

MARGOT SCHWASS

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS
A STUDY OF MIGRANT WRITERS IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with a consideration of what constitutes migrant writing, and points to the difficulties in arriving at an absolute definition. Some justification is given for the fact that the ensuing discussion concerns short stories alone, and some of the particular qualities of the short story which make it an appropriate form for migrant literature are examined. The first chapter also makes a brief survey of the context for migrant writing within New Zealand literature, and compares the work of several short story writers, migrant and non-migrant.

The work of two New Zealand migrant short story writers is discussed closely in the chapters that follow: Amelia Batistich's stories are examined in Chapter Two, and Yvonne du Fresne's in Chapter Three. In each discussion, formal qualities are given equal attention as matters of content and theme.

The final chapter attempts to draw connections between the work of these two writers and the problems of definition raised in the first chapter. Consideration is also given to the attitudes and expectations of readers of migrant fiction.

The appendices to the thesis contain biographies of Amelia Batistich and Yvonne du Fresne, and transcripts of conversations with them. The conversations were recorded in 1984, and have been lightly edited. A bibliography is included which provides a selective guide to the two authors' published and unpublished work, and a full account of all secondary material consulted.

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Chapter 1

DEFINITIONS AND CONTEXTS

1.1 THE MAKING OF A NEW ZEALANDER

'Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head...'
(Matthew Arnold, 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse')

A study of migrant short story writers in New Zealand begins with an epigraph by Matthew Arnold and a discussion of a story by Frank Sargeson: proof indeed of how fluid and problematic are the limits of what constitutes 'migrant writing' or what qualifies as 'migrant experience'. For, perhaps unexpectedly, both writers offer revealing perspectives from which to view this alarmingly undefined territory. In particular, Sargeson's story "The Making of a New Zealander" (1939) provides much which is useful in any attempt to chart what might be called the 'migrant presence' in New Zealand's short fiction.

The story centres on a conversation between the narrator, an itinerant farmworker, and Nick, a Dalmatian immigrant. Despite the drawbacks of living in a country where 'everybody wants money quick ... money, money all the time',¹ Nick confides that he will never return to Dalmatia, repeating at several points his claim "I am a New Zealander" (p. 103). Yet the narrator sees

¹ The Stories of Frank Sargeson (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1964) p.102.

something different beyond these words: '... Nick was saying he was a New Zealander, but he knew he wasn't a New Zealander. And he knew he wasn't a Dalmatian any more' (p. 104). That night, some sort of innate sympathy for Nick causes the narrator to insult his hard-nosed employer Mrs Crump, accusing her of having her heart in the wrong place. For this, he loses his job and the story ends with him heading for town and a drinking binge 'to get Nick out of my mind' (p.105).

This slight chain of incidents and sparse thread of halting dialogue make the story on first reading essentially a revelation of Nick. His voice, which dominates the dialogue, seems a voice from a void somewhere between the point of departure and the point of arrival — moments in time which do not necessarily coincide with the arbitrary divisions of clocks and calendars. For Nick, Dalmatia has been physically left behind, yet we sense that it is still the 'home' to which his heart and mind pay tribute. Similarly, his physical presence in New Zealand is shown to be 'no guarantee of a sense of belonging here; nor is this provided by the mere act of naming himself a New Zealander. The 'making of a New Zealander' is not easily achieved, as shown in Nick's conflicting desires to be recognised by New Zealanders as one of them yet still to remain disassociated from them. To be able to call himself a New Zealander seems above all a means of hiding his sense of personal uncertainty and rootlessness, of forgetting that he is 'wandering between two worlds', a foot in each but belonging to neither.

But after subsequent readings, attention may be drawn less towards Nick — whose dilemma seems straightforward and explicable — than to the narrator. The focus moves to those moments where the reader is drawn into his mind, or where his experiences and Nick's suddenly seem to connect and merge, where their

relationship seems closer than we (or they) may have thought at first. The strongest thread that draws them together is that sense (detectable beyond Nick's words) of his wandering between homes, an outsider in both: this rootlessness and displacement constitutes a problem which the narrator also shares. The story opens with an account of his casual, unplanned arrival on the farm -- from where, we are not told -- and ends with his equally unplanned departure, wandering into town in search of other jobs, other brief and unformed relationships. We have a sense of him drifting through life as he does through this story, a life comprising perpetual departures, journeys, transient contacts with other people in surroundings he can never call his own. Like Nick too, the narrator wants both to belong to the people he is with and to disassociate himself from them, an urge which leads to his dismissal. And like Nick, he seems sensitive to the quality of emotional barrenness that is the price of life committed purely to work and to making money. His final comment to Mrs Crump is, after all, an attack on her lack of feeling for others. He is, in Bill Pearson's words, representative of 'all New Zealanders, not yet grown into their time and place'.²

The story initially seems to work through the tension caused by the bringing together of two apparently different individuals, a difference made obvious by the easy polarities of 'Kiwi' and 'Dally'. But ultimately, the story draws out their similarities more than their differences, and in doing so, attests to the complexities of the experience that is migration, and of the fiction that is born out of it. Most importantly, the story shows that the feelings of rootlessness, loss and uncertainty which migration can cause are not properties exclusive to that experience alone. Individuals can feel homeless without passing through their

² 'The Making of a New Zealander' in Fretful Sleepers (Auckland: Heinemann, 1974), p.132.

front doors; their own race can seem foreign to them.

John Berger wrote recently that by plunging into the amorphous state that is migration, between departure and arrival, the individual is 'undoing the very meaning of the world ... to emigrate is always to dismantle the center of the world, and so to move into a lost disoriented one of fragments'.³ Yet the theme of fragmentation, of the individual isolated in a hostile or simply meaningless environment, reverberates through much of the literature (particularly) of this century, and has its roots in many more disorienting experiences than that of physical isolation alone. The ambiguous and intense emotions of disillusion and commitment, the pull of the past and the clamour of the alien present; these are found in life and in literature in many forms and for many reasons, of which migration is one. If, as Berger says, migration is 'the quintessential experience of our time' (p. 55), it is a term that must be understood to signify far more than just movements between geographical boundaries. As Sargeson's story shows, the territories amongst which a migrant may move are of far greater ambiguity than a map might indicate, and the naming of an individual as a migrant may rest on reasons beyond those which a passport can provide.

1.2 DEFINITIONS

The fluidity of definition concerning migrants and migrant experience which is revealed by Sargeson's story acknowledges that there are certain difficulties in talking of migrant writing in general, and further problems yet when the context is New Zealand literature. Questions present themselves far more readily than do answers: are migrant writers properly only those for whom English is a second

³ John Berger, And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p.56.

language? Can the migrant's experience be truly expressed only in the writer's own language, with any attempt to do otherwise a diminishing or transforming of that experience under linguistic necessity? Or is language in fact a red herring in the search to discover who the real migrant writers are -- as Sneja Gunew has noted, 'the fact of being born overseas into a language other than English does not guarantee that one speaks from a place different from that taken by writers placed within the host language'.⁴ In other words, perspectives are not necessarily different by virtue of the language in which they are framed. The acquisition of English as a second language does not automatically confer the status of 'migrant writer' -- the fiction may show little difference of approach, vision or perspective from that of the so-called 'mainstream' writer.

Clearly then, the acquisition of English as a second language is not a necessary criterion for determining whether a writer is a migrant writer. It might be thought that details of nationality and birthplace would provide incontrovertible proof -- however, this seems not to be the case. Both Amelia Batistich and Yvonne du Fresne consider themselves migrant writers. Yet Yvonne du Fresne is a third generation New Zealander of Danish and French descent -- clearly the closeness with the country and culture of her origins which emerges so vividly in her fiction is the result of a strong imaginative identification only, not direct experience. And Amelia Batistich's situation is very similar -- born in Dargaville of Dalmatian migrant parents, she wrote for over thirty years of a country she calls her homeland before she actually went there. Both writers frequently use their respective European languages in their stories -- yet for each, it was an acquired language, learnt perhaps with just the same difficulty which anybody of any other cultural descent might experience. But curiously, as readers

⁴ 'Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins?', *Meanjin*, 42:1, 1983, p.19.

we are probably willing to overlook these facts in the face of the sense of foreign territories and displaced lives which are evoked in their fiction -- it is the presence of these exotic elements that bestows on their fiction the label 'migrant writing'.

And in our willingness to accept this -- despite the factual evidence which states plainly that neither of the authors is, strictly speaking, a migrant -- something of a double standard seems to be in force. For readers are perhaps less willing to see as 'migrant fiction' the work of writers who have rather better-known and less exotic territories informing their work. Russell Haley, a naturalised New Zealander originally from Yorkshire, is a prime example. In his recent book Real Illusions,⁵ he explores the whole area of migrant writing and migrant consciousness, placing himself firmly within the migrant writers' camp -- a writer whose fiction is inseparable from his experience journeying between England and New Zealand. Yet so familiar to most New Zealanders is the Old World which Haley's fiction looks back to, many may see him as part of the mainstream -- after all, Yorkshire is hardly exotic and mysterious in the way that Amelia Batistich's villages by the Adriatic are, or Yvonne du Fresne's Nordic world of snow and magic. Yet Haley demands to be read as a migrant writer -- a claim which must be considered as credible as du Fresne's or Batistich's, if not more so. And so defining migrant writers on the strength of their place of birth and nationality is clearly misleading and ultimately unhelpful.

Perhaps it is the fiction's content that will offer conclusive proof of its status -- are there perhaps some particular experiences, particular subjects common to all migrant writers? Again, such expectations can be quickly dashed. To demand

⁵ Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1984.

recognizable 'migrant' content from those accorded the title 'migrant writers' seems unreasonable — for who is to decide what constitutes authentic migrant experience? What are its components — stories of hardship, journeys, problems of adjustment, disappointment and success? These are popular enough perceptions of what migration involves — fuelled by such powerful symbols as the Statue of Liberty and the solace it offers to the 'huddled masses'. But this sort of popular image is not necessarily borne out by reality — and perhaps merely provides the non-migrant with a convenient myth, a comforting and effortless substitute for real knowledge, real understanding.

And the futility of expecting a consistent, homogeneous image of migrant experience from all migrant literature becomes apparent from even the briefest of glances at two short stories by Renato Amato. Maurice Shadbolt comments in his introduction to Amato's collection The Full Circle of the Travelling Cuckoo (1967) that the author's own emigration from Italy to New Zealand was essentially 'of the spirit ... It certainly had very little to do with national boundaries'.⁶ Amato's work reinforces this sense that migration is an experience involving more than journeys between specified geographical locations. Even those stories which have apparently little to do with migration often in fact prove to be concerned with very similar preoccupations. Many centre with bitter sensitivity on isolated individuals, embattled with their personal devils of loneliness and a sense of vulnerability amidst a hostile or simply indifferent community.

In 'Perspective', for instance, the central character goes to a brothel on a rainy night to seek solace from a prostitute he has visited many times and to whom he believes he is truly special. Her 'love' constitutes his 'home' (p.51), 'the world ...

⁶ Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1967, p.12.

the piece of ground I stretched on ... that made a graceful gesture to welcome me and shelter me and let me rest' (p.54). Yet he does not realise that this 'world' is an illusory construct -- without his glasses, he has been unaware that his adored girl is in fact a succession of girls. In this collapse of the known and the certain, he seems severed from all the unchanging reassurances which the external world is assumed to possess. And the nature of this character's experience points to a connection between this story and others by Amato which deal more overtly with migrants and their journeys. For this disintegration of the familiar world into fragmentary chaos is, to the migrant, familiar territory too.

The same territory emerges also in one of Amato's autobiographical war stories, 'Only A Matter of Grammar', in which the narrator witnesses the execution of his former comrades by their enemies, of whom he is now one. Torn by feelings of betrayal, self-preservation and detachment, he discovers that it is indeed 'only a matter of grammar' whether one sinks into the safety offered by the pronoun 'us' or faces the certain death of 'them'. It is a fine line, and one of an importance to which perhaps a migrant writer is particularly alert. At the moment of his execution, his sense of unity and community is destroyed forever: 'Every time I started thinking about it, it was as if I were trying to remember a dream that had lost its continuity' (p. 31). It is this breaking of the dream, of the continuity of a single life, which marks the beginning of the migrant's journey. In this story, it is prior to the hero's physical departure, but the important severance has been made: 'I only saw that broken thread and couldn't care less'. (p.31). Both these stories suggest that in order for writing to earn the label 'migrant literature', experiences of physical migration need not be overtly evoked. Amato's work implies that migrant writing may perhaps be any in which the mind at work has been modified by having to accommodate, and be accommodated to, a variety of

territories; geographical, emotional or imaginative. What proves a migrant writer, perhaps, is the acknowledgement their work makes of their belonging at least in part to two places, and in consequence, their sense of belonging nowhere completely.

Rather than despairing at the ambiguity and open-endedness which beset attempts to establish the necessary credentials for migrant writers, in this thesis I have tried to take advantage of its positive implications. I have not attempted to make a definitive survey of 'migrant writers' in New Zealand -- in a country whose literary history is only a little over one hundred and forty years old, such an attempt seems to involve considerably lengthier argument than this thesis can encompass. Instead I have selected for close examination the work of two living writers with whom I have been fortunate enough to have considerable correspondence and conversation. This personal contact has enabled me to move the focus of my discussion away from hesitant theory about 'migrant literature' and its limits, and towards a consideration of some specific examples. It is from these particular reference points that I have attempted to draw some more general conclusions about migrant writing.

My intention has been to give primary consideration to the individual qualities of their writing, and to avoid using 'migrant literature' as an expedient label which implies that because they are both of migrant descent their work can be unthinkingly assumed to disclose interchangeable perspectives and preoccupations. Yet, perversely, there are undeniable similarities between Yvonne du Fresne and Amelia Batistich. Both are of European descent, but wrote for many years without first-hand experience of the homelands their fiction so frequently evokes. Both have written novels, but have made a more prolific -- and, I feel, successful

— use of the short story, a form of notable popularity amongst migrant writers, both in New Zealand and elsewhere. Why this trend should be so is a matter demanding considerable attention, for not only does it shed light on the individual literary qualities of these two writers, but sets them within the context of other New Zealand writers working in the same genre.

1.3 MIGRANT WRITING AND THE SHORT STORY

Initially, it seems difficult to find clear reasons for the apparent attractions that the short story form holds for migrant writers. Its familiar properties seem appropriate for the rendering of migrant experience, but not exclusively so. Yet, as Claire Hanson points out, the short story has flourished amongst writers for whom transit and uprootedness are familiar conditions of life, who work within 'incompletely developed cultures'⁷ still being established or else in the act of disintegration or reconstruction:

The short story seems to be the mode preferred by those writers who are not writing from within a fixed and stable cultural framework. It has also been favoured by writers who find themselves to be personally opposed to the society in which they live and for whom the idea of society and shared values is problematic.

(p.12).

Writers on the fringes of their societies or writing within societies that are themselves on the fringes of their cultural metropolitan centre (Katherine Mansfield, V.S. Naipaul and Rudyard Kipling are some notable examples) reveal their isolated positions through short stories, the utterances of what Frank O'Connor calls 'lonely voice(s)'.⁸

⁷ Short Stories and Short Fictions 1880-1980 (London: Macmillan, 1985), p.12.

⁸ The Lonely Voice (London: Macmillan, 1963).

While this accounts for some of the important historical developments in the short story, it is hardly an adequate explanation of why such writers should turn specifically to the short story to make heard their 'lonely voices'. Does the form itself possess inherent properties which can be tailored exactly to the needs of the migrant writer (or one who is uprooted and disoriented for any other reason), and which are not available in other literary forms? One of the novelist's most significant resources is the possible length of his or her narrative, enabling a discursive, leisurely, expansive narrative which has traditionally sought to construct an impression of wholeness, of a totality revealed to the reader by an elaborate, panoramic exposition. The writer of short stories, however, is denied such possibilities for expansive narration, or for lengthy chronological progressions, or for showing characters 'whole' from a range of perspectives and a variety of moments in time. As Frank O'Connor says in his study of the genre:

Because [the short story writer's] frame of reference can never be the totality of a human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it, and each selection he makes contains the possibility of a new form.⁹

The short story effectively releases the author from any of the obligations the novelist may feel to represent the 'totality' of an individual's life or of a particular experience. What is focussed on instead, according to O'Connor, is 'the significant moment' (p.23), the point at which the writer constructs out of the fiction a peephole through which the reader can have a momentary, oblique glimpse of an individual.

If it is the short story writer's concern to identify and reveal the 'significant moment', it is important that the subject matter and setting of the story be capable of yielding up such moments, and it is here that some explanations emerge

⁹ Ibid.

for why the short story seems a particularly appropriate and popular form for migrant literature to take. For the experience of migration and its effects at all levels -- physical, emotional, material -- are frequently represented in fiction as a mass of unresolved tensions embedded within the individual. The migrant may still be in transit long after the physical journey is completed. He or she is often trying to reconcile an Old World that seems to have faded into dream with the alien demands of a New World. The migrant is depicted struggling to reassemble his or her life, to restore to it the coherence, continuity and unity that seems to have disappeared at the point of departure from the Old World. The migration may have involved the acquisition of a new language, and so a more complete dismemberment. When the individual is torn between two languages, two levels of self-expression are created -- one innate, deeply-felt and personal; the other assumed, hesitant and for public consumption only. The immediate moment is constantly flooded with fragments from the remembered past -- what is real? What is dream?

Russell Haley evokes well the constant tensions, the ambivalences of feeling which characterise migrant experience, when he writes:

As a migrant you are never here or there. You are here and there. So you build what you can with what you've got ... As a migrant, living now in this part of the world, you have to stretch your skin between here and there. You have to get used to the cries of 'solipsism' from both critics and friends.

But you have no real country out there. It is all in here ¹⁰

And once this sort of stretching (or dismemberment) of the individual takes place, the fictional form in which it is represented can share the same unresolved tensions, the same collision of opposites, the same tugs in irreconcilable directions -- again, as Haley notes of his own fiction:

¹⁰ 'Here and There', op. cit., p.122.

I must confront a landscape here which rears with all the strange familiarity of a place constructed in a dream. I suppose this is why many of the stories in this collection circle around the theme of building a house. I am trying to make a place in the world.

But the house is a field of force, a net of language, rather than a solid structure and it bends and warps and bulges. The migrant writer is driven to build his or her fragile dwelling on a fault line.

(p.123).

The short story is a form capable of sharing the migrant's 'stretched skin'. For, by virtue of its brevity it too can bring opposites into collision, establish taut tensions between characters, locations, between words themselves — and preserve them at the moment of connection, the realisation of the 'significant moment'. Elements clash, mesh together and interpenetrate: they may 'bend and warp and bulge' as Haley has it, but they are not explicated or unwound.

Valerie Shaw has identified amongst the distinctive properties of the short story form 'the combination of chiselled definiteness and tantalising suggestiveness'¹¹ and suggests that this in itself makes it a form particularly suited to what she calls 'frontier subjects'(p.193) — experiences in a hazy borderland beyond the limits of an individual's familiar territory, a 'third entity' (p.192) between two regions. This is the territory which migrant writing so frequently explores: characters wander without bearings somewhere between a point of departure and a hoped-for arrival, looking back to a past that has taken on the appearance of a dream and forward to a future that may be a nightmare or simply a void, the unknown.

While not claiming that such 'frontier subjects' are the exclusive property of the short story writer, Shaw suggests that because such subjects are 'inherently dramatic' they yield 'conflicts which can be encompassed in a brief

¹¹ The Short Story (London: Longman, 1983), p. 192.

narrative'(p.193). The form's complementary properties of compression and open-endedness can not only render well the collision of worlds experienced by the migrant but also the fact that such conflicts are not quickly or easily reconciled. And Shaw adds that this capacity inherent in the short story means that form and content have an unusually close, dependent collaboration:

Watching a character cross a frontier, literal or metaphorical, the reader can be made to feel that he too is discovering something new, experiencing in a short time span the dislocating sensation of entering a foreign state, unlike the one he normally inhabits.

(p. 193).

The short story can be effectively used not only as a means of telling about migrant experience, but of imitating (and so reinforcing) that experience. The reader shares the jolt as the old and the new, the familiar and the foreign, are not explicated but brought into collision by the structure of the narrative itself, the way it builds towards revelation of the 'significant moment'.

There are many examples of the way migrant writers can exploit the tensions and oppositions inherent in their theme by deft handling of the form's potential. Yvonne du Fresne's story 'The Old Ones',¹² for example, ends with the child Astrid Westergaard watching a Danish friend handing her grandmother a bunch of daffodils. She suddenly finds herself seeing instead an image from prehistoric Jutland — the priestess receiving a branch of flowers from a young warrior about to be sacrificed to bring in the Spring. The two images and the two incongruous places and times which have produced them collide briefly, hauntingly — the story ends. The two worlds which Astrid occupies — the New Zealand she is discovering through her sensory experience and the distant Danish world she knows through her imagination — have interpenetrated for the single moment the story has been building to, the centre around which it is organised.

¹² Farvel (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1980), p.62.

The effect on the reader is bewildering, dislocating -- we too are caught in the collision, our recognizable and reassuring world having been momentarily disrupted by an invasion from unknown territories.

So too in the title story of Amelia Batistich's collection An Olive Tree in Dalmatia ¹³ the old man Stipan suddenly finds the New World invaded by the Old while digging around the roots of an old puriri tree on his Northland farm. The sight of his boot-mark on the soil suddenly recalls his last day in Dalmatia over fifty years ago when he had left a similar mark on the soil around the olive tree he was planting. Suddenly, the globe starts spinning backwards -- he sees the familiar world with new eyes, overlaid with images from that remote past, that dream. The bringing together of these opposites -- the Old World and the New, the past and the present, the reality and the dream -- is the moment upon which the story hinges, the moment at which the reader too is drawn into the story, disturbed by the same jolt which shakes Stipan's equilibrium.

In the stories of Renato Amato in his collection The Full Circle of the Travelling Cuckoo, the ability of the short story form to create collisions, disjunctions and incongruities is perhaps even more visible. Unlike the other two writers, Amato experienced migration directly, as a painful departure from a country torn apart by war and a bewildering arrival in a new country with a new language to be learned. A further important difference from the stories of the other writers is that Amato's contain little sense of community -- they focus largely on individuals in acute isolation. Consequently, tensions are evoked not only between the Old World and the New, but within the hearts and minds of these lonely and silent people -- particularly between their semi-articulate public

¹³ Auckland, Longman Paul, 1963.

selves and their real selves lying mute beneath. In 'The New, New ...' for instance, there is a major conflict between the protagonist Gerolamo Musmeci and the boorish stranger who accosts him with an anti-foreigner tirade: "I don't know why they let you in at all ... You chaps are a bunch of blood-suckers; you're taking the bread out of our mouths" (p. 74). But the real conflict is revealed at the story's end when Gerolamo is left prattling the meaningless phrases which he knows to be the only means of placating 'this nice man'(p.75). The migrant's refuge is his cynical recognition of the power of language to deceive and to fabricate such conciliatory statements as "I am so happy to be in this country. Everything is so easy and doctors are so marvellous ... Yes, thank you, I am very happy"(p.75). Again, a disturbing rift is opened which cannot fail to trouble the reader — a rift not just between the two worlds of the migrant, but between the surfaces and depths of his personality and between the form and the meaning of his words.

The short story contains inherent formal properties — in particular, its ability to mirror 'the dislocating sensation of entering a foreign state' (Shaw, p.193) — which makes it an appropriate means of rendering the tensions and dislocations which may constitute the experience of the migrant. But this fact alone does not adequately account for why it is an attractive form to migrant writers. It has also been suggested that whilst in some senses the short story is one of the most consciously artful narrative forms — involving as it does compression of narrative detail, an economical handling of time sequence and character presentation, a judiciously selected point of approach to the plot — it is also a form which remains 'closely linked to the traditional oral tale'.¹⁴ The links are revealed in what Valerie Shaw calls the 'colloquial spontaneity' (p.6) which exists in the short

¹⁴ Hanson, op. cit., p.5.

story alongside its consciously crafted literary devices. This colloquialism determines the relationship between author and reader -- there is frequently in the short story "a sense of a human teller presenting the material" (p.20), conveyed either in the author's direct personal utterances or mediated through the presence of a fictional narrator.

The link between the traditional short story and older oral models is acknowledged also by Clare Hanson. She finds it manifest in the expectations of the reader -- expectations which are similar to those of an audience listening to a story-teller:

The stories are essentially communal in intention and effect, depending on a fundamental agreement between reader and writer (or teller and listener) as to what constitutes 'the great and little things of life'. ... the story depends for much of its effect on the reader's familiarity with the code employed, and his ability to recognise departures from it. The stories are not exactly formulaic in the medieval sense, but work within certain assumptions of shared formal knowledge.

(p. 6).

It seems hardly surprising that many of the migrant writers who make frequent use of the short story form have a cultural background in which traditional oral story-telling is important. Russell Haley's autobiographical story 'Looping the Loop'¹⁵ evokes a Yorkshire childhood in which the telling of family stories, embellished with his mother's 'verbal embroidery' (p.4) is an essential means of self-definition. Story-telling creates (or invents) the link between present and past, the mythic and the real -- 'Mother faced her past and invented it as readily as we plan our futures, looking towards the new' (p.7). In this tradition he absorbed, the human voice is enormously powerful. It can revitalise the past, restore the dead to the living, and its accents and cadences can transform

¹⁵ Real Illusions, p.1.

apparently static daily life into subtle living theatre:

If my mother had been able to tell the whole of the family history it would all have been in dialogue ... She could do Welsh and Geordie and would sometimes exaggerate her native Yorkshire and use so much dialect we could scarcely understand her. So the tale would have been like a great rambling play with all the characters in each of their phases, child to bent man, out on the stage together.

(p.12).

Story-telling as 'verbal embroidery' is also suggested in many of Yvonne du Fresne's stories -- indeed, the link between the crafts is often referred to explicitly:

For hundreds of years they told the old stories of Denmark in the weaving huts. That is how I learned them. While I listened to the stories I watched the fingers. They knitted, they pulled threads out of linen for the drawn-thread designs, their needles flashed in and out of linen, embroidering field-flowers. ... Sometimes the flowers were Danish -- but more and more, New Zealand flowers crept in.¹⁶

Yvonne du Fresne's stories at times share these qualities: as the Danish women come to know New Zealand and make a place for themselves within it by weaving it into their handcraft, so too do these stories interweave Denmark and New Zealand, the two languages, the remembered and the real, the past and the present. At times, the language is as supple and colourful as embroidery thread, the author's pen moving with the quick dexterity of a needle, penetrating the fabric at one point only to emerge at a surprising distance. Her syntax can display a mobile, flexible pace that suggests a close affinity with oral story-telling, its spontaneity and energy. It is no surprise to learn that Yvonne du Fresne grew up in an atmosphere in which the telling of stories -- both family anecdotes and Nordic myths -- was common and encouraged:

The first stories I heard were oral stories. Peacefully related at any time of the day, or chanted with some urgency. The voices matched the words, short sentences, very tight rhythm, the use of silence, hands lifted and dropped. The stories of the North. The

¹⁶ 'Arts and Crafts', Farvel, p. 40.

stories of Jutland, in Denmark ... In those regions, stories lay hidden, unchanged.¹⁷

Evidence of a close contact with oral story-telling from an early age also emerges in Amelia Batistich's Dalmatian stories. She recalls that she too had an oral tradition -- 'My mother ... would start to talk and you would think that she had never left the village of Zaoztrog ... So out of this you build these stories. And she made it so richly alive'.¹⁸ Perhaps to a greater extent than any of the other migrant writers discussed here Amelia Batistich's stories display the firm imprint of this tradition. Almost without exception, their language and sentence structure implies the presence of a teller. Sentences tend to be short and exclamatory, at times rhetorical. The reader is invited into a relationship of familiarity with this narrative presence who addresses the audience directly and assumes our fore-knowledge of characters and events. Characters reveal themselves through their voices which are nearly audible, so closely are the accents and syntax of human speech recalled.

The work of each of these writers also acknowledges the narrative forms characteristic of the oral tradition -- myth, fairy story, folk tale, personal anecdote. Nordic gods and heroes frequently burst into Yvonne du Fresne's stories of war-time New Zealand family life, with quite disturbing effects. Amelia Batistich's stories often contain stock elements from fairy stories or folk tales -- doomed love between goat girls and rich young men, old people for whom Death restores the beauty of youth, the recurrent motif of the naive youth departing into the great wide world to seek his fortune, and of course the ubiquitous vilas of Serbo-Croatian legend.

¹⁷ Unpublished essay.

¹⁸ Conversation with the author, see Appendix A, p.202.

The liberal use of such elements points to a further explanation of the popularity of the short story amongst migrant writers, and confirms Valerie Shaw's observation that the short story 'has a unique ability to preserve and at any time recall its mixed origins in fable, anecdote, fairy story and numerous other forms' (p.20). When one of the important tensions which underscores the experience of migration is what Elizabeth Bowen calls 'a cleft between my heredity and my environment',¹⁹ it seems that the form of the short story can provide a possible means of reconciling the two. The migrant story may be set in New Zealand (for example) and informed by aspects of this environment, but its form and diction recall the distant cultural inheritance — geographical or temporal — of its author or protagonist. So in the gap which is exposed between immediate environment and cultural inheritance, the story is woven — affirming once more the close relationship between form and content in migrant short fiction.

1.4 THE SHIFTED PEOPLE:THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

The formal properties of the short story which make it such an appropriate means of evoking migrant experience are, of course, available to all writers and clearly many non-migrant writers admire and employ the form for precisely the same reasons. This suggests that whatever can be said to constitute migrant experience has links with many of the other varieties of human experience which an author may choose to explore in fiction. To acknowledge this is to accept that migrant fiction is more than just an expression of isolated or exclusive interests: as the Australian journal Meanjin suggested recently:

¹⁹ Pictures and Conversations (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,1975) p.23.

It is not just for relics of pre-modern culture, or for understanding of 'the migrant experience' that we should look to migrant art and literature, but for explorations of the alienation and fragmentation of modern existence.²⁰

It is with this notion of the universality of migrant experience in mind that the work of migrant short story writers in New Zealand can be viewed in the context of their non-migrant colleagues. The potential the short story form offers for the creation of tensions between an individual and a community, the freedom it gives the author to manoeuvre the elements of the narrative on to a collision course and abandon them at the point where a novelist may feel obliged to step in and tidy up the wreckage: such tantalising opportunities have been relished by countless New Zealand writers. And so, the migrant writers stand amongst them not as exotic, alien creatures, 'colourfully-costumed singing dancing migrants',²¹ whose manifest cultural 'difference' means their work is read with an entirely different set of assumptions from that of their 'mainstream' fellows, but as an integral part of that stream.

Considering migrant writers in the context of other New Zealand short story writers not only reveals a plentitude of fictional voices at work, but confirms anew the relative youth of this particular tradition. While it is facile to say that in a country whose literature is a little over one hundred and forty years old, its history is in essence a history of migrant literature, this statement nonetheless makes a broad gesture towards the truth. Not only does it indicate the obvious fact of cultural diversity — that many cultural, national and linguistic veins run through New Zealand literature — but it acknowledges too the fluidity with which that literature is organised. Just as Sargeson's story reveals no easy

²⁰ 'On Clowns and Migrant Artists', *Meanjin* 42:1, 1983, p.141.

²¹ Ibid.

polarity between the insider and the outsider, no crystalline 'us' and 'them', so too do categories and pronouns overlap alarmingly when one attempts to draw up divisions between 'mainstream' and 'migrant' New Zealand writers. When in 1932 Phoenix announced, 'we are hungry for the words that shall show us these islands and ourselves',²² it could not perhaps have been anticipated that fifty years later there would be an enormous range of people, with quite different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who would line up behind the word 'ourselves' and so claim the right to write on 'our' behalf. A recent collection of New Zealand short stories also acknowledges this surprising diversity of people and territories that exists within New Zealand, its editors noting that the stories reveal 'a number of other countries — which [have] grown up and persisted despite all the pressures towards uniformity of "official" New Zealand'.²³

As I suggested earlier, it seems that the effect on the individual forced to stretch his or her skin between any 'here and there' is a state which is neither exclusive nor requisite to migration between geographical territories alone. Indeed, transit between territories and homes, and the feelings of isolation and rootlessness that this can cause, occupy a significant role in New Zealand's short fiction. Even Samuel Butler's narrator in Erewhon (1872) seems to be an early link in this tradition. Lost in the Southern Alps, he suffers 'dreadful doubt as to my own identity — as to the continuity of my past and present existence',²⁴ a passage which contributes to what has been called 'the first narrative version of the New

²² Quoted in E.H. McCormick, Letters and Art in New Zealand (Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940), p.176.

²³ Marion McLeod and Bill Manhire (eds.), Some Other Country (Wellington: Unwin with Port Nicholson Press, 1984), p.(i).

²⁴ Samuel Butler, Erewhon (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 65.

Zealand myth of Man Alone'.²⁵ Whilst the territories Higgs has exchanged are those of community and isolation, the way his mind has accommodated the upheaval is the same as if the transition had been between countries.

A crisis of identity seems to emerge inevitably in the literature of a country whose first writers were frequently struggling to accommodate an imaginative and literary inheritance which lay in England with the incongruous and often disappointing experience of living and writing in New Zealand. Several sufferers became this country's well-known godwits; Mansfield, Hyde, Davin and Courage among them, whose work at times bears witness to their sense of disorientation, struggling to reconcile the dream of 'there' with the disappointing 'here'. Others, like Blanche Baughan in 'An Active Family' (1912), used fiction to effect both a transformation of the depressing realities of life in what has been called 'a cultural climate in which reading was a waste of time, imagination an impractical self-indulgence',²⁶ and also an escape from it. These writers became, in Bill Pearson's words, 'the shifted people ... having to reorient their own consciousness ... learning to recognise themselves in the limitations of their time and place'.²⁷ The echoes of the situation of New Zealand's contemporary migrant writers are unexpectedly real and resonant.

Later writers, particularly after the depression and the war, seem to suffer fewer of the symptoms endured by these 'shifted people' — caused perhaps by a diminished dependence on a foreign literary and cultural inheritance. James

²⁵ Roger Robinson, 'Samuel Butler: Exploration and Imagination' in Len Richardson and W. David McIntyre (eds.), Provincial Perspectives: Essays in Honour of W.J. Gardner (Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1980), pp.66-7.

²⁶ Bill Pearson, 'Frank Sargeson's Stories', in Fretful Sleepers (Auckland: Heinemann, 1974), p. 129-130.

²⁷ 'The Recognition of Reality', *ibid.*, p. 137.

Courage's story 'After the Earthquake' (1948) seems located at this point of change — suggested by Mr Blakiston's reflection that 'the new climate was changing, ... adapting its laws and forms to a younger society. And he himself had changed, and was changing with it'.²⁸ The earthquake of the title seems ultimately to refer to the jolt experienced within the small farming community as it becomes aware of the nostalgic English past falling away, and of being left on fragile ground with none of the reassurances of the past. As the same character says; "I shall probably never go back to the Old Country. It's too far away now, too long ago"(p. 71).

The death of the Old World is also evoked in John Reece Cole's story, 'It Was So Late', written in the following year. Here, images of decay proliferate, both in the faded decrepitude of the stately country house where a reception is being held for the district's returned servicemen, and in the genteel English mannerisms still desperately cultivated by its occupants. The central character, a returned pilot, observes with amazement the stubborn perpetuation of the Old World and its values which his experiences in the War convinced him had vanished — feelings which are ambiguously expressed in his parting comment to his hostess; "I didn't realise that it was so late".²⁹ This story, like Courage's, evokes a culture and a people stretched between two worlds. Yet in both stories, the Old World is shown in its death throes, beyond revival and sinking into obsolescence.

More recent fiction has continued this increasing detachment from a strictly British inheritance, which for so long provided the basis for 'official' New Zealand fiction. Yet this has meant not a diminution, but an enlargement of the range of

²⁸ James Courage, Such Separate Creatures, (Christchurch: Caxton, 1973), p.63.

²⁹ John Reece Cole, It was So Late (Christchurch: Caxton, 1949), p. 76.

territories to which writers have access. Vincent O'Sullivan's story, 'The Boy, The Bridge, The River' (1978), for instance, is told largely from the perspective of a European migrant. The link between this story and those of the European migrant writers discussed earlier is located not only in its subject matter, but in the way O'Sullivan handles the form. Like so much migrant literature, the story works through a fractured, disjointed narrative — plunging between territories, moments in time, voices and perspectives. It effectively mirrors the experience of its central character, Latty, who 'was not a man with one continuous life, but lives that were like the broken tracks of a railway, lines that ran towards each other until where they met was in fact where they did not meet at all'.³⁰ O'Sullivan constantly brings Latty's past — an existence shattered by war and the loss of a family — into collision with the incongruous present. Not only does this clash reveal that Latty is effectively a man with two disconnected lives, ^{moreover,} but [^]a man who lives as if in a dream. The past was where his real life was led — his present existence in New Zealand he sees as a temporary suspension in an unreal, unknowable territory in which his only needs are 'the clear simplicities of food and peace'(p.122). His plight recalls that of Amato's migrant in 'Only A Matter of Grammar' who feels no connection between his past and present selves, as if his life were 'a dream that had lost its continuity'.³¹

By shaping the narrative as he does — following the broken tracks of Latty's past life, his present, and the lives of the New Zealanders he lives amongst — O'Sullivan is able to reveal 'alternatives to certain accepted or preferred views of New Zealand and New Zealanders'.³² And he is not alone as a non-migrant writer

³⁰ Vincent O'Sullivan, *The Boy, The Bridge, The River* (Dunedin: John McIndoe and A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1978), p. 111.

³¹ Amato, op. cit., p.31.

who reveals other countries, both within and beyond New Zealand. Ian Wedde and Michael Gifkins, as well as the naturalised Russell Haley, are others who display the same preoccupation, although their techniques differ. At times, the territories which inform their stories are named -- Hong Kong, Barbados, the Antarctic -- and so become more conventionally recognisable. But others barge into their fiction with an anarchic disregard for geography, substituting instead a vast and fantastic territory of the imagination.

All these writers are enriching the variety of New Zealand short fiction and so making it a place broad enough to accommodate perspectives outside what was previously the norm -- migrant perspectives among them. But it is with the fiction of Maori writers that migrant literature can be most closely entwined. There is an obvious similarity in the fact that both groups are outside of the dominant, most visible national culture, but further links emerge as well. For instance, the tendency in recent Maori fiction to present images of Maoris moving between country and city invites comparison with the migrant's drifting between worlds and cultures. Bill Pearson gives further substance to this parallel in his comment that 'in any situation a Maori is confronted with two codes of values, two courses of action, Maori and Pakeha; and ... which one he chooses depends on the time, the place and the circumstances', a state he describes as 'having to live in two worlds at once'.³³

It is little surprise therefore that images of transition, homelessness, isolation and journey occur with a frequency in Maori literature comparable to that in migrant writing. In Mason Durie's story 'Goodbye' (1959), Tuhou makes the

³² O'Sullivan, *op. cit.*, Publishers' note.

³³ Pearson, 'Attitudes to the Maori in Some Pakeha Fiction', *op. cit.*, pp. 62-3.

archetypal journey from a small rural community to the city. While his grandmother mourns 'losing her favourite mokopuna to the Pakeha',³⁴ the boy's emotions are poised between love for all that he is about to leave and a sense that he must move beyond the limitations of his grandmother's world, 'a kind peaceful world not infested with clocks and timetables' (p. 112). This exchange of worlds, so closely mirroring the experience of those who migrate between countries, is made explicit in Tuhou's thoughts as he leaves: 'He felt very lonely as he gazed out the window — almost like a love bird on a long migration to another country' (p. 134).

It is a migration that also underscores Witi Ihimaera's trilogy of stories 'In Search of the Emerald City' (1974), 'Yellow Brick Road' and 'Return From Oz' (1977). The very titles of the stories reflect the importance of fantasy to the migrant: the dream of happiness in a new place is tolerable compensation for the hardships that are involved in getting there. The fantasy is the migrant's seduction — as Renato Amato calls it; 'the legend of lands that flow with milk and honey'.³⁵ Ihimaera's stories reveal the gap between this seductive legend and the reality of migration as they chart a family's journey from Waituhi to Wellington, and the return trip that is made by the next generation. Central are the fantasies and hopes of the young boy Matiu who is perplexed at his parents' mixed feelings as they are about to arrive — "'Can't they see this is where our life begins and this is where our dreams begin?"³⁶ The use of the child narrator parallels Yvonne du Fresne's migrant stories: like Astrid Westergaard, Matiu

³⁴ Margaret Orbell, ed., Contemporary Maori Writing (Auckland: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1970), p. 131.

³⁵ Amato, 'One of the Titans', op. cit., p. 72.

³⁶ 'Yellow Brick Road', The New Net Goes Fishing (Auckland: Heinemann, 1977), p.7.

mediates between spheres and can manage what the adults find impossible – to hold in equal balance fantasy and reality. Ihimaera's division of the narrative between English and Maori achieves similar effects to the linguistic blends found in other migrant stories: the experience of the reader mirrors that of the migrant, sharing the same uncertainties and frustrations. The reader must feel through the text for the experience it discloses.

This same narrative quality emerges from Patricia Grace's stories – 'Journey', for instance, where there is a collision not only between Maori and Pakeha worlds, but also between the old and the new. The narrative is fixed in the mind of an old man, and wanders through his recollections of the past and his observations of the present, his voice rendered in both Maori and English and with a range of tones from the ironic to the lyrical:

And between the tunnels they were slicing the hills away with big machines. Great-looking hills too and not an easy job cutting them away, it took pakeha determination to do that. Funny people these pakehas, had to chop up everything. Couldn't talk to a hill or a tree these people, couldn't give the trees or the hills a name and make them special and leave them. Couldn't go round, only through. Couldn't give life, only death.³⁷

The prose patterns the old man's words into a rhythmic ebb and flow, proof of what one critic has described as Grace's creation of 'a prose style based on the structures of Maori speech'.³⁸ A useful comparison can be drawn with some of Amelia Batistich's stories – 'A Glass of Prosek' and 'The Old Man and the Mountain', for instance – where the prose is controlled by the accents, the syntax, the unique cadences and tones of their Dalmatian narrators.

³⁷ Patricia Grace, 'Journey', The Dream Sleepers (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1980) p.55.

³⁸ Bill Pearson, 'Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace', in Cherry Hankin, ed., Critical Essays on the New Zealand Short Story (Auckland: Heinemann 1982) p. 177.

