant peoples.

Thus, it would seem that at the end of the twentieth century the predicament of Australians had become global. It is indeed the historian R.M. Crawford who, in the opening pages of his *Australia*, noted that 'the history of Australia is a chapter in the history of migration.'

All migrants experience exile in one form or another. And the trauma of exile in its many forms lurks behind the scenes in all of Rushdie's novels, and it remains a central question in *The Satanic Verses*, the work which contributed to ostracize him forever from his culture of birth. Interestingly, though trained as a historian, Rushdie chose fiction to explore the upheavals of the contemporary world and the immediate past, utilising the resources and freedom of movement intrinsic to the tradition of the novel. In *Shame* Rushdie suggests 'it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history.' But exile enriches a migrant's sense of history. This is because the metaphorical possibilities inherent in the concept of exile enable us to expand on those of migration, adding to it a sense of multiple dislocations.

Starting from the literal meaning of migration and exile, one can move on to the metaphorical because physical exile is often the starting point of other forms of exile—cultural, linguistic, psychological, ontological, existential, and metaphysical. Besides, exile also invites a rapprochement between displacement and writing.

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