Even this preliminary account of some of the ways New Zealand short fiction has concerned itself with universal concerns such as transition, displacement and isolation goes some way towards establishing a context for migrant writing within the canon of New Zealand short fiction. In the authors' treatment of these ideas — causing collisions between incongruous experiences and moments in time, disrupting a narrative in English with other languages (and generally, without helpful glossaries for the uninitiated) — 'official' New Zealand fiction is transformed. Migrant authors are only some amongst many short story writers in this country who are making available a number of new perspectives on New Zealand and New Zealanders, revealing voices and territories whose presence attests to a statement made in a recent Australian journal of migrant writing, that 'cultures, like oceans, can never be so wholly filled that more cannot be added'.³⁹ If a country's literature is not to remain static and inbred, this contribution of 'otherness' must be embraced. In the following chapters, I will discuss the contribution of two migrant authors to this country's literary ocean, whose work considerably extends its shores.

³⁹ Outrider 1, No. 1, June 1984.

Chapter 2

AMELIA BATISTICH

2.1 AMELIA BATISTICH AND THE ORAL TRADITION

2.1.1 Giving New Shape to an Old Tradition

Valerie Shaw writes of the short story form that it has a 'unique ability to preserve and at any time recall its mixed origins in fable, anecdote, fairy story and numerous other forms' and a distinctive power to convey 'a sense of a human teller'.⁴⁰ This sense of a generic link between a relatively modern literary form and an older non-literate tradition is perhaps unexpected, yet it occupies an important role in the work of Amelia Batistich. Her personal affinity with a tradition of oral story-telling is evident in her recollections of her Dargaville childhood:

My mother would sit by the stove or the fire and I'd get her to sing to me or say those poems ... and you would think that she had never left the village of Zaoztrog ... So out of this, you build these stories. And she made it so rich, as if she had never left it.⁴¹

And her absorption in the stories and songs of her family was a means of participating in the culture she had inherited, a way of keeping alive her Dalmatian identity. As she has said recently, 'it's a very Dalmatian thing to laugh and cry and talk a lot, and that's what I'm doing [in my stories] – talking a lot'.⁴²

⁴⁰ The Short Story (London: Longman, 1983), p.20.

⁴¹ Conversation with author, see Appendix A, p.202.

Her words imply an important context for her work: her stories are indeed part of a cultural tradition of 'talking a lot', written stories fashioned with an eye (or perhaps, more correctly, an ear) to the distinctive qualities of oral narrative. Moreover, it is possible to place her stories with some accuracy within a specific variant of the broad tradition of European oral narrative, for it is a regional tradition that survives today and has been the object of considerable scholastic study.

The oral tradition of the South-Slavic region has as its common element the Serbo-Croatian language. The territories it embraces include many whose names, borders and status have been thrown into chaos by the influence of war and time — Dalmatia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, Hercegovina, parts of Turkey, parts of Austria, contemporary Yugoslavia. Yet despite this, the nature of the tradition itself is clearly known, in all its intricacies and regional variety. This is largely due to the pioneering studies of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the nineteen thirties who sought to prove that the work of Homer and other Greek heroic poets was orally composed. They made painstaking interviews and recordings with many Serbo-Croatian oral singers, claiming that the techniques, conventions and forms they employed comprised a living example of the way such works as the Iliad and the Odyssey would have been composed. But their observations, and subsequent discoveries by later scholars, also provide some valuable insights into the tradition which Amelia Batistich absorbed as a child and which emerges — both by design and apparently unconsciously — in her short stories.

42 Letter, 18.6.84.

What then are the main characteristics of the Serbo-Croatian oral tradition that are echoed in Amelia Batistich's work? Most of the singers Parry and Lord observed and recorded had extensive repertoires -- often knowing two or three hundred songs of up to fifteen hundred lines each.⁴³ Most (except for women) accompanied themselves on a single-stringed instrument, the gusla. The majority of their songs were traditional -- memorised stock passages mixing with improvisation to form accounts of historical events such as the Battle of Kossovo (1389); stories of mythic or magical occurrences which incorporated elements of fairy stories and folk tales; or tales of semi-legendary Serbian heroes, such as the fourteenth-century figure Marko Kraljevic.

Such subjects constitute the basis of a great many Serbo-Croatian narratives, even those composed in recent times. And it is interesting to note that several are referred to explicitly in Amelia Batistich's work. For instance, her story 'The Gusla' is brought to a close by a fiery rendition of the song about the Kossovo maiden and the nine brothers dead for Serbia⁴⁴ -- a story whose earliest recorded performance is found in the diary of a traveller in Bosnia in 1531.⁴⁵

This perpetuation of a particular story through its re-creation in another narrative, by another narrator, illustrates the way the Serbo-Croatian oral tradition continues to survive. In this example, the ancient story has not only undergone a significant change in narrative medium (from its relatively free mutable existence in oral form, to a more 'closed' written existence) but has bridged a vast period of

⁴³ See Jan de Vries, Heroic Song and Heroic Legend (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 175.

⁴⁴ An Olive Tree in Dalmatia. p.66.

⁴⁵ See Felix J. Oinas, (ed.), Heroic Epic and Saga (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p.258.

time and enormous distances -- like a seed which has drifted across centuries to plant itself in alien soil. And so although the oral tradition is constantly looking to the past for its thematic resources and recurrent motifs, it continues to change and develop in response to the present. Mary Coote has noted that oral narrative in general, and heroic songs in particular,

have been officially encouraged both in pre-war and in post-war Yugoslavia, and songs have been created there and in émigré communities about the battles of two world wars, the Yugoslav civil war and revolution, and other events of the present time.⁴⁶

It is in this sense that Amelia Batistich seems to be working within the tradition she inherited -- it is a tradition whose conventions, concerns and techniques she consciously employs, as well as making explicit reference to them. Her stories of Dalmatian migrant life in New Zealand seem to have a relationship with the oral tradition that is both re-creative and creative: overtly acknowledging and incorporating elements of that tradition, and simultaneously contributing something new to it. And this simultaneous process of reconstitution and invention is itself a vital ingredient in an oral tradition -- indeed, the essential impulse beneath its continuation, as Jan de Vries suggests:

Who preserved this [oral tradition] through the centuries if not an endless row of bearers of a common popular tradition, who sometimes did no more than communicate a text that they had learned by heart but who sometimes (with more or less talent) gave a new shape to a legend?⁴⁷

There are fixed, recurrent elements in the Serbo-Croatian oral tradition that are common to both re-creative and creative narratives. Its cornerstone is repetition: verbal, syntactic and thematic. Milman Parry defined the basic unit of narrative as a 'formula' -- 'a group of words which is regularly employed under

⁴⁶ Mary P. Coote, 'SerboCroatian Heroic Songs', Oinas, op. cit., p. 269.

⁴⁷ Op. cit., p. 168.

the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea'.⁴⁸ His colleague Albert Lord subsequently refined this definition and so clarified the link between syntactic and thematic repetition. He describes a theme as 'a subject unit, a group of ideas regularly employed by a singer, not merely in any given poem, but in the poetry as a whole'.⁴⁹

The primary purpose of such formulaic elements in oral narrative is clear -- as Jan de Vries states, 'they are the fixed points around which a song is composed',⁵⁰ recurrent landmarks which enable the singer to get his or her bearings and to remember what comes next. Yet they are also the means by which the tradition is perpetuated, the formula preserving a link between each performance of each song -- which is essentially a new song. The use of repeated phrases, motifs and themes is a conscious acknowledgement by each singer that whilst they are individual artists, they are more importantly dependent upon and responsible to a tradition. As Walter Ong explains, 'orality operates with 'the sort of commonplaces, formulaic [sic] expressions and clichés ordinarily despised by fully literate folk, for, without writing, an oral culture must maintain its knowledge by repeating it'.⁵¹

Essentially, therefore, oral narrative depends upon a known vocabulary of stock word groupings and devices -- 'a grammar of parataxis and of frequently used and useful phrases'⁵² according to Lord. Added to these recurrent verbal

⁴⁸ Quoted in John Miles Foley, (ed.), Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1980), p. 30.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁰ Op. cit., p. 178.

⁵¹ Walter Ong, 'Literacy and Orality in Our Times' in Norman Simms, (ed.), Oral and Traditional Literatures (Hamilton: Outrigger, 1982) p.14.

patterns are common structural patterns, some of the most frequently used being 'proverbs, riddles, curses, incantations, dirges and toasts'.⁵³ Traditional images and motifs -- or 'topoi'⁵⁴ -- are also important ingredients and are often the means by which a particular narrative is known, and continues to be known, by an audience of many more people than just those who have heard it first-hand -- how familiar to us, for instance, is the motif of a hero's descent into an underworld.

Clearly, the use of syntactic and structural repetition is determined considerably by genre, and it would be quite misleading to suggest that Amelia Batistich's prose fiction can be examined for evidence of the sort of syntactic and metrical patterns that scholars have discovered in Serbo-Croatian oral poetry. Nonetheless, such a strong tradition has a pervasive influence, and Mrs Batistich's stories do possess some properties which are surprisingly reminiscent of those found in oral narrative.

This link emerges most obviously in the conversational narrative style she frequently employs. In imitating the natural rhythms and cadences of human speech even in passages of indirect narration, (for example, in 'My Uncle Tony' or 'Champion of the Northern Wairoa') the prose adopts the repetitive patterns common to oral expression. Words and phrases are repeated for emphasis; changed slightly, they create a total shift in tone, a complete redirection of purpose. Similarly, her frequent use of a conversational style and tone is accompanied by

⁵² Quoted in Svetozar Koljevic, The Epic in the Making (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 324.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 324.

⁵⁴ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 27.

some essentially colloquial structures of the kind which Koljevic finds prevalent in traditional oral narratives. Proverbs -- both invented or traditional -- and emphatic statements are frequently used; 'Land is something you buy for money, sell for money again!'⁵⁵ 'Whisky, that's the drink for a man'.⁵⁶ So too are rhetorical questions, curses, chants and prayers -- essentially oral structures, exclamatory and persuasive. The contribution such formal elements make to the stories will be examined more fully throughout this chapter. For the present, it is sufficient to note that Amelia Batistich's stories employ a considerable number of techniques and structures found more usually in oral story-telling, and that their use is both an acknowledgement of the oral tradition the author has inherited and a means of adding to that tradition -- even if adapting it to another medium, environment and implied audience.

Yet there is also an important connection at a thematic level. Amelia Batistich's migrant stories have embedded in them several major motifs, recurrent chords struck time and time again, echoing from one to another. The effect of reading a range of these stories can be likened more to listening to a symphony than to a recital -- a group of separate movements which are integrally related to one another and to the larger body they comprise, an amalgam of themes and motifs. Most of the chords struck are in a minor key -- the fragmentation of the migrants' lives, the discontinuity between their present and their past, the unassuaged ache for home, the disillusionment of an attempted return. Yet there are also more cheerful counter-themes -- the satisfying relationship with the land, the pleasures of relative prosperity after a lifetime of hard work, the pride of seeing children and grandchildren enjoying advantages undreamed of in the Old

⁵⁵ 'The Farm' in An Olive Tree in Dalmatia, p.67.

⁵⁶ 'Champion of the Northern Wairoa' New Zealand Listener, 18 June 1965, p.4.

World. All these recurrent themes involve a common urge to refashion a severed existence into something whole and purposeful, to make order where there is only confusion and fragmentation.

These repeated themes bind the migrant stories together, yet simultaneously bind them to a far larger tradition of story-telling of which Serbo-Croatian oral narrative is but one example. Such themes are common to much of the fiction which has entertained, comforted and enthralled a reading or listening audience for as long as story-telling has occurred, for they reflect some of mankind's enduring concerns. Mary Coote describes how the deeds of the heroes in Serbo-Croatian oral narratives are essentially concerned with 'restoring order from chaos. The underlying story patterns are mythic, expressive of the persistent concerns of mankind'.⁵⁷ She adds that such basic patterns are capable of infinite variety and adaptation: 'Narrators in various eras and regions have shaped these patterns in different ways to celebrate figures and events that have particular meaning for their 'audiences'.⁵⁸ Once again, then, a link between this older tradition and Amelia Batistich's stories is suggested: she is another story-teller fashioning traditional, recognisable themes and motifs into narratives appropriate for a particular set of circumstances, a particular audience.

Like Coote, Albert Lord also finds in Serbo-Croatian narratives the expression of some of the most durable concerns and activities of human beings —including a preoccupation with replacing chaos with order and disjointedness with unity, an enforced journey away from the known and certain, the suffering of hardships made possible only by the promise of return. These are common thematic patterns

⁵⁷ Oinas, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

in oral narratives, essential threads in a texture comprising a network of taut oppositions whose tensions hold the fabric together -- a 'tension of essences'⁵⁹ as Lord calls it. He cites the Odyssey as the prime example of a narrative which works through the highly controlled and inventive maintenance of this tension.

There is a further important contribution which the tradition of oral narrative makes to Amelia Batistich's work, and this concerns the function of the narrator. The predominant narrative style of these stories is third person, the narrative voice having varying degrees of intimacy with the events and characters presented. In 'The Tea Party' (Olive Tree, p.127), for instance, the narrative voice and perspective are located at a vantage point at some distance from the three women at the centre of the story, yet possess sufficient mobility to transmit information 'from the inside', as well as external description. Yet in other stories -- 'Roots' (Olive Tree, p.72) for example -- the narrative viewpoint is more consistently interior and intimate with the character's thoughts and experiences.

It is largely in stories of the latter kind that the qualities of the human voice spill over easily into the prose and thereby recall oral narrative. And so it frequently seems as if characters are telling their own stories or are having their stories told for them by an intimate acquaintance who becomes the sympathetic meeting point between the character and the audience. Frequently, this creates an atmosphere of intimacy and familiarity which is more common to a narrator/audience relationship than to an author/reader one. The reader may feel as if he or she is received into a community of listeners, each of whom is assumed to have a degree of familiarity with the events or character being presented. 'Everyone agreed with Pavich' announces the narrator at the opening of

⁵⁹ Quoted in Foley,(ed.), op. cit., p. 20.

'The Funeral' (Olive Tree, p. 109), a narrator who feels no need to set the stage in advance, to tell us who Pavich is, or just who constitute the 'everyone' in agreement with him.

Character, teller, listener: all are brought into close contact by the medium of the story which introduces people and places with such casual familiarity that it soon seems that we have always known of them, that this world is ours too. Such is the power of the oral narrator to make the moment of the story's utterance bring to life what is past and distant, to unite a real audience and a fictional world in a brief, illusory relationship — a power which V. Gronbech has described eloquently:

The heart of the audience warms while listening to the songs for in them is happiness and will-power. When the singing begins ... the great deeds of the past are conjured up and are present before the mind's eye ... The hall fills with friends and relations; the dead as well as the living.⁶⁰

This is the tradition whose conventions and techniques Amelia Batistich's stories reflect. At times, it seems the imitation is conscious and part of a deliberate narrative technique. Elsewhere, it has a more subtle presence — a pervasive atmosphere which evokes the Old World and an old tradition that is both foreign and yet (as Coote's and Lord's comments suggest) concerned with the most fundamental and universal preoccupations of mankind. Again, the notion of narrative that is both creative and re-creative is suggested: Amelia Batistich's stories are woven out of some of the most enduring motifs and archetypal themes common to the history of oral narrative. Yet the fabric that is created absorbs the hues of a new environment and time — a traditional garment made with an eye to the experiences and needs of those who will wear it.

⁶⁰ Quoted in de Vries, op. cit., p. 169.

2.1.2 The Farm

The influence of this oral tradition does not emerge in Amelia Batistich's stories unprompted. While undoubtedly its legacy places subconscious pressures on the author's imagination and method of telling her stories, their oral qualities seem to be produced primarily through deliberate effort and particular skills. A companion-for-one-for-her-earliest-stories, 'The Farm', which first appeared in 1959,⁶¹ with its final version in the 1963 collection An Olive Tree in Dalmatia , shows this clearly.

In both versions, this fairly short story is narrated by a woman recalling her childhood visits to a farm owned by a favourite uncle. Stella's love for the simple, rough life on the farm is disrupted when her uncle marries a 'mail order' bride from 'the old country'.⁶² The arrival of his bride transforms life on the farm considerably, as Stella notes disapprovingly -- 'You wouldn't have believed a place could change so much! ... Everything was shiny and polished. Not a bit of dirt anywhere' (p.9). Thoroughly resenting the woman whose presence has brought about this transformation, Stella decides to run away. But she is soon lost in a vast paddock of corn, in which it seems she can hear the voice of God reproaching her. Her bravery soon evaporates, and she returns in relief to her comforting, friendly aunt baking bread in the kitchen.

This simple story is fixed for the most part in the past that the narrator is recalling, the thoughts and words consistent with those of the young girl. But the opening of the original version puts strong emphasis on the fact that it is adult recollection, and so adds a self-consciously reflective tone to the story that is

⁶¹ Northland, No.9, December 1959,p.8.

⁶² Ibid.

subsequently unfolded. Of the farm she is to describe, the adult Stella notes; 'There is another house upon the hill and another name is on the title deeds. Maybe that is the difference, the reason why I don't go back' (p. 8). With this note of poignancy struck at the outset, our reading of the story is directed -- we now anticipate a sentimental threnody for a lost childhood and happier times.

In the revised version of 'The Farm', the changes are not extensive except in effect. Most importantly, the retrospective and poignant mood is no longer present. In her revision, the author has placed her strongest emphasis on accurately re-creating Stella's experiences and her manner of expressing them. Gone is the nostalgic, sentimental opening -- now the adult narrator plunges us straight into the heart of her story. It is now the farm itself which demands our immediate attention -- just as it did for the child Stella -- rather than its subsequent loss into the possession of strangers. The sentences are short, exclamatory, audible -- 'Land is something you buy for money, sell for money again! ... "Three thousand pounds for a wilderness!" Mama said the first time she saw it' (Olive Tree, p.67). The continued use of this arresting, involving narrative manner as the story proceeds enables the author to make an easy transition between the story's opening, told by the adult Stella, and the rest of the story which is relayed through the eyes of the young girl. In the earlier version, there was an awkward gap in the levels at which the story was unfolded -- the rather philosophic musings of the adult giving way uneasily to the exuberant tone of the child.

The revised story continues this concern with establishing a tone in which to convincingly render childhood experience. For instance, we now gain a far better sense of Stella's feeling of pleasurable fear as she rides past a particularly sinister patch of bush near the farm; 'And my heart would go pounding with hope and

fear. Say if a lion, or a tiger, or an elephant came trumpeting out' (p.69). Through an attentiveness to the words and constructions Stella uses, and by borrowing liberally from the way language is used orally, the passage stands as a considerable improvement on the earlier, colourless version, 'I half expected to see a lion, or at least a tiger, run out'.

A similar injection of immediacy and credibility is given also to the passage in which Stella is lost amongst the corn. In the earlier version she reports, 'I was alone in a frightening world. I began to run — here and there, everywhere, but wherever I went the green arms struck me down' (p.9). After revision, the actual experience has altered little, but with a few minor changes of punctuation the reader is given an infinitely more vivid sense of it: 'I was alone in a frightening world. I began to run. Here. There. Everywhere. But wherever I went the green arms struck me down' (p. 71).

The final important revision concerns a passage in which Stella recalls the way she would sit with her uncle and the other men after dinner, listening to their songs and stories of the old country. In the earlier story, this receives brief treatment. But after revision, it becomes one of the story's strongest and most vivid passages. The reader is now told that the stories are 'about ghosts they'd seen there, and vilas singing in the mountains' (p. 69), and their songs now have the accompaniment of a gusla, made by Stella's uncle 'from an empty olive oil tin and hair from a horse's tail. He made a bow of bamboo and played funny wailing tunes on the gusla, and they sang to that' (p.69). Stella's statement, common to both versions, that 'this was the life I loved' (p.69) now carries conviction. The readers of the revised version are able to recognise and understand her pleasure, for the author, by recording more of the detail of the scene, conveys more strongly its attractive, relaxed atmosphere.

These few changes in themselves seem minor, yet they reveal a significant awareness of the opportunities for written fiction to borrow some of the qualities and atmosphere of oral story-telling. It is this awareness which has added such qualities to the story as its new sense of immediacy, despite the fact that it remains a retrospective narrative. There is a greater recognition of the effects that can be achieved by the careful selection of striking or colourful detail. The prose has been patterned into shorter syntactic units — infusing it with a conversational quality. Experience is now mirrored by the language and constructions, rather than words being used to explain or divulge experience.

There is moreover a considerable ambiguity in how the narrative is presented — by an author or a teller? And while in one sense, Amelia Batistich is invisible in the revised story — stepping back to allow the child Stella to tell her own story — paradoxically, she exerts greater control over it. She may well borrow from the characteristics of oral story-telling, but she cannot allow the prose to ramble in the digressive, circuitous manner of spoken anecdotes. She finds herself following in the footsteps of all the story-tellers of her cultural tradition, artists who must strive to achieve a perfect balance between artistry and apparent spontaneity, between learned skills and inventive improvisation — the craftsman who is both creative and re-creative.

By enlarging the section in which Stella is caught up in the story-telling of the Dalmatian men, the author acknowledges the qualities of oral story-telling which she too has borrowed — its power to make a place for the fantasies and fables of a distant world amongst the mundane routines of daily life. Stella, listening to these stories and to the strange music of the gusla, becomes aware of another world beyond her immediate surroundings. So too do Amelia Batistich's

readers find themselves catching faint strains of a distant country and a distant time by making their ears, as well as their minds, receptive to the stories, listening through the prose to the audible rhythms and cadences of the human voice which tells it.

2.1.3 Form, Structure and Theme: The Oral Influence

It is perhaps a major part of the appeal of oral narratives -- and certainly a significant factor in their difference from their strictly page-bound counterparts -- that their formal components cannot be easily broken apart and examined singly. Isolated properties such as narrative structure, tonal shifts and the level of language all merge and are subsumed into the single thread which is the story at the moment of its telling. The spoken story seems to resist attempts at retrospective analysis; it disintegrates at the moment its utterance is complete, and will take on a new existence with every re-telling. Amelia Batistich's stories share enough of the qualities of oral narrative -- the sense of a human teller, a quality of wholeness inherent in the events themselves -- for attempts to analyse their formal components in isolation to be similarly frustrating.

Not only are their borrowed oral qualities common to the tradition of heroic song and epic poetry described earlier, but influenced also by related genres such as folk tales and fairy stories. In the same manner as epic narratives such as the Odyssey, these other populist forms are built upon a number of recognisable recurring motifs and themes, many of which are universal and fundamental to human existence. Folk tales and fairy stories, according to Italo Calvino, form 'a catalog of the potential destinies of men and women, especially for that stage in

life when destiny is formed'.⁶³

'Living', in An Olive Tree in Dalmatia, is one of the best examples of how folk and fairy stories exert an influence on Amelia Batistich's work, found as specific points of reference and as a source of particular narrative structures and techniques. The basic facts revealed at the beginning of this story immediately suggest a fairy-tale scenario — a beautiful and vain peasant girl, Mara Bella, with hair of 'spun gold and her skin like honey' (p. 88), and a chorus of village crones muttering darkly that her beauty will, of course, one day be vanished like their own. But the links between this story and the fairy story's familiar model run deeper than the narrative details alone. The narrator's opening words — 'Everyone agreed that no good could come to a girl being as beautiful as Mara Bella' (p.88) — carry such a declamatory, persuasive tone that they seem the utterance of a teller who has total familiarity with the subject of the tale and with its eventual outcome.

This quality of intimacy and fore-knowledge one senses in the tale and in the tone of its teller is confirmed when the background to its composition is known. It is a story that Amelia Batistich heard as a child from her mother, a personal account of a real person in her mother's own village of Zaostrog:

She would talk to me — for instance that story about Mara Bella, about her cousin with the beautiful hair. She'd just be telling me all this, about how when she washed her hair, the women would come out and say 'Mara Bella is washing her hair!' So out of this, you build these stories.⁶⁴

⁶³ Italo Calvino, Italian Folktales, trans. George Martin, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. xviii.

⁶⁴ See Appendix A, p.202.

And so a written fiction emerges from a personal anecdote, embedding into itself not only the subject matter of its model but also the distinctive manner of its telling -- the narrator with her comfortable familiarity with the tale creating an atmosphere of intimacy that reaches out to embrace the audience. This story pays tribute to the tradition which produced it, a tradition, according to Minna Skafte Jensen, in which the oral narrative 'may be considered as a collective piece of art, a co-production of singer and audience'.⁶⁵

'Living' initially proceeds along a course which our knowledge of countless fairy tales has led us to anticipate. Mara Bella meets a rich young student travelling through her village; he is enraptured by her beauty and vows to marry her. But this fairy tale world begins to be encroached upon by a harsher, contemporary world that is perhaps closer to the one in which we ourselves live. 'Perhaps distance encouraged disenchantment' (p.91) the narrator tells us, and with these words, our own disenchantment begins too -- the young man jilts the peasant girl and emigrates to America, while Mara Bella mourns and her family and friends revel in this blow to her pride. What began as a beguiling fairy story, seemingly adrift from the firm moorings of place and time, is quickly becoming a grim story of poverty and disillusionment, set firmly into a recognizable modern world of isolated individuals, broken promises, and lives disintegrated by the wrench of migration. Calvino's comments on the motivations behind many folk and fairy tales seem pertinent here -- he notes their essentially "realistic" foundation ... the point of departure spurred by dire need, hunger or unemployment'.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ The Homeric Question and the Oral-Formulaic Theory, (Copenhagen: Press: Copenhagen, 1980) p. 162.

⁶⁶ Calvino, op. cit., p. xxxii.

Mara Bella's beauty fades, and with a steely sense of survival she makes a loveless match by mail with a Dalmatian migrant in New Zealand. The remainder of the story charts her arrival in the new country, her husband's death not long afterwards and her grimly resilient response. She becomes fiercely committed to the one thing left to her -- her land; 'everyone can go, but the land remains, and she wore herself into a woman like rock' (p. 94). Inevitably though, the years of hard physical work exact their price from this hardy individual, and the story closes with her death on the farm -- 'her hands were clenched into the earth -- and it was all they could do to loosen it from her hold' (p. 95).

Despite its sombre conclusion, the story has an undeniably satisfying and complete quality -- provided largely, it seems, from the elements of folk and fairy stories that are embedded within it. Its culmination seems the only one suitable -- at the outset, the story establishes certain expectations in the reader which it then must fulfil. We anticipate that Mara Bella's pride will be followed by her fall, that 'the idle young dilettante will jilt her but that she will overcome her misfortunes, learn from them and eventually prove her former suitor to have been unworthy of her anyway. The reader's expectations have been formed well in advance of their encounter with this story, a sort of innate vocabulary acquired by familiarity with countless other fairy tales containing variants of the same stock ingredients. Where the individual skill of the author is apparent is in the fact that she both works within these conventional patterns and breaks them as well. 'Living' uses the familiar, idealised world of the fairy story to indicate the less pleasant reality from which such fiction is a means of escape. And the story addresses itself to matters which the fairy tale, by virtue of its deliberate distance from reality, can only imply or ignore.

Once again, it seems that the relationship between Amelia Batistich's story and an older model is both re-creative and creative — a re-telling of a Dalmatian anecdote, and a refashioning of that anecdote into a modern fairy-tale adapted to the contemporary world and the experiences of its inhabitants. In this sense, it exemplifies Calvino's observation that while folk and fairy stories appear to be the exclusive property of the Old World, they in fact possess a surprising toughness and pliability which makes possible their adaptation to new circumstances, new environments and new audiences — 'the folk tale, regardless of its origin, tends to absorb something of the place where it is narrated — a landscape, a custom, a moral outlook, or else merely a very faint accent or flavor of that locality'.⁶⁷

Amongst the distinctive qualities of folk and fairy stories is their ability to convey the sense of the complete, satisfying resolution of an individual life. The perfect marriage is not only a familiar conclusion to many such stories, but the supreme culmination and resolution of the characters' lives. 'Living', although ranging far outside the normal boundaries of the fairy story world, nonetheless ends in the same fashion — at a point where the character's life is resolved and complete. The disappointments of Mara Bella's youth have been fully erased by the tangible achievements of her later life (joyless though it is). Loss has been balanced by gain, the vanity of youth made up for by the hard-working virtue of old age. Even Death plays a restorative, positive role — returning to the old and withered Mara Bella her youthful beauty. The sense of wholeness and resolution at the story's close provides a brief satisfaction in which narrator and audience are joined. It is a pleasure which fundamentally involves the artist's ability to create order and meaning out of what were previously disparate elements. It is reminiscent of the pleasure Astrid Westergaard experiences in

⁶⁷ Op. cit., p. xxi.

Yvonne du Fresne's story 'Guy Fox' after listening to a story narrated by her aunt -- 'We gazed, satisfied, at each other'.⁶⁸

The way in which the progression of time is managed also makes an important contribution to the complete, resolved quality which Amelia Batistich's stories so often achieve. Many seem to successfully encompass the whole life of an individual, even one whose life is stretched between two distant countries, and the means by which this effect is achieved again indicates the influence of the forms and narrative style of the oral tradition. Compression is something we recognise and accept readily as a convention of the fairy story form, although we might be less indulgent were it to appear in another narrative form. And the audience's willingness to accept compression is another characteristic of the oral and popular narrative tradition which Amelia Batistich makes use of. Albert Lord notes that in traditional Serbo-Croatian narratives, chronology is frequently and deliberately disrupted; 'Time is telescoped. The past of various times is all assembled into the present performance. ... Oral epic presents a composite picture of the past'.⁶⁹ This quality is revealed in Mrs Batistich's stories by the way the past so often makes itself felt in the present, as if any single moment in time is forced to shoulder a vast legacy of the past.

Such intermingling and compression of time is in fact a particularly useful technique for rendering the experience of the migrant. For it echoes the way that the mind of the migrant may accommodate the dislocating journey that has been made -- a connection that emerges particularly when the story is concerned with migrants reviewing their lives in old age. Their thoughts return constantly to the

⁶⁸ *The Growing of Astrid Westergaard* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1985) p. 13.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Foley, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

point of departure from the Old World -- as if the years since have been a suspension of normal life in which immersion in hard work is a means of forgetting the pain of fracture. It is only in old age when the hard work ceases that the migrant seeks to reconnect the life that was suspended at the moment of departure. As the title story of Renato Amato's collected stories suggests, it is at this point, when an attempt is made to join up that which has been broken, that the migrant makes 'the full circle of the travelling cuckoo'. Amelia Batistich uses the telescoping of time as a major structural element in her stories so that this sense of the cyclical, restorative movement of the migrant experience can be emphasised.

For example, in the title story of her collection, it seems that the span of an individual's life is charted from youth to old age. The central character, Stipan, is shown first as a young man on the day before his departure from Dalmatia. The story lingers on this day and then passes rapidly over the following decades he spends farming in New Zealand. The pace of the narrative slows once more to record Stipan's thoughts in old age as he reviews his life. In this manner, the structure of the story reinforces the fragmentary, disjointed quality which Stipan himself perceives as he reminisces.

At the story's opening, the author's choice of narrative detail infuses the Dalmatia of Stipan's youth with the qualities of a dream-world, and his imminent departure bears many elements familiar to us in fairy stories -- Stipan is 'one of the chosen three' (p. 13), off to the New World to seek their fortunes. And one of his last actions is a flamboyant, poetic gesture which reinforces this atmosphere of dream -- a final gesture to the fantasy from which he is about to awake. As he plants the olive tree, he stamps hard on the soil around its roots:

He smiled down at his footprint there like a primitive signature on the land. The action pleased him. In all his nineteen years he had never done such a thing ... But in each man's life comes a moment when he is a poet, and that was Stipan's moment, his gesture to the past that he was leaving, to the future that he did not know; and it pleased him in the way a man is pleased when he paints a beautiful picture or makes a song.

(p. 15).

In dwelling on this moment of self-expression, Amelia Batistich explores the moment of Stipan's severance from all that is known and certain, the point which not only marks his transformation from youth to adult, but also signifies the moment where the Old World is put to rest and he is ready to be reborn into the New World. His is an awareness similar to that of Renato Amato's migrant narrator in 'Only A Matter of Grammar' when he talks of the past as 'a dream that had lost its continuity'. Both characters acknowledge the chaotic, disruptive effect of migration on their lives, an effect likened to the disorienting and alarming experience of being woken suddenly from a dream. For Stipan, so significant a moment requires a suitably momentous gesture, bringing out of himself an eloquence he has never previously discovered.

This important moment of eloquence is reinforced by its importance to the story's structure. It forms the crucial point of reference for what is subsequently told about Stipan's fifty-three years farming in New Zealand, and it is the memory of this poetic gesture which prompts Stipan to return to Dalmatia — hoping to re-enter the broken dream, to express through a physical journey the emotion he is otherwise unable to articulate:

Leaning against the puriri's trunk, he looked down at the tangled roots and from somewhere in the depths of his memory came suddenly the picture of the little olive tree he had planted that last day and the footprint he had stamped into the earth around it.

(p. 21).

Once rediscovered, the gesture haunts him inexplicably, prompting him to go back to his childhood home. And it is the disenchanting realisation of this desire that brings the story to its close, and brings the migrant's journey full circle. Stipan's unhappy return with his wife only serves to show him that the two countries he has attempted to straddle are 'not a life-time, but a world away' (p.28). Any wholeness his life may seem to possess is an illusion created by this story – the narrative embraces the two worlds of Stipan's experience in a way which he is himself unable to achieve. His past is a vanished dream, a place of the dead where he and his wife feel like 'two strangers wandered in from another life' (p. 26). The apparent unity of the migrant's life is illusory: he is in fact a man who has led two disjointed lives, like a reincarnate soul.

This story demonstrates that Amelia Batistich chooses particular narrative techniques and structures in her migrant stories which are tailored to fit the experiences they disclose. Another such technique is the use of narrative envelopes – stories contained within the main story, creating a structure of interlocking stories set amongst a variety of times and places. Flashbacks are used, which provide an apparently rounded, penetrating character portrait in a short space of time and establish some telling contrasts between a character's present and past lives. It is a technique which works by providing us with foreknowledge, by kindling our expectations and then either fulfilling them or shattering them by reference to the past. It infuses a story with an intriguing ongoing propulsion towards an anticipated ending – Joseph Conrad's novels (Lord Jim for instance), which are narrated by Marlow and a succession of other narrators, offer some excellent examples of the way this technique can be used.

Amelia Batistich's 'Love Story' is fashioned in just this manner, introducing us initially to an elderly migrant woman Mariana who seems at first to be lamenting the loss of a husband — 'It should have withered long ago, the memory of Ivo' (Olive Tree p. 41). But as the story winds back through Mariana's past, our expectations are disrupted and the initially sketchy figure of the elderly widow is fleshed out with some surprising detail. Echoing the fairy-tale scenario of the first part of 'Living', the young Mariana is a beautiful peasant girl. Unlike Mara Bella, however, she is a goat girl and from the poorest family in the village. Ivo — who has already been introduced as the object of her enduring memories in old age — is revealed to be the student son of the village's richest family and captivated by Mariana's beauty. Immediately a tension is established between what the story's opening has forewarned — a love affair or marriage between Mariana and Ivo — and these seemingly contradictory circumstances.

Out of the initial fairy story, other stories are also spun — for instance, we are shown Mariana dreaming herself into an ideal world where she is beautiful and loved, the same dreams 'for a goat-girl as for a princess' (p. 42). Ivo too weaves himself a fantasy in which Mariana is 'a princess out of the stories' and he 'the prince that has to free [her]' (p.43). Here the potential inherent in the technique of narrative envelopes is exploited. It is as if this is not a single story, but a self-generating web of stories discovered within one another like a series of ornate Chinese boxes — acknowledgement of the power of fiction to bring out of itself further fictions in a process as limitless as the human imagination.

The central story of Mariana and Ivo slowly works itself free of the other fictions it has produced and moves gradually out of the enchanted realm of the Dalmatian past back towards the harsh world of the migrants in the Northland

gumfields which was evoked at the story's outset. Ivo is forced into a loveless but more socially acceptable marriage; he later jilts his wife and tries to find Mariana, now married in New Zealand. He is warned off by her brothers, and the rest of Mariana's life is as poor and as hard as her girlhood in Dalmatia -- 'but she never expected any other' (p.47). The story ends with her thoughts not of the past but of the future; "We could not be together in this world. We will be in the next" (p.47).

This sort of narrative structure in which stories are placed within the envelope of other stories enables a fluid movement between the past and the present and between distant places. It is, it seems, a technique of particular appropriateness for the rendering of migrant experience. It enables subtle juxtapositions between the past and the present, between the dream of migration and the reality which it eventually delivers. The stories take their shape and proportions from the experience at their core, distilling, from the broken, incomplete lives which they explore, fictional images which are -- paradoxically -- satisfying and seemingly complete.

2.1.4 The Rich Voice

'And in the beginning there was Parenga' -- not only does the opening of Parenga--and All! (Olive Tree p.77) recall the opening of one of man's oldest popular narratives, but it is also an example of the way the human voice so frequently seems to lie behind Amelia Batistich's prose, nearly audible in the immediacy and apparent spontaneity of the phrase. This oral quality has become increasingly more sophisticated and successful in her work ^{something} --^ apparent in the differences between her first stories and more recent ones.

Many of her first published stories in which the tones, cadences and rhythms of human speech play an important part deal not with Dalmatian migrants but with Maoris. Some of the links between the work of migrant writers and that of Maori writers in this country have already been explored earlier in this discussion. It is sufficient here to point out that Amelia Batistich's understanding of the experiences and emotions of the migrant has given her a particular sympathy ^{with} \wedge the experience of Maoris caught between the conflicting worlds of the city and traditional rural homes, and between the values of a vanishing old world and those of a new (Pakeha) world which are difficult to ignore. In these early stories, the feelings of uncertainty, confusion and disruption experienced by her Maori characters anticipate some of the dominant themes of her later migrant stories.

Her first published short story, 'Street Corner' (1948),⁷⁰ is a carefully observed description of life in a small Northland town. There is little plot — it seeks more to encapsulate a moment in time and to depict the surface character of a selected group of people and incidents. But there are occasional shifts from this external, detached narrative stance, and it is at these moments that the story achieves more than a rather static, deliberate exercise in scene painting. It is the mobility of viewpoint that brings life to the story — for instance, at the point when the author ceases to present the figure of the old Maori woman Maggie Tepanua as a photographer might show her (posed 'like a Goldie painting' [p.32]), and starts to write through this woman's voice. And so we are told that Maggie will only wear boots to town providing they are 'at least three sizes too big' and so 'nice and comfortable' (p.32). These words are not uttered directly by Maggie, but they reveal more about her than did the previous careful descriptions

⁷⁰ New Zealand Listener, 15 October 1948, pp.32-33.

which showed us only a flat outer surface; they convey information from the inside.

Another character is also brought to life when the author allows her voice to be heard -- the young and flashy Sadie Topia. Initially she is a restricted character, constrained by the author's choice of detail as a stereotyped brassy young woman, dressed to kill in 'bright red patent leather pumps with three-inch spike heels' (p.32). Yet she is released from this limited role when she is allowed to reveal her thoughts and feelings in her own terms. We discover that she is not nearly so poised and confident as her appearance indicates:

Her feet hurt ... but she felt smart in [her shoes]. She was glad she wore them, especially when she saw Rangi Thompson making his way down the street ... perhaps she could get him to take her to the dance tonight ... What would the others say, if they saw her coming to the dance with Rangi Thompson!

(p.32).

Although not using direct speech, Mrs Batistich allows her characters to express themselves in their own idiosyncratic manner and so turns flat, one-dimensional figures into fuller characters. And by placing their voices in close proximity to each other, the author exposes the gap between the respective outlooks of the generations. In Sadie's contempt for the two old women who are observing her disapprovingly ('the old hags!' [p.32]) and in the terse unspoken appraisal Maggie makes of the young girl ('That Sadie Topia!' [p.33]) the pressure points between the generations are indicated, with no need for additional comment -- ruinously didactic in so slight a narrative. Lying beyond this brief vignette of small-town life is a whole range of issues, an entire subtext of issues to delight the sociologist or psychologist: the indifference of the young to their elders, their apparent seduction by the flashy trappings of modern urban life, the inertia of the old and their apparent unwillingness to change. Yet rather than bludgeon her readers

with these problems and thus blur the dividing line between reality and its fictional re-creation, the author wisely chooses fiction. The characters themselves contain the story: it succeeds or founders by virtue of the vigour of their presentation. This vigour is achieved when the narrative is filled with the sound of their voices giving expression to their thoughts. 'Street Corner' is not an especially significant story, but for the presence within it of the near-audible cadences of human speech and the sense of the flesh-and-blood individuals that this provides.

Many other early stories share this quality with varying degrees of success. 'Landscape With Figures' (1952)⁷¹ is another story which seeks out the pressure points in a community caught between the ways of the Pakeha and the ways of the Maori, and it reveals too the author's sensitivity to the particular word-use and cadences of Maori speech. Here, the differing views of old and young, of radicals and reactionaries, are presented as a dissonant chorus of conflicting voices, all insisting to be heard. Tupuna, son-in-law of the chief of his tribe, laments the loss of their tribal lands to the Pakeha but reveals also a more spirited tone in which he expresses his optimism for the future:

Aiue ... the pakeha had been too smart for the Maori. He had shown him the gold and told him that it was worth more than the land ...

The Maori will be strong in his own land only when he can stand on the pakeha's own ground and say to him, "Now I know all that I know — and that you know too".

(p. 26)

Tupuna's lament is set against the voice of Aunt Miria, who is similarly disenchanted with the past record of the Pakeha, but mistrustful of their future actions too -- "'What Gummament ever want but to make trouble for the Maori!'"

⁷¹ Here and Now 3, No. 2, November 1952, pp. 26-28.

(p. 26). Indifferent to both these viewpoints are the children -- yet their words reveal them to be already won over to the Pakeha future their elders are so unsure of. Talking of their dreams for the future, one boy's ambition is to be an All Black -- "Gee! That would be pretty good, wouldn't it?" -- while another sees himself as a movie hero -- "Two bright guns blazing in his hand ... slow drawl of "Listen, hombre ..."' (p. 27). In their ambitions, and in the entirely credible way in which they express themselves, the author suggests that the gap that is increasing between their dreams and their immediate experience will be inevitably irreconcilable.

This story seems less successful than 'Street Corner' -- perhaps because it tries to achieve too much, to become a vehicle for too many attitudes and too many voices. It veers away at times from being an effective, deft vignette -- quite literally a 'Landscape with Figures' -- towards performing the more ponderous, cumbersome function of social commentary. Yet it has in common with the early story¹ the firm imprint of an author who is willing and able to speak with a number of voices and to range amongst a number of viewpoints with an impressive mobility. She also demonstrates a judicious personal reticence, recognising the potentially destructive effects of authorial polemic.

Her method of preparing to write these early Maori stories attests to her conviction that, in order for characters to be credible and interesting, they must be able to speak for themselves in a credible and interesting manner. Rather than merely gathering background material through reading and research alone, Amelia Batistich listened. Writing a story about a young Maori boy for a School Journal, for instance, involved spending hours in conversation with a Maori boy from a local primary school, intent not only on what he said but on the way he said it.

It was from this sort of attentive affinity with the human voice that its fictional re-creation could begin -- as she recalls, 'before I put anything down on paper I thought myself into the characters I was writing about,... found the people I wanted, questioned listened and watched'.⁷² With the more recent emergence of Maori writers, Amelia Batistich is uncertain about the authority of her own earlier efforts to re-create the speech of Maori characters or to write from the perspective of a Maori. But there seems little doubt about her re-creation of individual voices and speech in her stories concerning migrants -- not only in regard to the authenticity of these elements, but more importantly concerning the strong contribution they make to the stories.

Not only does her work show a concern with the accurate rendering of oral language, but also with the way stories are told aloud. The characters, in telling their stories, reveal themselves too -- their individuality emerges in their particular tone of voice or choice of words which may also be used to conceal aspects of their personalities. The narratives establish patterns within themselves -- patterns of fluency countered by sudden hesitation, expansiveness giving way to evasion or stubborn silence. This quality is reminiscent of a passage in 'And Time That Flows On' (Olive Tree p.142) where an old migrant woman recites a traditional Dalmatian poem into a tape recorder:

The rich voice, nervous at first, halting to dredge up from memory a line that stumbled, going on again in a flood of remembering, stopping again to apologise for the lapses of a long memory. 'It is a long time since I learnt it. When I was a little girl I heard the women singing it at olive-picking time ...' The poem, all remembered at last, coming to its end.

(p. 148).

⁷² Letter, 18/6/84.

The most effective of Mrs Batistich's stories are those in which the voice of the teller is used in just this manner, so true to the imperfect, halting way in which we reveal ourselves and our stories to one another -- partially, circuitously, evasively; our memories reshaping events in the very act of our telling them, never reaching an immutable point of closure. In such stories, their true narrator (the author) seems to slip quietly from the room, leaving her characters to make themselves known to the reader at their own pace and in their own words.

'A Glass of Prosek' (1979)⁷³ allows the reader to eavesdrop on a conversation between two elderly Dalmatian men who are drinking wine and remembering the past they have shared. The interplay of their spoken and unspoken thoughts creates the sense that we are witnessing not just an isolated moment in these men's lives, but a moment into which their past keeps flooding, unprompted and unchecked. Their meandering dialogue moves them suddenly out of their lonely, ailing old age and back into their distant Dalmatian youth, and so provides a means of inverting their physical journey, their 'jump across the sky' (p.116).

Once again, the shape of the characters' lives is mirrored in the shape and structure of the narrative. Their reminiscences enable them to 'dig themselves back to Dalmatia' (p.116) -- the story is the point of juncture where the disparate elements of their experience are brought together. In this sense, their voices and conversation which form the story share the qualities of the bottle of Prosek they are about to drink -- fluid, releasing a rich past in its aroma and taste:

Golden grapes drying in the Dalmatian sun, their essence captured in the wine as the moth is captive in that piece of kauri gum up there on Petar's shelf ... Back in the strength of their youth, they shoulder the piled baskets home from the grape harvest. Kolo! Kolo! The call of the dance drums in their veins.

(p. 116).

⁷³ New Zealand Farmer, 9 August, 1979, p.116.

The past of the old men is accessible to the reader not only in the incidents they relate, but in their voices -- heavily accented, filled with rhythms and patterns which speak from a distant place:

'I look at paper. Doktor, I say. Is dis all a man good for? To be pill swallower?

"Go swallow a sword then!" he say. Cheeky young bugga in white coat. My gran'son too.

Funny his name Petar, like mine. But I like call him Doktor. Doktor. My gran'son'.

(p. 116).

Consistency and credibility of character are achieved through the consistent and credible use of their voices, whether speaking to each other or to themselves. The effect maintained throughout is of a sense of intimacy. The reader feels that he or she has been ushered into the presence of two other human beings, with the story itself being the medium through which these two old men have chosen to present themselves. But this is fiction, and not authentic personal anecdote -- the fact that the true narrator is Amelia Batistich, and the two old men in fact only her fictional creations (however real and close their presence may seem) means the reader is accorded additional privileges. For instance, we are able to hear their voices even when they are outwardly silent, speaking only within their own minds.

Petar and Stipan in 'A Glass of Prosek' are examples of a type who will soon become familiar to anyone who reads a number of Amelia Batistich's migrant stories -- the effusive, natural raconteur whose very voice alone is sufficiently loud and rich to carry the entire story. Indeed, Petar and Stipan fade into relative colourlessness beside some of the other characters Mrs Batistich creates -- for instance Matti Dominovich in 'Champion of the Northern Wairoa' (1965) who will tell his story to anyone who stays long enough to listen:

[Mark] these words, there's nothing he wasn't best at. None of your second bests for Matti Dominovich ... there wasn't a man to match

him at tree-topping, gum-digging, post-splitting — anything you like
to name.⁷⁴

Mrs Batistich's intimate third-person narration here allows a sense of closeness with this proud, ebullient old man, yet also a distancing. From a distance, we are less overwhelmed by Matti's flamboyance and can view with sympathy the loneliness he is reluctant to admit; we can also share to an extent the feelings of Matti's children who 'love their old dad but ... wish he didn't talk so much'.

Yet Matti's personality is such that he eventually takes charge of his story — just as he would like to take charge of the wedding dance that is going on around him at the time the story is being told. And finally he does take command of that as well, sweeping up a young Dalmatian girl into an old-fashioned waltz while the band plays rock-and-roll — it is no matter; 'he wants to sing and he does'. He sings his own song, he tells his own story: the author is able only to squeeze in a smattering of the viewpoints of others or of her own objective appraisal, for it is Matti's voice which demands most loudly to be heard.

There are many characters like Matti who parade throughout Amelia Batistich's early stories, talking loudly and at length. One of the most engaging is Johnny Ulich in 'Why A Man Got To Worry'⁷⁵ a hearty individual, proud to have escaped the snares of marriage and the work ethic. His speciality is good advice, which he doles out plentifully to the narrator of this story and hence to the wider audience of readers too. In this manner, Johnny takes over the narrator's role — the original 'I' speaker is gradually silenced by the never-ending flood of handy hints and homespun philosophy; "I'm telling you, you got to be

⁷⁴ 'Champion of the Northern Wairoa', New Zealand Listener, 18 June 1965, p.4.

⁷⁵ Mate, 12 June, 1964, pp.27-30.

smart, boy! What they teach you in school -- nottings to what Johnny knows! ... You lissen to Johnny, you won't go wrong" (p.28).

But within her collection An Olive Tree in Dalmatia , Amelia Batistich has not included many of these character portraits dominated by a single loud individual. More complex narratives take over, allowing shifting, multiple views of people and events, and there is less deliberateness in the rendering of the accents and idiosyncratic speech patterns of the migrant characters. But the opening story, 'My Uncle Tony', is more closely linked to such earlier character portraits as 'Champion of the Northern Wairoa', and indeed is perhaps the finest of these stories in which effusive characters tell their own stories and make them resonate with the timbre and cadences of the human voice.

This story has a more sophisticated narrative technique than the earlier larger-than-life character portraits however, as there is a more audible narrative presence which not only counters some of Tony's more ridiculous claims, but also keeps a stricter control on the prose itself. The sentences are pared down to a minimum, there is a careful choice of casual detail designed to enhance our sense of Tony beyond what he tells us himself, and there is a prudent elision of all but the most significant information. This stronger narrative presence exerting a firm control over the way Tony is presented makes this a more effective character portrait than the previous examples, which tend to become overly digressive and unfocussed as their central characters start to exert their personality on the flow of the narrative.

Yet the tighter narrative control does not diminish the attractively spontaneous and intimate quality that is the hallmark of such character vignettes. The narrator's choice of pronouns seems to extend a warm invitation to the reader to

become involved in a chatty anecdote, to join a community of accepted and receptive listeners:

Everyone likes Uncle Tony ... About three years ago Uncle Tony surprised us all by marrying. He was getting on to fifty and settled, we thought, in his carefree, bachelor ways. But we were wrong.

(p.1).

This apparent relationship of familiarity and intimacy between teller and listener is embodied also in the narrator's good humour, a warmth which extends not only to her audience but to the subject of her narration as well — seen, for instance, in her description of Tony's method of obtaining a 'mail order' bride from Dalmatia:

Uncle Tony is not one of your romantics. When he decided to get married he went about it prosaically enough ... He married her by proxy ... and there wasn't much she could do about Tony's being fat and nearly bald. The picture that he sent her had been taken with a hat on, and he was sitting behind a bamboo table, much of him obscured by a large aspidistra in a wicker pot.

(p. 1).

Passages such as this reveal a gentle narrative humour which seems to derive from an unabashed enjoyment of the sheer act of telling about such a likeable person as Tony. The reading of a story such as this is not a solitary intellectual pursuit — it is a sociable activity in which we become involved with other people through the medium of the story. We become part of a community which includes narrator, audience and characters, implicitly welcomed as one of the 'everyone' referred to by the narrator. In this story and the others like it, we cannot fail to perceive the influence of a tradition of oral story-telling.

As the story progresses, it is inevitable that Tony himself becomes increasingly dominant, just as he dominates the lives of those around him with his exuberant zest for life, his freely-offered advice and his love of the dramatic. Yet the narrator's occasional comments provide a moderating influence, and the story ends

with an invitation to the readers to share in her appraisal of Tony which mingles exasperation with an acknowledgement of his redeeming good-heartedness. It is this story's good humour (residing largely in the narrator's tone) which rescues it from its potential weaknesses. Such character portraits can suffer from superficiality, because Tony (and other characters like him) is a performer, a man of broad gesture and flamboyant presence. He parades through the story as a larger-than-life figure, requiring little imaginative or emotional engagement from the readers — we are reduced to the level of passive spectators. Yet our extremely intimate, familiar relationship with the narrator compensates for this, preventing the weaknesses which flaw the earlier stories such as 'Why A Man Got To Worry', where both narrator and audience become silent, passive, and eventually uninterested in the loud-mouthed Johnny Ulich.

Many of the strengths of Amelia Batistich's stories seem to depend not only on her own skills, but on the relationship she has with a strong tradition of oral narrative. Her stories can be seen to give new forms to some traditional patterns — the stock ingredients of folk and fairy stories, the telescoping of time, the use of recurrent powerful themes and motifs which bind her migrant stories together and to a larger body of universal experiences. The legacy of the oral tradition is felt also in the way her stories so frequently seem to be 'told' — concerned with the accurate and credible rendering of human speech, and filled with its audible accents, cadences and rhythms.

Most importantly, Amelia Batistich uses such characteristics of oral story-telling as a means of reinforcing the migrant experiences of which she tells — the experiences of individuals poised on a perpetual high wire between the present and

the past, between the remembered and the real, the dream and the disappointment. And in her use of traditional models, she acknowledges the power of fiction which Stella Parentich discovers in 'The Mazurka Afternoon' (Olive Tree, p.82) , who thinks when listening to her mother's stories of Dalmatia; 'She made a story, for us all to live in. It was the place where we belonged' (p. 86). Amelia Batistich's stories are capable of sharing this power -- ushering the past into the present, drawing the reader into an intimate relationship with the teller and the characters by the medium of the tale. The stories, and the voices which tell them, are thereby infused with some potent properties -- not least amongst them the capacity to transform and invigorate the dull stuff of the moment, the most enduring aspect of the story-teller's art.

2.2 ACHING OUT THE MILES:THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE

2.2.1 Some Preliminary Remarks

By discussing first the narrative method of Amelia Batistich's stories, I have given deliberate emphasis not to what the stories tell, but how they tell it. The relative importance one gives to these factors is central in reading migrant literature. To read only to be informed about migrant experience is, I feel, restrictive, for it denies the literature the privilege of being assessed by the common criteria that are applied to more familiar, legitimate 'Literature'. If the reader is searching migrant literature solely for the information it discloses, he or she is refashioning fiction into another form -- treating it as a documentary or personal account of migration thinly disguised as 'a story'. The implications of such manipulative reading have been provocatively explored in a recent issue of the Australian periodical Meanjin:

We can ... listen sympathetically (and a little guiltily) to stories of hardship and cultural misunderstanding, but we remain essentially

outside these experiences, voyeurs of their spontaneity and suffering. And our cultural hegemony remains secure. The work done by people of non-Australian backgrounds becomes categorised as migrant literature or ethnic art, evidence of our tolerance of diversity, but removed from the centre where the serious business goes on.⁷⁶

This warning about the assumptions inherent in reading migrant literature from within the dominant culture ('where the serious business goes on') seems equally pertinent in New Zealand. The fact that such literature is written from a migrant perspective — that is, an identifiably 'alien' perspective — should not automatically imply that its contents must be ruthlessly scrutinised by a reader who becomes in effect like a diligent customs officer, seeking out whatever proof of foreign-ness the suitcase contains. It is literature primarily; migrant literature a more specific definition only. And so it seems that its literary qualities should not be trampled in the rush to extract the 'migrant experience' it tells of and which might be equally (and less ambiguously) available from documentaries, personal histories and other similar sources.

That is why I have accorded primacy to discussing the narrative qualities of Amelia Batistich's stories — their rich texture of prose interlaced with elements of spoken narrative, and the gestures they make to forms and conventions from traditional oral models. It is from this standpoint that their thematic content must be examined. And the thematic concerns of the stories must themselves be released from the limitations which the definition 'migrant writing' imposes: they do not concern solely the exclusive, limited experience of migrants, but expand outwards to embrace some of the fundamental and universal preoccupations of human beings. It is with these considerations in mind that some of the predominant themes of Amelia Batistich's short stories will be discussed.

⁷⁶ 42:1, March 1983, p. 141.

2.2.2 The Dream That Had Lost Its Continuity

It has already been seen how some of the narrative techniques employed by Amelia Batistich embody and reflect the shape of the characters' lives -- and that shape is most frequently jagged, discontinuous and fragmented. 'An Olive Tree in Dalmatia' provides an account of the archetypal migrant experience which produces this chaotic effect, and which recurs in varying forms in many other stories: the hopeful young man who departs from the known and familiar, his traumatic arrival in a strange New World, immersion in hard work as a means both of forgetting the Old World and of establishing a place in the New. The final stage in Stipan's journey is the return home in old age -- an attempt which suggests once more the metaphor of the homeland as dream, a delicate and transparent substance that is impossible to catch hold of.

But the disenchantment that occurs when Stipan and his wife Ana return to Dalmatia is even more comprehensive than they feared. It would be bad enough had they returned to find things changed totally, to find familiar places transformed and populated by strangers. It is worse to discover that little has changed visibly, and that the inhabitants of their former homes are not strangers, but living ghosts, descendants of the people who were young with Stipan and Ana. Rather than recapturing a dream, they enter a nightmare in which the familiar world is superficially the same, but drastically altered in substance. It is not only a disenchantment, but a further dislocation -- 'They began to feel like strangers from another world' (p.26).

It is Ana who finally gives voice to their painful disillusionment: 'Better the dream in New Zealand than the truth here' (p.26). A dream of the past is only of comfort when it is erected as a barrier against the hardships of the present. It

shatters at any attempt to transform it into reality. And the concept of 'home' is not, as Stipan and Ana discover, sufficiently elastic to yoke together two distant times and places -- as Ana reflects, 'Home is where you have lived your life. It cannot be any other place' (p.27).

The discoveries which Stipan and Ana make are confirmed in another story in the collection, 'Homecoming', which focusses solely on the moment at which the disillusionment begins, the attempted point of re-entry into the dream. Having returned to her former Dalmatian village, Manda Ivich is trying to find the house she grew up in. She is simultaneously haunted by her knowledge of her family's sufferings after her own departure for New Zealand -- the result of war, oppression and hunger. Because of her absence, their suffering during that time is foreign to her -- yet she feels implicated in it. Her guilt at having escaped what her family endured haunts her as she stands in the ruins of her former home. It is an even harsher form of disenchantment than Stipan and Ana experience -- the ruined house is a grim symbol for the destruction of her dream of the past and for the discontinuity between that past and her subsequent life in New Zealand:

She gave herself up to the silent house as if she too had died, as she had died to it, all those years in New Zealand. Wordless, all those she had left ^{here} living, pressed around her, sucking out her own life to leave her a dry skeleton, too. Like a person in a nightmare she stumbled through the barn-like rooms...now the sobs tore out of her, great animal cries like wolves howling.

(p. 140).

The stories of Stipan and Ana, and of Manda Ivich, are powerful illustrations of the discontinuity and fragmentation that comprise the price exacted by migration. Yet in their efforts to re-enter the dreamworld of the past, some more universal yearnings are implicit as well. The journey home to recapture some of the quality of one's past is not exclusive to those who have migrated across the

world. Such a journey may take place between hemispheres, as here, or between points on the map which is inscribed on every individual's memory. The motives for such a journey to a fondly desired point of arrival are essentially the same, and both share the inevitable outcome of disenchantment. The return to a childhood home, in fact or in memory, is almost always a disappointment. Its proportions are diminished, its glories dimmed. Or worse, it may bear the superficial forms and facades of its previous state, but with all its intangible atmosphere debased, transformed or simply vanished.

Such disillusionment brought about by attempts to regain the past is a universal theme common to much literature of all genres. One thinks perhaps of the remorseful poetry of loss of Thomas Hardy, or of Charles Ryder's bitter revisiting of Brideshead in Evelyn Waugh's novel. Amongst New Zealand literature, it is a theme given rather whimsical treatment by Allen Curnow in his poem 'Country School'⁷⁷ where his nostalgic trip to an old school produces only such 'disappointing discoveries as 'how sad the dunny/ And the things you drew on the wall'. James K. Baxter explores his childhood and the fallacious effects of memory in many poems, perhaps nowhere more elegiacally than in 'The Bay'⁷⁸ where he records:

A thousand times an hour is torn across
And burned for the sake of going on living,
But I remember the bay that never was
And stand like stone and cannot turn away.

The emotions and states of mind being explored by each of these writers have close connections with what Amelia Batistich's stories reveal about their migrant characters. She, and other migrant writers, are making use of the migrants'

⁷⁷ A Small Room With Large Windows, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.4.

⁷⁸ Collected Poems, (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.44.

physical journey as a ready metaphor through which to express the futility of trying to recapture the past, the theme which Baxter and Curnow also explore. The character's inner journey back to the past is plotted against their physical journey, and each leads to the same destination -- as Ana observes in 'An Olive Tree in Dalmatia', 'There is nothing for us here' (p.27).

To attempt to regain the past, the broken dream, is to force a confrontation with death: the death of the past world and the people who once populated it, and the death of one's own youthful self. And it brings therefore not the rejuvenation which seems to underlie the hopes of those who attempt it, but rather a confirmation of mortality. The migrant experience which Amelia Batistich writes of can therefore be seen not as the kernel of her stories, but as their shell. It is the medium through which she explores some of the most fundamental concerns of people, whether they have made a journey between hemispheres or, more commonly, within the enclosed world of their own minds.

2.2.3 The Brown Earth

It is an interesting feature of An Olive Tree in Dalmatia that although characters and incidents vary from story to story and each ^{story} is complete within itself, there are nonetheless some strong ties that bind the stories together and which give the collection an unusual quality of unity. For instance, the title story and 'Homecoming' not only possess considerable similarities themselves, but they additionally serve as extreme reference points for our reading of other stories. Stipan, Ana and Manda's disillusioning return home to confront the poverty of their own pasts can be read as an experience implicit in the futures of many characters in other stories. We do not see the same journey enacted, but see it

foreshadowed in their frequently expressed desires to return one day to the place they fondly imagine fixed immutably at the point of their departure. And so the stories establish correspondences amongst themselves: one character's disappointing achievements are the barren fulfillment of the unrealized hopes of another character; an old man's contented retirement on the farm he has made from scratch is the seemingly unattainable goal which, in another story, keeps a young man going while waist-deep in water digging gum. And so the two stories of the migrants' return home can be seen in the perspective of other stories where characters seek not a reconciliation with the Old World, but rather, a place within the New World.

For most, this can be bought only through hard physical work in which the mind and the emotions, as well as the body, are totally immersed. 'Parenga-and All!'¹ provides a vivid account of this sort of labour. It is the story of Andrea Parentich who, after arriving from Dalmatia, works in the gum-fields of Northland, standing 'thigh-deep in water all day long', collapsing at night in the meagre comfort of a sacking hut in which cut-out pictures from the 'Weekly News' are the only embellishments. He finds welcome company and solace in his 'letter-bride' from Dalmatia: yet for her, the hardships of a lonely life in the middle of a swamp are compounded by getting to know this stranger who is her husband. This account of the young migrant's tribulations is softened by its placement within a narrative envelope in which we see them at a later date, enjoying the material comforts they have worked for. It is as if the days in the swamp can now be regarded from the security of high, dry ground. It is the archetypal migrants' dream -- from hardship to relative prosperity, a comfortable position from which to review what can be now judged as 'a good life' (p. 81).

Yet such hard physical labour is shown in other stories to bring much more than material well-being alone. For the old woman Mara in 'Roots'⁷⁹ it is only through her lifetime of working with the soil of her adopted country that she has been able to put down roots. The bond with the earth joins her not only to this country but to her past life in Dalmatia, where she depended on the land for physical survival. This dependency has left her with an attitude to the land which is near religious in its intensity – 'All peasants are the same. Father and mother and country and flag the brown earth is to them ... the smallest patch of earth was holy as the Bread of God' (p.74). It is an attitude that does not adapt readily to New Zealand farming, and she is faintly incredulous at the fertile richness of the land which is theirs to farm. Yet she retains her spiritual attitude to the land, while her husband's modifies to a more proprietorial bond – 'The farm was his country. All his world was in those shining acres' (p. 72).

Yet for both Ivan and Mara, their sense of belonging to their land is both essential, and prior, to their sense of belonging to New Zealand – their 'country' in a more nationalistic sense. Mara notes of Ivan:

...his roots were deep and wide in these acres. In some mysterious way he was bound up with them, so that it seemed to her that the very sap that ran in his veins was drawn from the same spring that flowed through his land.

(p. 75).

For Mara herself, by her own admission a 'peasant' and 'an ignorant old woman' (p.75), her relationship with the land is of infinitely greater substance than the tenuous bond she has with the community around her. In that world, she is an inarticulate wanderer, excluded from belonging by 'the words she could never loose from her tongue, the hard English speech that cut between her and the people around her' (p. 74). Shut out of the social life of her new home, she finds

⁷⁹ An Olive Tree in Dalmatia p. 74.

compensation in her constant, reassuring contact with the land, talking to it 'as to an old friend ... Here alone, it seemed to her, did she belong' (pp.73-74). It is both a means of contact ^{with} and belonging to the New World and also a means of connecting herself with Dalmatia -- a kind of guarantee of the continuity of her identity despite the enormous upheaval of migration.

When Lucia in 'A Dalmatian Woman'⁸⁰ arrives in Auckland from Dalmatia as the letter-bride of a large, silent, awkward man she knows only from a photograph, her feelings of disorientation ^{to the reader} recall John Berger's definition of migration as 'undoing the very meaning of the world and ... abandoning oneself to the unreal... [To] emigrate is always to dismantle the center of the world'.⁸¹ Her sense of unreality is akin to death itself -- as she reflects, 'It felt like the end of a life, not the beginning' (p. 103). And as her husband takes her to the bleak shack which is to be her home, migration seems to be a fate even worse than the death she first felt she had undergone -- it is a nightmare from which there is no hope of release.

Yet through the physical work on the farm which she finds is expected of her, she finds surprising comfort. Not only does it reassure her that she is still alive, but also confirms that she is still the same person who had existed under her name in Dalmatia. The nightmare is temporarily suspended -- 'Her back ached, but there was something in the feel of earth in her hands. Generations of peasant blood warmed to it. Earth! And it belonged to her and her husband' (p.107). The land is therapy not only for the dull ache she feels for the past and the nightmare of the present; it also fills her once again with a sense of the

⁸⁰ Op. cit., p.103.

⁸¹ Berger, op. cit., p. 57.

future:

The acres of land became an obsession with her as with him, and when ~~their~~ first child was born and she brought it home from the hospital, she held it up to the land and said -- 'See what we are making for you!'

(p. 108).

Contact with the land seems a means of restoring coherence and purpose to a life apparently shattered by the journey: to John Berger, quoting Mircea Eliade, it is a way of restoring the centre of the world at 'the heart of the real'.⁸²

The sense of land possessing a value beyond its monetary worth -- as a symbol of continuity, security, endurance, and a denial of the fragmentation which is the cost of migration -- is perhaps most skilfully explored in a story that does not appear in the collection, 'The Old Man and the Mountain'.⁸³ It is told through the dying voice of an old Dalmatian migrant, and records his attempts to dredge up his memories of the past and reconcile them with the present. He makes this final reckoning under the watchful gaze of a constant friend throughout his days in New Zealand -- a mountain, Maungariri. Since the death of his wife twelve years earlier, the old man feels that this inanimate friend knows him better than anyone -- even his children -- for his whole life has been entwined with it. He dug out Maungariri's hidden hoard of kauri gum as a young man; later, he cleared some of its bush to make himself a farm.

But it is a relationship more of emotional dependency than of exploitation. He has always gained solace and purpose from its presence, even when his life seemed bleak. While digging for gum on the mountain's lowest slopes he had thought 'Hell [was] in New Zealand'. The mountain had seemed to respond, putting his

⁸² Berger, op. cit., p. 56.

⁸³ Unpublished, broadcast on 'Open Country', 29 December 1968.

thoughts in perspective and dissuading him from giving up -- "Man, you only a baby yet!" the mountain said. "Wait till you a million years old!". And the things that he has taken from the mountain are balanced by what he has given it in return; the body of his son killed in the First World War lies in a grave at the mountain's foot, guarded by its enduring watchfulness. It is this gift which has clinched the bond he feels with Maungariri and with the spirit of the hostile land he once worked only in order to get sufficient money to be able to leave -- 'he felt he had more of a stake in the country with the boy there'. He has given a piece of himself to the land's care and so acknowledged that he has a place here -- ^{he is} no longer a traveller scratching its surface for whatever it will yield, and then moving on.

But not only does Maungariri represent the meeting point between his own life and the life of the country he has come to; it is also a reminder of Viter, 'the other mountain', which watched over his early years in Dalmatia. Named after the wind, that mountain was surrounded by history and legends of vilas -- the fairy women locked inside it to wail throughout eternity. It enshrined some personal history too, such as the story that was told of the day his own grandfather had died and 'the sun had danced across its crest and struck the earth with fire'. It seems this intimate connection between Viter and his own life has been transferred to Maungariri -- a reassuring symbol of continuity that seems to know about that other mountain too; "I understand" the mountain said. "You are only stepchild of this sun".

And so as the old man dies, through the presence of this adoptive mountain it seems he is being returned to that first mountain to dwell with his own ancestors, continuing a tradition in which the passing of a man's life has always been marked by the mourning of a mountain:

And then the mountain spoke.

'Time now, man!' the mountain said. 'Go, go to your parents, to your ancestors! Go then, farewell! Farewell!'

In this story, Amelia Batistich makes perhaps her strongest assertion of the intimate bond that migrants may establish with the land. It evokes sharply the sense of the land as more than a mere provider of prosperity: it is a certainty to shore up against the alien ways of the New World, and a means of restoring continuity to lives that are fragmented. The story is a personal favourite of hers because of the diverse elements it integrates — the migrant finding a solid, unchanging meeting point with the land he has adopted; the past and the present being reconciled in the old man's mind; and perhaps the most delicate connection of all, the meeting point between two cultures. The Dalmatian migrant forms an intimate bond with the spirit of the land which is Maori in the values it seems to enshrine and in its voice. Says the author:

Of all my stories ... [this] is the story apart from the rest. It says (for me) what I want to say about the Dalmatians, the land, and the soul-meeting with the Maori, the first owner of the land.⁸⁴

2.2.4 The Ache That Was Never Quite Stilled

But in other stories, the examination of their lives which many characters make in old age reveals a progression towards disintegration, rather than the integration which is achieved in 'The Old Man and the Mountain'. As Matti Dominovich in 'Champion of the Northern Wairoa' reflects, it is only in old age that the full discontinuity between one's past and present life is realized. As an old man, he feels more of the migrant's sense of disorientation than he has ever felt before; amongst the indifferent young people at a local wedding, he feels for

⁸⁴ Letter, 14/9/84.

the first time a true foreigner.

His sense of being a stranger, not only from Dalmatia, but from the past as well is an emotion experienced by many individuals apart from migrants. It recalls the fragmented consciousness expressed so well in the opening of L.P. Hartley's novel The Go-Between where the narrator observes, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there".⁸⁵ Matti discovers not only this painful truth, but an additional irony: it was for the futures of these people who now shut him out of their world that he made that immense journey all those years before:

Well maybe it doesn't mean anything to anyone any more ... They don't know what it was like to come to this country thirty and forty years ago and work like hell so your kids won't have to work like this.

(p.4).

Somewhere, the past and the present have become disconnected, and the hopes of his younger self seem dashed by the reality of what has been achieved.

And so old age frequently becomes a time of disillusionment in which the young migrants' naive hopes for the future are shown to have delivered nothing. For the quartet of friends in 'The Tea Party'⁸⁶ the leisure and prosperity of their old age is weighed against all that they have lost of the Old World. The New World has undeniably brought them the prosperity they dreamed of in Dalmatia:

Mrs Adamich looked around the room. It had never looked richer. She was especially pleased with the new mahogany cabinet that showed off her crystal so well. It had cost a lot of money, but why shouldn't she have all she wanted? It had taken a long time to get it.

(p. 130).

⁸⁵ (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), p.9.

⁸⁶ An Olive Tree in Dalmatia p. 129.

Modest pleasures certainly, but they are the enjoyable fruit of a lifetime of poverty in the Old World and hard work in the New. Further pleasure is gained from the achievements of their children and grandchildren -- the women's boastfulness and gentle rivalry on this count conceals a faint amazement that their children have so effortlessly attained goals that were totally outside their own grasp. Their pride is also in seeing their own descendants losing the stamp of separateness they themselves have always worn -- their own English may be heavily accented, but their children are indistinguishable from other New Zealanders.

But their pride in this achievement is countered by its painful cost: they have willingly handed over their children to the New World while they themselves are somewhere adrift between it and the Old World. The women's pleasant tea party is suddenly transformed into a wake as this fact hits home -- all the dried-up memories of their past lives come flooding back as a lament for all they have lost; "Ah! My mother! And she lived all those years after I left, and died, and I never saw her again!" (p. 132). The visible gains of migration which surround them seem suddenly diminished. Yet they are caught between the relative merits of loss and gain, trapped by the paradox that 'if [they] had stayed there [they] would have been poor all [their] lives!' (p. 133). But in the irresolute tone of the story's ending, it seems that the intangible memory of the Old World has a more persuasive power than do the visible benefits of the New:

No one spoke. But it seemed to Mrs Adamich that she could smell the scent of the almond blossom on the tree outside her mother's house. It filled the room with its fragrance, and suddenly she wished ^{that} it wasn't the mahogany cabinet she was seeing, but the blue, blue Adriatic sea'.

(p. 133).

The losses and gains of migration are also weighed by Simun in a more bleak story, 'The Gusla'.⁸⁷ Here his own unhappy situation adrift between worlds is painfully brought home to him by the distance he finds himself from his daughters. They smoke and wear trousers, have witty and smartly dressed friends from the city, and enjoy elegant lunch parties and dancing to the radiogram. The author reinforces the distance between the world they move in and that of their father by occasionally writing from their perspective:

"Dad!" said Lina in exasperation.

"Dad!" echoed Katie, like a parrot. Of course he was a darling, but Lord! let him remember which forks you picked up for dessert, and which for ^{the} main course like she'd told him.

(p. 61).

It is a gap between more than generations. Implicit also is the distance between Simun's youthful hopes for the future, transforming a gumfield into 'The best farm in the district' (p. 61), and their barren harvest. And so too does the story evoke the distance between the Old World and the New, embodied within Simun's mind by his memory of his mother and her incongruous link with his daughters:

Sometimes when he looked at his daughters he wondered what his mother would have made of these hard, bright girls, smoking cigarettes like men, wearing trousers like men. Flesh and bone of that strong old woman. The same eyes. The same features. But how different!


(p. 63).

The memory of his mother's appearance seems more familiar, more comprehensible to him than that of his daughters. Yet to admit this is to admit that he is living in the past; which is, in fact, to be homeless — 'there was Dalmatia, getting farther and farther away from him, leaving him out on a limb to belong nowhere' (p. 63). Old age can provide the migrant with the opportunity to restore wholeness to a life made discontinuous, but for Simun it brings only increased disintegration; [he] felt like a man who had strayed into the wrong life'

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

(p. 61).

His only pleasure comes from the time he spends with his Dalmatian neighbours, Marko and Rosa. They have reached the same level of prosperity as Simun, but have made far greater gains in other ways. For they have found an effective reconciliation between Dalmatia and New Zealand, between the dream and reality. They have brought their Dalmatian past with them and woven it into their daily lives in their new country, making a life that has all the strength and richness of a cloth embroidered with many coloured threads, rather than two torn-off remnants of a larger fabric. With their encouragement, Simun imports a Dalmatian gusla and by playing this instrument he finds 'something of his own' (p. 65) which links him back to the past he aches for. It is not a wholly successful reconciliation between Dalmatia and New Zealand however, because it is as much a means of shutting out the present as ^{of} rediscovering the past.

The story illustrates one possible outcome of migration, a painful one in which the migrant never truly arrives in the New World nor wholly leaves the Old. It seems an arbitrary, indiscriminate fate, the unhappy outcome of the best possible intentions. It is not the fault of Simun's daughters that Dalmatia is dead to them. Migration is fickle and unjust to those who embrace it — why should Simun's life be so unhappy while Marko's is so fulfilled? Neither Simun nor the author offers any easy answers, and the story ends with a powerful outburst from Simun that may be ^{as much a protest}  at the power of migration to be at once seductive and destructive, as an utterance of his own pain:

The noisy music of the radiogram screamed out into the night. A sudden rage possessed him. He waved the gusla at the unseen monster. 'We'll show you — this and I!' he shouted. ... And drawing the bow across the gusla he began to sing loudly and defiantly of the Kosovo maiden and the nine brothers dead for Serbia, the nine Yugovichs dead on bloody Vidov Dan.

(p.66).

2.2.5 A Dalmatian Woman

This ambivalent, fickle aspect of migration is discovered commonly in old age. Traumatic though this is, many of Amelia Batistich's other stories show that for another group of migrants those painful feelings are endured over a considerably longer time, and are usually suppressed. This group is migrant women, and the author reveals a particular sensitivity to their feelings. Theirs is frequently a double isolation: not only are they marooned in a strange country, but put in solitary confinement with a stranger whom they have married by proxy. The fight to restore a semblance of everyday reality to this abnormal life is therefore harder yet. Nor can migrant women escape so readily through the outlets available to their husbands who can immerse themselves in hard physical work — farming or 'clearing' bush, 'often' in 'the company of others.' For the most part, the women must work in isolation in their bare homes — a comfortless environment within which they are to begin their lives anew. If they are denied that vital contact with the land their husbands have, the New World is a barren place indeed.

'A Place Called Sarajevo'⁸⁸ offers a fleeting glance into the life of such a woman, a glance made by the young girl Ketty who is an unwilling visitor to the Zelich's farm. From the outset, she finds Mrs Zelich a strange and unsettling woman. Her conversations with Ketty soon reveal her to be in a plight similar to Simun's in 'The Gusla': unable to feel at home in the New World, she lives imaginatively in the Old. She is a woman quite literally living in a dream — it is little wonder Ketty finds her odd.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 113.

As a girl in Sarajevo, she was known as "' Kossara Dyevoyka", the girl with the long hair' (p.116) and when she tells the story of her engagement to Steve Zelich, it is as if she is telling a fairy story about a woman who has never existed -- as Ketty observes:

It could have come from the pages of a book, not something that happened really. Steve Zelich walking through a street in Sarajevo and the girl, seeing him from the window ... calling to him: "Young man, where are you from?" And when he answered "New Zealand", calling back, "Marry me and take me there!"

(p. 117).

Her fondness for telling of her past in this way is further confirmation of her inability to leave it behind and engage with the life she is living now. That dream of her own past, that fairy story, seems more real to her than the events going on around her, which even the child observes are not as they should be. The Zelich's marriage has turned into a loveless, silent prison, and at one point during Ketty's stay she sees it has a violent side too:

Mrs Zelich [was] standing in her nightdress with her arms held out to something. Mr Zelich was telling her to come to bed ... She kept saying the angry things and started to laugh and laugh and her husband told her to be quiet, she would wake the child, but she wouldn't stop. He hit her on the face and her nose began to bleed. The blood ran down her chin and on to her nightgown.

(p. 118).

The next morning, Ketty's only proof that this sight has not been a dream is the piece of blood-stained embroidery Mr Zelich has used to wipe his wife's blood. The destruction of the previously beautiful cloth is a powerful image for the violence that has taken place and suggests that the woman is a victim of more than her husband's violence alone. The stained embroidery suggests the way that the whole experience has damaged her, the rough demands of the New World violating her romantic memories of the Old World and its traditions.

It is a violence which seems about to drive her to madness. As Ketty leaves, she asks her to check on the map whether "There is a place called Sarajevo" (p. 120). It seems that once she begins to doubt the existence of this single certainty that she clings to, she is truly lost -- not merely suspended between two worlds, but adrift without the reassuring sight of either.

Like others, this story serves as one of the collection's extreme reference points around which a group of related stories orbit. None of the other migrant women seem to reach the degree of dangerous desperation of Mrs Zelich. Their sense of personal disorientation is at least temporarily assuaged by new demands: marriage and motherhood in particular. These mothers tend to transfer to their children the dreams and anxieties underlying their own arrival in the New World, creating standards and expectations their children find hard to fulfil. Above all, their determination is that their children should 'fit in'. When Stella Parentich in 'All Mixed Up'⁸⁹ is accused of being an 'Austrian squarehead' (p.9) by a classmate, the dominating Mrs Parentich is quick to assure Stella of her national status in unequivocal terms -- "'You are not Austrian. You are Dalmatian New Zealander. Tell them that'" (p.9).

Bringing up Dalmatian New Zealanders is not an easy task. Many of the migrants have themselves a confused relationship with their homeland: glad to have left, but never entirely losing the ache to return. And so the Dalmatia they pass on to their children in anecdotes and songs is both the dreamworld, in which Mrs Parentich was 'Milka Filipova ... and the way she says it it's like saying she was a princess or something' (p.7), and also a real world of poverty, oppression and little opportunity. The migrants themselves find it hard to resolve these two

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.7.

faces of Dalmatia: it is harder yet for their children who are uninterested in its harsh side, and seduced by the dream world it offers.

The difficulty of raising Dalmatian New Zealanders is compounded further by the character of the New Zealand community in which most of the stories are set. For like the rural Manawatu community of Yvonne du Fresne's stories, the social world of Dargaville seems predominantly English in character, with a strong Irish presence adding some variety. But it is to the English world and its conventions that the Dalmatian migrants seek to belong, and in a documentary-style piece, 'Two Way World',⁹⁰ Amelia Batistich paints a vivid image of this community. Amid the 'ancient silence' and 'pillaged forest lands' (p. 225) of Northland, the inhabitants of Dargaville turn their backs on this hostile environment and gravely set about to graft onto it a piece of England:

Lace curtained windows looked out onto trim gardens and trellised paths.

Fragrant with England, those gardens bloomed in a world of dreams ... Tea roses flagged the paths, latticed doors welcomed you sedately, if you were asked inside.

(p. 225).

From these few images rises a picture of an entire community out of touch with itself, secretly struggling with the very problems which beset the Dalmatian migrants — the difficulty of finding a point of balance between the Old World and the New.

As might be expected, the relationship that develops between this deracinated English community and the migrant community becomes complicated by this fact. It is as if the two groups are trying to build a bridge from opposite sides of a river, a project of mutual benefit. Both groups are new arrivals in the place but

⁹⁰ Jim Henderson, (ed.), Our Open Country, (Wellington: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1971), pp. 225-228.

only one is prepared to admit it -- the other takes a lofty and unhelpful stance throughout the bridge-building as if they are the initiated, the ones who belong already. And it is a situation which the Dalmatian community finds they must accept if they are to 'get on' at all. The English way must be accepted as the New Zealand way. Dalmatian homes become imitations of English homes, however incongruous the results. In 'Two Way World', the narrator's front parlour is adorned with the only acceptable decorations, no matter how hideous -- pictures of Faith, Hope and a cold Charity ... [or] the pair of wild horses rearing in the face of ...apocalyptic lightning' (p.225). Yet in their very zeal to acquire such things, they are unconsciously acknowledging their exclusion from the community they are so intent on joining:

We Dalmatians had no inherited china or family bricabrac. We had started from scratch. As others discarded, we bought. True, this was the Georgian era, and we were just cresting the wave of the Victorian -- we could only follow in these things. But make no mistake, we were going to get them all.

(p. 225).

Such 'acquired symbols of prosperity sit uneasily beside the cherished fragments of the Old World -- family photographs, 'patient, peasant faces .. the strong, stoic faces of all the Dalmatian forbears' (p. 226) looking uncomfortable amidst their alien surroundings.

Yet strange juxtapositions such as these mark the struggle to be Dalmatian New Zealanders, a struggle most frequently left up to the women of the family. It is the women who keep the traditions of Dalmatia alive in the New World, in their celebrations, funerals, community picnics and dances. In 'The Wedding'⁹¹ the women vie for the privilege of cooking the hams 'The way they were done in Mrs Tomich's village' (p. 30), and 'frustule' will fight for space on the wedding

⁹¹ Olive Tree p. 29.

table with 'good New Zealand sponges' (p.30). They decorate the hall with a hybrid mix of nikau fronds and the Dalmatian tricolour, adorn the tables with cherished embroidered cloths never used since leaving Dalmatia because 'for such occasions were their rich embroideries intended' (p. 32). At last, something of the past can be given a sanctioned and honoured role in the New World — the past need no longer be suppressed, a private and lonely dream.

The story contains a blend of moods — reflecting perhaps the way the migrant women tend to bury unhappiness beneath a capable and energetic exterior, an ability vital to surviving the hardships of migration. Pleasurable though the revival of traditions for the wedding is, it also reinforces that these traditions are usually absent. And so the happiness of the wedding is constantly punctuated by a sense of loss — indicated in the words of comfort given to the bride's mother; "She has only gone next door; not like us, twelve thousand miles away". And we began to talk quickly, all together, to shut out the sudden remembering — the ache 'that was never quite stilled' (p. 35).

Making the traditions of Dalmatia live in New Zealand is a means of establishing a continuity between the past and the present, a reassurance necessary as much at a personal level as at the cultural. This need for continued affirmation of the past underscores the matchmaking, the 'eternal business' (p.99), that takes place in 'The Picnic',⁹² which sums up well the feelings underlying the migrants' desire for their children to be Dalmatian New Zealanders:

Each village has its clique of representation here, excluding the pretensions of others. The girls of Podgora must marry with the men of Podgora. The 'Islanders' must marry their own. Korchula. Dubrovnik. Spalato. Names caught in the cobwebs of history, all that richness given to new ground, its children given to a new race. In these far antipodes who will remember Dalmatia in a

92 Ibid, p.96.

thousand years? Yet something must survive. In the high cheekbone, in the black eyes, the gesture of a hand, it will be there unsung.

(p. 99).

2.2.6 Held in the Dream's Thrall

If looking to the past is a means of affirming cultural and personal identity, so too is looking to the future. The short span of a single lifetime is not long enough to complete the full process of migration. Even if a total severing of the individual from his or her past is achieved (and this seems rare), it seems virtually impossible for the migrants to achieve thorough immersion in their new home. This final step of complete integration must be made by the next generation: the future the migrants dream of for their sons and daughters is the confirmation they need of the success of their own journeys. As Mrs Parentich tells herself in 'The Mazurka Afternoon'⁹³ when Stella is rebelling against her enforced music lessons and rigorously supervised homework sessions, 'Wasn't that why she had left the old country to give her children opportunities she had never had?' (p. 83). The achievements of the next generation comprise the desired destination of the migrants' journey.

Yet, as 'The Mazurka Afternoon' goes on to illustrate, the second generation themselves are not nearly so single-minded about their futures. The unresolved tension that pervades their parents' lives, the gap between their past and their immediate experience, is something that may be inherited in full by the next generation. For just as her mother's life is still deeply entwined with her dream of Dalmatia (despite the pragmatism with which she tackles her present life), so too is Stella drawn irresistibly by the lure of that dream-world. Its attractions

⁹³ Ibid., p.82.

seem infinitely preferable to the acquisitive, ambitious future her mother plans for her. The ending of the story is a powerful indication of the way the second generation is seduced by the very dream their parents are struggling to suppress. Here, Mrs Parentich is surprised in her diligent supervision of Stella's piano practice to hear her daughter playing a Chopin mazurka, rather than the usual dull exercises:

Mama wasn't listening to me ... 'I used to dance Mazurka!' she said surprisingly. 'Like this!' And round and round the room she went, three steps here, three steps there, the apron swinging with her. I watched entranced ... Mama dancing for me in our dining room! Not looking to see if the silver was polished, or if there was a smear of dust anywhere, but dancing! I could have stayed looking at her for ever.

(p. 87).

The arresting, haunting effect this image leaves at the story's conclusion mirrors its effect on Stella — the strange sight of this dignified woman in her immaculate, prosperous New Zealand home suddenly being transformed by the sound of music that seems to call to her from another world, another time. And it is by this admission of the powerful existence of another world that Stella is entranced, and by the accompanying knowledge that it is a world in which she too has a stake. For Stella, as for her mother, her problem is to find her own place amongst these disparate worlds.

For if the problems of the migrant who is forced to exchange the Old World for the New are as much physical and pragmatic as mental and emotional, the difficulties for the next generation are exclusively of the latter kind. Not only is Dalmatia a private, incommunicable dream, as it is for their parents, but it is a dream woven out of the dreams of others. Theirs is a relationship with an entirely fictional country in which their imaginary alter egos lead imaginary lives, a fiction built out of the stories and memories of their parents.

This is evoked well in another story about Stella Parentich, 'All Mixed Up', and is achieved through the author's deft handling of the narrative – particularly her skilful manipulation of tenses and time sequences. For example, Stella speaks of her dream of Dalmatia:

I like Mama's stories about Dalmatia. It is such a lovely place there. You have lots and lots of grapes and the sun shines a lot and they ripen till they're black and you go out with all the other children and pick them and press them into wine ...

Sometimes I wish Mama had stayed in Dalmatia. Then we could live in the story too.

(p. 8).

Here, the narrative has a real fluidity, the easy changes in tense marking the moment when the imaginary life merges with the actual. And this narrative fluidity mirrors the way Stella's mind moves with the utmost mobility between the real world and its fictional alternative. She, like her mother, is of two countries: New Zealand, and the fictional country she has fabricated out of shreds of an acquired language, out of stories told and family histories recited, out of meetings with relatives and glimpses of cherished photographs. And so, for Stella, her mother's stories have become invocations of a world with which she is intimately associated, tales in which tenses, pronouns, facts and fictions are easily interchangeable. They have the power to usher the past into the present, and to vanquish the unwelcome aspects of real life, as Stella notes in 'The Mazurka Afternoon':

I loved it when Mama talked like this. She made a story for us all to live in. It was the place where we belonged. The white stone house, the blue Adriatic, almost at its door, the almond tree flowering by the window. It made up for a lot.

(p. 86).

But Stella is a child: other stories show how growing up may bring a form of disenchantment as the migrants' descendants find they cannot live in a story.

New Zealand is where they live, and any other country — real or imaginary — cannot be superimposed to hide its shortcomings. In some stories, the Old World does not only diminish in importance for the next generation, but dies. And with the death of every migrant, even the memory of the Old World is extinguished a little more, as the old men note of the death of their friend Yakov in 'The Funeral':⁹⁴

Soon he would become part of the legend. Stories would grow around him ... and the truth would be embroidered to the fantasy men like to build of the past. Their children, listening politely would smile, half-shamed, half-scornful of such old men's tales. And their grandchildren would wonder who on earth old Yakov had been.

(p. 109).

For Stella Parentich, fashioning fictions out of the past is a means of keeping it alive and making it her own: 'The Funeral' shows another alternative, whereby the past is diminished by its constant falsifying re-creation. The distant world of Dalmatia is weakened into a watery substance which holds no attraction to those who inherit it: eventually, under their indifference it will dissolve completely.

The final story in An Olive Tree in Dalmatia, 'And Time That Flows On' (p.142), provides a more hopeful picture of the migrants' descendants and their attitude to the past. A family is gathered together for their first family party since the death of their matriarch. It is told primarily from the perspective of the middle-aged Stella as she observes her children and grandchildren, and recalls her mother. Yet we also hear other voices, foreign voices such as that of Roger, Stella's son-in-law. He is resentful of these 'Dallies' (p. 143) and bristles at their unconscious ability to make him feel excluded — even a little inferior. His relatives seem to be transformed when they come together, as if they gain some collective force which enables them to reconnect themselves with their inherited

94 Ibid., p. 109.

past:

...these others, even his young wife, Ann, looking both ways when they got together; they were different. Maybe it was because they spoke the same English as you, and it gave you a shock to see how easily they could be something else, too.

(p. 143).

He is mystified and annoyed: his family show no visible signs of belonging to any world other than the one he lives in too. But all their 'ancestor-worship' (p.144) reveals them to have a secret relationship with another world to which he has no access. And he cannot understand why they should be able to go where he cannot — 'only two had ever seen Dalmatia, but something had got into them, and what did a fellow on the outside do?' (p. 144).

His only answer is to retreat into silence and hostility, and to protect his son from the threat of their alien and incomprehensible ways:

His baby with a good plain English name. If he'd let them, they'd end up making a little two-way job of him too... He watched them silently. It was his kid, wasn't it? It had Irish and Scotch and English blood. More than enough to drown out the Dalmatian.

(pp. 143-144).

And while this cultural warfare is taking place within Roger's mind, Stella's mind too is a battle-ground of conflicting claims. This gathering is an important test: with her mother dead, she is now head of the family and responsible for maintaining its ties with the past. Her reflection that she must 'keep us together' (p.145) acknowledges a responsibility to many more people than those gathered in the room alone — she must keep the memory of the dead alive for the living, and keep knitted together their present life with their distant Dalmatian origins.

And so she has re-hung the family portrait as a visual reminder of the past; "It hasn't always been like this" she wanted the picture to say to them. "We had a beginning somewhere and somehow else" (p. 146). The photograph illustrates a

world now exclusively in Stella's possession, for her younger sisters were not born at the time it was taken and the younger generation are indifferent to such 'excursions into family history' (p. 146). The portrait was taken to send back to relatives in Zaostrog as proof of their prosperity in the New World, and Stella herself must now assume that role -- the tenuous thread that binds the Old World to the New. She has already had one warning of the fragility of this connection -- a tape recording has been erased of her mother reciting a traditional Dalmatian poem on her last birthday. This loss has made her determined to prevent more:

I don't want to lose it. The poets and the peasants and princes at Kossovo. All your stories, Mama ..

Fifty years of New Zealand had not washed out Zaostrog, Stella thought, remembering. And I don't want it washed out either! I want to keep it. Maybe it's because it's easier being the end of something than the beginning.

(p. 147).

And the story ends with an affirmation of this decision to refuse to let Dalmatia die, so that Stella and her family will never be 'on [their] own' (p. 148). And it is in consequence an affirmation of her parents' lives, of their decision to make a journey between two worlds, one which they never really left, the other which they never quite reached. Stella's words confirm that both worlds are important, both must live.

This ending is used as the jumping-off point for a very recent unpublished story, 'The Woman From Hercegovina' (1984). Here the narrator has gone a step further than Stella in her determination to keep the link with Dalmatia alive. She is making the journey to Dalmatia, and so feeling her way back along the thread that was spun from that country to New Zealand decades earlier by her own parents. The end-point of this journey will replace a dream world with a

real country, and^{it} is therefore an identical journey to her parents', holding all the same potential either for fulfillment or for disillusion.

The story is concerned solely with the journey itself, in which the narrator discovers what it is to be a migrant, suspended between worlds, between a dream and the reality that will soon supplant it. Her companion during her flight is also a returning migrant, 'a still sombre figure in black ... the face had a winter beauty, grave, classic'. She is a widow, returning home from the Antipodes with her child and her grief. She barely communicates with the narrator throughout the flight, each hesitant in the language of the other. But there is an unspoken bond between them, formed by their shared destination and their shared past. This journey is a confirmation to the narrator of what she has always known — that she too is a migrant, caught between the pull of two poles:

Here we were, the woman from Hercegovina , me from Auckland, New Zealand, locked together for one whole night, stranger-voyagers flying over continents, children of the same dark history, sisters in blood, strangers in time.

In studying her neighbour, the narrator is unwittingly becoming acquainted with her homeland, the beautiful face of the woman 'like the faces you see in ikons', with its 'sanctified mother look'. And in doing so, she is preparing herself for finding her own place in this New/Old World — the face is, as she will find, the face of Yugoslavia:

A face I was to see in church paintings then marvellously out in the street. As if the saint had walked out of the painting and onto the crowded pavement, where the living faces merged, my own among them, slavic, heavy with history, not alien here.

But this story's strength lies not in its anticipation of what the narrator will experience in Yugoslavia, but in its powerful evocation of the journey itself. In her presentation of the flight, the author is particularly concerned to make explicit

the link between this voyage and the voyage of the narrators' parents: they moved out of a dream towards an unknown life, while she re-enters that dream at the point it was broken off. And so the author's choice of detail and imagery gives the journey a surreal atmosphere, reinforcing the sense of a dream beginning:

It is an unreal world, the world of the night flight over unknown, unseen lands and seas to many destinations. Co-travellers bound together for these hours of darkness ... we lose touch with everyday reality, no longer masters of our fate, we surrender our lives to the unseen hands that keep the controls. Propelled by a power few understand, sky people, the umbilical cord to mother earth cut, adrift in the airways, like children we trust the morning will find us.

This journey, like that of the earlier migrants, involves the suspension of the real, the disintegration of the self — 'It was me here, wasn't it? Not some changeling who had slipped into my skin?'. And the story ends not with a triumphant conclusion, but with a sense of the narrator hovering on the edge of a discovery that may bring un hoped-for fulfillment or devastating disappointment. This personal uncertainty aside, she is nonetheless satisfied to have completed the cycle begun by her parents, to have confirmed that the two seemingly disparate worlds they moved between can be brought into balance at last; '... here I was, and here it was, the world, the impossible dream, all happening now'.

But can this wholeness ever be restored? Is it not after all, an 'impossible dream'? Amelia Batistich has yet to answer these questions in her fiction. Yet we can at this point twist Ezra Pound's statement and 'End fiction. Try fact'.⁹⁵ The author herself has undertaken the journey described in 'The Woman From Hercegovina', which culminated in the launching of her novel Sing Vila in the Mountains about Dalmatian migrant life in New Zealand. At the ceremony in which excerpts from the book were read in Serbo- Croatian, Amelia Batistich was

⁹⁵ See 'Near Perigord', Selected Poems, (London: Faber, 1959), p.145.

conscious of having completed the journey her parents left unfinished, and her novel was the means of reconnection; 'I was thinking of my father and mother leaving there and I felt, now here they are come back. Because it is theirs -- the story is of their life in Dargaville'.⁹⁶ Not only were the loose ends of the circle joined, but the two worlds which Amelia Batistich grew up in seemed finally to be brought into balance, neither one outweighing the importance of the other -- an experience she can only describe in emotional terms; 'tears ran down my face, because to translate Dargaville into Croatian, into Zagreb ... and to have those people hearing about Dargaville -- because I love Dargaville -- it just seemed another world'.⁹⁷

But this apparent achievement of wholeness and restoration does not seem total. Her return to the world of her parents was, in several senses, a return to a world that no longer exists. Not only is this explicitly indicated by its changed name -- she returned not to Dalmatia, but to Yugoslavia -- but implied also in the incongruity she discovered between the Croatian she spoke and the everyday speech of the Yugoslavians she met. Her own language was, she found, the speech of a dead world, the world of her parents. This discovery of a considerable gap between the dream world fondly cherished in the migrant's mind and the real country it refers to, recalls the observation made by the Australian critic, Anna Rutherford⁹⁸ about the stasis that so often plagues the writing of migrants about their Old Country -- a country they imagine to have ground to a halt at the point of their departure. This stasis seems to pervade the writing of

⁹⁶ See Appendix A, p.208.

⁹⁷ Op. cit., p.191.

⁹⁸ See 'Enhanced Nationalism: Viking vs Empire,' in Gross and Klooss, (eds.), English Literature of the Dominions, (Wurzburg:Konigshausen and Neumann, 1981), p.87.

the descendants of migrants too, perhaps to an even greater degree. For their Old Country was never a real place to begin with, and its distance from reality will necessarily always increase in proportion to the passing of time and the pace of change which occurs in the real country it is based on.

If this seems to imply defeat or to suggest that migrants can never expect to find a satisfactory resolution between the two worlds of their experience, it is perhaps time to return to the fiction. Amelia Batistich's stories seem to embody a compensation for the disappointments of real life, an affirmation that fiction can deliver what reality is unable to provide. For in her stories, she seems to have straddled the vast gap between the Old World and the New, brought them together onto the same plane in a way that could never be achieved in fact. It is through her fiction that she enacts what it is to be a Dalmatian New Zealander, and it seems therefore that in writing about migrant experience, she is herself adding to the variety of that experience. The narrative texture of her work shows that it has absorbed, and so come to embody, the tensions of migrant life. The present and the past, the dream and the reality, the hope and the disillusionment; the interaction of these contraries forms the fabric of Amelia Batistich's stories. The qualities inherent in fiction allow their resolution or ordering in a manner real life does not permit: the stories thus become both the representation of migrant life, and a further stage in the migrant's attempt to bestow the illusion of wholeness on an experience whose essential nature is fragmentary.

Chapter 3

YVONNE DU FRESNE

3.1 FINDING A VOICE

3.1.1 The Immigrants

It may seem that for the migrant writer, as for any other, the most pressing problem is to establish an individual voice. Yet for the migrant writer, this task may be accompanied by an additional duty: to make that individual voice sufficiently distinctive to announce that he or she is speaking from a different place than the 'mainstream' writer. For some, this distinctive voice is found unconsciously, apparently without the writer deliberately intending to make his or her fiction offer alternative perspectives – it just happens. Renato Amato seems a case in point: even his stories which are apparently unconcerned with migrant experience reveal him to be a migrant writer, with an awareness of belonging to another place and time beyond his immediate locality.

Yet the development of Yvonne du Fresne's fiction tells a different story – one of a slowly-discovered fictional voice in which to express her particular perspective as a New Zealander of Danish descent. She has described this voice recently as 'that abrupt Danish clonk: a bird falls like a stone out of the sky (clonk)'⁹⁹ – succinct, understated, somewhat ironic.

⁹⁹ 'Daring to be Danish', New Zealand Listener, March 23, 1985, p.24.

That this voice was only hesitantly and gradually acquired may be attributed to the fact that du Fresne grew up between two cultures, and with allegiances divided between them. The ambivalent feelings she had towards the two worlds that shaped her caused du Fresne particular problems in her fiction. She realised that in attempting to re-create the Danish world that had so influenced her development, she was led inevitably to criticize and, in part, to reject the other world and its values. If she was to find a true voice through which to give fictional expression to her personal sense of being a New Zealander, she had also to decide what sort of a New Zealander she felt herself to be.

Her childhood experiences had led her to doubt the possibility of being both New Zealander and Dane - the two seemed mutually exclusive identities, one for home and one for the world outside. The 'English' New Zealanders who dominated the world beyond the secure Danish community seemed to the young Yvonne du Fresne to be suspicious and contemptuous of the cultural differences displayed by the Danes. Their differences had either to be removed or concealed if the smaller group was to be accepted by the larger. She commented in a recent interview that:

We'd been encouraged not to show off about ourselves. We'd finally got the message that nobody wanted to know about us, we must become English ... So I bottled all that stuff away; tried to write English stories from reading English books ... That was my task, to be an artificial English woman. It was quite hard - you had to do a sort of a back -somersault.¹⁰⁰

And so she learned to wear two masks - a public one, and another more comfortable for private use. Once she began to write fiction, this habit of disguise and cultural concealment prompted self-questioning. Would it cause offence, suspicion, ridicule if she were to speak in the voice she felt to be her

¹⁰⁰ Conversation with author, see Appendix B, pp.250-251.

own, that Danish 'clonk' ? Would it not be better to continue to pretend, to continue to imitate faithfully a tradition of writers to which she felt she did not belong - Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield?

Yvonne du Fresne did not find any instant answers to these questions. Finding a voice has involved a long process of experimentation, whose measure can be gauged by contrasting the first version of one of her earliest stories with its recent revision.

'The Immigrants' was first published in the New Zealand Listener in 1956. It was revised by the author recently, following the success of her first collection of short stories, Farvel. It may be that the popularity of that collection gave du Fresne renewed interest in some of her earlier stories, and it seems certain that many of the changes made to 'The Immigrants' were intended to lend it some of the qualities which had brought Farvel its popular acclaim. The story is considerably lengthened under revision, but the most important changes occur in the presentation of the central characters and in the overall handling of that central theme indicated by the story's title.

In the original story, the central character is Ellen, a schoolgirl holidaying with her aunt and uncle in Wellington. The story opens on the last day of her holiday, as she and her Aunt Con are walking on a hillside overlooking Wellington Harbour. They pause for a time to watch 'the English boat' making its way across the harbour with its cargo of seven hundred immigrants coming to settle in New Zealand. Aunt Con clearly disapproves - "isn't it a lot when there's no houses or anything for our own! ... They should be grateful."¹⁰¹ Yet Ellen is less interested in her views than in her own sudden vision of the Europe

¹⁰¹ New Zealand Listener, 18 May, 1956, p.24.

that these migrants have left behind, a continent she imagines as 'a great crumbling statue, sinking back behind the mist and waves, staring blindly after the little boat as it crept with a flurry of foam around the great spinning globe, down into the south'(p.24). And Ellen has a similarly vivid imaginative picture of the migrants themselves as 'birds, coming silently over enormous distances, watching for the first spray breaking on New Zealand rocks' (p.24).

This is strong descriptive writing, yet it is not sustained, nor is the impression it creates of Ellen as a character of perception and feeling unusual for her years. Passages of imaginative 'seeing' such as this are rare: the overriding impression of Ellen is as an undeveloped character, the perfectly proper schoolgirl who makes such uninspired observations as "'Holidays always end too soon'"(p.24).

The story moves on to describe Ellen's train journey home to the Manawatu, and this provides the means of linking Ellen with the migrants whose arrival she had observed from a distance the previous day. Several of the immigrants from the boat are also travelling north on the train, and Ellen observes their 'confident smile(s) shadowed by anxiety' (p.25) and overhears their conversations with other travellers. Only two of the migrants are closely depicted, as they attempt to engage a soldier in conversation about the relative size and merits of Liverpool and Auckland. Ellen's observation of this encounter portrays the migrants sympathetically - she seems sensitive to their homesickness and to their attempts to conceal it with cocky cheer. But the author seems to want to imply that there is more to Ellen's attitude than mere pity or sympathy; indeed, to suggest that she has some sort of inherent understanding of the experience of migration. This is expressed in another passage of imaginative 'seeing':

Ellen watched them go. Ships and voyagers still crowded through her mind, but now long canoes, garlands streaming, and painted viking prows^{rigidly} dipping through green seas cluster on the rim of the

world, faintly and faintly, until she could scarcely see them anymore.

(p.25).

This is familiar territory to readers of du Fresne's later work, but in this context it seems somewhat out of place. Ellen seems to summon up this elaborate series of images out of nowhere. Their specific references to older cultures and their migrations seem to imply perhaps that Ellen herself has had some experience of migration, that she herself is a descendant of earlier travellers in 'long canoes, garlands streaming'. Yet this suggestion is undeveloped, and although the passage seems prominent, its significance remains uncertain.

In fact, this passage and the ambiguities it raises bring about something of a collapse in the story, and it tails off with Ellen's thoughts returning to her imminent arrival home. Its dissatisfying conclusion seems to stem from inconsistencies in Ellen's character. On the one hand, du Fresne's intention seems to be to create an impartial and impressionable character who passes on to the reader some unmediated observations of immigrants. But, simultaneously, the author seems to want a more developed character whose insights and observations enable her to express a more complex attitude to migration - a character who has an innate sensitivity to the migrants which is the result of her own experience.

Yvonne du Fresne's unpublished revision of the story more than twenty years later seems directed towards correcting this inconsistency, and to embedding the theme of migration more firmly at the story's core. Yet the most striking change in the story is far more superficial; all the characters' names, earlier so inoffensively English, are now flamboyantly European. The prim Ellen becomes Olga, Aunt Con is now Tante Bodil, Uncle Bill now Onkel Johan; Olga's distant parents are described as 'Mor' and 'Fader'. And a new character is introduced -

Olga's grandmother, her 'Bedstemor'. The most obvious effect of these cosmetic changes is to provide the story with a more overt European content - specifically a Danish content. But the name changes also announce a more fundamental change in the story: there is now a clear and strong connection between the central characters and those peripheral figures, the immigrants.

This link is revealed in Aunt Bodil's words as she and Olga watch the ship coming across the harbour. By making a few changes to the pronouns, Yvonne du Fresne changes Aunt Con's words to Tante Bodil's, and in doing so, shows the different places they speak from:

'You know who comes on that boat ?' cried Tante Bodil.
'Immigrants! The new people from Europe.'

Olga clasped her hands.
'To live with us here ?' she asked.

'After we have been alone so long', said Tante Bodil, ... 'after the war, the government said they would bring them out. And they have!'

In this exchange, Bodil and Olga make plain their relationship to the 'we' they speak of - a small word that joins them with the migrants on the boat and implies their distance from the 'they' of official New Zealand. And this impression is clarified by the other changes the author has made to the conversation. While in the earlier story, the dialogue was frequently flat and lifeless, now the conversation is invigorated with exuberance and broad gestures - claspings of hands, statements now 'cried' rather than calmly uttered. These changes not only make the characters considerably more vivid, but also strengthen the reader's sense of their migrant backgrounds. Olga and Bodil are more emotional, more expressive than were Ellen and Aunt Con - not in deference to any hackneyed notion of 'emotional Europeans', but simply because they are shown to have more to be emotional about. They are, after all, a very small 'we' in the face of a large and intimidating 'they'.

Most of the ensuing alterations to the story are made with an eye to emphasising the bond between Olga and the migrant past that is now being claimed for her. Consequently, the passages of imaginative 'seeing' which also occurred in the earlier version have a clearer significance in the story. Character and vision are closely integrated: it now makes sense that Olga imagines the things she does, as here where she is told how the first of her family arrived in New Zealand:

'You know how our people came, lille one. You know well it was in our sailing ship. Coming through there!' She pointed at the distant Heads. Through it Olga saw once again the beautiful ship speed, sails slanting back, the scarlet banners, the Dannebrog streaming in the wind. She saw her Bedstemor lean over the side, she saw her blonde hair fly, her strange eyes gleam at the new land.

Yvonne du Fresne's more overt treatment of the theme of migration in the revised story is directed not only to establishing the powerful influence exerted on her characters by their migrant origins, but also to showing that their past has left a painful legacy. This is acknowledged in a section added to the story in which Tante Bodil announces that she will invite the Danish immigrants who are on the boat to a welcoming party at the local Danish club - "They will be tired ^{after the war} and will want their people around them" she explains. But in her eagerness to make contact with the new arrivals, it seems perhaps that her urge for community with her own people is equal to theirs. She seems overjoyed at the prospect of this meeting - above all, it is a means of reconnecting herself with her suspended Danish past: "We will bake cakes for the parties and they will tell us the news. 'What has happened in Jutland?' we will ask, and they will tell us". Beneath her enthusiastic words can be sensed an undercurrent of vulnerability and desperation - confirmed in her refusal to accept her husband's firm belief that the newly-arrived immigrant boat in fact has no Danes aboard. Now Yvonne du Fresne seems to be achieving in full what she attempted in the story's earlier version - to present not just a picture of immigrants, but a picture infused with an emotional content.

Here, the reader cannot help but be struck by the apparent fragility of the immigrants' connection with their adopted country, and the far stronger ties of memory that bind them to their distant homeland.

This newly-strengthened emotional content is also evident in the revised scene at the railway station as Olga is about to leave on her journey home. Bodil is still determinedly searching amongst the other passengers on the train for any Danish immigrants, and while doing so, gets into a conversation with a stranger;

A woman standing by them said, 'Look at those English immigrants. Seven hundred of them in this boat. Isn't it a lot when there's no houses for our own ?'

'There are some from Europe too, do you know ?' cried Bodil.

'We don't want those too', said the woman, opening her handbag and looking, absorbed at herself, in a mirror inside the flap.

Bodil opened her mouth and closed it again, her cheeks flaming. She nodded at Olga and whispered, 'Don't listen. You go now. Farvel, farvel!'

It is an ironic indication of how far this story has come from its original version, (and perhaps also of how far the author has come in her handling of the migrant theme) to note that most of this stranger's opinions were originally voiced by Aunt Con. There is no doubt how the reader is meant to respond to the passage; the carefully chosen narrative detail of the woman absorbed with her reflection in the mirror plainly suggests the smug inwardness which underlies her views. This addition to the story announces in non-compromising terms the author's attitude that was vaguely hinted at in the earlier story. Now she makes her attitude plain by providing this harsh picture of the narrow, insular reaction of the New Zealander to the migrant, and so takes a partial, critical point of view which was absent (or concealed) in the previous version.

From this point in the story on, there is little doubt that the author is intent on highlighting the gap between English New Zealanders and the European immigrants, and

that she herself speaks firmly from the immigrants' side of that gulf. Passages are added which give a more vivid picture of immigrant life -- such as Olga's thoughts of home which preoccupy her throughout her train journey. The dominant images are of warmth, security and love:

At home was the carved furniture, the massive sideboard and corner cupboard, painted with its garlands of Danish wild flowers; the lights from the farms, regular, in their places on the Plains for nearly one hundred years. Behind the lit windows, cousins, tantes and onkels, friends, English and Dane. All knowing each other.

Clearly, there are some English New Zealanders who do not share the attitudes of the woman on the station platform. But while making this concession, in this passage the author simultaneously intensifies the image of the immigrants as an isolated, vulnerable group - conveyed particularly though the picture of Olga's home as a secure haven of warmth and security shutting out the dark and unknown world beyond.

The gulf between New Zealanders and the immigrants is asserted also in a rewritten passage describing the English migrants' attempts to converse with other passengers on the train.¹ The encounter in the earlier story was sympathetically reported through Ellen's eyes; yet her account gave equal recognition to the migrants' brash assertiveness ^{and} the New Zealander's indifference. But after revision, the incident becomes another example of the insensitivity of New Zealanders to migrants who now seem pathetic outsiders, desperate to make contact. The New Zealand soldier makes no comment at all in response to their overtures, retaining a surly silence throughout.

Having established firmly this polarity between New Zealander and migrant, the remainder of the story's revisions are directed once more to strengthening the central character, and, particularly, to knitting together her final thoughts with the foreign past which has been attached to her by the author. And so the story concludes with Olga's thoughts of home which no longer comprise a rather limp and disconnected coda, but an image which draws into itself many of the story's themes:

Not far from here ... in the middle of these plains, there is a house whose roof rides against the night sky like the prow of a Viking ship... At the same time every night you can faintly hear a train, its long homeless whistle cutting through the silence of the plains, circling the foothills, coming closer and closer, louder and louder, but never stopping, and dying away into a restless murmur to the north.

Ideas of home, of travel, of security, and the absence of each of these, gather around this final image making it suggestive and appealingly open (the evocative call made by the 'restless murmur to the north'), yet also suitably powerful and climactic.

What can be learned by comparing the two versions of 'The Immigrants'? The first story seems notable less for what it says, than for what the author was manifestly trying not to say. In it, we see her assuming the masks she speaks of as essential to her role as an 'artificial English woman' and writer. Not only are the characters flat, their voices lifeless (with none of the author's Danish 'clonk' audible) but the theme of migration seems to be consciously restrained, as if battened down by the author in defiance of her own instincts. Consequently, there is a perplexing lack of integration between the warm empathy for the immigrants that Ellen occasionally reveals - a relationship located, it seems, solely in her imagination - and the external, factual details about Ellen which the omnipotent narrator provides.

If the original story stands at the starting point of Yvonne du Fresne's progressive discovery of her own voice, the revised version stands at the other end of that process. Here, she commits herself fully to the purpose she skirted around in the earlier story: presenting a powerful, personal vision of migrant experience and attitudes - a vision which comes, as it were, from the inside. Not only is this achieved through the increased importance to the plot of the immigrants and their relationship with other New Zealanders but it is acknowledged also in the abundant use of Danish names and words. Here is literal proof of the author speaking in her own voice, and in a way that makes no concession to those unfamiliar with it. The author's lack of translations or

explanations of the Danish words she uses suggests that she locates herself more with the characters in her story than with her readers. She is not translating immigrant life into something immediately accessible and comprehensible to non-migrants - indeed it seems that to do so would distort the very nature of migrant experience. She is instead writing from within that experience, leaving the reader as an outsider who must make efforts in order to understand - perhaps in doing so, forcing the reader into a position from which to identify with the migrant's problem of communication. Yvonne du Fresne is not breaking new ground here: she is rather adding variety to a fairly recent tradition in New Zealand fiction whereby writers from minority groups refuse to make concessions to the majority. An example may be found in Witi Ihimaera's collection of stories Pounamu, Pounamu which contains no glossary to assist non-Maori speakers to negotiate his frequent use of that language. It is soon to be published entirely in Maori.

The revision of 'The Immigrants' is important for what it reveals of Yvonne du Fresne's sense of being a migrant writer. Her concern is fundamentally to express her stories in her own authentic voice, a voice which marks itself off from ^{those of} other New Zealand writers by virtue of its intermingling of Danish and New Zealand influences. Yet this desire for authentic self-expression is countered by her horror at what she describes as 'seeming exotic'¹⁰² - the gratuitous use of a foreign accent in order to lure readers with the promise of some romantic armchair travel.

Finding a path through this precarious territory of migrant writing is clearly not easy, and even though she is now confident in her use of the Danish-New Zealand voice she feels is her own, Yvonne du Fresne nonetheless still finds difficulty in deciding how loud or how sharply she should let that voice speak. The revised version of 'The Immigrants' seems an attempt to use her voice more harshly than in many of her other

¹⁰² 'Linking Up With the Past', (interview), New Zealand Listener, March 29, 1980, p. 18.

stories: its polarities are sharply defined, its criticisms more honed. This business of finding the proper level at which to pitch her voice is not only her personal concern, but one she sees as the proper concern of migrant writers in general. A recent comment she made about the novel she is currently writing implies much about her attitude to herself as a migrant writer:

I was trying to persuade myself, 'shall I really go right out and confess it, or shall I keep it hidden'. This is the trouble with ethnic literature - you have to wonder how really honest you can be'.¹⁰³

'The Immigrants' was an attempt to answer this question. In the following discussion, I hope to show how the problem it suggests is handled in other stories, particularly those in her two collections, Farvel¹⁰⁴ and The Growing of Astrid Westergaard.¹⁰⁵

3.1.2 Just Like Going Over To Europe

It was with the publication in 1980 of her collection Farvel that Yvonne du Fresne gave her first extended public airing of the Danish-New Zealand voice she had been tentatively exploring in her fiction. And the immediate success of these stories - both amongst the general reading public and amongst reviewers - seemed to bestow a stamp of legitimacy upon this voice, despite the author's doubts about whether it would find acceptance. The collection contains eighteen stories, almost all set in the Danish migrant community in the Manawatu where Yvonne du Fresne grew up. Thirteen of them centre around a small girl, Astrid Westergaard, who is essentially a fictional version of the author's childhood self. They were produced, according to the author, by 'a tremendous nostalgic feeling for my

103 Conversation with author, see Appendix B, p.234.

104 (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1980).

105 (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1985).

primary school. I wanted to wander round in that lost world'.¹⁰⁶ The collection also contains five other stories, most of them written before the 'Astrid' stories.

But it was this main group of autobiographical stories that brought the collection its considerable success. They were broadcast on Radio New Zealand's National Programme under the title 'Astrid of the Limberlost'; her work was thereby brought into contact with a wider audience than perhaps much New Zealand fiction reaches. A further endorsement of the stories was given when Farvel was awarded the PEN Award for the Best First Book of Prose in 1981. It was this combination of popular and critical success that led Yvonne du Fresne to assemble another collection of stories about the same central character — The Growing of Astrid Westergaard, published in March 1985, once again simultaneously with readings of the stories by the author on national radio.

There are several things which seem to account for this popularity. It seems beyond dispute that New Zealanders have a particular fascination with reading about themselves and their country, and here, the Astrid Westergaard stories have an instant appeal. They are firmly anchored in a recognizable rural New Zealand setting during the nineteen thirties and forties, and present an image of the social life of that time familiar to many. But as well as endorsing the known and recognizable, the stories seem also to attract readers through their simultaneous evocation of a foreign and enticing world: the reassurance of the familiar provides a safe vantage point from which to observe the attractions of the exotic. Whether or not this sort of no-risks foreign travel is quite what the author intended her stories to provide, she is nonetheless resigned to the fact that this accounts for much of their appeal. Of the many letters she received in response

¹⁰⁶ Radio New Zealand Umbrella Publicity, 1980, compiled by Margaret Burnett, p.2.

to Farvel she says:

A whole lot of New Zealanders ... want to know where their own roots are. A lot of them don't know where their own grandparents came from ... The majority [of letters] came from everyday New Zealanders who wanted to have their backgrounds filled in, who wanted a bit of romance.¹⁰⁷

That her stories of immigrant life were to fill this need for romance was a lesson learnt early by Yvonne du Fresne from the reaction of the editor of Islands, Robin Dudding, when he read some of her first 'migrant' stories: as she says, 'he wanted Europe because he'd never been overseas and he wanted it... And now I realise that it was just a trip he wanted — it was like going over to Europe'.¹⁰⁸

And so it seems that the migrant voice which entered New Zealand short fiction with the publication of Farvel found a receptive ear because of the mixed delights it offered. It told of both the known and the new, and in doing so offered a comfortingly effortless means of exploring unknown territory. The plains and river-mouths of the Manawatu were there to remind readers of the places they knew by direct experience: but so too were the forests and white nights of a Nordic world that was for most readers probably known only through dimly-remembered fairy stories or Wagnerian opera. And in the migrant community life that the stories depict, readers were able to see for the first time behind their neighbours' closed blinds, to have satisfied what the author has described as 'a newly awakened hunger to know more about the variety of New Zealand life'.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, despite the exotic pleasures the stories offer up,

¹⁰⁷ Conversation with author, Appendix B, pp. 265-266.

¹⁰⁸ Conversation with author, Appendix B, pp. 261-262.

¹⁰⁹ 'Linking Up With The Past', New Zealand Listener, March 29, 1980, p. 19.

they do not depart in any major way from a well-established tradition in short fiction – the world seen through the inquisitive, penetrating, imaginative and often comic vision of a small child. Their adherence to the conventions of this tradition provides the constant from which they venture their novelty, keeping in check their foreign-ness.

Yet to limit the appeal and success of Farvel to the presence of these qualities alone does not do them justice. I want now to look at some of their less obvious attractions – concerned not so much with the way they are malleable and responsive to the requirements of their readers, but with the way the readers must accommodate themselves to the demands of the stories.

3.1.3 Listen Carefully

The stories in Farvel and The Growing of Astrid Westergaard start to exert demands on their readers when the author uses them as emblems of the literary tradition she feels she is following. The stories seem to share some of the characteristics she sees as typical of the Danish style of story-telling and conversation. This style is, she says, essentially spare and understated – 'it's not too sentimental – they're very realistic'.¹¹⁰ Understatement and brevity are perhaps not these stories' most striking qualities however. Her stylistic links lie more obviously with Katherine Mansfield than with Frank Sargeson. Yet understatement and brevity do have an undeniable role in her work, albeit an idiosyncratic one that neither Mansfield's nor Sargeson's stories anticipate.

¹¹⁰ Conversation with author, Appendix B, p.237.

¹¹¹ Farvel, p. 93.

For example, in 'The Morning Talk',¹¹¹ Astrid Westergaard finds herself trying to hold her classmates' flagging interest in her 'talk' by telling them stirring Nordic legends which prophesy the end of the world. In doing so, she assumes the appropriately apocalyptic tone of the seer and bard: she becomes the 'mouthpiece' (p.98) for 'the pattern of that old Fortaelling' (p.98). But her doom-laden prophecy gives way surprisingly as Astrid is brought back to earth by her headmaster's sarcastic reminders of her more pressing duties as a very junior pupil. Astrid's wry mental note that 'Skalds had awkward lives — to foretael one moment and do the spelling tests the next' (p.98) perfectly encapsulates the quality of understatement and ironic deflation which the author finds so typical of Danish stories. It makes its presence felt here and in many other stories as an ironic twist in the narrative, a verbal shrug that says 'ah, well' and defuses the intensity of the moment without ever making it a throwaway joke.

Linked to this Danish narrative quality is another; extreme brevity. Says the author, 'one word does for a sentence if you can do it. It's pare down, pare down so you get maximum shock'.¹¹² Her revision of 'The Immigrants' was in a sense a form of 'paring down' — eliminating everything from the story that did not add to the image of migrant life that lies at its centre. The same concern with brevity and directness of statement is apparent in the changes she made to the initial draft of a story that now appears in The Growing of Astrid Westergaard, 'The Young Kings' (p.56). It tells the story of Astrid's friendship with a young Danish-American soldier, Ib Jensen, who is stationed in the Manawatu for a time during the Second World War. He entrances Astrid with his narration of the legend of the Nordic god Baldur who died and is reborn with every new season's corn crop. Subsequently, Ib is killed in battle and the story ends with Astrid's

¹¹² 'Linking Up With the Past', New Zealand Listener, March 29, 1980, p.19.

comment that although she 'watched Mr Bell's wheat spring up year after year,
... he never came back' (p.61). In an earlier version, this abrupt ending
was added to by some more elaborate and verbose metaphors which seemed to take
the utterance away from Astrid;

He died under machine gun fire that came at him like swords. Like
Rex Danorum, like Baldur the Beautiful.
All those young men with the shining faces, who wore their
crowns of silver and gold at a rake-helly angle. Over one eye.¹¹³

Not only does the removal of this passage fix the story more convincingly in
Astrid's voice, but ^{it} also contributes to the sense of that voice as a Danish New
Zealand voice like the author's own, using words in the Danish way she elsewhere
describes as 'that Danish "clonk": abrupt, arresting, and fiercely unsentimental.

Yet, despite this concern with qualities such as irony, brevity and
understatement, much of the appeal earned by the Astrid Westergaard stories is
due more to qualities which seem completely contrary. Whilst on the one hand,
Yvonne du Fresne seems intent on performing a disciplined unpicking of all but
the most vital and arresting verbal stitches, the basic fabric of the stories never
seems sparse — it remains a colourful and complex tapestry of narrative.

In 'My Bedstemoder',¹¹⁴ Astrid notes how a Danish relative:

tells stories as if she has just heard them; as if, in a second, golden
people, firebirds clashing burning wings, will come into the narrow
room, the walls will melt, we will see the great world.

(p.101).

At their best, du Fresne's stories share this quality. Through their rich texture,
woven out a multiplicity of voices passing the narrative strands amongst
themselves, they frequently allow mystery, magic and surprise to slip into the

¹¹³ Unpublished story.

¹¹⁴ Farvel, p.99.

conventional routines of daily life. And so readers must make themselves alert to the voices which are audible in these stories - most obviously, the voice of its central character, but also the frequently conflicting voices of the English and Danish minor characters, the retrospective and occasionally didactic voice of the author, and the voices of the Danish past which reverberate in the stories as they do in Astrid's imagination. The reader of Yvonne du Fresne's stories must, in effect, become a listener too.

It is in the interaction of these voices that the stories embody the predicament of the central character, caught between the call of two worlds. In 'The Old Ones',¹¹⁵ a good example is provided of the way the mythic Danish past can suddenly erupt into the familiar New Zealand present. As Astrid watches her classmate Kjeld Friis hand a bunch of daffodils to her grandmother, she suddenly sees in the gesture an imitation of a ritual she has seen depicted on an ancient silver bowl from Jutland - a priestess taking flowers from a warrior who was then to be sacrificed so that Spring would come to the land. The final lines of the story yoke together these two disparate worlds into a single image;

My Bedstemoder spoke to Kjeld. Two words. 'Dansk Mand'. Danish Man.

Then she buried her face deep into the daffodils as if she could never have enough of them. The strange daffodils with the red centres. Red as men's-blood.

(p.66).

It is a gentle clash of worlds, hollowing out this moment in the story to allow the words to gather there and pool together their different significances. This richly layered narrative texture has been seen by one reviewer to be caused by the author 'seek(ing) out moments of incongruity, where different kinds of experience interpenetrate'.¹¹⁶ It is also a

¹¹⁵ Farvel, p. 62.

¹¹⁶ Russell Poole, 'Vikings in Maoriland', in Comment, No. 11, June 1980, p. 29.

textural quality akin to that found in Danish folk-tales where, according to the author,

things that are inanimate suddenly blink open an eye and look at you, and the eyelids close again and I hope you're never quite sure that everything around you is as you think it is. ... Things suddenly come alive; ... it's done in the briefest possible way.¹¹⁷

The presence of these quick, subtle changes of direction, focus and level in the stories comes also from the audible interaction of voices controlling the telling. Once again, 'The Morning Talk' serves as a good example. Here, Astrid's well-prepared talk about Denmark's geography and butterfat returns is abandoned in the face of more compelling material:

'Vikings,' she said abruptly, 'had their training camps at the back of our farm at Trelleborg'. The class lifted its drowsy head. ... Astrid, the mouthpiece, recited the Fortaelling of her people.

Nidhaggr gnaws through the last root of Yggdrasil, and Jormungan, the serpent that circles the world, turns itself so that a wave sweeps over the earth. ... The Gods die. Darkness falls over the earth. Ragnarok is upon us now. ... But I will tell you of the end. ... For thousands of years there is darkness, and then a small star, no bigger than a little spark, appears. Thousands of years pass, and it slowly grows. Until at last the first faint dawn appears ...'

The pattern of that old Fortaelling had been changed when she had been its mouthpiece. The Gods are here, she thought humbly.

'The years,' she said clumsily, 'we can read as meaning "days". Then Denmark rises again. And England !' she added hastily, careful not to offend ... The Gods departed in a breath. The class rustled and several people turned and looked at her.

(pp.97-98).

In this account of Astrid's talk can be heard many voices beyond her own, operating at a variety of pitches, constantly changing in tone and speaker, weaving a web of narrative that contains past and present, real and mythic, the child's voice and the adult's shaping sensibility. The authentic identity of the child is overlaid by other identities — the awkward child who at one point struggles to locate Denmark on the map is transformed into an intense prophet, uttering images of doom. And this voice in turn gives way to

117 Conversation with author, Appendix B, p.235.

the author's ironic tone, revealing through Astrid's attempt to placate the 'English' a capacity for sharp social satire.

Voices of a different kind each clamour to be heard in another story from Farvel, 'The Spy' (p.11). Here, while visiting the house of a friend, Astrid is banished by her friend's very English mother to have afternoon tea in the playroom:

'Come along now. Go with Hilary. Chop-chop!' Chop-chop ... Quick as Thor's magic axe ... I slid off the chair, sucked in my stomach, and walked lightly and quickly after Hilary. Girls of the Empire, going to tea in the playroom.

(p.13).

Here in brief is evidence of several voices speaking in the space of a single sentence. The voice of English briskness is transfigured by Astrid's imagination into something from a Danish legend — the sound of Thor's axe — which gives way in turn to a credibly childlike expression of obedience and eagerness. The incident is also deliberately shaped by the author in an effort to reveal something of the attitudes and manner of English New Zealanders — and so a quiet voice of social commentary is once again audible amongst the rest.¹

This range of voices heard in rapid succession is handled deftly by the author in this particular passage. They hum together quite agreeably, rather than attempting to shout each other down, and the fact that the tune they are humming is in a light and comic vein contributes much to the passage's success. It stands as an example of the way the stories must be listened to — as well as read — if their qualities are to be experienced fully. The attentive reader must be prepared to follow the injunction that Astrid's teacher gives to her class concerning their appreciation of the complexity of the English language — "listen carefully!" (Farvel,p.44).

3.1.4 Most Of Them Are True

Handling such an unruly and disparate chorus of voices as those which are audible in her two collections is obviously a demanding job, and it is hardly surprising that Yvonne du Fresne is not always able to achieve the deftness of command which is apparent in the passage from 'The Spy'. In particular, the undeniably autobiographical element in the stories causes difficulties. The small girl who appears in the cover photographs of both collections is the young Yvonne du Fresne; many of the incidents and characters are direct treatments of her childhood experiences. She makes no attempt to deny the fact that 'most of them are true'.¹¹⁸ Yet in this ready admission lies a problem which has been described in the following terms;

She creates a vision of life which fails to conform to reality. The information may be literally true, but the imaginative evocation of the thoughts and emotions which surround these facts is suspect.¹¹⁹

What seems to be suggested here is a rather uneasy marriage between fact and fiction, and the co-existence of two kinds of memory — the memory which preserves the true character of events and experiences, and the fallible memory which takes the original experience and rearranges it in a preferred order or gives it a new significance.

What the area of 'imaginative evocation' lacks at times in these stories is, it seems, an adequate distinction between Astrid Westergaard at her most convincing and thoroughly credible — a child who is imaginative, observant, sensitive, funny and not too wise — and another Astrid Westergaard who seems to be little more than a vehicle for the expression of the author's mature views and insights. This

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Rutherford, 'Enhanced Nationalism: Viking vs Empire', in Gross and Klooss, (eds.), op. cit., p. 89.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Astrid is a child seer who simply does not ring true, an adult dwarf bowed down under the weight of the author's adult consciousness and her desire to educate, inform and proselytize -- desires which are then weakly (if conveniently) connected to the child herself. This results in passages which contain an awkward incompatibility between content and expression, between levels of perception and comment, between the child's eye and the adult's mind.

It is perhaps constructive to illustrate the passages which possess such weaknesses by comparing them with others in which the author seems to overcome them, passages which embody the quality the reviewer Russell Poole describes as 'the narrative pass[ing] with marvellous flexibility, from one voice to another'.¹²⁰ The predominantly successful achievement of this narrative flexibility has the unfortunate effect of highlighting those places which fail to attain it, where the narrative is effectively overwhelmed by a single intrusive voice - that of the author telling of herself rather than of Astrid.

First then, a brief passage from 'The Spy' provides a good example of the narrative flexibility that Poole praises. The voice of the author is silent: the prose seems controlled purely by Astrid, fixed convincingly at a tone and pitch appropriate to a young child:

It is so early in the morning when I first saw the world.

Somebody puts me down on the ground. Somebody pushes my hands down. My fingers feel warm, hard earth. My fingers touch thick jointed grass. The grass will not keep still. It glitters, it moves under my hands like a living animal.

(p.11).

¹²⁰ Op. cit., p.18.

Here, Astrid's sensory perceptions control the movement of the prose. The present tense enhances the sense of this as a vital, significant experience, something happening now, not a filtered retrospection. This brings a sense of urgency and activity: the prose mirrors the movements of the child as she plunges her hands into the grass, coming to know it by discovering how it feels. Yet accompanying this effect of urgency and immediacy is an incongruous mood of timelessness, a sense of the child occupying a world as unbounded and infinite as her imaginative and sensory capacities. It is a state of being that is being rendered here, not an experience that can be neatly referenced to a particular place and time or to a particular sequence of events. Furthermore, the quality of this experience seems close to that which the author describes as typical of the way Danish children develop, taught to live 'very intensely physically and [to] understand things with [their] bodies'.¹²¹ And so not only does the passage allow Astrid to present, as it were, primary evidence of what it is to be a child and experience for the first time feelings that adults have forgotten or take for granted, but it discloses more specifically what it is to be a Danish New Zealand child, learning to experience the New Zealand environment in a distinctly Danish way. That the passage has such riches to divulge stems primarily from the fact that the author allows Astrid herself to be the mouthpiece for the narration.

This passage can be contrasted with excerpts from two later stories, 'My Bedstemoder' and the uncollected 'The Christmas Tree', which the author seems also to have attempted to cast in a credible child's voice. It is perhaps an over-deliberateness that mars these passages -- as if the author is attempting to use her own voice to express things in a childlike manner, rather than allowing the voice of the child itself to emerge as it did in 'The Spy'. And so, although in

¹²¹ Conversation with author, Appendix B, p.238

'My Bedstemoder', Astrid is once again expressing her response to a natural environment, here the effect is totally different:

The bush is full of tiny shivering ferns, elf-haunts ... I drink
the water from the taps with lips barely open ... You could
swallow an elf, a lille spilomager, if you did not take care.

(Farvel, p.99).

Similar narrative qualities can be seen also in the following passage from 'The Christmas Tree':

The tree sighed then with the memory of the endless snow of
Denmark falling through its branches. Frost sparkled on its needles,
the glass acorns and nuts glowed with life and the little red-capped
Nisse peered at us from behind green pine-cones and the strings of
tiny scarlet and white Dannebrog.

(Unpublished).

Both these passages are notable for their abundance of diminutive images; a conscious attempt, it seems, to equate a child's manner of expression with her size -- hence the tiny ferns, lille elves, tiny flags. The use of such imagery weakens the prose on several counts. Firstly, it bears little relation to the authentic speech of children, and seems to be more a conscious attempt to portray an ingenuous and appealing child rather than a believable one. More importantly, this self-conscious language is inconsistent with the language used elsewhere by and about Astrid -- language which reveals a clear-eyed child with an instinctive capacity for mild, self-deprecating irony. And so the inconsistency of language betrays a further weakness - an inconsistency of character. Is the child whose thoughts are expressed in this faintly cloying manner compatible with the Astrid we see in 'The Morning Talk', a spirited prophet of doom, or with Astrid the pagan sun-worshipper in 'The System' who 'each morning ... rose, did Tante Helga's deep breathing, facing the rising sun, and gulped in its red flames for strength' (Farvel, p.27)?

Consistency of voice is clearly something it is difficult to maintain throughout a lengthy sequence of stories about a single character: so too is consistency of vision and understanding. In the following passage from 'The Old Ones', Astrid is exploring her relationship with her Danish past through her imagination, and in doing so is measuring the distance she stands between the Danish world she knows vicariously, and the New Zealand world of her direct experience:

That night when we had dinner, I watched my Bedstemoder, I watched my Moder. While we ate our dinner, they slanted their eyes away from time to time, over our heads, out of the windows. What did they see ? Their eyes took on a coldness, a remoteness. They looked into the dark world outside. What children of the Dead did they see ? What ghosts of Jutland warriors, what queens and kings with their silver hoards ? ... I craned to see the sky outside the window. All I saw were faint pin-pricks of light. Stars. Jewels glittering in a dead king's crown.

(Farvel,p.63).

They are difficult questions Astrid is posing herself, and it is to the story's benefit that she ventures no answers. Astrid is not attempting a rational understanding of the connection that exists between her relatives' present lives and the past -- both personal and cultural. Her voice transmits her sense of wonder, and the intensity of an imagination that is stretched between two hemispheres, two points in time. The final image suggests the way Astrid inhabits two worlds -- one known by a perceptive and inquisitive observation of what lies around her (the 'faint pin-pricks of light' she notices in the dark sky outside) and the other known through a rich and receptive imagination -- the faculty that transforms those stars into an image of 'jewels glittering in a dead king's crown'.

This delicate, suggestive treatment of Astrid's relationship with her migrant past is, however, not achieved consistently throughout the stories. In 'The Woman From Norway',¹²² for instance, Astrid seems to possess a far more sophisticated

¹²² The Growing of Astrid Westergaard,p.45.

understanding of her personal connection with the Danish past. Here, she is watching a harpist performing at a local wedding reception and her eye is caught by the face of another wedding guest, a woman from Norway;

She leaned forward and touched a string. It gave out a single cold sound. And when I heard that sound, I looked up...

Then she sang and her voice was as cold, as full of our far-off lands as the harp-sound. ... one face gazed ^{out} over the singer's head. Two eyes as grey as rain surveyed a land they had never forgotten. And never would.... The eyes took me in for a moment, and then glanced away, not shining like rain, but holding ice, the memory of winter.

(pp.45-46).

This sequence of perceptions seems to accumulate so great a weight of implicit meaning and significance that, at the passage's end, it is hard to hear the voice of an eight-year-old child beyond it all. Here, Astrid seems to possess an uncanny ability to reach beneath the surface of the everyday world around her and find there another world, the discovery of which is articulated precisely and eloquently. This discovered world is Denmark, and even though two generations of New Zealand life lie between Astrid and the land of her origins, it is claimed that she possesses an innate knowledge of its intimate character. Certainly, it is entirely credible that Astrid has learned enough about Denmark for it to have established itself within her imagination. Indeed many of the stories reflect this and show also that her image of the Danish past is sometimes projected outwards to inform her understanding of the immediate world of her direct experience. But in 'The Woman From Norway', this imaginative link with Denmark is supplanted by rational understanding which apparently allows her to perceive from the mere appearance of the Norwegian woman that their origins are shared, jointly grounded in 'our far-off lands'.

In this unconvincing expansion of the young Astrid's capacity to understand -- to make rational connections between herself and others, between the present and the past, to transform the immediate into a vision -- the close link between author and character seems to be the main cause. It seems that adult insight and adult understanding are projected onto Astrid. An adult voice - eloquent, absolute in its utterance - supplants Astrid's own. Conviction of character seems to be sacrificed to the author's desire for statement, for the assertion of claims of kinship between Astrid and her migrant past which may well play an important part in the author's self-perception but which cannot be successfully grafted onto the consciousness of an eight-year-old child.

Skirting around this problem seems to require, above all, that the author who writes autobiographical fiction, establishes a clear and firm line between character and self. The preservation of a visible distance can considerably enhance the fiction, quite aside from preventing weaknesses. For example, distance allows a veil of irony to divide the author from her childish alter ego, as demonstrated here in an early version of 'Guy Fox'.¹²³ The passage is cast ostensibly in the voice of the child herself, allowing the author to stand aside, joining herself with the reader in a wiser adult world where it is possible to have a quiet laugh at Astrid's serious attitudes to events of which she has only a limited understanding. Astrid, 'not quite seven' (p.150), has been sent to the local store to buy fireworks for Guy Fawkes day;

I could not remember what to say to the store-man, Mr Coutts ...
There was black silence. My voice had gone, forever.
'Dumb, I see' said Mr Coutts. 'Catherine Wheel ?' he wheedled. I
nodded. I could not tell him I was buying the wrong things.
There was no fire in that box. ... I climbed sombrely down from
his butter-box and pushed the bag of rolls into my school satchel. I

¹²³ In John Barnett, (ed.), All The Dangerous Animals Are In Zoos, (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1981), pp.149-154.

bowed to him, then slowly and sadly tramped out of his store and down the long road under the huge Manawatu sky, like a soldier defeated in the wars, marching slowly home.

(p.151).

Much of the humour which runs throughout both collections stems from a similar narrative technique -- a sort of comedy of inappropriateness, in which Astrid's responses as a child are viewed by the readers with a sort of amused indulgence, finding humour in her misinterpretation of experience adults take for granted. But such humour only becomes possible when the author relaxes the intensity of her grip on the character of Astrid, detaching herself from the child, from the fierce dependency each has on the other by virtue of the autobiographical connection between them.

Such distancing, and the gentle humour that it can produce, are notably absent in the title story of the second collection. Even the very title, 'The Growing of Astrid Westergaard' (p.71), indicates the sort of problem that besets this story, suggesting as it does the presence of an omniscient authorial presence who will stand outside of the story and invest its events with a significance, so that the reader will be fully aware of what comprises so monumental an experience as 'the growing of Astrid Westergaard'. The reader is asked here to empathise with the character and view events through her childish vision (with all the limitations that this implies), but to simultaneously have one ear cocked to the voice of the author, telling us as we read what these events amount to, what the story is about, what lessons we are to draw from it.

In this story, Astrid's class visits her family's farm to watch the Maori adzes that have been unearthed there being blessed by a group of local Maori elders. For the most part, the first person account renders well Astrid's excitement at the

discovery and her pride at showing her schoolmates around her home. But the story's conclusion introduces a totally new tone:

And I bowed my head and began my long life's journey, the learning by heart of the stones and the grass and the wind of our new homeland. And at last I would call each man my Fader, each woman my Moder, each girl my sister, and each boy my brother. In our country.

The growing of Astrid Westergaard began.

(p.77).

Once again, it seems the author's mature retrospection is forcing Astrid's voice and vision into an unnatural mold. Her vision of multi-cultural harmony, her self-awareness, her consciousness of being on the threshold of maturity: these insights are cast in Astrid's voice, but patently do not belong there. And the weakness this creates attests to the potential dangers of autobiographical fiction where fact and imagination or fantasy are not sufficiently delineated, where the author cannot resist using a fictional character to re-fashion the past into a more desirable form. Irony, humour, conviction of character and especially of voice, are lost in the process: their presence in many of Yvonne du Fresne's other stories only serves to intensify the weaknesses that arise when they are absent.

3.2 WHERE WERE WE?: NEW ZEALANDERS AND DANES TOGETHER

3.2.1 New Zealanders versus Danes

The complex issue of nationality and identity announces its importance in the very first story of Farvel, 'The Spy'. Astrid's earliest statement of personal identity is also an acknowledgement of her complex national identity: 'I was born here. I am a New Zealand girl' (p.12) she says, but must immediately qualify this simple assertion — 'my blood was formed in the Jutland marshes' (p.12). Her mere place of birth alone does not adequately express her identity — so simple a

fact cannot define the individual whose sense of home stretches between two places. Her awareness of belonging to two places brings its rewards, as many of the stories show. It allows her mental travel between two countries, one real and one imagined, and an exciting and limitless playground to explore. But the consequence of belonging in part to two worlds is that she belongs fully to neither, and this role as an outsider causes as many problems for Astrid as it brings rewards.

From an early age, the comfortable security of her close family life is countered by her growing awareness that her family occupies another place beyond the tangible world she sees around her:

Aunts, cousins, my Moder, my Bedstemoder sat gossiping over their embroidery, over the blue and white coffee cups, in the long afternoons. Their faces swam, melted in light. Where were we? New Zealand? Or Jutland ? The voices ran on in the deep guttural Danish ... One moment...we were in the floating mysterious white days and nights of midsummer in the Jutland marshes. Houses, trees, people swayed and dissolved, became something else. The Jutland spy, Astrid Westergaard watched the land through slit eyes, trying to find New Zealand.

(p.12).

What seems important about this description is the nature of the confusion of identity Astrid experiences. The confusion concerns not only reconciling the claims of two countries, but also reconciling a dream with reality. Denmark is presented not as a real country, but as a land of misty, mysterious magical atmosphere – a country of the imagination. The passage emphasises too the means by which Astrid is aware of this other country; through its constant re-creation in the anecdotes and stories her family tells her. It is a place constructed out of the combined deceptions of narrative fiction and notoriously fallible human memories, a combination which must inevitably produce a highly unrealistic image. In a sense too, Yvonne du Fresne's stories themselves form another layer in this construct of

fictions, in the fictional image they offer of an individual's relationship with a fictional homeland.

But in her bewildered question 'Where were we?', Astrid shows that she is as much aware of the real world beyond her enclosed family circle as of the imaginary world they have constructed for her. And the remainder of this story follows Astrid's steps into her immediate environment, the 'Jutland spy' who will 'find' New Zealand. It is a role confirmed in another story in Farvel, 'The Messengers', by an elderly relative who tells her, "'You are so young to learn this new land ... but you are the lille one who has to find the message for us here — from the old world to the new'" (p.92). Spy, explorer, interpreter of signs, mediator between two peoples: they are weighty roles for a five-year-old child to perform.

As the Jutland spy, her first observations are of the physical environment around her. She has an instinctive responsiveness to the land, to its living forces, and the prose renders extremely accurately the landscape of the Manawatu Plains — grasslands brought to the boil by the wind, sky that never remains static or calm for an instant. The reader comes to know this environment as Astrid makes her first explorations of it, tentatively at first, but becoming rapidly more confident as she senses the powerful presence of the land around her and gains certainty within it: 'In that blinding light from the sky, skylarks screamed; I ran with my jolting cart and shouted back'.¹²⁴ But this intense responsiveness to the land around her is not only produced by her sensory experience, but determined too by her Danish blood. Again in 'The Spy', the houses of the Danish migrants in the Manawatu are described; 'there was light everywhere. The land and the sky

¹²⁴ 'Houses', The Growing of Astrid Westergaard, p.14.

came through the windows. The long muslin curtains moved in and out, in and out, moving to the heart beat of the plains' (p.11). For the Danish settlers, the house is the meeting point with the land, an emblem of their relationship with it, and a means of honouring and celebrating the elements. It is these attitudes to the land which Astrid has inherited.

It seems too that such responsiveness to the land is found frequently in migrant fiction. Amelia Batistich's Dalmatian migrants treat the land as a friend in an otherwise alien world; it is also a common element that links them with their past life in the Old World, convincing them of the continuity between their seemingly fragmented past and present lives. And Yvonne du Fresne's characters share this near religious attitude to the land, worshipping it both for what it is and also for what it can provide. But Yvonne du Fresne places less emphasis than does Amelia Batistich on the pragmatic side of the migrants' relationship with the land as farmers or bushmen, drawing their livelihood from it. She emphasises instead the spiritual feeling for the land which is the groundnote underlying the migrants' relationship with New Zealand. By feeling the spirit of the land, they feel the spirit of the country, perceiving it as a unifying force which draws together its disparate inhabitants:

The land was absolutely flat, like a dinner plate. Lion-coloured, it took on an air of grave nobility from isolated groups of giant trees. But it lay silent and empty. The people who had been there had gone away.

Sometimes a gale roared for three days without stopping. It seemed then that words were nearly audible in its voice.

(The Messengers', p.85)

This passage shows Astrid's ability to perceive not only a living presence in the land — the words 'nearly audible' in the wind — but to perceive through it the presence of its former occupants. Because they are themselves cut off from the

land which constitutes their true home, perhaps these migrants have a particular empathy for the dispossessed inhabitants of their new land. Several stories explore this idea further, focussing on the sympathy felt by the migrants with the Maori people of the Manawatu, the people who 'had gone away' -- they will be discussed later.

Astrid the spy seems to be in total command throughout these first missions into the world beyond the secure confines of her home and family. She discovers a land which is alive and rich, and her reports on it bubble over with her enthusiasm for what she has found so far of New Zealand. But once she makes her observations further afield and penetrates the camp of the English, on whose fringes her own migrant community lives, her reports show increasing bewilderment and uncertainty about what she finds.

This is determined in part by the role she sets herself. As a spy, she seems to anticipate confrontation -- implicit is the sense of the English as an enemy, of whom observations are made and information gathered so that tactics may be decided. It is a role that invests the relationship between the migrant community and the wider English community beyond with an air of mistrust, wariness and distance -- shown, for instance, in the fact that Astrid does not visit her first English house; she 'penetrate[s]' it. (p.12). The English and the Danes occupy clearly divided camps in these stories, and Astrid is the scout who moves surreptitiously between the battle-lines.

This polarity between English and Danes is clearly established in the very first story of Farvel, and is affirmed repeatedly throughout the two collections in a variety of circumstances and with varying levels of seriousness. Images of Danish and English behaviour are frequently placed in close proximity to one

another, inviting the reader's comparison and judgement, as in 'The School'¹²⁵ for instance, where passages describing the appearances of Astrid's mother and an English school teacher are carefully juxtaposed. The description of Astrid's mother, 'walking home alone in the three-piece costume and the hat over one eye for the admiration of the wild flowers in the grass beside the road' (p.20), gives way quickly to an account of Astrid's new teacher, the aptly-named Miss Gore:

A woman as thin as leather stood on some steps. She was wearing a knitted two-piece. She wore a blouse and a man's tie. She wore men's shoes.

'Poor soul,' murmured my Moder in Danish, 'no man's-love has she known'.

(p.20).

Du Fresne seems here to be making use of some Dickensian techniques, especially the ability to suggest an entire character through a few well-chosen details of their physical appearance. With her 'hat over one eye', Mrs Westergaard is established instantly in the reader's mind as pretty and perhaps a little dreamy, whilst Miss Gore's personality is completely encapsulated by her severe men's clothes and her build 'thin as leather' — divulging a wealth of associated qualities of meanness, lack of emotion and narrowness. But this latter description is also a caricature (again, shades of Dickens) whereas the former is not. Such rough justice is something which, in some fiction, many readers may find hard to tolerate. But readers of these stories may be inclined to exercise greater indulgence — such descriptions are, after all, ostensibly made by Astrid. It is to be expected that her perceptions will have all the merciless perspicacity of childhood, that idiosyncratic mix of clear-eyed honesty and unwitting cruelty.

¹²⁵ Farvel, p. 17.

Yvonne du Fresne turns her character's merciless gaze on a range of subjects in order to expose further the differences between English and Dane which are suggested in 'The School'. In several stories, Astrid finds some significant contrasts between the voices of Danes and English -- which in turn seem to suggest some significant contrasts in character. The voices which Astrid grows up amongst, the voices of the Danes, are frequently described as rich, expressive, 'dark as chocolate snapping' ('The Spy',p.11). The voices of the English, she learns, do not share these qualities and if she is to gain acceptance amongst them, Astrid finds she must abandon her true 'deep dronning's voice' ('The School',p.22) in favour of 'the brisk, brief voice of the ladies of the British Empire ... [a] light, cool voice' ('The Spy',p.13). If not, she is doomed to disapproval every time she speaks in the class-room, 'Westergaard [with] a voice like a bull' ('The System',p.28). As with the description of the respective appearances of Mrs Westergaard and Miss Gore, the details Astrid notices serve as signposts to the characters' deeper natures. The Danes are suggested to be open, expressive, loving in their greater volubility, whilst the English are brisk, abrupt, impersonal in their dealings with others, and quick to take offence at those who are more effusive. This polarity is continually reinforced through these conflicting voices, their differing timbres and tones, which echo constantly throughout the stories.

The difference in the ambience of Danish and English homes is another area of scrutiny - while the Danish homes open out to the land, light and sun, Astrid notices that all the rooms in an English friend's home 'were shaded by blinds and thick lace curtains' ('The Spy',p.13). Such differences come to imply a multitude of other contrasts in attitude and lifestyle which separate Dane from English, and which are claimed to exist by virtue of nationality alone. Du Fresne gives a picture of the English community that emphasises its introspection -- tamping itself

down, giving little of itself away, watchful and suspicious of the world beyond the myopic vision the 'blinds and thick lace curtains' imply. Again, these negative qualities are replaced amongst the Danes with thoroughly positive counterparts, suggested in the openness - both physical and mental - which Astrid is accustomed to within her family life.

Such is the result of Astrid's forays into the strange world which lies beyond the secure nest of the Danish community. This world, she discovers, will not readily accommodate outsiders. Equally, the negative features she has observed convince her she does not wish to belong there anyway - especially if it involves abandoning the Danish community. But at school, she is forced to dwell in the English world, and must therefore adopt a strategy for survival in this battleground. Her observations of the considerable differences between Danes and English convince her that conflict is inevitable - how she is to emerge unscathed, as 'a New Zealand girl' who is not an English girl, becomes her major preoccupation.

3.2.2 Chillier Tactics

It is scarcely surprising that Astrid conceives of her role as a schoolgirl in military terms - as a 'spy' who must penetrate the enemy camp, file reports, and decide tactics - when the nature of the school itself is examined. Again, the description which Yvonne du Fresne provides via Astrid's observations suggests a particular point of view about the English community. The school is an outward manifestation of the character of the English community: obsessed with perpetuating the traditions and values of the British Empire and, (particularly evident because these stories are set during the Second World War) determined to glorify the war ethic and inject as much as possible of it into the daily life of the school.

And so the schoolroom becomes the battlefield upon which the cultural polarities of English and Dane are played out. Astrid is fully prepared for the martial conflict she will face even before she starts school. Her father spurs her on with his recollections of his first day at school:

'...these schools^{here} are the same as the English Public Schools. At playtime, they fight you. The whole school. You have to prove your brave heart...

On the first day it was hell. We didn't understand a word. We kept our mouths shut.'

(The Spy, p.15).

And so, with this advice ringing in her ears, Astrid sets off to fight her own battles in 'The School', dressed in her 'blue linen tunic with the jumper underneath embroidered in magic signs ... to save me from peril' (p.19). A mock-heroic comedy is produced out of the incongruity between the five-year-old child and the role in which the author casts her - Astrid the child-warrior of her race:

The farm land ran up to the school fence and stopped. Over the fence it changed to school land, stained with ink, that vanished into dark brooding trees. The trees rose seriously up into the sky ...

My Moder clutched me and swallowed.

'Farvel, lille Astrid,' she said^{to me,} as one who is farewelling a soldier off to the cruel wars.

(Farvel,p.19).

Appropriately, Astrid's enemy is also defined in militaristic terms and consists of the formidable combination of Miss Gore and a fanatical, domineering headmaster introduced in 'Armistice Day':

He was coloured grey - grey suit, grey face, grey hair and grey teeth. We hid behind bushes when we saw him coming, pointing imperiously. We watched the senior children darting about, stuffing paper bags into rubbish tins, or tearing out weeds with dreadful obsequious smiles. When we came face to face with him, we skittered past like ghosts, with our eyes half closed, so that he could not see us.

(Farvel,pp.45-46).

This figure becomes both Astrid's prime enemy in her personal war as an imaginative, intelligent child against a repressive and conformist school system, and also the supreme embodiment of everything the author wishes to assert is true of the English character.

These qualities are suggested also by the details of the school's appearance which Astrid notices in 'The Mound' (Farvel, p. 36). The school hall becomes, in her eyes 'a sad Valhalla' filled with 'the signs of the valour of their Fathers, the Warriors of England and New Zealand' (p.36) and with portraits of the British monarchy:

Dronninger, konger, laden with furs, hair, crowns ... Frowning. I was in the heart of the British Empire. The kings and queens gazed steely-eyed at me, dressed in their dragon-robos of royalty.
(*'The School'*, p.22).

Details such as these recur constantly throughout the stories, comprising a network of signs which represent the particular view of the English community the author wishes her readers to take. If the earlier story 'The Immigrants' suffered from a seeming reluctance on the author's part to be explicit about the viewpoint she held, these 'Astrid' stories seem an attempt to compensate for such reticence. They are in this sense didactic stories -- vehicles for the author's opinion about a particular group of characters and about migrant experience in general. Written from an overtly ideological stance, they make no attempt to provide a broad view of the territory in question from a neutral lookout (although the existence of any such 'neutral' literature, devoid of ideological positions with an author 'refined out of all existence' seems dubious, at least). But by presenting her stories through the voice and vision of an engaging child, the author perhaps effects a concealment of her stories' didactic nature -- somehow, overt statement and polemic seem absurd when their mouthpiece is a droll five-year-old.

And so despite the strong insistence made in the stories on the black-and-white cultural polarities dividing English and Dane, the reader's attention is not allowed to dwell on these abstractions for long. The focus moves quickly to Astrid's attempts to survive in this cultural battleground she has entered. Initially, she seems shell-shocked -- unable to read, to draw or do simple arithmetic, she seems doomed to failure and the contempt of her brisk teacher to whom she is that exasperating 'Westergaard child'.¹²⁶ She is, in her own miserable self-appraisal, a 'Danish dolt'.¹²⁷ The price of failure is indignity -- foreshadowed in the disdain Miss Gore shows for her in 'The School' when she attempts to place her name on the school roll;

I am Astrid Frederikke Dagmar Westergaard' I said. 'Goddag.'

'Dear me,' said Miss Gore, looking seriously at another teacher ...
They bent over a long thin book...

'Right across this column,' said Miss Gore. 'How am I to fit it in with all those letters ? ... I will abbreviate... There is a little ostentation here, I think'.

(p.20)

Not only is Astrid's pride quashed, but the very basis of her identity brought into question. Once her name is threatened by a characteristically English concern for brisk efficiency and restraint, her entire self-perception receives a jolt -- it is, she discovers, unacceptable to exhibit her cultural difference too flamboyantly. The questioning of her name becomes to Astrid a challenge, a gauntlet dropped by the enemy which demands her response.

¹²⁶ Farvel, p.28.

¹²⁷ The Growing of Astrid Westergaard, p.4.

Not surprisingly, her immediate reaction is one of despair, and an inclination to acquiesce in the demands placed upon her. The only chance of survival seems to be to adopt the conditions imposed on her by the enemy -- to forget her relaxed, effusive Danish personality and assume instead the guise of a proper English schoolgirl. Again, a comedy of absurd incongruities is created as Astrid struggles with this new role. She is abetted by her family who are also in their own way spies on the English community, bringing home their finds to share with Astrid in one of the funniest stories in Farvel , 'The Looters' (p.30). Here, their trophies are words and phrases culled from their unwitting English neighbours:

'Great Scott!' cried Onkel Henning, 'dash my wig! By Jove! Food!' Then he paused. His military bearing lost its crispness. He did not know what to say next. Henning's favourite subject for looting expressions from was Major Gore...

My Fader's eyes sparkled. He bore down on the table. He stooped like a dwarf. He made his mouth as thin as a twist of string.

'We-ll Sonny,' he drawled, 'yer goin' to have yer tucker now, eh?'

He was Mr Lessington, the next door farmer again. Mr Lessington could not deal with Fader's liveliness, so he called him Sonny, turning Fader into a milk-sop little Dunskie boy with blonde curls. Every night Fader took his revenge and imitated him. 'Hope the tucker isn't crook tonight, boy!'.
(p.31).

The Danes' merciless satire shows the cultural warfare is two-sided: it is only the tactics which differ.

Yet Astrid seems to be forced into daily battle with the English to a greater extent than her family -- they can choose to disassociate from the English in a way which is denied her, using satire such as this as both a means of escape and a weapon to effect revenge. Astrid, however, is forcibly immersed in the English

world and has no such means of escape -- except through camouflage. And so, in 'Astrid of The Limberlost' (Farvel,p.67), she takes to reading, intent not only on looting the English language, but on finding appropriate models for imitation. The novels of Ethel Turner provide her with inspiration: she reads them compulsively, always alert to the way her own situation can be moulded to mirror the fictional events, and herself to mirror the heroine:

Tomorrow I would have to start trying to find the Great Swamp of the Manawatu. Then I would start the arduous task of collecting moths, butterflies and Indian arrow-heads, dodging the pool covered with green slime around which my Moder paced at night calling my Fader's name. I would ... finally trudge along the twenty miles to the High School in Palmerston North, carrying my bucket of lunch and a load of Indian arrow-heads carefully bunched in my skirt to sell to the Manager of the Bank of New Zealand ... It would be a terrible life, but with grit and spunk I would pull through.

(p. 72).

The absurdity of this passage is achieved not only through the utter incongruity between Astrid's immediate experience and the fictional model she has adopted, but also through the consistently serious tone which is sustained in Astrid's voice. The comedy operates over the top of Astrid's head, between author and reader: we enjoy as a joke what Astrid resigns herself to as grim reality.

Additional participants are invited to join in observing the comedy in 'The Looters', where Astrid's dour attempts to imitate yet another fictional model are watched by her family with a mixture of bemusement and amusement. The Canadian heroine of Ethel Turner's novel has been replaced here by another model -- an English public-school girl. She reads avidly about such heroines in the Girls' Annual, or demands that her father reads these stories to her - which he does, 'in a bored, remote voice' (p.33). Eventually, reading about her idols is no longer enough: she must endeavour to assume her role completely:

Out on the back lawn with my Sunday straw hat turned up at the back and down in the front and a ribbon tied around my

lower skirt to turn it into a nineteen-thirties gym frock, I hobbled up and down with an old tennis racket, playing lacrosse with the Lower Fourth at Willendon.

'Jolly good,' I droned as I hobbled. 'Splendid shot! Oh, bad luck, Mavis!'

My Bedstemoder and Moder would admire me from the windows.

'Ah!' my Bedstemoder would cry, 'what movement - what a dancer ! I could eat you!'

With ears flaming with embarrassment I averted my eyes from this unseemly un-English emotionalism.

(p.33).

Here is the rehearsal of Astrid's camouflage tactics. By adopting a model she presumes to be acceptable to the English community, she will, she hopes, be invisible amongst them. The cost of these tactics is, it seems, a rejection of those aspects of the Danish nature which seem antithetical to the English values she is trying to embrace.

Hardly surprisingly, this price eventually becomes too high for Astrid and she decides to abandon her attempts to conform and placate. Her tactics become more subtle, more dangerous, but also more deadly -- 'chillier tactics' (p.95) as she calls them in 'The Morning Talk'. Here, the war-time setting of these stories is an important factor, as Astrid discovers that in the eyes of the English -- exemplified by the Headmaster -- she is a convenient representative of occupied Denmark and all the other 'over-confident, treacherous, fallen European nations' (p.94). By consequence, she is an object of contempt to these loyal subjects of a nation still determinedly fighting the enemy on the beaches of Europe -- and, it seems, in this country school-room as well:

She apologised inwardly for her over-blond hair and wolf's eyes. The Headmaster seemed confused in his knowledge of the ethnic groupings of Northern Europe. She suspected that he lumped the Danes in with the Northern Germanic tribes ...

'Foreigners,' he stated ...have the gift of the gab. Can you give us a little talk tomorrow? A brief talk, if that is at all remotely possible, Westingad'.

(pp.94-95).

Astrid ignores his casual insults and indifferent regard for correct pronunciation -- the first indication of her new tactics. Her strategy now is to adopt a superficial docility, a meek acceptance of the superiority of the English, while her thoughts and imagination follow their natural course and have an unchanged commitment to Denmark and the Danish people. And so she displays laudable English stoicism in the face of the Headmaster's insults -- uttering only 'A neutral chuckle ... Astrid sat stolidly on' (p.95). Meanwhile, she enjoys a satisfying imaginative revenge:

... she sat wearing a new neutral smile to avert a little of the flood-tide. She dwelt on the pictures in her mind that became richer day by day, of the long-ships bearing down on the English coast, and fires starting here and there...

In her mind, more long-ships beached. The Golden Warriors leapt into the surf. The Headmaster and his family made a clumsy attempt to run up a hill, but were losing ground ...

(pp.94-95).

The hardening of Astrid's tactics as she weaves her way through the minefield that lies between the two cultures reveals several important things. Firstly, it provides an indication that Astrid is indeed growing, as the title of the second collection claims. Her toughened tactics comprise a necessary reference point in these stories, which seem collectively to possess a static, timeless quality, which makes the Astrid of The Growing of Astrid Westergaard visibly no older than the Astrid in the first story of Farvel. The development of her 'chillier tactics' provides a tangible index of her growth.

It also shows a resolution of the problem that Astrid discovered in 'The Spy' where she knew that she was a 'New Zealand girl' -- but needed to learn how to be a New Zealand girl who was not an English girl. The New Zealand she

found initially was the rich, inspiring natural world discovered through her senses: social New Zealand, she learns, is synonymous with English society. This revelation is prompted by her sense of exclusion from the community beyond her Danish family, and convinces her that a choice must be made between the two communities. Her embracing of the Danish community and its values is also a rejection of the English world. And it is a decision that gives the stories considerable significance beyond that contained in their 'migrant content' alone, for it shows Astrid exploring what it is to be a New Zealander. Astrid's choice between the English and Danish communities exposes the lack of a crucial third alternative -- that she might choose to be a New Zealander. It is perhaps a fair reflection of the inadequacies of the community in which Astrid lives that New Zealanders do not seem to exist amongst the characters in these stories; they are either English or Danes. The only exceptions are the infrequently and vaguely presented Maoris, who themselves seem to constitute another kind of migrant community. As much as anything, the observations of Astrid the Jutland spy reveal a community in which it is not the Danish migrants alone who are displaced -- a discovery with some important implications for the social picture these stories create.

3.2.3 How Could Arthur Mee Make His Voice Heard Here?

Astrid the spy moves easily between two communities, observing both and making her reports. Her position therefore blends involvement and detachment, while her voice ranges between cool, remote observations, and emotionally-charged celebrations of whichever world she is for the moment immersed in. This shifting narrative stance contributes to the mixed appeal these stories offer -- the recognizable, reassuring mirror image of a familiar world gives way at times to

glimpses of unknown exotic territory that lies unexplored within the familiar. But Astrid's detachment from the community which is probably more familiar to the stories' readers -- the English world of small-town New Zealand -- means her judgements of it do not always provide the reassurances or approval the reader might anticipate. Her distance from it is sufficient for her view to be both broad and penetrating;^{for her} to observe its features with a startling, and sometimes even disturbing clarity.

Perhaps the most disturbing feature Astrid reveals of the world lying beyond her own community is its unvaryingly and unattractively English character. At first, her intention to 'find' New Zealand seems based on fundamentally faulty expectations, notably a concept of some identifiable homogeneous clump which can be readily 'found' and understood to be the country's essence. It is a concept suggested also in the Danes' practice of 'loot[ing] the English language and [bringing] home their finds' in 'The Looters' (p.30). The migrants seem to view the country beyond them as consisting of a solid, unchanging culture which lies like a forest to be explored, its flora and fauna collected, labelled and displayed. However misguided this may seem initially, as Astrid moves deeper into the community outside her family her reports seem to indicate that such homogeneity does indeed exist; that the New Zealand she finds is exclusively English in its character.

As the central character is a child, her school is the most important influence outside her family, and it can be seen as a microcosm of the community it serves. Its complete allegiance to England and the Empire is indicated in the events it celebrates -- Armistice Day, Coronation Day, Guy Fawkes, the Centennial Exhibition. Even a garden party, the most genteel of English entertainments, is included on the curriculum. But Astrid's penetrating eye reveals not only the

school's unfailingly English character, but also the wider implications of this. For, just as these events and celebrations are the outward trimmings of a culture totally foreign to Astrid, so she shows they are equally foreign to all the other schoolchildren. From her position as an outsider, she unwittingly reveals that other New Zealanders are also outsiders of the culture they try so hard to adopt. The double fact of her being a child and of migrant descent gives her voice a unique quality of bewilderment and ignorance, yet also a devastatingly accurate ability to perceive the incongruities and anachronisms that lie beneath the 'English-ness' of the New Zealand community — as here, in 'Guy Fox':

That November...the teacher at school told us of somebody named Guy Fox. He had lived long ago and had sought to destroy the king with fire. We had a night in his memory, she said. November the fifth, when we lit fires to honour him. Why would we do that? I asked her.

(The Growing of Astrid Westergaard,p.10).

Why indeed, is the question that immediately enters the reader's mind. Astrid's simple question, in seeking out the truth about something which is new and strange to her, suddenly makes us perceive the strangeness and silliness of this ritual ourselves. And so, Astrid's spying can bring about quiet revelations about New Zealand and New Zealanders, not only to herself and her family, but to the reader too. It exposes contradictions, peculiarities, and flaws in territory that may be too familiar to permit the searching examination that Astrid's eye makes possible.

One of her most penetrating revelations of the absurdly English character of the New Zealand community is made in 'The School Picnic' (Farvel,p.78). Here, Astrid's earnest and enthusiastic teacher Miss Martin is teaching her class nature study at Foxton Beach. It is soon apparent to the reader from Astrid's weary, despairing tone of voice that their exercise is doomed to failure because of its utter incongruity with their inhospitable environs:

'Come, come, little ones!' she called. She had Arthur Mee in her hands.

We sighed in our straggling wind-blown line in front of her. For how could Arthur Mee make his voice heard here, under the great brass cymbal of that sun, against the savage roar of those waves out on the bar?

'Sea wrack, winkles and sea lavender,' read Miss Martin with some difficulty as Arthur Mee helplessly fluttered his pages in the wind... 'Fan out. Find the treasures of the sea.'

We fanned out, and glumly clumped along, looking for treasures of the sea. We found pipi shells, some seaweed and one old bottle.

(p.81).

In this marvellously bathetic last sentence, the passage conveys succinctly the hopelessness of Miss Martin's attempts to transform the harsh New Zealand landscape into a gentler English scene that will offer up such treasures as 'winkles and sea-lavender'. The jingoistic children's writer Arthur Mee, is referred to in other stories in Farvel, such as 'Arbor Day' where, in looking for 'nature's bounty' (p.52) in a particularly impenetrable and gloomy patch of native bush, Astrid notes that 'Arthur Mee never told us what to look for in there' (p.53). His name becomes a byword for all the misplaced cultural allegiances that the school requires of its pupils, demanding that they look for a home not in what lies outside the classroom windows, but in a distant country probably few of them have ever seen.

But the story in Farvel which provides the most clear and penetrating image of the Englishness of the New Zealand community is 'The Garden Party' (p.56). Throughout the story, the school authorities strive to achieve the impossible: putting on an English garden party for the entertainment of the children's parents. The story renders well the laboriousness and ultimate futility of their attempts to mimic this most incongruous of events at a country school in the middle of raw,

empty, rural New Zealand. Indeed, there is something almost pathetic in Miss Martin's attempts to kindle her pupil's waning enthusiasm with the encouragement that garden parties 'are all the rage, quite the mode in the Old Country' (p.57) -- even her choice of language has a worn, second-hand, quality to it. It is a quality sustained throughout the account of the preparations undertaken for the event. The kewpie dolls the pupils manufacture for sale become a metaphor for the garden party itself -- gaudy, false, and hollow. The children practise an appropriately English dance to perform, accompanied by a recording which sounds to Astrid like a 'tiny orchestra, with no breath left after its long journey to us from England' (p.60).

Astrid's observations, and the amused sarcasm with which her family view the preparations, give direction to the readers' responses. Again, the fact that the narrative viewpoint is that of the outsider enables some particularly penetrating revelations to be made -- as in Astrid's father's dry comment on the children's dance: 'Gathering Peascods'; 'but we don't grow peas here' (p.58). The distance from which the Danes curiously observe the preparations for the garden party enables them to perceive that, like themselves, the English New Zealanders are disoriented migrants, attempting to preserve what is past and distant by denying the present:

'You dance, in crepe paper?' insisted my poor Moder ...

'It is the mode,' I said in Miss Martin's voice, 'quite the thing in the Old Country'.

'Their Old Country,' said a voice in the doorway. My Bedstemoder bore in the soup.

(p.58-59)

The detached viewpoint of these outsiders enables them to recognize the desperation beneath the intensely English culture which permeates the New Zealand community around them. Like themselves, these other New Zealanders are

struggling to reconcile a foreign culture with an unsympathetic environment -- like hybrid plants whose roots lie thousands of miles away.

For the most part, this cultural confusion the Danes uncover in the community around them is the object of their wry amusement -- they seem to enjoy finding the soft spots in the steely armour of the domineering English. Only on a few occasions does it have more serious repercussions -- as, for instance, in 'The Battle Charge' in The Growing of Astrid Westergaard. Here, misplaced patriotic fervour spills over into physical conflict and Astrid and other Danish children are accused of being 'Huns' by their classmates. But, in general, the cultural conflict is of a more gentle kind -- names continually and thoughtlessly mispronounced, customs ridiculed by virtue of their difference from the English norm.

And so the stories' ability to offer both the familiar and the exotic gains a new twist. At times, the voice of the outsider provides startling revelations of aspects of New Zealand life which are accepted unquestioningly by many. Yet it stops short of alienating the readers who are within the community it scrutinises, holding back from damning criticism or unchecked outrage. The child narrator performs a particularly useful function in this respect; her perceptive, innocent eye reveals much, yet she is unable to judge or lambast. Critics sensitive to what the stories reveal about New Zealanders and their attitudes to culture (their own and that of foreigners in their midst) are nonetheless charmed by the teller -- descriptions of Astrid and her stories make abundant use of such adjectives as 'breezy',¹²⁸ 'joyful'¹²⁹ and 'loveable'.¹³⁰ Yet this delightful character is able to

¹²⁸ 'Others Together', New Zealand Listener, 17 May, 1980, p.73.

¹²⁹ English in New Zealand, 8:1, 1980, p.47.

offer some discomfoting perspectives on New Zealand and New Zealanders, as we have seen. And in some stories, her keen eye alights not only on the English community but on another group, who, like the Danish migrants, are submerged within it.

3.2.4 Tales of Maoriland

The Maoris are the one group which prevents Astrid's local community from achieving a purely English character. They occupy a similar relationship to the dominant English community as the Danish migrants — both groups are excluded, both watchful and wary. And this becomes the basis for many other links that are asserted to exist between them.

The powerful spiritual feeling the Danish migrants have for the land around them is explicitly linked to the Maoris' attitude in 'The Messengers', in which Astrid senses the land as an embodiment of its rightful owners — 'Sometimes a gale roared for three days without stopping. It seemed then that words were nearly audible in its voice. But the people who had understood them were not there anymore' (p.85). Yet Astrid's inherent sympathy for the Maoris — the absent owners — involves more than just a shared regard for the land. It is a sympathy that joins the two races by virtue of the injuries both have received at the hands of the English. The Maoris have been dispossessed of their land, and as such stand on shared ground with the migrants, dispossessed in a more obvious sense. The two races are shown to share particular values and sensitivities of which the English are ignorant — intent on the mercenary use of the land, they are incapable of hearing or interpreting the words in the wind, which only the Maoris

130 Farvel, Introduction, p.7.

and the Danes are able to understand.

This inherent cultural sympathy is evoked at several points throughout the stories: for instance, in 'Centennial Exhibition' (Farvel, p.73) where Astrid and her aunt Helga see a group of 'hawk-faces'(p.76), Maoris, sitting on a station platform. This is presented as an incident of profound significance -- 'Tante Helga looked at me, and her face^{had} changed, but she said nothing' (p.76). Later, the full import of this brief encounter is revealed when Helga, in a voice 'harsh and proud' (p.77), tells Astrid of the link between their races -- "'the Maori and the Dane, they knew how to travel the great seas'" (p.77).

The link is asserted again in a different context by Astrid's father who says of the Maoris in 'The Messengers', "'They know many things ... They love their land, and use it wisely'" (p.91). But it is most overtly stated in the title story of Farvel, through the words of an adult Astrid who attempts a summary of all the shared connections that she has come to feel with the Maori people:

I see those Danes and Maoris, now clear, now blurred, standing facing their lands. My house, like Rangi's, reaches its roots down to the heart of this land. Our roots are the same. We have our people, living and dead, around us forever.

Canoe, Viking ship, foam-necked, set out together on the last journey north, over the sea-roads to the world's-end.
(p.140).

Yet despite the insistent claims for these deep-rooted links between Maori and Dane, they are not always convincing. Apart from one acquaintance at school, Astrid seems to have little contact with Maoris, and certainly not of the kind to produce this sort of all-embracing empathy. There is a perplexing gap between the facts of Astrid's experience and the feelings towards Maoris that are claimed for her. For instance, while it is perfectly believable that Astrid has a strong,

imaginative relationship with her Danish past which enables her to experience vicariously an enchanted Nordic world, it is a different matter altogether when she is shown in 'The Old Ones' to have this same access to an equally fantastic pre-European New Zealand:

The wind swoops over the flax-blades on the river bank. They flicker their long swords, they clack their long tongues, gossiping of the old times. Then the sky seems to darken, the prows of the long war canoes knife through the water and the chants of the warriors echo up the river bank to where the huts of the first settlers stood in the mud.

(p.62).

This passage seems one of Astrid's imaginative flights of fancy, but as the story proceeds, it is extended into a claim for participation in values and a history that seem properly those of the Maori people alone.

The affinity that is claimed here and elsewhere suggests again how fine is the balance in these stories between fiction and personal recollection. It seems here the fictional character is being burdened with responsibilities she cannot carry: perhaps the author's own felt closeness with Maoris is being attributed in retrospect to the character who represents her childhood self. It is this confusion of fact and fiction which weakens the stories at moments – where the statements about cultural empathy the author wishes to make require the character of Astrid to be more mature, more engagingly wise and magnanimous of spirit, and her experiences more consciously 'significant' than is readily convincing.

It is a problem noted by several reviewers of Farvel , perhaps most lucidly by Russell Poole in his review 'Vikings in Maoriland', where he criticizes the stories' tendency to create cultural and national stereotypes and notes that 'the impressions of Maoritanga in particular seem conventional and second hand'.¹³¹

¹³¹ Poole, op. cit., p.30.

Gerda Bell, writing in New Zealand Book World observes that the author seems intent on presenting clear racial polarities, and comments 'it is characteristic that [Astrid] and her family avow to have a closer affinity with the Maoris than with the Pakehas'.¹³² And Anna Rutherford points to inconsistencies in the affinities that are claimed to exist between Maori and Dane at the expense of the English:

This linking together of two people as totally different as 20th century Danes and 20th century Maoris, coupled with an imaginary opposition between them and the English who surely must also be said to be a sea-faring people stretches even the most willing suspension of disbelief.¹³³

But when Astrid's intense interest in the Maoris she observes submerged in the English community around her is not expanded into a claim of participation or instinctive empathy with their experience, the fiction is more convincing. In 'Arbor Day' (Farvel,p.51), du Fresne evokes successfully the sort of relationship that might be felt with Maoris, not only by Astrid but by the other English New Zealand children as well. Here, the children are planting trees at the local Recreation Ground and pause for a few moments:

At the foot of the cliffs, by the Meeting House, an old Maori woman stood, dressed in black, watching us. Behind, the bush stood, black against the cliff ... And the wooden warrior on the Meeting House roof raised his spear, his paua shell eyes, guarding the holes, the caves deep in the cliff, where they had buried their dead in the old days, the warriors of the Maori Nations of old New Zealand. Their unsleeping eyes watched Miss Martin's class eating their chocolate fish.

(p.55).

It is a moment that suspends a number of elements in a delicately-maintained tension — a delicacy made possible by the absence of any heavy-handed cultural polarity. A bald statement of oppositions is replaced instead with an evocative

132 'Farvel to Denmark', New Zealand Book World, No. 59, November, 1980, p.24.

133 Gross and Klooss, op.cit., p.89.

interweaving of the past and present, of cultures, of immediate reality with the dreamy world of the imagination. The delicate balance of the passage is produced also by the gentle collision of incongruous images -- the imposing Maori warrior receiving scrutiny from the children between munches of their chocolate fish. Above all, it achieves a fragile poise between the credible rendering of the scene from a child's viewpoint and the intervention of the author's craft, supported by a more mature and complex awareness. These elements work to the same ends here, transforming the moment into one of significance and peculiar beauty which leaves the reader, like Astrid, on the threshold of a discovery which lies just a little out of reach.

3.2.5 Lonely Ladies

In the exploration of the communities beyond Astrid's own -- both English and Maori -- these stories depict New Zealand and New Zealanders from a new and often disquieting angle. Yet these revelations are tempered by the undeniable charm of the character who makes them. And so the stories have an ambiguous mixture of qualities -- offering some sharp social criticisms in an innocent and beguiling voice. So too is there a blend of attitudes and tones in the treatment of the characters' migrant experience. At times, its painful and disorienting effects are indicated, but for the most part its effects are shown to be entirely positive -- after all, it is the catalyst for Astrid's enchanting journeys through a mythic Nordic past. But in her future work, the author plans to dispense with this ambivalent treatment. She wants to achieve a greater degree of direct, clear-eyed statement divested of an engaging and loveable mediator: 'I should say things a bit more sharply than I have'.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Conversation with author, Appendix B, p.224.

And in fact, the small group of stories at the end of both collections seem to be steps in this direction. Concerned with characters other than Astrid Westergaard, they possess markedly different qualities from the other stories -- a disturbing bleakness and air of desolation in particular.

In Farvel, the four final stories all address themselves in some way to migration and its enduring effects, but none of the last three stories in The Growing of Astrid Westergaard has an overt migrant content. Despite this important difference in content, the two groups of stories share several qualities. Most had been published previously and so had an established life prior to the appearance of the 'Astrid' stories. They were clearly written out of experiences and motives considerably different from the ones which prompted those nostalgic autobiographical journeys into childhood. Each of the stories explores separate regions of the same territory, each focussing on individual women who might be seen as different facets of the same woman. As Yvonne du Fresne herself has commented of these stories and of the period in which they were written; 'I was still very occupied with the business of 'survival'. I wrote endlessly about lonely ladies -- widows, spinsters -- very sad stories'.¹³⁵

In 'Home' and 'Last Summer' (both in Farvel), the loneliness of the women they concern is produced and intensified by their migrant pasts. Their more obvious forms of isolation -- old age and widowhood -- seem mere concomitants of the central devastating experience, migration. In 'Home' (p.122), the old woman Gudrun Skautrup's mind has become the meeting point for a jarring clash of worlds. To those around her, she seems a wilful, exasperating, wandering old woman for whom they are responsible. But in passages of direct intimate

¹³⁵ Unpublished essay.

narration, Gudrun reveals herself to be caught in a conflict between Denmark and New Zealand, between a desire to die and a desire to go on living. The two collisions are in fact aspects of a single conflict, as her wish to make 'the journey home to Denmark' (p.122) is synonymous with her wish to be reunited with her dead husband. And so the pull exerted upon her by the memory of Denmark is a signal that it is time for her to die — a signal she finds emblazoned everywhere around her:

All morning they whistled in her ears, turned in the wind to snap flies, flew over the river grass, singing as they flew. Those birds, those birds, telling her to get ready. Any moment now, the journey home to Denmark ...

A strong traveller she must be. So far to go. Her daughter Ingeborg had locked her into New Zealand and thrown away the key! ... The river was getting ready to speak ... Then she heard it. Reeds talking. Not gossiping. Over and over.

'Gudrun — Gudrun — Gudrun!'

(pp.122-123).

The land is the conveyor of messages to Gudrun (as it is for Astrid) and is the point of connection between her true home, Denmark, and this alien country. For this 'lonely lady', the huge journey she has made in the past now intensifies the pain of loss, stretching even further the distance between herself and that which she loves. Husband and homeland become interchangeable; each is the focus of her desire for reunion. The absence of both is enforced by the bars placed around her ^{by} her daughter's well-intentioned imprisonment, and her unwilling captivity by life itself. For a life so painfully fragmented as Gudrun's, death is not extinction. Instead, it offers restoration and wholeness, the completion of the migrant's half-finished circle, the consummation of that which is most deeply desired.

Although less disoriented than Gudrun by the unceasing conflict within her mind, Konstanz Skovgaard in 'Last Summer' (p.128) shares her isolation and desire for death. She too is an aging widow, a migrant exiled not only from her homeland, but within her adopted country as well -- an isolated foreigner in its midst, devoid of community, the last 'pure Dane' (p.130). And like Gudrun, in the absence of people, she turns to the land for communication -- again its message is a prophecy of death and a promise of return to a loved husband and homeland:

— I am another world, said the river. The morepork in the trees would sound his warning...

Now she knows what caused this grief. It was that light, sure vision of trembling water, so that she nearly woke in the old world in Denmark... And with one leap, the long, white house in its birches, by the lake, with its swans, its fire-haunted castle, in South Jutland.

(pp.128-129).

With such mobile narrative and rich imagery, this story charts the events of the day on which Konstanz dies, recreating the two worlds she is poised between, on the threshold of achieving their final resolution.

In both these stories, the migrant experience offers du Fresne a powerful metaphor through which to explore isolation, death, and the individual's search for unity amongst chaos. And although bleak in tone and outcome, the two stories nonetheless have considerable and unexpected strengths. They reveal du Fresne to have a capacity for inventive, flexible narrative which shows an individual from a number of angles and distances -- both deeply intimate and revealingly objective. Her sensitivity to the human voice and her skilful rendering of its subtle, flexible qualities are directed to different ends than in the Astrid stories. Here, the voices are interior, reflective and anguished. Yet they are similarly successful in

suggesting the state of mind of their protagonists, and especially in expressing their positions as migrants -- isolated, exiled and imprisoned in foreign territory.

In the stories which bring The Growing of Astrid Westergaard to an end, the strengths also seem to derive from similar narrative qualities. In 'The Telephone'(p.81), 'The River'(p.90), and 'Christmas'(p.97), women in isolation are once more the object of scrutiny. But here the women are younger, women 'only halfway to senility' (p.105), women isolated not by migration or death but by the vagaries of human affection, 'travellers in the desert' (p. 87) striking out on their own. Like so many others of du Fresne's stories, these embrace several worlds: with fluid ease, the immediate physical world slides away to reveal hidden worlds of the imagination, the private fantasies which keep these travellers going in their trek across the desert.

For Nan in 'The Telephone', the image that keeps flooding into her solitude is 'her old world of gently rolling sheep paddocks, pearly in the light that came after the great gales had polished each grass stalk dry' (p.82). And she slips just as easily out of this dream of the past into a dream for the future -- trusting that 'Somewhere, sometime, after the desert ... there is another country, a distant hint of a morning world, of sea and light and committed love' (p.89). Like the migrant, Nan is in the midst of a journey away from the memory of the known and certain ('safe, long-ago things; night coming gently to paddocks and hills' [p.85]), towards another unknown world, seen alternately as a bleak prospect, and as a land of hope where she will at last be at home.

In 'Christmas' too, the central character is journeying -- in fact, making a double journey, for her physical journey home to her parents' home at Christmas enacts an interior journey. She is at its mid-point: a middle-aged single woman,

lacking the accepted accoutrements of husband and children, she finds her return to her family is also an unwilling return to her childhood role. Like Gudrun and Konstanzt, she too is an exile amongst her own people, having no legitimate place there, as she discovers from her parents' welcome: "Daddy -- our girl -- home at last!". Can you still be their girl at forty-five?(p.98).

Again, the mobile narrative encompasses fragments of spoken dialogue, and the equally fragmentary dialogue within the central character's mind. From this interior perspective, we hear her trying to come to an arrangement with her ambivalent position as a middle-aged exile from her home and family:

Where are we going to go? Where are all those slick smooth answers I knew when I was fifteen and playing Chopin? They've temporarily gone... And I think O God, here I am wanting to stay for the first time in my life, and now I have to think of shuffling off this globe with a calm and happy heart. And I may never find the shoulder of my dear for my weary head.

(p.103).

With all these 'lonely ladies', it is at these moments of intimate self-revelation that we see the nature of their isolation. It is not a static, solitary condition, but an ongoing journey away from the known and secure and into an uncertain world (old age, widowhood, death) capable of rendering either fulfillment or further desolation. And so these stories reveal the idiosyncratic perspective that also emerges in du Fresne's stories of migrants. In each, she displays an acute sensitivity to individuals in transit, wandering between worlds -- whether they are represented by specific geographical entities or by more amorphous substances. They are haunting, restless stories. Their protagonists' rootlessness and lack of secure roles and communities are reflected in the shifting, mobile narrative. It moves them beyond the tangible world of solid forms and masses into another kinder world of dream and fantasy -- 'another country, a distant hint of a

morning world, of sea and light and committed love'. So while these stories reveal some unexpected links with du Fresne's migrant stories, they show a considerable shift in tone and vision, countering the Astrid stories with their dark and dissonant notes.

Yet the title story of Farvel and 'A Walk By The Sea' seek to establish a more obvious connection with the Astrid stories. For they show the engaging child as an adult, a woman coming to terms with unhappiness and isolation, intent on 'Not cracking up' (p.115). Yet although this woman is called Astrid and is evidently a grown version of the young girl, the connection between them is an uneasy one. This may stem in part from the readers' sentimental desire to keep intact an image of Astrid Westergaard as forever young, forever innocent, forever untouched by pain or loss — seeking from the fiction the reassurances that real life fails to deliver. But it is also hard to connect this lonely, grieving woman with the child because, throughout the stories in both collections, Astrid never 'seems to grow (despite the claim made by the title of the second collection). She seems fixed in a sort of static childhood Arcadia, and shows the same odd blend of great sensitivity, acute perception and innocence, from the first story to the last. And so it comes as something of a shock to be suddenly introduced to this woman with the 'wind-furrowed face' (p.139), remembering in dispassionate terms when she was 'the child Astrid' (p.113).

Curiously, it seems as if the title story of Farvel might have been intended not only as a retrospection by the adult Astrid on all that has gone before, but as her farewell. This is suggested not only by the title, but by the over-abundance of Danish words — as if the author is intending a thorough summary of the importance to Astrid of her Danish past. But their abundant use blurs their

potency. Singers, sacred dancers, swans, magic signs, sacred trees, viking ships — together with a strong assertion of the link between Dane and Maori — all these clash together and drown each other out in the clamour to be heard and to have their significance understood.

And if this is intended as a final statement on the life of Astrid Westergaard, it is rather ironic that she is given a new lease of life in the second collection. Perhaps 'Farvel' is meant to disenchant — to remind readers that Astrid's enticing romantic world which blends the real and the mythic is too delightful to endure; that she too is subject to age, to change, to disappointment. It is a sober, tough note on which to end a collection — yet it becomes inaudible with the publication of the second collection and its restoration of Astrid to her unchanged, golden childhood world.

3.2.6 How Really Honest Can You Be?

Dreamy nostalgia and realism coexist in du Fresne's stories, tugging gently at each other and adding considerably to their varied texture. Yet Yvonne du Fresne's comment about her Astrid stories that 'most of them are true'¹³⁶ causes problems for the reader. The author's nostalgic recreation of her childhood world cannot and should not be challenged — it is a private world to which she alone has access, and unknown territory to anyone else. This is the privilege that the author of autobiographical fiction can exercise: in presenting fictional images which are also claimed to be 'true', the author alone knows the accuracy of that depiction, a knowledge that cannot be easily controverted. But where the author's eye moves further afield into a wider world to which her readers too have access,

¹³⁶ Quoted in Anna Rutherford, 'Enhanced Nationalism: Viking vs. Empire', in Gross and Klooss (eds.), op. cit., p.89.

the 'truthfulness' of her fiction will be open to increased scrutiny and judgement of the sort Russell Poole makes in his review of Farvel:

The wider dichotomy between Danish and British strikes me as forced... Is it too tiresomely literal-minded to insist that the Danish sensibility must bear some imprint from their stern, prudish middle classes, their 'konger' and 'dronninger', their experience of colonial rule?¹³⁷

In essence, Poole's question echoes du Fresne's own when she says the migrant writer must decide how far it is possible to go, 'how really honest you can be'.¹³⁸ How honest must the migrant writer be in depicting minority and majority cultures, as du Fresne does, in drawing up cultural battlelines and amassing troops on either side by virtue only of nationality, never personality. It is an interesting question, and one that reminds us that readers of fiction have the same rights as readers of daily newspapers: bias, distortion or propaganda ought never to be dressed up under the beguiling label of 'truth'.

The forced dichotomy that Russell Poole describes seems the result, at least in part, of inconsistencies in the presentation of character in several of these stories. Invariably, the English characters are mere caricatures, consisting of a few obnoxious or ridiculous character traits barely fleshed out — Miss Gore and the grey headmaster are the prime examples. By contrast, the Danish characters — even those presented extremely briefly — are accorded depth, subtlety, complex emotions. The method of character presentation thereby reinforces the cultural divisions and conflicts which du Fresne claims. It is an acceptable method when the desired end is comedy (as, for example, in 'The Looters'): more questionable when it demands to be read as the truth.

¹³⁷ Op. cit., p.29.

¹³⁸ Conversation with author, Appendix B, p.234.

For instance, in 'The Cousin From Holstein' from the second collection, Astrid's grandmother tells of their Jutland past, their homes and land constantly over-run by "the Proos-i-ans... Wicked men who ... sit on their horses outside the people's houses in South Jutland and shout" (pp.63-64). Astrid in confusion applies this description to the only person she has ever seen sit on a horse and shout -- her family's neighbour, the retired Major Gore. The story brings into conflict Astrid's grandmother and this nominal 'Proos-i-an'; but the outcome of the battle is tilted by the author in the old woman's favour from the outset. In the dispute that takes place about a trespassing heifer, Astrid's Bedstemoder is depicted as a passionate and spirited old woman, dignified and admirable in her emotional refusal to forget the past injustices inflicted on her homeland. She is variously described as a 'Jutland girl-warrior'(p.63), 'an old Danish *dronning*' and 'a frost-dronning' (p.64). Major Gore, however, is a figure of fun, an archetypal haw-haw major who shouts, wears leggings, pronounces her name wrongly, and addresses her in the stagy, machine-gun-fire delivery associated with his type.

But it seems his character traits that are the object of ridicule are very similar to those qualities of Astrid's grandmother that receive the author's approbation. The manner of each character reveals a passionate, if backward-looking, relationship with a distant homeland; each pays strict adherence to the conventions of an older culture -- it is this allegiance to a tradition that means Astrid's grandmother refuses to speak to a 'Proo-s-*lan*' and which also demands that Major Gore raises his hat when he speaks to a lady and call her 'ma'am'. Yet the two characters are treated with totally different levels of seriousness: while one is lauded, the other is ridiculed. It is revealing that Astrid's grandmother, in her frequent mispronunciations and incorrect use of the English language, is displaying worthy political defiance. When the Major calls her 'Mrs

Westigid', it is the object of the other characters' mirth (a signpost for the readers' responses), and it is ignorance and insensitivity that he is exhibiting, rather than a spirited and commendable political gesture.

This sort of unbalanced treatment is characteristic also of the way the Danish children are rendered in comparison with the English children, such as Cherry Taylor. Cherry is a realistically unremarkable child — she speaks in a credibly childish voice, but has limited imagination and knowledge. Despite the authenticity of her character, she is nonetheless shown always as a weaker, more colourless, less attractive child because she is constantly set alongside Astrid who has wisdom, imagination, spirit and intelligence often well beyond her years.

Astrid receives a special sanction from the author to develop beyond the limitations of her age and narrow environment and experiences — a development made possible by her access to a wider world, the legacy of her migrant past. It is a world which not only contains several other countries, but also different periods of time and has a history that loses sight of any distinction between reality and myth. Her mobility within this alternative world allows her character a richness, vigour and resonance that are unavailable to poor Cherry Taylor, the restricted and hopelessly ordinary English schoolgirl. We are never shown her flights of fancy into an imaginative inner world, and indeed it is suggested that she is incapable of having any. This may be readily indulged by the reader, but it is a different matter when these differences between the Danish children and Cherry Taylor are suggested to be the result purely of nationality, and not of personality. Cherry is a rather dull and boring little girl because she is English: Astrid and Anna are magnificent and loveable because they are Danish.

In 'Coronation Day' in the second collection for example, both Astrid and Cherry become fervent followers of the British Royal Family, identifying closely with the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. All we see of Cherry's character in this story is her intense and fervent commitment to royalty. With Astrid, however, we are permitted glimpses into her thoughts which reveal a more half-hearted loyalty. She looks 'wistfully' (p.5) at her father in the distance as he mimics the royal waves they are practising at the roadside, and secretly wishes him to do his famous imitation 'of the Duke of Gloucester travelling up the Foxton Line in his large black car'(p.6). No such insights are given into Cherry's thoughts as she stands by in prim disapproval – "'Don't look," hissed Cherry in my ear, "he is vulgar!"' (p.5). And she voices similarly conventional sentiments when Astrid's grandmother shows the girls a photo of a member of the Danish Royal Family:

He is good fellow. Always telling stories and drinking schnapps with the people ...' Cherry took in the Danish Throne-Follower with one bleak peep.

The English Royal Family don't drink schnapps, Mrs Westergaard,' said my brave, loyal Cherry.

(pp.6-7).

It seems that in this story, du Fresne establishes something of a dialogue between ourselves and Astrid, a dialogue that excludes Cherry Taylor by placing her on a lower level of perception and understanding. Astrid's private thoughts about the Royal Family – ideas that are adult, modern and cynical in tone – are likely to find accord with the reader, to whom Cherry's obsession with the Royal Family probably seems as ludicrous as it does to Astrid's family.

Again, the stories' autobiographical nature seems at the root of this. Sympathetic communication is established between the readers of the 1980's and

the Astrid of the 1940's by making that character an amalgam of the author's adult self (shown in the maturity and sophistication of vision she exhibits at times) and a fondly imagined childhood self -- endearing, charming and loveable. Given such a range of capabilities, the character is able to slip comfortably out of the limitations and prescriptions imposed by her environment and time, while the English characters remain fixed there forever, their quaint anachronisms and pathetically disoriented culture exposed for all to see.

This is true not only of the stories which contrast Cherry and Astrid, but of several others in which the same differences are enlarged and applied to the entire communities the two children represent. In 'The Battle Charge' from the same collection, Astrid is labelled a 'Hun' by her English classmates and discovers that 'the school was fighting two foes. The Germans. And us' (p.40). The wise Anna Friis explains to her the complex geographical and national factors that have led to Denmark's occupation by the Germans, and the intermingling of the two races -- an explanation which makes more comprehensible the insults of the other children. But Anna's wise understanding of the complicated situation and her depth of knowledge creates a huge gulf between her and the English children of the same age. She has a sophisticated understanding which enables her to see both the facts and the tragic implications of war: the other children are moved only by prejudice, ignorance and mindless patriotism. And that this division is once again based on inherent national qualities is asserted in Astrid's following comments:

My Fader taught me the great truths about the European nations. The Dutch saved their nation from the sea that tried to drown them. The Russians in their icy nation knew how to defeat the cruel winters. And the Germans had made for me a nest of wooden bowls for my dolls' house. They fitted exactly on the tips of my fingers. Those bowls gave my fingers the most wonderful feeling.

'They understand wood.' said my Fader. 'All men have something precious to give to the world.' And his face shone with pride to be part of the world, to be brother to all men.

(p.41).

The Danes have special qualities of insight and feeling which set them apart from the English who respond only to more base emotions. They see the world from a more comprehensive, tolerant and humane perspective -- a national characteristic that must surely be as questionable as it is to state that all New Zealanders of English descent are as imperialistic and fervently patriotic as the grey headmaster.

It is interesting to note too that the English community is frequently ridiculed or condemned for attitudes or behaviour that are merely a variation of what is so commended amongst the Danish community. In 'Coronation Day', there is a cynical and deadly accurate portrait of a community determinedly clinging to the threads that bind them to their distant homeland - one such link being the Royal Family. On the day of the King's Coronation in London, Astrid's school throws itself headlong into a celebration to confirm to themselves the importance of that link. The school-children gather, dutiful offspring of a Mother Country few will ever see, and prove their loyalty -- to what, they are not sure. The Headmaster works hard to drum up the right spirit of enthusiasm:

'All over the world,' shouted the Headmaster, warming up, 'boys - and girls - are turning their most fervent thoughts towards that great city, London, ... where soon our King will be enthroned'.

(p.8).

His pompous rhetoric condemns him: it is a comedy, with the headmaster as the unwitting buffoon. In turn, the royalist sentiments he expresses become part of the comedy -- ludicrously misplaced, pathetic in their fervour.

Yet the Danes too have strong royalist tendencies, as shown in the following passage from 'The Battle Charge':

At home, the Grand Onkels raised their glasses of schnapps before dinner.

'To brave lille Denmark!' they rumbled. 'To Konge Christian of the Danes!' Their eyes gleamed ice-blue with tears...

(pp.41-42).

By contrast with the previous passage, the sentiments here are sympathetically presented; there is no sense of the author condemning her characters out of their own mouths, allowing a veil of irony to drape between character and reader. The feelings of the Danes are communicated without the author's mediation;^{they make} a subjective, personal utterance which demands sympathy from the reader, not mirth.

These same contrasting attitudes towards royalism are applied also to patriotism. The war-time patriotism of the English is consistently presented as manic, blood-thirsty, uninformed and bigoted. The Danes exhibit altogether finer feelings in their inherent tolerance and understanding of other races, yet they too have patriotic feelings aroused by their country's plight during the war.

Yet is there any fundamental difference between the cultural allegiances of the English and the Danes? Both groups are looking back to a distant homeland, finding a comforting reassurance that what was past and distant continues to exist in such tangible figures as the Royal Family. For each group, their feelings could be coldly described as misplaced and as a means of avoiding coming to terms with their immediate experience. But a more sympathetic understanding of their attitudes is also possible, one that recognizes a human need for continuity and tradition to shore up against a chaotic world. In the narrative tone of these stories, there is evidence of both attitudes - the cold and cynical, the sympathetic and tolerant. It is a means of reinforcing the cultural divisions asserted so frequently that these two distinct attitudes are applied separately to the English and the Danes, and there is little doubt as to where the readers' sympathies are directed. And it seems odd that the very factors that are used to establish links

between Dane and Maori -- a shared regard for the past, for tradition, for ritual -- are presented also as proof of the divisions between Dane and English.

Anna Rutherford has made some perceptive comments about attitudes she says are prevalent amongst migrant communities -- both in reality and in fiction. There is, she says:

A tendency to turn in upon themselves ... Being beleaguered creates a garrison mentality and this in turn tends to make one look in black and white terms both at people and issues. There is the tendency to look at the past through rose-coloured glasses, to forget the negative and concentrate on the positive.¹³⁹

Referring specifically to Farvel, she says these attitudes emerge amongst Danish migrants as 'a nostalgic worship of the past'.¹⁴⁰

Rutherford's comments are interesting and provocative, casting light not only on the characters within these stories but on the position of the migrant writer, and on migrant writing in general. It seems beyond argument that one of the most attractive features of Yvonne du Fresne's stories is the exotic, fantastic world that Astrid leads her readers into, a unique blend of rural New Zealand and a mythic Nordic world of ice, fire and magic. Without this tendency for 'nostalgic worship of the past' which Rutherford identifies amongst the Danish migrants, such a world could not exist, and the stories would be infinitely poorer for its absence.

But if Rutherford's comments are applied to the author also, they shed light on some of the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the stories which may mar them for some. Whilst du Fresne throws a thoroughly positive and sympathetic light on the nostalgic yearnings for the past felt by the Danes, when the English

¹³⁹ Gross and Klooss, *op.cit.*, p.87.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

display the same tendencies they are parodied and condemned. This partiality in the author's vision and presentation may perhaps be accounted for by her personal position as a descendant of the same migrant community she portrays in her fiction -- producing a loyalty which emerges in the clear-cut cultural polarities she claims, exalting her own Danish people at the expense of the English. It is as if the author has two diverging narrative purposes; firstly, to make a nostalgic, fond recreation of a cherished family past, and simultaneously to provide penetrating, satirical social criticism. The two aims sometimes seem to exert conflicting and uncomfortable pressures on the stories.

Yet these criticisms do not take stock of one important element in these stories: the character of Astrid Westergaard. In the presentation of this character, there is complexity and subtlety as well as charm and, for the most part, complete credibility. These qualities raise her above the other characters in the stories, who in comparison, seem flat and restricted by having to represent whatever personality the author sees as typical of their race -- repressed, unimaginative English or lively, emotional Dane. Such characters can be the deathknell of any fiction, but of migrant fiction in particular. Characters who exist solely to represent a national type tend to signal an attempt to present under the guise of fiction a personal political polemic, an arid sociological or anthropological tract. But with so strong a central character, Yvonne du Fresne's stories evade such descriptions. It may be that Astrid's life might not be successfully extended beyond two collections of stories, but within these, her character has a satisfying richness which takes her beyond the confines of the page and fixes her firmly in the reader's imagination -- the proper home for literature's wandering populace.

Chapter 4

SOME CONCLUSIONS

This discussion began by surveying the lie of the land: attempting to establish what constitutes migrant writing and who are the candidates eligible for the title 'migrant writer'. There seems to me no doubt that the work of Amelia Batistich and Yvonne du Fresne is migrant writing and that — despite the facts of their nationality and place of birth — they are migrant writers. However, this is affirmed less by what they tell of, than by the way in which they tell it. At its most general, the migrant sensibility emerges in their stories as a sense of a shaping consciousness aware of belonging in part to places and times beyond the immediate environment, and an accompanying awareness of belonging nowhere in full. This is the migrant's 'stretched skin' that Russell Haley writes of and it is a skin that can be sensed wrapping around migrant writing too, its nebulous presence conferring on it that status — regardless of the facts stated on the passport of its creator. It is writing that is enlarged and diffused by the way it stretches towards two poles, and ambivalent also in the way it fails to attach itself firmly to either.

While it can in this sense explore and re-create the migrant's journey, migrant writing is also a continuation of that journey. This is suggested in the way Amelia Batistich's novel of Dalmatian migrant life in Dargaville provided her with a means of passage back to the homeland she had never seen, and confirmed that she too was as much a migrant as her parents had been decades earlier. So too for Yvonne du Fresne is literature a means of negotiating a place for herself

somewhere between the two worlds to which she has intermittent access: like the central character in her novel The Book of Ester, her fiction is witness to her 'com[ing] to an arrangement with New Zealand'.¹⁴¹

Both writers' fiction is a means of representing (and so participating in) the tensions which are set in motion by the act of physical migration, which Terry Eagleton has called 'the subtle and involuted tensions between the remembered and the real, the potential and the actual, integration and dispossession, exile and involvement'.¹⁴² These oppositions may be felt in equal measure — if not greater — by those for whom migration has been a received experience. And so it seems that a useful understanding of what constitutes migrant literature can be arrived at by an attentiveness to the taut interaction within it of the oppositions Eagleton mentions. Certainly this may prove a far more revealing angle of approach than enquiring into the condition of the writer's passport, or querying whether English is their second language or whether they have ever been to the country they speak of as 'Home'.

In looking beyond the fiction's subject matter to its form for the 'migrant experience' it discloses, it quickly becomes plain that migrant writing is exciting territory indeed. Concerned with a state of becoming rather than with an achieved and permanent state of being, it is fiction of ambivalence, of open-endedness and delicacy — or as Russell Haley suggests, it constitutes the migrant writer's 'fragile dwelling on a fault line'.¹⁴³ Because of the writer's unfixed, ambivalent position wandering between worlds, migrant writing can offer

141 'Linking Up With the Past', New Zealand Listener, March 29, 1980, p. 19.

142 Terry Eagleton, Exiles and Emigres, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 18.

143 Haley, Real Illusions, p. 123.

a mobility and range of perspectives unavailable to writers who speak from within a settled mainstream milieu. Reading migrant fiction is thus in a sense an 'unsettling' process, demanding that one leaves the safe and known world and enter foreign territories, both geographical and imaginative. For the migrant writer, there is an immense potential for fiction which seeks to unsettle the comfortably 'settled' reader through the use of flexible, discontinuous narrative. This is especially true when the chosen narrative form is the short story, which in its very structure and apparent oral spontaneity becomes a suitably mobile vehicle to effect the sort of collisions, compressions and unresolved tensions the migrant writer so frequently seeks out.

Yet what are the expectations of the reader of migrant fiction? Is it read for the innovative, interrogative positions it speaks from, or for the opportunity for comfortable armchair travel it provides? Worse still, is it approached not as fiction which explores, queries and occasionally undermines the mainstream cultural milieu at whose fringes it is situated, but as a means of confirming the dominance of the 'settled' establishment? As the Australian journal Meanjin comments, there is amongst a section of the reading public a feeling that the literature of 'colourfully-costumed singing dancing migrants'¹⁴⁴ operates 'in the theatrical space of entertainment ... evidence of our tolerance of diversity, but removed from the centre where the serious business goes on'.¹⁴⁵ And this willingness to view migrant writers as literate versions of E.T. — endearing and rather pitiable aliens, but not to be taken seriously — has considerable implications for the activity of the migrant writer. For what does the writer who writes from a migrant position feel compelled to offer: images and voices which confirm the cultural

144 'On Clowns and Migrant Artists', Meanjin, 42:1, March 1983, p. 141.

145 Ibid.

hegemony from which they are excluded (and so according to Meanjin, 'confirm by their jolly lack of dignity the grave dignity of the host nation')¹⁴⁶ ? This may seem an unlikely purpose, but it may be the one the migrant writer is forced to embrace in order to have a reading public at all, as another Australian, Sneja Gunew suggests:

One is not thereby magically freed of the conventions associated with the way the migrant is metaphorised in writing. Both women and migrants internalise the process whereby culture constructs them, and it requires a great deal of self-conscious analysis before they are able to step (and only ever in part) outside these constructs.¹⁴⁷

Further constraints yet are placed on migrant writing when it is ransacked for the recognizable, conventional images of migrants and migrant experience it offers (the 'huddled masses' and their sorrows and joys), and when that experience is assumed to be validated by the first-person narrative voice. For migrant writers who choose to speak from this position (or even, as Gunew suggests elsewhere, in an apparently confessional third-person mode)¹⁴⁸ are risking the fictional status of their work. To some readers, the pronoun I authenticates the experience it tells of, removing the narrative from the realm of fiction and transforming it into autobiography or personal anecdote. Again migrant writing is devalued and severed from 'the serious business' of literature — tolerated for its marginal interest as documentary, for the brief and untroublesome images it provides of exotic places and hard times. As Gunew notes of Australian attitudes to migrant writing:

¹⁴⁶ Op. cit., p. 140.

¹⁴⁷ 'Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins?', Meanjin, 42:1, p.19.

¹⁴⁸ 'Migrant Writing: Promising Territory', Kunapipi, 6 No.1, 1984, p.16.

The justification or authority for speaking seems to rest on the migrant voice as synonymous with victim and/or social problem...

[If] migrant writing is only perceived as autobiographical accounts of suffering it then functions primarily to position 'Australia', gratifyingly, as the eternal promised land ... The attraction of such writing to the dominant culture has been analogous to that found in naive art.¹⁴⁹

It seems to me that despite the fact that Yvonne du Fresne and Amelia Batistich expose themselves to all the risks which Gunew warns of – writing predominantly in a mode that suggests autobiography, offering images of 'migrant experience' to an established mainstream milieu of writers and readers – they largely avoid them. For, to all but the most insensitive reader, their work offers much more than just personal accounts of migration and the effects of the migrant experience. Both authors are concerned not only with writing about migrants, but seek also to speak as migrants. Their work shows each to be consciously selecting a migrant voice and perspective through which to render the sense of wandering, the split self which is their personal legacy of migration. And by choosing any single perspective, the writers reject a range of alternatives. It is here that migrant writing shows its potential for innovation and inventiveness. The selected narrative voice becomes a subversive voice, the voice of the outsider interrogating the fixed and conventional world, burrowing beneath its apparently smooth surface and disclosing the varied and often inhospitable terrain that it hides.

Reality itself may be revealed as an arbitrary concept. For instance, many of the migrant voices which are heard in du Fresne's and Batistich's stories are at home in two languages – Astrid Westergaard and Stella Parentich for example. In moving between the two modes of expression that are available to these

¹⁴⁹ Op. cit., pp. 15-16.

characters, the narrative exposes the arbitrary and deceptive qualities of language, described also by Renato Amato's character who finds the gap between words and the concepts they refer to 'like putting a mere facade on an empty lot and calling it a complete building'.¹⁵⁰ And the notion of two territories being adequately represented as geographical entities is similarly shown to be fallible — Astrid roams with equal ease in the mythic Danish past as on the windswept plains of the Manawatu; Stella makes herself into a character in one of her mother's stories. Stipan's homeland in 'An Olive Tree in Dalmatia' is an imaginative construct only, a country which, he finds, exists now under another name. Yet his dream has a sufficient reality for him to use it to shore up against the pain of separation from the Old World, the pain of never quite belonging in the New.

In this sense, the migrant writer becomes a fantasist, exploring not only the gap between two geographical entities, but also the gap between the migrants' real experience and their imaginative apprehension of that which is past and distant. So the migrant writer may be concerned not only with representing reality — the same sort of authentic 'migrant experience' which documentary accounts also provide — but perhaps more importantly, with representing the way dream and fantasy impinge on that reality, forcing it to take on a different form. Perhaps this refashioned 'real' world of the migrant can only be successfully evoked by a writer who has at least an imaginative access to the migrant experience and is thereby capable of recognising the strange interpenetration of dream and reality that it involves — like Salman Rushdie for instance, who writes in his novel Shame:

As for me: I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose on them the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to

¹⁵⁰ 'One of the Titans', The Full Circle of the Travelling Cuckoo, pp.70-71.

Not only do migrant writers-as-fantasists bring to the conventionally recognizable modern world they write of an awareness of imaginary countries, but their creation of alternatives in turn calls into question the nature of the recognizably 'real' world. This is especially so if the narrative voice the writer adopts is not only a migrant's, but a child's too. Both Amelia Batistich and Yvonne du Fresne make prolific use of child narrators — subversive agents who in their access to two worlds can scrutinise and expose the conventions of both. To write as a child and to write as a migrant may in fact be to write from the same position: each has a similarly proportioned relationship to the wider world as a diminutive and diminished voyager in a land of assured and complacent giants who are alternately patronising benefactors and oppressors. And so the child's voice has an appropriate tone — incorporating both acute perceptiveness and bewilderment — to be a mouthpiece for the migrant experience, as this excerpt from a prose poem by the Polish Australian writer Ania Walwicz reveals:

before they were big i was small they could do things more than me ... we were all wrong here i was the translator i was the mother of my mother they were more helpless they were useless nervous didn't know what to do ... i was bigger than them my parents were again small old children they were heavy for me they couldn't do much you are helpless useless.¹⁵²

Although Walwicz was born in Poland and emigrated to Australia as a teenager, the position and voice she adopts is open to anyone. And the poem also indicates that the very tone and diction of the chosen voice is as revealing as the subject matter of which it tells.

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Russell Haley, Real Illusions, p. 122.

¹⁵² Quoted in Sneja Gunew (comp.), Displacements: Migrant Story-tellers, (Victoria: Deakin University, 1982), p.2.

For the New Zealand migrant writers I have been discussing, the number of available voices is increased by the very strong oral traditions both inherited. From the myths of the Nordic world and Dalmatia, from the traditions of singers and skalds, from the legacy of tales with the power to bring 'golden people ... into the narrow room ... [so that] we will see the great world',¹⁵³ both Yvonne du Fresne and Amelia Batistich borrow some of their idiosyncratic narrative techniques and voices. And by the presence within their stories of these oral talismans of other cultures and other times, the potential of migrant writing to achieve a flexible, fantastic narrative quality is again indicated. It is this quality which must be held in equal measure with their faithful and appealing representation of migrant life when the contribution of these writers to New Zealand literature is being considered.

Perhaps it is true that the migrant writers I have been discussing have not yet committed themselves as fully to the outsider's interrogative viewpoint as, for instance, some of Australia's migrant writers have done. Certainly, their narrative methods (particularly du Fresne's) show at times an innovative and flexible quality, produced largely by the way the narrative is moulded to suit the voice which utters it. But the overall impression from reading a range of their stories is of an unwillingness to depart to any considerable degree from traditional narrative models. For example, none of New Zealand's migrant writers have yet explored the potential of the prose-poetry mode of Ania Walwicz's migrant's interior monologue, alternately halting and eloquent in its rhythms, exploiting the implications of the lower case pronouns and lack of punctuation. So far, the New Zealand migrant writers' exposure of the world they view from the outside has rarely been especially angry or bitter in its revelations (apart, perhaps, from some

¹⁵³ Yvonne du Fresne, 'My Bedstemoder', *Farvel*, p.101.

of Renato Amato's migrant stories, pitched in an anguished and lonely voice). Perhaps this tendency to defuse criticism and anger through wry humour in du Fresne's case, or a gentle optimism in Amelia Batistich's, reveals the writers' own positions in relation to the world their migrant characters scrutinise from the sidelines. Perhaps there is an element of inhibition, a reluctance to make damning revelations or overt criticisms when the writers themselves are not fully detached from the mainstream culture or fully identified with a migrant group — a considerably more ambiguous position than that occupied by Ania Walwicz, for instance. Both Amelia Batistich and Yvonne du Fresne may feel that they belong at least in part to a world beyond the limits of this country's national boundaries, but they are simultaneously defined and contained to a considerable degree by its territorial limits. And it is from reluctance to be seen as transgressing these boundaries and undermining this country's established terrain that Yvonne du Fresne finds she must ask herself 'how really honest'¹⁵⁴ she can be as a migrant writer, how deep her pen can dig. It is perhaps a question which every migrant writer must at some point confront.

The European migrant writers I have focussed on are not, of course, the only New Zealand writers who are exploring and exploiting the possibilities of writing from an outsider's position, of interrogating the mainstream from a vantage point at some distance. Recently, several non-European voices have emerged — Polynesian, Asian. And several of New Zealand's Maori writers speak from places at a similar distance from the dominant culture and its distinctive voices — in doing so, their short fiction also becomes a subversive tool, digging up the previously undisturbed soil and exposing it to the light. They, and other writers willing to speak from positions of exclusion, are making their voices heard in

¹⁵⁴ Conversation with author, Appendix B, p.234.

ways that command attention. Collisions are produced in their stories — not only the collision of narrative elements which is so distinctive a hallmark of the short story form, but colliding voices, collisions of the real and the imaginary worlds, collisions of the present and the past. In the pliable, dislocating narrative texture that may result (Patricia Grace's 'Journey' for instance, or Ian Wedde's 'Paradise'), the stories interrogate and undermine the conventions of the known and comfortingly familiar New Zealand, the official country which traditional fictional viewpoints (predominantly Anglo-Celtic and male) have for so long revealed.

And this is the welcome contribution migrant writers bring to this country's literature. The increasing availability of alternative voices and territories within the fixed geographical and cultural entity we call 'New Zealand literature' attests to the accuracy of a comment (quoted earlier) made by the editors of Outrider — that 'cultures, like oceans, can never be so wholly filled that more cannot be added'.¹⁵⁵ Their work enriches this country's literary ocean not only by surveying previously unexplored territories, but by the new voices in which its discoveries are disclosed — bringing new tones, new cadences, new rhythms, new harmonies and dissonances.

And while this contribution brings innovation and novelty it is not a literary aberration, but part of an established continuum. For these migrant voices and the new songs they are singing can be seen to be responding to a persistent concern of New Zealand writers throughout this country's literary history, from Samuel Butler to Janet Frame. It is a preoccupation with accommodation, with the quality of the relationship between the individual and the community of which he or she is a part, whether through compulsion or choice. New Zealand writing has for

¹⁵⁵ Outrider, 1, No.1, 1984.

much of its life reflected the concerns of 'shifted people',¹⁵⁶ immersed in the business of fitting in, trying to find an arrangement between their distant cultural inheritance and an inhospitable environment, physical or social. New Zealand's contemporary migrant writers share this preoccupation, and in doing so, announce their genealogy and confirm that they are part of this country's literary tribe. Perhaps Maurice Duggan's narrator in 'Along Rideout Road That Summer' sums up best the tribal preoccupation when he suddenly finds, in the sight of his mother struggling to put on shoes two sizes too small, an apt metaphor for his own similarly uncomfortable situation -- wandering between childhood and adulthood, trying to fit in somewhere between the narrow New Zealand of his direct experience and the new territories he is starting to glimpse within it. He gives voice to what is perhaps the common predicament of all such unfixed wanderers -- New Zealand's migrant writers amongst them -- when he discovers: 'this profound cultural problem affecting dramatically the very nature of my inheritance, nines into sevens in this lovely smiling land'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Bill Pearson, op. cit., p.137.

¹⁵⁷ In C.K. Stead, (ed.), New Zealand Stories, second series, (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1966; rept. 1976), p.63.

Appendix A

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in 1915 in Dargaville, Amelia Batistich was the first child of migrants who had come to North Auckland from Zaostrog on the Adriatic coast of Dalmatia. Zaostrog is a small, hilly village, perched between the sea on one side and a forbidding wall of arid mountains on the other. At the time her parents left Zaostrog, its inhabitants lived in much the same manner they had for centuries, relying for a living on their olive trees, goat herds, fishing and vineyards. It was a poor community controlled by a Church of relative wealth. But the power of the Church existed alongside an older faith with its roots in pagan times — stories of vilas, spirits and magic had been kept alive through the generations and have an enduring importance still.

The combination of poverty and constant oppression exerted by the Austrian Empire (of which Dalmatia was nominally a part) prompted escalating emigration during the end of last century and the beginning of this. The first emigrants went to America and their reports of the prosperity possible there impelled rapid, more random migration — to Australia, South America, New Caledonia and New Zealand. The men who had made the first moves into the New World became established and wrote home to their villages for wives, whose arrival gave a sense of permanence and purpose to migrant life. Dalmatian villages were reproduced in other small enclosed communities on the other side of the world, communities

which retained the conventions, social structures and traditions of those they replicated.

Amelia Batistich's father, Ivan Barbarich, arrived in New Zealand in 1896 and worked in the North Auckland region -- digging gum, farming, doing construction work. He returned briefly to Zaoztrog in the ominous months prior to the outbreak of the First World War, staying long enough to become engaged to the sought-after daughter of one of the village's most prominent families. A hurried return to New Zealand was necessary, as the threat of conscription into the Austrian Army became increasingly imminent. His wife-to-be, Milka, soon followed and they were married in Auckland. During Amelia's early life, her father owned a quarry which was on the family farm at Waihui, although the family lived in Dargaville. They also ran a boarding house there, catering mainly for new arrivals from Dalmatia, young men known or related in some way to the family, and local Dalmatian bachelors.

Amelia's early years were spent living between this strong Dalmatian community, in which the Old Country was created for her out of her family's memories and stories told often in Serbo-Croatian, and the local Convent School where she was a weekly boarder. Her secondary schooling was also at a Catholic boarding school, Saint Mary's in Pukekohe. The two worlds had strong influences on her later writing, both instilling in her a love of story-telling, music, and poetry from a rich mix of traditions -- Dalmatian and Irish.

At the age of eleven, the family moved to Auckland where Amelia Batistich has lived ever since. In the harshest years of the Depression, theirs was the focal household in a fairly poor Dalmatian community living around her father's quarry at Mt. Wellington. This secure sense of being part of a large migrant

community was very important to her -- it was here that she met her husband Tony when he was employed as the quarry's manager. But since marrying and moving into East Auckland suburban life, and more recently since the deaths of her parents, Amelia Batistich has had little regular close contact with the Dalmatian community. Her lack of contact with the Serbo-Croatian language is something she particularly regrets -- her children are not bi-lingual.

Her first stories were written in 1948 as exercises for W.E.A. writing classes. Her attempts to get them published were instantly successful, two stories being accepted within weeks of each other by The Listener ('Street Corner' and 'Roots'). Over the next few years, her stories appeared also in Arena, Here and Now, Northland, and New Zealand Weekly News. Most explored Dalmatian migrant life in New Zealand, interweaving her own observations with stories she had heard about life in Dalmatia. Others dealt with Maori characters, particularly in Northland.

She soon became a regular writer of children's fiction for the New Zealand School Journal, and wrote for the magazine over a span of twenty-five years. She was frequently asked to contribute material on minority groups in New Zealand; Chinese, Maoris, Bohemians, Indians, Scandinavians, Dalmatians. She is now somewhat amused that her own migrant background was seen by some as sufficient proof of her authority to write about any other 'foreign' groups. But it is an experience which has left her with a deep interest in migrant and ethnic literature, particularly that emerging in Australia, and she is critical of the fact there has been as yet little New Zealand writing which reflects the variety of New Zealand's cultural mix.

Writing for the School Journal still left Amelia Batistich with sufficient time to explore other forms of fiction. A collection of her short stories, An Olive Tree in Dalmatia, was first published in 1963 by Longman Paul, and since then she has written many more stories that have been published in periodicals here and overseas, and broadcast on the radio. A number of the stories explored ideas which she was subsequently to develop in her novels. Another Mountain, Another Song (1981) grew out of a story 'Hearts, Flowers and Cabbage Trees' written in the sixties, while her second novel, Sing Vila In The Mountains, (not yet published in New Zealand) developed over about ten years from some of her semi-documentary work for the School Journal in the fifties.

This most recent novel grew erratically and sporadically 'strung together like a rosary'¹⁵⁸ is how the author describes its birth. Initial interest in it by publishers succumbed to financial pressures and the author herself lost enthusiasm for it. But in 1980, it was the object of attention from the Yugoslavian Emigrant Society which was planning a series of publications entitled 'Our Beautiful Homeland', in which they intended to present work by Yugoslavian emigrants and their descendants from around the world. Her novel was translated into Croatian by a teacher of English at Zagreb University, Dr. Kesic-Safar, and in 1981, Amelia Batistich was invited to go to Yugoslavia and attend the launching of the book. She sees this trip as the highlight of her personal and professional life as a writer — a return to a 'Home' she knew only through the stories and memories of others, yet which was as important to her as Dargaville, her much loved childhood home. It was with considerable and complex emotions that she listened to her novel about Dargaville read in Croatian in Zagreb. Her pleasure was more than just personal gratification — the publication of the novel in

¹⁵⁸ Letter, 5/5/85.

Yugoslavia was also a gift to her parents, now long dead.

At the time of writing, Amelia Batistich is considering once again the possibility of having this novel published in New Zealand. Her desk is covered with manuscripts of stories, ample for another collection which she says would be 'much better'¹⁵⁹ [than Olive Tree]. She admits to laziness and a lack of enthusiasm for getting this work published, not to mention family commitments which she finds have perversely increased with the years rather than diminished. It is to be hoped that she will continue to publish, as her recent work seems to increase in strength and subtlety. She does not write solely about migrant life — 'The House of Love' published in the recent anthology of New Zealand Listener short stories is a fine example of this.

Her appraisal of her writing is characteristically modest — despite the fact that in 1984 she was honoured by the Auckland Branch of P.E.N. for her contribution to New Zealand writing. She stresses that she is compelled to write only by the sheer pleasure of doing so, not by any desire to proselytize or theorise about migrant experience. In trying to explain what returning to Yugoslavia meant to her, she finished simply by saying 'I think the story [The Woman From Hercegovina] will tell you this'.¹⁶⁰ And this is the sense in which Amelia Batistich is a writer — it is through her stories, through gesture and suggestion, that she evokes an impression of migrant experience, rather than presenting it in bald diagrammatic form. Her own assessment of her career is simple and shows a devotion to a craft rather than to a role; 'I wrote for anything that would publish my writing, took the money, and enjoyed the writing. It was good.'

¹⁵⁹ Letter, 18/6/84.

¹⁶⁰ Letter, 25/8/84.

This is my sixth battered Olivetti -- my alter ego'.¹⁶¹ And she takes as her motto a comment made by the nineteenth century Dalmatian poet, Fra Andrija Kacic Miosic who in response to criticism said merely, 'who likes my songs, let him sing them; who does not, let him make better'.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Letter 18/6/84.

¹⁶² Quoted in conversation with author, Appendix A, p.213.

CONVERSATION WITH AMELIA BATISTICH, AUGUST 30th, 1984

M.S. How did you make a start as a writer ?

A.B. I always enjoy my answer to that question put to me on public occasions -- my first piece of writing was on the back page of Best Bets! It was actually about a dozen verses -- I'd hesitate to say it was a poem -- and was to do with a race horse called Brookby Song. I was too shy to put my own name on it. But when I saw it, oh my goodness! When my Dad was dying, the week the verse came out in Best Bets, he kept saying 'read it again Amelia, read it again' -- he loved the horses. But the first stories were really in The Listener and in Arena in 1948 . I had two accepted [by The Listener] within about three weeks -- it was a dream! And then it dropped dead and I had a job getting anything through [to The Listener].

M.S. Has telling and listening to stories always been important to you, something you were exposed to a lot as a child?

A.B. My aunt by marriage -- she was a great story-teller. She came to New Zealand in about 1923. She didn't come to marry my uncle - my mother had other plans for him, but Uncle Jack made up his own mind when he saw the girl Ivyka. She was a cousin of my father's who came to stay with us, and had been brought to New Zealand by her brother... Anyway, she did marry my uncle, and she told me these stories. They were really real to her - the presence of these vilas in the mountains, and the witches. Because of course this was their only entertainment when you see how their life was in winter - nothing to do but sit around the great stone stove there, and someone would tell stories. And she would have listened as I was listening in Dargaville.

But I didn't have these legions of aunts and grandmothers and I envied schoolmates who had legions of relatives and grandparents. I never knew my grandmother -- she was a story to me.

M.S. Did she come out here?

A.B. Baba Manda? No. She had nine children, widowed ... But she would have coped. She had to bring up all those children and look after her inn and land.

I have this cousin [born in Dalmatia] and she came to visit me -- talk about head-on clashes! But we loved one another. Amelia's a rather witching sort of person, and she believed she had these powers -- and I'm not sure she didn't! She was born in Dalmatia, and sent to Australia and married there, lived in Darwin on the opal-fields -- her husband was killed in a mining accident and she was left with two children.

But she had this strange witching power. She told me stories of the old country -- of Grandmother, her own mother, the vilas and the witches in the mountains. [She told me] how in the Old Country, in all that grinding poverty, she'd wait for parcels to come from New Zealand with dresses I'd outworn, and had worn them feeling rich as me -- the lucky one in New Zealand, 'Zealanda', as she called it. 'The wheel turns round', she'd say, piecing together an invisible jigsaw. By this stage when she came here, she was rich and I wasn't! She wanted to buy me everything -- it was a sort of a payback: in a way, out of generosity and love, and in another way, 'it's me who can now give'.

Anyway, one night she's talking about these ghosts and goodness knows what. She said the rain had never fallen on her face. And I took her to the trots at

Alexandra Park and as we were coming home, a few drops of rain fell. She was incredulous about this -- she said, 'the rain on my face!' After, she told me that the rain never fell on her, like some magical power she had. And this particular night she was talking about ghosts and goodness knows what, we really clashed because I would not believe in her magic powers. And she said I was only a writer making life up, but she was living it ...

Anyway, she said 'You don't believe it? I'll show you. Wait till midnight'. About midnight, I heard the doorbell ring. At first I thought I was dreaming, but then three times it rang. There was no-one there, but I swear I heard footsteps on that lawn. There was no sign of her - she hadn't got up. And the next morning she was wanting me to ask about it, but I wouldn't. But out of this, I wrote this story. ['The Jigsy Puzzle'].

M.S. Is story-telling something that's very strong in Dalmatia?

A.B. Oh yes, and witches and vilas are very powerful in the stories and songs. The vilas are enchanted fairy women who steal children and keep them with them in the mountains. They also have the role of Proctresses of their villages -- there seems to be a Queen Vila, like the Queen of the Willis, and the song 'Vilia, Oh Vilia' also echoes this power.

[Here Mrs Batistich showed me a copy of the Serbo-Croatian translation of Sing Vila In The Mountains with a picture on the cover depicting the Croatian Mother, holding a single loaf of bread while surrounded by the hungry faces of her children. The painting is by the Yugoslav artist Mladen Veza, who also designed the mountain motif on the cover].

All those hungry little faces; the hungry children and only one loaf of bread.
That is emigration, the reason for the emigrants.

M.S. She's a Mother Country figure?

A.B. Yes, the Croatian mother. It's very confusing - Dalmatia is part of Croatia. But as a child, I didn't know about Croatia - we were always known as Dalmatians in Dargaville.

Dalmatia's very ancient - it was ancient Illyria. In Plutarch's Lives, the first honour Caesar was given was to be a kind of Governor of Dalmatia and the right to levy a hundred thousand soldiers, Dalmatians having been conquered by the Romans. They were the troops he took to Britain. They were originally Celts - they would've been fairly hardy types and some of them stayed.

Most of the early emigrants from Yugoslavia came from our region on the Dalmatian coast and from the nearby islands round there, because it was a chain migration. A relative would write and say, 'I'm doing alright out here.' And one would hear the other and they would come from that region. But nowadays of course, they're coming from everywhere.

M.S. From the area your family lived, did they go mainly to New Zealand or to America and further afield as well?

A.B. Oh yes - they went to America, to Australia ... My father was supposed to go to New Caledonia, but he didn't. I don't know how he got to Auckland, but he came here instead. And I have more relatives in America than I would have in Yugoslavia. My Baba Manda's descendants - at one place [in America], they

had a Thanksgiving dinner with over a hundred of her descendants. In fact my brother visited New York State, and in one town where my uncles and two aunts went, I've got sixty cousins. They would send them so very young then. It was this idea of the golden land -- to send back money and also to establish them there.

So we are scattered all over the world, and we feel we are related to half the world... But they went mainly to Australia and America, to South America -- Chile, Argentina. I remember reading in this Yugoslavian paper this old man writing and complaining that his grandchildren were Argentinians, not Yugoslavs. How can a Yugoslav be an Argentinian? It seemed so strange to me. But then I thought of myself and all the others; well we are Yugoslavs -- and New Zealanders. That weightlifter in Australia, the millionaire -- he's a Yugoslav, but he is also Australian.

So they're everywhere by now. Since the war, they've come to New Zealand from all parts of Yugoslavia. But at that time [the time of her parents' emigration], there would be very few. You see, it was Austria then -- my father's passport was an Austrian passport. He came here as an Austrian. They weren't politically conscious - they were mainly very young. This movement for separation from Austria was growing, but this Croatian identity - [the wish] to be part of Croatia -- wasn't strong in my family, and not very strong in many of the others. There were a few families (in Dargaville) that did identify ... But we were the Dalmatians: when they said 'speak Croatian' we called it Dalmatian, and 'Dalmatinski', the dialect we spoke. It's not even pure Croatian -- it's mixed with Italian. There's a strong Italian influence because of the long post-Turkish Venetian rule.

M.S. So if people came from further inland, they'd speak differently?

A.B. They'd speak a different dialect, a purer dialect. Mind you, from when I was there and from my reading now about how English has infiltrated all the other languages, if you didn't know the Croatian word, you just took the English word and gave it an ending — weekend cottages are 'vikendica'. Looking at a Yugoslavian newspaper, you can practically read it from the English. English is infiltrating every language in the world.

And in New Zealand, what we spoke here became a pidgin language. Dalmatian speakers, born here as I was, or living here — not the newcomers since the war, but the older ones — they will speak half English. But they've turned the words — 'vawkia' for 'walked', and so on. This is why the language has changed. So if I went home and spoke in that language they would wonder what it was. I'd be pretty safe now though because they all speak either English or German as second languages.

It's a very highly educated country now — in fact it's possibly over-educated. You see, after the war education was made available for all and suddenly people who couldn't read or write — their families had the opportunity. All they have to do is pay for their board, but the education has been free right to university since the war. And now, a high percentage of their secondary students are graduates. Therefore they do speak two or three or four languages. And finding jobs for them! A lot of the ordinary migrant workers commute between Yugoslavia and factories in West Germany, coming home for weekends — that's stopped now with the hard economic times. And that had brought a lot of prosperity to Yugoslavia, and brought a lot of money.

When I went there I had to speak at this gathering, and I speak [Croatian] rather haltingly — I'm out of practice now. The language I'd learnt as my 'mother tongue' is there, but for the moment I was tongue tied. Then out it flowed. The Croatian I was speaking was different from my listeners', but they understood me and I understood them. With education and change, language changes — village dialects have gone, the mother tongue has become adulterated with English, mostly, and German. I am speaking a language that was spoken when my parents were there.

M.S. So it's quite outdated?

A.B. Yes, and even my relatives were quite fascinated to listen to it. This is the changing pattern of language you see — it's happened in French Canada for example, hasn't it. At first I thought, 'what am I going to do?' But then out it flowed — they understood me ^{all right}.

The translation of my novel [Sing Vila In The Mountains] by Dr Kesic-Safar was superb. You wouldn't believe that she could translate the English idiom and get the flow of the English that I wrote. I couldn't believe it when I read it and when I heard it — an actress read a chapter from it. I'd just been handed the book — I hadn't even seen it — and I couldn't believe it! Tears ran down my face because to translate Dargaville into Croatia, into Zagreb which is a very cultured city — it's no village. To translate that, and to have people hearing about Dargaville — because I love Dargaville — it just seemed another world.

M.S. The one who translated it, had she ever been to New Zealand?

A.B. No -- she's a professor of English at Zagreb University. She'd translated American writers. She did write me for some of the words and expressions, which I sent her. Nevertheless, it is incredible -- I can almost hear the English, the rhythm of the language that I wrote.

[Dargaville] is my little world that I grew up in, and that is the world of that book. That book should be published, but it has a problem now I think in New Zealand, if only for historical reasons.

M.S. In that novel and in many of your stories, you express what seems a very deep affinity with Maoris. Where does that stem from?

A.B. Well, that would come from Dargaville. I had an aunt, half Maori and half Dalmatian, and her children would have been the only children I knew who were part Maori because in the convent school we didn't have any other Maori children. There were Maoris in Dargaville -- everywhere you went you just saw these lovely smiling faces. They all knew my father, and there were Maoris on the farm next to ours ... So I grew up loving them -- and also my father looked like a Maori, he was often mistaken for a Maori. On one election years ago, so the story goes, he was walking down Victoria Street -- they used to have a different day for Maori elections -- and a Maori woman came up to him and said 'who are you voting for, eh ?

I remember Mum's face when Dad told her -- I don't think she favoured our dark complexions. She had a kind of mystique about her own fairness -- she was very fair, milk-white. My father was very dark -- I am like him. But I am really my mother's girl. I think I held off from her -- it was my father I identified with, this lovely dark laughing man. My mother had the correcting job, which mothers do have, you see, so they come off rather worse.

Once when my father brought me to Auckland, Sir James Carroll was there at this hotel, and Dad was there and they used to play cards together. Sir James Carroll was a Maori and he looked so like my father -- I would never go and sit on a strange man's knee, but I went and sat on Sir James Carroll's knee. And now when I see his picture up at the trots when I go up there -- to stand and look at it because he still looks like my Dad to me. And I always say the Maoris, wherever they came from originally, they came via Dalmatia.

So in that novel [Sing Vila In The Mountains] there are Maoris in it. There's none in Another Mountain because there were no Maoris here in Auckland at that time -- none that I knew. The only Maoris you saw were if you went down to the racecourse -- you'd see the old wahines, old kuias with their black scarves and smoking their pipes. Or else they would come round in the Depression time with a kit of kumaras to exchange for clothes. They were country Maoris and the only ones we ever saw in Green Lane. It wasn't until the war and we suddenly saw the Maori battalion soldiers, and they moved into the city.

But I do associate the Maoris probably with my father's laughing disposition. I suppose he wasn't -- I imagine he wasn't always laughing. He was probably a hard man in business. We had the quarry in Mount Wellington, and his workers -- all Dalmatians -- earned their pay. But he always got on well with the Maoris, so I liked them too. Still do.

Bella in Sing Vila was a real-life Maori woman. She was part of our home in Dargaville, our washer-lady we called her. A big laughing woman, always chasing us kids out of her wash-house, handing out sweets and slaps, talking to the wash-tubs as she worked and me all ears listening in. I think today some

readers might see her as a caricature or stereotype, but she is warm in my memory. Of course, as you write you take over the character — it's fiction, not documentary. The same happens with my Dalmatians — again some readers [Dalmatians] would see them as something other than they wish to be seen as, but a lot of us were like that — I just listen to my daughters and their friends relishing the characters they knew, enjoying the memory recalled to life. Now last night I re-read an A.P. Gaskell story, 'The School Picnic' — you couldn't write that story today. You see times have changed — we've got very sensitive at looking at how we really are. I would say there would be some Dalmatians who would not like the way that I wrote about some Dalmatian characters. For instance, old Taddi [a character in Sing Vila and in an earlier short story, 'Hearts, Flowers and Cabbage Trees'] who wasn't real — he wasn't one real character, but he was a composite character, fictionalized but true in essence.

M.S. Why might they not like them — for the same reason, the question of caricature and stereotypes?

A.B. Yes — there was a stereotype like Taddi, this large expansive person. But it's not an empty stereotype — it was very typical. There were Taddi-types. Now, stereotype is a bad word.

I would have had several instances of someone like this character [Taddi], a cousin who married my beautiful Maori Aunt Mary, who I loved. Beautiful, soft voice — gentle, she was, while her husband was loud and gruff, just like Taddi. And such people would have had Taddi's attitude to religion — they came out here [New Zealand] and the first thing of course, they tossed out the baby with the bath water. They weren't going to church any more — there was no church, and therefore there was no God or priests.

And they would look back on the Old Country — and they had reason, too — and they would say, [the Church] got all the land and we were poor.' Bit by bit the monks had accumulated the best land in the villages, and then they had to pay them tithes — not so much money, but so much wine, so much oil. I remember my father telling me he had a grievance against the monastery because they always got the pig's cheek if they killed a pig, the best part of the pig such as his cheeks and ears. They got the best part of the bacon too.

So [the migrants] came, not irreligious, but anti-religious. Anti-clerical. It happened throughout Europe too — France, Italy, everywhere. The women missed the church very much, but the men didn't. The young Ante Kosovich in his poem 'From the Dalmatian in Exile'[1906], he does bring this in with great beating of his breast. He laments the fact that he's got all these things on his soul and he can't go to confession because in this pagan country of New Zealand there's no Catholic church. He didn't even know about Saint Patrick's — he must have come to Auckland, been taken up Queen street and seen all the Protestant churches but no-one took him to Saint Patrick's. A godless race! And then he must have heard the Salvation Army band — he said, not only do they have no Catholic churches, but they're luring you into the churches of their false religions; lions and tigers were not as fierce as they, and their banners with tigers. But I think what he really saw were the patent medicine stalls and that tiger balm thing, because he associates tigers with it. And these dreadful 'Lutherans' — the Protestants were Lutherans.

To the Catholics of Dalmatia whose lives were lived in their own simple villages, the only chance to get out was for the men when they went on their army service and their experience of the world was broadened. But the women

mainly stayed there or were married in the next village, or went off to America as letter brides. But the only other religion they knew was Lutheran. When my grandmother wanted to say 'you're so wicked, you're beyond salvation', she would say to my mother and to all the children, 'Lutheran!' You see, that's the word they had for 'Protestant'. And my mother once found me reading a book about Martin Luther -- she thought the Devil would walk out of a book about Martin Luther. So you see, you have these attitudes ...

The men were very much in revolt against these attitudes -- very few of them held to their religion. I suppose it was this new freedom, away from the control of the priest -- and the fact they had no women with them when they first came here. The women lamented the churches not being here. But old Ante [Kosovich], he ended up a very devout Catholic and took the collection plate around in St. Patrick's Cathedral on Sundays. He was very religious in his old age -- a pillar of the Church. At the same time, he was a great admirer of Marshall Tito and the partisans, so I don't know how he worked it all together.

M.S. In what sort of form has the Church survived in Yugoslavia since?

A.B. It's very strong and it's very powerful -- it's powerful in the villages. In Zagreb especially -- Croatia is ultra-Catholic like it is in Poland, and it'd be a political instrument too. But I thought there were more nuns visible in Yugoslavia than I see here. The streets are full of them, and goodness, they are so beautiful! It's almost as if they need to enter a beauty contest to enter the convent. But they do have churches there -- it's not been officially banned and co-exists peacefully. The members of the Communist Party probably wouldn't go. But it will be a long time dying out because of the villages. My niece spent

time in the villages with her husband and she said the power of the priest there was so intense that when she was going to Mass and wanted to receive Communion on Sunday, the women said to her, 'you can't go to Communion because you didn't go to Confession on Saturday and the priest will know!'

It will be hard to work out, and they don't want to work it out either. Of course they have beautiful churches and all the wealth of the churches is well displayed; beautiful gold monstrances, vestments, beautiful paintings. And of course, they're a great tourist attraction too — you see all this. I saw it in my mother's village too. It did cross my mind, I must say — all this wealth, and all this poverty. However that poverty's gone now — they don't live that way any more. It is gone.

M.S. To what extent do you think the socialist revolution has been responsible for rekindling a strength of Croatian identity, something that writers and other artists — both in Yugoslavia and in migrant communities elsewhere — can draw on?

A.B. Yes, they do have a very strong identity. For instance in Dalmatia now, you never hear the word 'Dalmatian' — you'll hear them say 'Croatian'. Yet I will stay Dalmatian till I die because that's the way I was raised. In Dargaville, we were the Dalmatians, and Dalmatia is our ancient name — it's Dalmatia in the Bible, and it has been Dalmatia in history, and it's a geographic term. But again, we're different from Croatia — Croatia is a very beautiful country. It's incredible. Of course, it's been part of the Austrian Empire — it's part of Europe and the land is so fertile and so cultivated. I couldn't believe the beauty of it as I went through. I expected to be mesmerised by the Adriatic because after all that's my

land, it's where I come from, and when I saw it, it was a tremendous feeling. But Croatia! And I was never one for saying Croatia -- I didn't like the sound of the English word. 'Hrvatski' [Croatian] -- that was different, but I'd far rather it be 'Dalmatian'. But Croatia really got to me -- it's Europe.

M.S. Growing up as part of an immigrant community, did you feel that the rest of New Zealand was 'English'?

A.B. Oh yes, we still do -- you know, 'he's married an English girl', not 'New Zealand'. And of course, they could be Irish or Scots. But with us, we could identify pretty strongly with the Irish because we were Catholic. And never in my school, I was never made to feel that I was any different or worse than the others -- except in the playground, but never by the nuns because they were the Irish Australian Order of Saint Joseph's. In fact, being mostly top of the class -- except for the time I had to wear the dunce's cap... I don't forget that, walking across the playground aged six to meet my father when I was boarding in the Convent. I had to wear the dunce's cap right across the playground and he was wondering what on earth this was. I was wondering too -- I think I couldn't make my pothooks right, or something like that.

I did identify very strongly with the Irish because of course it was my upbringing -- all those Irish songs we used to sing. My son was born here -- this is the Harp of Erin of course [a part of Greenlane]. My son when he was about eight or nine said on Saint Patrick's Day that he had to wear the ribbon -- a bunch of green ribbon. And I said, 'what do you want to wear the ribbon for -- you're not Irish!' And he said, 'of course I'm Irish! I was born in the Harp or Erin, wasn't I?'

So [Irish and Dalmatians] do have this affinity and have married. Sometimes they might marry the real English, but usually it was someone of the same religion -- Catholic. Or Irish or Scots -- yes, we identify also with the Scots. It could be some sort of Celtic throwback too. But the fact was that Britannia ruled the waves, and we were not British -- it was a very strong feeling.

I found that music the other night, 'Land Of Hope And Glory', which I do love, and I used to sing this without realising it wasn't my song. The flag you carried when the Governor General came -- you did all these things, but yet you were aware that it wasn't quite yours. And when I went to Dubrovnik and the Dubrovnik Festival -- which is a great European music festival of arts, Shakespeare, opera, traditional folk dance and song too -- and it was the first time I had ever experienced a ceremonial of my own people. It was something, that great opening ceremony. All my life it'd been 'God Save The King' (and now 'Queen'), and you're watching the Trooping of the Colour on T.V., and you're identifying with the royal family. But this was a new experience -- something that was so ancient and mine!

M.S. In your stories, there are some instances of New Zealanders associating Dalmatians with Germans and Austrians -- especially during the War -- and of the confusion and hostility that grew out of this. Was there much of this sort of misunderstanding and prejudice?

A.B. Yes, well there was -- and in the Second World War [also]. That novel [Another Mountain] is not altogether autobiographical. It is based on my young life, so you recall events and characters, but the story takes on a life of its own. I see it as a political novel -- the Depression made a great impact on our lives,

Uncle Scrim and all that we shared with our English neighbours. It's based on experience, so you remember things from it.

In the First World War, Austria fought with Germany, and it was from living through the War and even before the War that there was fear of the Austrians. Fear of the foreigner has always been very strong in New Zealand, but it's not now for suddenly we've become very interesting with all these Vietnamese refugees and earlier post-Second World War refugees. And now we have restaurants with exotic foods of every nation, and cook with garlic and olive oil — it's all the in thing. But I'm all for roast beef on Sundays, though!

This word 'foreigner' and this word 'Austrian', I used to hate. I didn't ever associate it with 'The Blue Danube' — that was about the only Austrian thing I knew. I just thought it was bad, something bad. I did quarrel with my very best friend. She just told me as a matter of fact that we'd been on the German side in the First World War. I didn't believe it — I'd never heard of this. It hadn't really registered in my Dargaville childhood. We had a bitter quarrel about this — I didn't speak to her for six months! I didn't realise it but I knew, because by that stage the War wasn't so much remembered in my early years. It was a time of peace. But there would be factions in the town that would not like the Austrians who were fighting with the enemy. But I remember walking along the river bank and thinking about the war, that there had been a war. And it seemed to me that it had been ages ago.

M.S. Throughout your writing life, what sort of connection have you maintained with Yugoslavian or Serbo-Croatian literature?

A.B. Nothing before I published the Olive Tree stories. Some years after, the Embassy began to send me these papers that I get from Yugoslavia regularly now, and I began to read them, and to read their poetry. I haven't read Ivo Andric in Serbo-Croatian, but I read him in English -- The Bridge on the Drina is my most-loved novel.

I recognised in that book this folklore, the stories my mother told. Because what I had was given to me orally and it was this folk-memory thing that got to me. You see, they weren't book people -- my mother could read and later she did read in English, but in those days she wouldn't have had very much time. In fact I used to be taken to the pictures to read the captions on the silent films for her and for the young Dalmatian brides when they came to Dargaville, and I liked this very much. So we didn't have books, but I had this oral tradition -- listening to stories, listening to the songs and growing up amongst it.

In fact, it probably came to me much later than then -- when I was older, when we did actually go to live by the quarry where there was a Dalmatian community. Because I had been at boarding school and away from [the Dalmatian community] from the time we came to Auckland to live until I was about seventeen or eighteen. Then I was suddenly thrust back into it and it fascinated me. I couldn't get enough of it. I didn't work -- I used to help the nuns to teach because you couldn't get jobs in those days anyway. And my mother would sit by the stove or the fire and I'd get her to sing to me, or say those poems to me. And I drew tremendously on that. I have been reading [Croatian] since, but I don't read as easily as I read English, though I'm getting better all the time and getting to know the richness and quality of the great Yugoslav writers.

M.S. Do you think this oral tradition was a direct influence on your own writing, both about this country and about Dalmatia -- before you'd even seen it, when it was more of an imagined country than a real one?

A.B. I'm sure -- and the people. My mother would sit here at this very table I'm sitting at now and she would start to talk and you would think that she had never left the village of Zaoztrog. She would talk to me -- for instance, that story about Mara Bella, about her cousin with the beautiful hair ['Living' in An Olive Tree]. She'd just be telling me all this, how when she washed her hair the women would come out saying 'Mara Bella is washing her hair' -- the mystique of the fair-skinned, golden-haired people, I suppose. So out of this, you build these stories. And she made it so richly alive -- as if she'd never left Zaoztrog.

I had this aunt also, the very opposite of my mother because Mum had lived down by the sea and that's a social distinction. But Aunt Ivka was with the poor families up in the village. She was actually a goat girl, and so she had this other side of the story. She would tell us stories too, very powerful -- she was the archetypal Yugoslav battling woman, rooted in her peasant origins. She would have made a great partisan. In fact, in that story 'Homecoming' which is in Olive Tree, -- where they both go Home and find that ruin there -- that's my aunt and uncle too. She described it to me. But mind you, on the other hand ... She had this soft heart -- generous, she'd go digging toheroas and send them to us in Auckland. And then she'd tell you what she thought of you enjoying her toheroas and laughing at her ingenuity in getting them to us -- and recklessness! She was a clever woman and probably she could have done with education -- she didn't have the chance. Her children are all very talented.

[Showing a photograph of olive trees in Cornwall Park, Auckland]. These are the only olive trees I knew. It was looking at those trees that made me write that story 'An Olive Tree in Dalmatia'. Their twisted trunks — that's the memory of the olive trees of the way they grow in Dalmatia and Greece. They twist to the wind and the weather, and here they do the same although we do not have that weather. I love them - they're beautiful, like dreams. Sort of grey.

M.S. What about your fiction that doesn't directly deal with migrant characters or migrant experience — 'The House of Love', for instance which was included in the most recent anthology of short stories from The Listener?

A.B. I'm glad too, because I'd like to be remembered for something else beside the Dalmatian stories. I perhaps like that story better than any because of the connection it has with my love of the Ellerslie race-course, not just for the racing, but for the crowds and the beauty of the trees, the ambience. I walked past that particular day and there was this beautiful wall of sunflowers in a garden by the race-course. And that scene on a brilliant sunny day, the trees near where the horses parade — it's beautiful. It's now become down-graded — I don't know what's happened to it. They don't dress up for it any more — jeans or any old thing goes. But this particular day, I'd seen this woman and I'd probably seen myself too — I'd seen everything and I wanted to recall that day. So I sat down and wrote that story and I liked it. In the house of love that I remembered in that story — it was their house [showing photograph of a large Dalmatian family]. They were so poor — she's a New Zealand girl and he is Dalmatian. They were poor and lived in this little cottage where they raised a big loving family. The week I wrote the story I had been to see her daughter and I looked at this picture of her mother and I remember saying to her, 'you were lucky; yours was

a house of love'. I had never known love to be such a palpable thing as in that house -- that whole family was bonded in love. And it was that house that somehow I connected into that story, the house of love.

M.S. It seems that in most migrant literature there's a very close association with particular environments and landscapes, a strong 'sense of place' -- would you say this was true of your work? Are there particular places which you feel very strongly about, which your fiction keeps returning to?

A.B. I love Dargaville -- when I see the Wairoa River, something comes to me. That grey, muddy swelling, huge river -- and when I see it, the excitement! And I felt that same thing when I saw the Adriatic and they're miles apart. Even though I'd never seen it before, I knew it, I recognized it. Even when I put my first step on Yugoslav soil, even in the Belgrade Railway station. There, all the people are tourists but they're mainly Yugoslavs going to the coast for holidays. Suddenly, you look around and every face is like yours, and you hear this language. It's your mother tongue, although you don't speak it any more -- but as a baby I would have spoken that before I spoke English.

[Showing a photograph of coastal Yugoslavia]. Here are the mountains -- stony! You wouldn't believe the stone and you wonder how people live there. In between, they wall what earth there is with stones and hoard every inch of soil -- and there's abandoned olive groves, growing untended now. It's urban drift and also education -- the great factories, the employment in the city. They no longer live in these houses -- for one thing, they're unlivable. It's earthquakes and war that have done it.

Only one old woman is there -- an old woman who refused to leave. She sits here in one of these houses, all on her own in black, and I was lucky enough to get a glimpse of her. And she sits there with her cat on her knee and looks down to the sea. She will not leave, and look, she could be a sculpture by Mestrovich, the great Yugoslav sculptor, one of the greatest in the world -- Rodin taught him. And she could be a sculpture of his because his sculptures have a tremendous energy -- it seems to me to be a Yugoslav thing. Probably it isn't, because you get it in Michelangelo -- but in Mestrovich's sculpture you feel the energy almost bursting out of the bronze. And she sat in the silence. Silence, I say, but the silence is a million locusts. And that's all she listens to all day. It's been written of her that she won't leave the place because she listens to the voices she once heard -- she said that a thousand people lived and worked around there and they're all gone, 'but I'm listening to their voices'. She will not leave, and they bring her food. She lives in this derelict place falling down around her, locked in memories.

I met her contemporary down in the village. Her son is a professor of law at Zagreb University and he's built this lovely home, a chalet type house by the sea in Zaostrog. The old mother lived with him and has since died, but the other old lady is still alive. When I saw her there, she's just huddled in her black -- lonely for the life and the people now gone. I was talking the way she talked, the language I learnt from my mother. She talked easily to me -- she didn't want to die but there's not much for her there. She was most unhappy, but she was probably happier than being uprooted. At least she didn't have to go to Zagreb and live or go to America or somewhere.

[Showing photographs of her parents' village]. These houses are in groups -- they are the setting for those stories from Zaoztrog. They're in family-name groups - second and third cousins, they spread out. This is where people have left from -- up in the mountains, there's nobody left. It's abandoned. Only the children come to Zaoztrog for the long summer holidays in the new houses by the sea.

Down by the sea it's still occupied, mainly by people with summer houses, and tourists. When I got there it was just like New York to me -- crammed. Thousands and thousands of bodies all over the beach. I came down at night from the mountains with a rather hair-raising taxi driver. I'd never seen such a press of people -- I thought it was like going to Times Square, it was just crowded. And what welcomed me in? A transistor playing 'Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley!' It's just so changed. And the taxi didn't get out of the way of the people and the people didn't get out of the way of the taxi. All the stalls around the side -- the gypsies come down from Bosnia and they're selling curios, trinkets, fresh fruit, melons and everything. It doesn't have a hotel but it's got a big camping ground. The campers who come there are probably more from Europe, from Germany and Austria.

And then there's the monastery. There weren't very many monks there -- there was one older monk with a cross on his lapel, and a young monk in jeans with a cross on him. They use it as a sort of holiday place for young monks and for young students too.

[Showing a photograph of a fortress above Zaoztrog]. That's right on top of the mountains and they believe there's the hand of a woman who was walled in the castle walls still visible -- they believe it's her hand in agony. But of course

it isn't because this was a centre of Mithras worship -- very old, thousands of years old. That was pagan worship, pre-Roman. When I saw the picture of it first, it frightened me because it looked to be just so much the anguished hand, as if it were grabbing. They do have this legend of the woman walled into the mountain when they were building this fortress. The walls would fall every night and the vilas said 'the walls will fall, they will never stand until the wife of one of you is walled into them'. But this legend also comes up in Irish mythology, in fact it comes up all through Europe. It's probably an old Celtic thing because they were Celts there originally.

The house where my mother was born -- you can still see the terraces where the young men used to come and steal carnations, but [the house] is a ruin now too. My witching cousin told me that my grandmother had twenty-seven keys. My mother was about twenty-one when she came [to New Zealand] -- she was what they would call in those days an old maid. But there were very few men in those days to marry -- there was someone in the village who wanted to marry her, but she wouldn't marry him because he came from up in the mountains and he was poor.

When I got to Zaostrog, even when I saw the mountains as we were driving in, I shuddered because they loom above you. But when I got to this particular one, Viter, it's called, and I was driven right up under it, I just couldn't look at it -- it's overpowering. And of course you sense the vilas locked inside them, you really do, the singing vilas like my aunty heard. I really believed in them! And then as we got out of the car, some sort of thorn caught at me. It's worse than bidi-bid -- it not only caught the outside of my dress but it caught all inside it, petticoats and everything. It held me there and I couldn't have got away -- I

really believed in the vilas then! And there's this old stone library still standing deserted there, and written on it is the name they gave it, 'Vila Vitera' — the vila of Viter. I really believe that the vilas had me fast, such is their power.

[Showing a photograph of modern Zastrog]. There's how it is now — with the new houses they've built all along there. They come here for the summer, but some of the people live there all the time and just live off the proceeds of the summer — that's the older people. But all the children live somewhere else. They won't build on the mountains any more because they are not safe from earthquakes. So the government gave them loans and they built houses down lower — the modern age has arrived there now.

M.S. With such a good response to Sing Vila in The Mountains in Yugoslavia, why haven't you published it here?

A.B. It was to be published by Longmans, and was well recommended. Phoebe Meikle was the editor and she was keen to publish it — and when it was just about to be accepted and published, there was no money. Luckily for me, because I wouldn't have got this trip — it's the greatest thing that has ever happened to me, this trip to Yugoslavia. It's like it happened to Cinderella.

And to see it published — at that launching I was thinking of my father and mother leaving there and I felt, now here they are come back. Because it is theirs — the story is of their life in Dargaville. Had [Longmans] published it, I would not have gone — [the Yugoslavs] wanted the first publication. So I was very lucky then.

Not long after Another Mountain was accepted, Bert Hingley took over the editorship. He liked Sing Vila, but the sales of Another Mountain weren't encouraging enough -- they've only sold about two thousand copies. I think the publicity was wrongly directed -- it is a story of a Dalmatian girl, but it's Auckland of that time too, it is Auckland. And Aucklanders have rung me and written me, from Remuera's heartland down to Orewa, saying 'where can we get it'. They can't get it, and if you can't get a book in the shops, there's a reason for it. I don't know, but I do know that I myself have been there looking for it in a hurry to give to somebody and haven't been able to buy it.

M.S. How did it get written?

A.B. Aunt Mildred and Uncle Taddi began life as a short story -- 'Hearts, Flowers and Cabbage Trees' -- I wrote it for real fun, and I really loved it. Then out of that and out of my feeling for Greenlane, because I've lived here since childhood and we have had so much part of the life here and the church down there. When you're living where you were living as a child, you're never the old woman that's walking along -- you're walking in the tracks of that child. I was so sad, because here all the houses are going, there's cars, places taken, the buildings are shut, the people -- everything's destroyed that was once real Greenlane. It was a lovely place and I wanted to put it all back.

That's what set that book going -- and of course there was all I remembered of the Auckland of my young days. I worked in a second-hand bookshop for a time, for a character of a book-seller -- what a man! No book he hadn't read, nothing he didn't know-- the bookshop was a chaotic place, books every where on the floor, piled high to the ceiling.

And I loved Auckland, and I loved the memory of Auckland, the memory of Queen Street as it was -- I don't like the place now. And we had so much to remember of a time that's gone -- you know, of Christmas as it was, with the shops all decorated up, even in the Depression time. Now, all this mirror glass and these huge glass mausoleums -- so strange and faceless and soulless.

I graduated through many jobs -- worked for lawyers, and when my children were older, worked in the city five years as a copywriter. So I got to know Queen Street very well, especially working for the lawyers and I had to go round all these funny old offices -- it was like Dickens' day. They've gone now -- these dusty looking offices and the files and the little old ladies sitting behind them. That was my Auckland which I loved and that's gone -- when you're getting old, you feel like you've lost track of everything.

M.S. Since the fifties, you've written a lot for School Journals, particularly about minority groups within New Zealand. How did that come about?

A.B. Well, now you've got Yvonne du Fresne and you've got Maori writers -- we didn't have them then. No one would ask me to write those stories now, but I did write these bulletins, about Chinese, Indians, Scandinavians, Maoris, Rarotongans -- I would have to be their voice. I wouldn't attempt them until I'd really felt myself into them, and I'd got to know the people too. The very first story I wrote for the Journal was a Yugoslav folk story. Probably after the second Listener story, they asked me if I would write a series on the gumfields. This'd be about 1954. After that I was commissioned to write about minority groups and about the Maoris -- we didn't have the Maori writers then.

And in the seventies when I was working at Training College, there was to be a pilot book for the ASPAC countries, to be translated. Then ASPAC fell through when the Kirk government came so it never got used for that, and so it was put out as a Bulletin. It would have been checked. But I used to feel when I was writing about the Dalmatians, that I'd come to know them, that I was one of them, but with the others I had to work hard. About writing the Maori stories, I remember how I would think myself into the Maori consciousness — it is after all my own country I write about. But now, this 'pakeha' thing has got into me ...

I was working in the Training College Library then, and I had this wonderful opportunity for background material — the Normal School was next door. This boy — I can't remember what his real name was, Maui anyway [the character in Maui Comes to Town, 1975]— and I could go there anytime and I had every help from everybody.

I'd walk around Mount Eden, full of all the old houses — now practically all gone. I found this house, and I thought, that's where I'll set my family, my Maori family who comes to town. I'd look for faces and I'd see this woman every night — perhaps she was working. She had the right face. And they were building the new Secondary College and this wonderful Maori construction worker became Uncle Tama. So I had all this resource material — I could read and read and read. I never attempted to do anything before I read and read and soaked it in, until I thought I was Indian, I was Greek. But nowadays ...

Why have we got no Jewish writers in New Zealand? All this wonderful writing that's coming from Australia, New York, London. The Bulletin publishes a supplement of Australian writing, and they're very good. I hope I don't die before

I see my story in The Bulletin because I've loved The Bulletin right from its very early pink days — they have writers from all the main ethnic groups. Wonderful writing — Australia has got this richness and they do encourage it.

I know why it hasn't happened here — there's no money in writing. Well, there wasn't — there is now if you're lucky enough to get grants or good sales, if you can hit on something that's a best-seller. There is plenty of money now given to writers and I'm not one for this business. They're having a Sargeson trust to encourage young writers — I don't believe in it. I think, if you're going to write, you're going to write. It was hard for all of us — but if you're going to write, you're going to write. Look at the writers who did . I've known many writers and I've known what they've had to write against, and I've known with myself too — working at home, a full time job, writing at night, getting up in the morning. It's something you've got to do. What I think they should encourage is publishers.

M.S. Publishers willing to take greater risks?

A.B. Well they do take risks. About the ending [of Another Mountain] — the Listener reviewer got it wrong. 'Peace ever after' — I meant the irony of it, because we had no peace ever after. How many wars since, the nuclear umbrella ... I was part of the Catholic Peace Movement here when I was working on that — I took over the secretaryship for a while. This had been a sort of a lifetime commitment of mine. And that was never meant to be read like that — I'd debated that, and thought about it, 'peace ever after'. I just wanted people to think about the 'peace ever after' that we've had. Take that whole book — it's anti-war. Ketty's questions about war were also the questions I asked much later

and thought about. It wasn't meant to be a sentimental bright-eyed ending — it was meant to leave you thinking about war. But I don't forget — my eldest son Anthony was a little boy in a pram or a push-chair, and I stood outside Satchell's bookshop looking at an open map from Life magazine. It had a map of the Soviet Union — this was the late 1940's with the war hardly over, and it had targets of where they were going to atom bomb the Soviet Union. It stayed in my mind, and ever since then, there has been so much talk about war — we're beyond salvation. And that's what I thought then and still think now.

Our great poet, Andrija Kacic Miosic — he was the abbot of a monastery in the nineteenth century, a great Dalmatian poet who collected poems of the Slavs and in fact dedicated them to Prince Potemkin, whom he looked to as saviour of the Slavs. They must have criticised his poems because of what he did — he took the people's voice and wrote them in a simple way, rhymed so that they were poems people could remember. They weren't literate, they didn't have book knowledge, but they could commit them to memory like the Irish bards and like the Maoris did — they rhyme and flow easily. So that's why my mother could sit here for hours and say and sing them to me — it was wonderful listening. Anyway, he must have been criticised for this, for the simplicity of his poems — he was a great scholar, but he did this deliberately. He said to his critics, 'who likes my songs, let him sing them; who does not, let him make better' — and I say it too.

M.S. From your work with School Publications, what sort of dealings did you have with James K. Baxter?

A.B. Jim Baxter commissioned from me a bulletin [in the 1950's]. And he came here -- I can still see him now, coming up the steps, slouched with his duffle bag on his back. My mother had just died about a week before. He sat there, and we became friends and corresponded for some time. I like his comment in a letter to me about my story 'The Gusla' -- 'are you sure that it's not you who is out on a limb Amelia?' But this bulletin, when it came out, I was so furious -- the pictures were not authentic, they were copied from a book I later got hold of. They're German photographs -- William Stubbs is a famous illustrator of children's books, and he copied them. He probably thought in this benighted country, they'll never know the difference, they'll never see them. But why he'd copy them I don't understand -- he's a fine illustrator. But he did and I was wild.

I was wilder still when I read the Bulletin proof of 'Olive and the Vine' and saw that Jim had written into it an incident where the girl burns her hand on the school stove. Later I read in Education his own memory of burning his hand on the school stove. When the proofs came, I remember Jim writing to me 'change anything you want to -- but for God's sake don't'. Alistair Campbell took over as editor from Jim, and I liked working with Alistair and did a lot of work for him.

'Maui Comes To Town' was the last Bulletin I did for School Publications -- Dave Francis commissioned it. I had about three weeks to do it -- I remember doing twenty-two hours at a stretch on this. He wanted it in a hurry and there was no-one else to do it. Well that was then -- now we have fine Maori writers, Witi Ihimaera for one whose first story I remember in The Listener, and Patricia Grace is another. In the stories of Yvonne du Fresne, I recognise a Northern light, and again, I do feel a kinship with the stories of Renato Amato, because I recognized that world -- we are of the warm South.

I remember reading the Sargeson story, 'The Making of a New Zealander' when it won the Centennial Prize. I recognized the setting -- as a girl, I knew that farm and those boys. I met him once at a Yugoslavian function in Henderson. He said to me -- and I don't think I've ever said it to anyone else -- he thought I'd written at that stage the best story in Arena. Still, no one ever mentions 'The Exile'. So I told him that I'd always envied 'The Making of a New Zealander'. But then after a while, I didn't like that story -- perhaps I resented that he would write it. I don't know -- I read it the other day, and it really is a good story.

And now, looking back and knowing those young men that became wealthy farmers and owned businesses -- they've all done very well. As a family in Dargaville, we didn't know the hardships of the gumfield Yugoslavs -- we lived pretty well. My father was comparatively prosperous, but I did visit the gumfields and the early farms, and I knew of my mother's first reactions to her new country and of my father's beginnings in New Zealand. The story 'Parenga and All' is of the first year my mother spent on Tangowahine -- 'crying woman', well named! The cottage painting on my wall reminds me of her first home -- poor, but a palace compared with the sack shanties the early women lived in.

M.S. In Yugoslavia now, how much interest is there in the migrant communities scattered around the world, and in the Yugoslavian migrant literature that's being written?

A.B. They're very interested in New Zealand in Yugoslavia -- they have an Emigrant House in Zagreb, a focal point for returning Yugoslavs, American and other emigrants and their descendants. They offer bursaries to the children of

emigrants, for language and cultural study, and they would have the most comprehensive library covering the history and writings of New Zealand Yugoslavs and other emigrants.

One of the New Zealand Yugoslavs I went with has been commissioned by a very wealthy Yugoslav from Australia to do a history of the Yugoslav people in memory of his dead wife. He's been working on it for about twenty five years, but now all this money's come to light to do it.

It's interesting to me that Yugoslavia is so interested in the emigrants. Television New Zealand went to Yugoslavia to make that documentary film 'Kiwi with a Dally Heart' about the return of Fred Gerbic the M.P. to his native village. They're very interested. I had a letter about a month ago from somebody from Ryeka in the northern Adriatic, and he sent me a story which his friend had written. They must have been replaying some of the television which they did when I was over there, and he'd seen me on television. He didn't know anything about New Zealand, where it was or anything, but he sent this magazine. Kalendar is a wonderful publication — an annual anthology published mainly for the Yugoslav emigrants, in several languages — in Spanish, in English and in Croatian. Its function is to keep the emigrants in touch with the homeland and with each other. Certainly they get money from it, but they're also genuinely interested and want to know what happened to the emigrants.

And the people want to know. There would be a million of them in America and in South America, right down to the tip. They went to Brazil, they went to build the Panama Canal — some of them were shipped out to do that. They went with such high hopes — some did very well, some didn't.

My cousin told me that when she was in Kalgoorlie, there was a riot. They said that a Yugoslav had done something and there was an absolute riot, and Yugoslavs were killed by Australians. They still had this foreigner thing — it was actually an Italian who had killed the man. But now Australia's got to come to terms with its massive ethnic minorities. A girl in Adelaide University who's doing her thesis — her name is Batistich but she's no relation of ours — she's been writing to me and she's been working on this ethnic thing. Actually, a group of Australian Yugoslav writers and artists are publishing a book of Australian and New Zealand writings — I sent them that story 'Grandsons', and was awarded the prose prize for it which will be published in English and Croatian.

I like to read about New Zealand in these Yugoslav publications, and got quite a buzz when I saw my 'Open Country' piece, 'To Dargaville With Love', published in the 1983 Kalendar — I like to think of Americans reading about Dargaville. I did identify very strongly with New Zealand when I was in Yugoslavia — the older people were delighted to hear me speak Croatian, my style. One old man said, 'stay here and marry me!' and I said, 'but you've got one wife'. No, he would have two, he said because 'you can speak!' They couldn't get over the fact that we had been born [in New Zealand] and still speak the language, the language the old people could understand. I remember a dear old nun in Zagreb when she heard I was from New Zealand with tears running down her face, exclaiming 'how far our people have gone!'

So you do identify as a New Zealander, and yet you are a Yugoslav — and I did like being a Yugoslav in Yugoslavia too.

M.S. Do you think you'll go back again?

A.B. Well, time's running out. I think I could go — they really made quite a fuss and said I could come back any time I liked. The Minister of Education said to me 'any time you want to come, come'. But something like that doesn't happen twice!

Appendix B

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The small rural settlements and flat farmlands of the Manawatu Plains formed the environment into which Yvonne du Fresne was born in 1929. Her early years spent on family farms encouraged the responsive, imaginative relationship with the land which has since emerged strongly in her fiction. Simultaneously, her contact with the insular social life of small-town New Zealand developed in her a sharp awareness of being part of a migrant group viewed with suspicion by the predominantly English community on whose fringes it lay.

In a recent interview, she commented that 'the English ... didn't want to know at all. They didn't want us to be different and often they became very irritable if they found we were different ... they had no idea where we came from'.¹⁶³ Meanwhile, the Danish migrant community observed them 'with sharp eyes'¹⁶⁴ but were nonetheless reluctant to display their cultural difference too flamboyantly - 'we were told by the families not to talk about our Danish background, not to be different or exotic'.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Conversation with author, Appendix B, p.226.

¹⁶⁴ Unpublished essay.

¹⁶⁵ 'Daring to be Danish', New Zealand Listener, 23 May, 1985, p.24.

Yet Yvonne du Fresne's family were not new arrivals to the area or to New Zealand. Her paternal grandfather, of French-Danish Huguenot descent, had arrived in the country in 1890 and established a building firm in Palmerston North. Her father's mother had arrived in New Zealand from a small village in South Jutland which had been occupied by the Prussians in 1864 — the rigours of this occupation drove some Jutlanders to emigrate to New Zealand where, according to Yvonne du Fresne, they hoped to find the freedom to be Danish. Meanwhile her mother's family — which included Shetlanders and Scots of Scandinavian descent — had come to Nelson as some of the district's earliest settlers. The family and the Danish-French Huguenot community which grew up around them were instrumental in the development of dairy farming in the Manawatu, using techniques they brought with them from Europe. They were also founding members of the Lutheran Church, and had particular interests in education and in music.

The influence of this diverse family background on Yvonne du Fresne was strong and enduring. She grew up with a keen awareness of Danish history and traditions, although she was not fluent in the language. The community retained a deep commitment to their homeland — something which especially during the two World Wars was regarded with considerable suspicion by their English neighbours, who the author says were apt to confuse anyone of European descent with Germans.

Although during her childhood and adolescence, Yvonne du Fresne wrote stories, 'rubbish ... mostly descriptions of things',¹⁶⁶ her energies were mainly directed towards music and acting. She chose teaching over singing as a profession,

¹⁶⁶ Unpublished essay.

and after Training College in Christchurch, she was posted to a District High School in the King Country. Many of her pupils were Maori, and it was in this environment that she deepened an affinity with their race of which she had always been conscious, and which was to emerge later in her fiction. As a child, her family had told her Maori stories and legends as well as those of their own homeland and she recognised connections between the two races which were confirmed by her experiences as a teacher: 'I loved those children because they were the same as us. We shared a history of the sea. We knew our ancestors. They responded to stories and music, to emotion'.¹⁶⁷

But she had still made no serious ventures into fiction although some early stories were published between 1950 and 1956 in Arachne, The Listener and Numbers. Apart from these, her teaching career consumed her attention for some years until she started writing again while working as a Lecturer in Music at Wellington Teacher's College. Until this time, most of her stories had not drawn directly on her migrant background. Her models included Katherine Mansfield and several English writers - Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Taylor, Elizabeth Bowen - fine writers, but foreign to both the New Zealand life of her direct experience, and to the European world she had inherited and knew imaginatively.

In 1968, however, with encouragement from Robin Dudding (then the editor of Landfall), she began to write stories based on the Danish community she had grown up in - 'nervous, because I thought it was 'showing off'.¹⁶⁸ Several were published, and she received encouragement from both the Danish community and the wider reading public. This kindled in her renewed enthusiasm, but also

¹⁶⁷ 'Daring to be Danish', New Zealand Listener, 23 May 1985, p.25.

¹⁶⁸ Unpublished essay, p.7.

amazement - 'When I realised that people wanted to hear about my Danish community, the uprush of pride was like a floodgate ... People found the stories very funny and I realised there was a whole race of New Zealanders I hadn't met'.¹⁶⁹ She found that readers were intensely interested (and a little disturbed) to find that another world —the world of the European migrants — existed within the country they thought they knew so well.

In 1978, she was awarded the New Zealand Literary Fund's Scholarship in Letters which enabled her to write full-time, working both on stories and on a novel based on the Manawatu Danish community. She was invited by Radio New Zealand to write a series of stories about a young girl at primary school, and the strongly autobiographical collection, Farvel (1980) was the end result. Her novel The Book of Ester was published in 1982, and a second collection of stories based on her childhood experiences, The Growing Of Astrid Westergaard, appeared at the beginning of 1985. Amidst this productive period of writing, she made her first visit to Denmark where she lectured and gave readings of her work. At present, she is working on another book, a historical novel whose action moves between nineteenth century Denmark and New Zealand in the early years of European settlement. She is enthusiastically anticipating the opportunity to write fulltime when she retires from her current position at the Correspondence School in about three years, and already 'has ideas for two further novels'.¹⁷⁰

This increasingly productive output of fiction is attributed by Yvonne du Fresne to one major factor: 'I found my voice, that abrupt Danish clonk: a bird falls like a stone out of the sky (clonk)'.¹⁷¹ It is the distinctive tone and cadences

¹⁶⁹ 'Daring to Be Danish', New Zealand Listener, 23 May, 1985, p.24.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

of this voice which make Yvonne du Fresne's fiction a unique, and enriching addition to New Zealand writing.

171 Ibid, p.24.

CONVERSATION WITH YVONNE DU FRESNE, JUNE 2nd, 1984

M.S. What sort of progression is there between Farvel and the most recent collection -- are you saying things which you were unable or unwilling to say in Farvel?

Y.duF. No -- this will be more in future stories really where I should say things a bit more sharply than I have. You know, sort of Ibsen-like stories -- I don't know why I use the word Ibsen. They'd be more folk tales, tough folk tales, the real Jutland ones that people don't often see because they're not translated. But these stories [The Growing of Astrid Westergaard] are about oddities in the community, men and women who had strange backgrounds, who were exotic sort of people -- like 'The Woman From Norway' for example.

There's another one about the Slesvig-Holstein War, you know, how the refugees from it dashed into New Zealand. My grandmother always used to say 'Ah, the Proo-sians!' -- she used to pronounce Prussians as 'Proosians' -- 'the Proosians have driven us out!'. And they'd stayed there until 1876. But they'd got out of their village in Egvad as soon as it was occupied, and fled just north to Haderslev which is a big cathedral city. My grandmother was baptised there at that cathedral, and that was the cathedral I put into The Ship, which was a radio play last year.

I was always curious about who the Proosians were -- I used to ask her what they were like and she'd say [they were] 'men come calling on their horses, and they never get down from their horses but just shout, and never knock on the door like good Christian men'. There was a dreadful old Englishman down the road who used to sit on his horse and shout 'Mrs du Fresne,ma'am' or 'Mrs

Clausen, ma'am, one of your heifers has strayed into my maize patch'. And I thought, aha — there's a Proosian.

I took a look at her one day — she would never speak English in front of people she didn't like, especially in front of Germans. Queen Alexandra was just the same, she had this maniacal hatred of the Germans which lasted all her life because little Slesvig was always being taken — it was pretty lousy. Rotten Bismark! It was a very modern occupation, like the Gestapo, and every night more and more young men would vanish — they actually swam their way across a convenient little river. If you got called up into the German army — well, you disappeared. You went off and fought their wars — some of them came back. After the Slesvig-Holstein War, they were sent to Russia to prison camps for a long time — for three or four or five years.

But that was rather tiny really [in the context of European history]. You see, no one knows about Denmark. It's a small country and it hasn't done anything extraordinary. It's got Hans Andersen, makes good cheese and butter, has very skilful farmers, and we've had the Vikings. Oh, and it makes marvellous wooden stuff, a lot of good glass, good porcelain, lovely furniture. But it's not a huge country, yet it isn't picturesque like Switzerland with great mountain peaks and things. It's so flat and unless you're a Dane ... I mean, when you say the word 'Dane' to people especially in New Zealand, they flinch a bit because they've been brought up on the Vikings as little kids. Or 'Dane' seems to be such a harsh Northern sound. You say 'Dane' and 'Prussian' and both names sound the same and they have the same effect in many ways. So, nobody would know much about the Slesvig-Holstein war — I mean, you mention it and people just don't know what you're talking about. It's a very small country.

M.S. When you were growing up, living as part of an immigrant community, did you feel the wider community just didn't want to know about your past, about where your people came from?

Y.duF. You mean the English? They didn't want to know at all. They didn't want us to be different and often they became very irritable if they found we were different, which is strange.

[For instance] Our Christmasses ... Christmas Eve was an important time, with the Christmas tree and our Christmas dinner. It was a bit mucked up because it was late night in New Zealand, so you dashed off and did your Christmas shopping and then you came home. The Christmas tree was in the house and it was all ready for you, behind locked doors and then you walked in, and you walked round it and sang to it. Then you kissed one branch, because it really was not a Christian symbol but a symbol of our land because greenery is very very important to us. Even though people say the Germans invented the Christmas Tree, we had spruce garlands stretching back to the dawn of our history. That's the symbol of our forests, the green at the turn of the year which suggests the sun won't desert us, and also of our 'great earth' as they say. The candles on the tree too — they're a symbol of beating back the dark. Candles are very important to us, to all Scandinavians. Then you got your presents, and you bowed and thanked your mother and father for the year and for having you, and then you had a glorious nosh-up.

So English people would say 'oh, are you hanging your stocking up dear?' and I never knew much about this stocking business — I always thought it was for poor little children from London who had no chance of having a tree, and who for some reason had to hang up a stocking. And I was very frightened of Father

Christmas — he seemed to be a dreadful unpleasant old man who was terribly fat and had not eaten the right food. Our Father Christmas is 'Julmande' and he comes in a sleigh drawn by white ponies at about three o'clock in the afternoon of Christmas Eve. He's dressed in crimson from top to toe, a medieval costume — cloak, hood and pointed boots. And he's met by the Mayor — he's the symbol of bringing light into the country. Every town in Denmark has the same Julmande coming at the same time. So I didn't know why this English Father Christmas had to get down the chimney — it seemed mad, and I didn't know how he could. The reindeer seemed cheapened reindeer — they weren't our reindeer of the North. It was all wrong — [the English] seemed to have an attitude to Christmas that it was the presents and the stockings.

And a very strange expression would come over their faces when they found we had this strange way of celebrating Christmas, a sort of frightfully prim look. In those days, everybody was madly trying to be English in our particular neck of the woods in the Rangitikei, so their voices were always frightfully artificial and what they fondly thought was upper class English — and they were surrounded by a lot of upper class English. ... And they'd say, 'that's a very strange thing, a strange time to be having Christmas! I mean, you must remember dear, you're in New Zealand now — we're English. We always hang up our stockings.'

And it was sort of thrown away as 'that nonsense' — it was half heathen, and a very bad thing was that they almost put us on a par with Eskimos or people who literally lived in hide tents and followed the reindeer. They had no idea where we came from. I don't think they even associated Hans Andersen with Denmark, and Hans Andersen translations were very bad at that time,

awful. So we were half German and therefore wicked, and half terribly primitive and even more wicked.

Because we had things like eel -- [the Danish immigrants] really missed those things and they smoked them like the Maori. They had a lot of food like the Maori -- and so we were the people who ate raw meat and raw fish. If [the English] were faced with any of our food, I've never seen such panic -- 'no thanks!', and if they inadvertently ate a bit, often they looked as if they were going to be ill. It was something about tasting another culture -- they were all like that, of any culture in those days. It took the War -- you know that bit I've got in Ester where she's gone to Cherry Taylor's house and they've played 'Remembrance' and 'Robin's Return' on the piano, and Chopin's 'Raindrop Prelude' and the water shakes off the roses. Then over afternoon tea which is so lovely -- they have all the little doilies -- and then the talk gets onto 'our boys overseas' and Ester always closes her eyes and prays that nobody will say their boy's gone to Europe 'where they'll break their poor awful teeth on our black bread'. 'Overseas' was [seen] like that -- and they'd write back 'these people do so and so' as if the people were absolute aliens. It was just isolation that had done it.

M.S. So while most of the New Zealanders you were living amongst were New Zealand born, they still thought of themselves as English?

Y.duF. Yes -- and some would have been second or third generation, because on that side of the river, on the Rangitikei side, there were descendents of Scots settlers who had settled in Parawanui and Turakina -- they'd come down from Turakina. ... There were big farms around Flock House and all the way into Bulls, and they belonged to families. ... The land was extremely good -- they

were pretty wealthy and they acted like run-holders, sort of a little Canterbury. Rangitikei's a bit like that.

So for the years that we were there it was interesting to me, and I loved the village -- I've put a few of those streets and funny little houses and things in the new stories because it was a Milly-Molly-Mandy world -- it was sweet. But the people were not sweet, and I didn't have the intelligence to realise that. I read years later, in The Observer or somewhere, that some English author said his idea of Hell was to finish his life in a sweet old English village. It was the most crazy, bleak and vicious place you could possibly live in. And when they were cruel, especially to children -- children were not liked in those days much at all. It was a sort of microcosm of old New Zealand -- there were still old drovers who were going through with great herds of animals as that was the main line north, Highway Number One and we were right on it. And you'd see a drover in the distance and if he saw children, he'd just stand up and scream himself hoarse with rage to get us off the road. We were only six, tottering along, terrified of these great steers and horses.

I think they disliked almost everything, some of them. They were all frightened of each other -- they were all jockeying around in that village for social position. They could never pronounce our name, and they were trying to haul themselves out of the old English society and into a more equal New Zealand society and they were always very aware of the wealthy families in the district.

The first generation that had come, everybody in New Zealand was pioneering together -- all they wanted to do was to cut that bush down. My great-grandparents made the trip to New Zealand even though they were well

above the age that people usually came but they just couldn't bear the fact that their village was over-run again. There was no way out of that Occupation — it went on till 1920 before we got that land back. [My great-grandparents] didn't leave until 1876, and they got here in 1877, and times were so rough.

And the sons of these two were very concerned about the bush being cut down. You see, they were very intelligent farmers and they knew about water tables and uncontrollable floods if you got rid of all the ground cover, because they came from marshy areas that had to be drained. A lot of the Jutland plains were recovered for farming. One of my French ancestors was a great heath man — a man who brought back hundreds of acres of worthless heath to be good farming land, but still preserved the wild parts of Denmark and got the government to take them over as State Parks so that people could see their land. And we were worried that these pioneers were cutting every stick down because they were frightened of the bush and they were land-hungry — and they didn't understand that underneath that was pug, quagmire.

I had one grand-uncle who spent his whole life watching the main drain, and his diary every night was 'up two centimetres' or 'down half a centimetre' or 'very nice tonight'. Then there'd be lovely gossip in broken English — oh it was sweet. I put it in Ester. He says of his wife — 'she bring home today new blouse and little teapot. Mor came over, we had coffee party with little tea pot. Main drain down to something or other'. And then I put something like 'let the winds roar, the main drain is alright. But watch the skies — you never know what's going to happen in this new country'.

So they did things like putting aside land — you know Totara Reserve which is just out of Palmerston North? Well, that was fourteen acres of original

bush land -- kahikatea and a little creek, everything that had been there. That was part of the Clausen land, so Grand-Onkel Christian Nikolai who was on the Palmerston North City Council for years, every month got up and made his little speech -- he did it for five years -- and said that the people of Palmerston North must remember what their original land looked like, and he was presenting it to them free. All they had to do was put a fence around it and a notice -- but they wouldn't accept it. They were very suspicious. He finally got them to accept it. He also said that their fencing was far too rigid and they should rotate their paddocks a little more successfully by using movable fences which were later electric fences. He also said they were wasting far too much land by these enormous road verges which were expensive to keep mown and looking nice. He went on to all sorts of things -- pig production, and grain-fed pigs. They were very good ideas, but nobody would listen to them at all!

So you found that the Danish houses would often have patches of bush on them, and when you were a child you'd be pushed into the bush and you'd have people like Onkel Henning who'd get very very sentimental about the trees -- he'd talk to the trees. All the little boys in my father's family would be taken out camping. I used to have a lovely picture of grandfather du Fresne, with an enormous apron from his neck right down to his ankles and a cook's cap on. He's got a big spoon and he's standing triumphantly beside his camp oven. He used to make scones -- they were a New Zealand delicacy, 'sconns and rosts'. I always remember asking him, 'what is a rost?' and he'd say 'pt ... pt... pt; the fat spit'. All these little boys would have to camp out in the bush, they'd make them keep awake after dark and they'd listen to the morepork and all the sounds of the bush.

They had a very religious feeling towards the land. They were the only people I knew who were not frightened of the bush. There were a lot of old New Zealand bushmen though who grew close to the land -- English boys who'd been brought up in New Zealand. Pioneering times were very democratic -- it was marvellous. Oscar Clausen who's a very social old cousin of mine can remember the marvellous picnics they used to have, and nobody minded who was foreign -- they were all first generation, and it was lovely.

And then I noticed in this book called Saga in Sepia -- it was Shailer's photographs that were published, and his grand-daughter Valerie Smith who wrote it realised that something had happened to the people [in Palmerston North] when the town got bigger... Blinds started to be drawn, curtains across windows -- everybody became suspicious of their neighbours and all that camaraderie went. The Maori were once more relegated to the outside, as frightening people. Whereas a lot of the early settlers had had to live beside them and they had learned a lot of Maori customs. They were frightened in the Hau-Hau Risings, because of course there were rumours in Rongotea that there was going to be a Maori strike, and there is a story that two thousand Hau-Haus did get down to Foxton, which I'm going to put in my new novel. I think that just might be true -- they didn't really know what to do when they got there. They just frightened the pilot at the river mouth out of his wits, and they left after two days, but it was terrifying.

So [Palmerston North] was a peaceful place and then it suddenly changed, I suppose around the nineteen hundreds. It stopped being just a tiny little place, because it didn't get going till about the eighteen seventies. There was a big depression in the eighteen nineties, when my grandfather du Fresne turned up.

And then after that, the city became larger and people didn't know each other. But Oscar often remembers those days — when he gets with old Danes, I just sit quietly and listen to them, 'Do you remember we used to go to the old Tiritea Reserve? It was so fine!' they'll say, 'so fine!' But no more.

M.S. In the stories, there's a constant sense of a connection between Danes and Maoris — how did this develop?

Y.duF. Yes — I think it was just relief to get away [from the English]. I just wrote a page yesterday [in the new novel] — Frederique goes to a Maori pa. She's there when the Slesvig-Holstein war has started and her young man is a cavalry officer, and she's had a dreadful waking vision, which a lot of Danes from our area have — they're a fairly superstitious lot. Often, they can tell in a rather sick muddled way that something bad is going to happen. They don't go round with second sight — they're very close to the earth, very astute. She's with an English missionary and she's got to be a young lady — well she is a young lady, but she's feeling a little bit constricted because he's helping her over every stone and always asking if she's all right on her horse. Her father's with her and she's frightened about the situation in Europe and the missionary doesn't seem to understand what on earth it's about, though he's the one who's brought the rumour.

She's rigid with fear, and then she gets to the kainga where there's an old woman who comes to their little school because there was a missionary there years before. I wanted to make a nameless missionary coming through to give an idea of the terrible hardships that a lot of those first missionaries went through. And he's disappeared, but he built a tiny little hut and they now use it for her

Academy, her school. And she's met by this old Maori woman, and the Maori women come out of the pa to greet the missionary, not Frederique, and she hears the great cry of welcome of the Maori women... And her nostrils dilate, and I remember the feeling of utter relief that used to sweep through, because as soon as you see the Maori, there's something about their faces, there's something about their vitality. In those days they used to wear long black dresses, and they looked very like the peasant women from our region.

I've written it about three times, and I was trying to persuade myself 'shall I really go right out and confess it or shall I keep it hidden'. This is the trouble with ethnic literature — you have to wonder how really honest you can be. I'm not frightened now of shocking people because things have got much better nowadays.

In Frederique, the sea's very important. We used to love going to the sea for picnics, and all the Danes would sit on the sand-hills and you'd see these lonely figures looking out to sea — that's a Dane being happy, or in those days it was a Dane being happy. It was the sea — they were never very happy if they were too far inland. And as soon as you sat down they'd say 'smell the salt'. Or if you had a sore or a little pimple or a cut or something on your leg, they would immediately dip your leg or arm or whatever it was in sea water. And they said the sea heals everything. There were always magic stories about if you snuffed up sea water it did all sorts of tremendous things. I loved the way they swam — they used to go 'Alley-oop!' and then they'd go straight in. And they always swam in a very classical style — like a little motor boat, and do a lot of vigorous head-shaking, then they'd throw sea water over their heads and slap their arms and shout 'Kom in, kom in!' The women swam, and I remember my

grandmother telling me that they'd come from the sea, and I could always see them — I put that in the new stories, wringing water out of their ears, a bit like Spartans, combing their sea-wet hair on the rock. But I had to stop myself from writing it.

And I always thought their eyes were so like deep water with the wind going over it — I thought, it shows, you see, they're mer-people. And when I was going over the sea, home to Denmark last time, I got a distinct feeling that we were mer-people from the North Sea. It was my cabin — it looked as if it had come out of the depths of the sea, scrubbed white, and I thought, yes, it's got salt-water everywhere, they've scrubbed it with salt water. I was very tired, and I thought, yes, the beds are still like hammocks — we come from the sea ...

[The new novel] is quite different from Ester: this has got a Victorian feel. So occasionally you get a rolling Victorian phrase to trick the reader into thinking he's in the eighteen sixties, and then a bit of Danish brevity comes in or a bit of French sensuousness or malice, really, because [Frederique] is half Danish, half French ... There's a lot of Danish imagery in this — where things that are inanimate suddenly blink open an eye and look at you, and then the eyelids close again, and I hope you're never quite sure that everything around you is as you think it is, because that's the basis of Danish folk-tales in many ways. Things suddenly come alive. It's Norse language, and I love it. It's done in the briefest possible way and I think that's probably why I enjoy writing — being able to use that.

[For instance, in The Old Ones] where the grandmother's suddenly remembering, or she doesn't even remember — she's only got a dim racial memory that before the Viking Age our women were equal, priestesses as well as the men.

Tollund Man didn't go to his death -- I mean we know that in our bones, that he wasn't screaming with terror. I mean, he looks just like all our uncles -- he's died as part of the earth.

And she recognises Kjeld -- it actually happened. And I saw then in Kjeld's attitude -- that was my cousin Erik Clausen -- I saw in his shoulders and his beautiful slanting very Baltic eyes, and he looked at her and just bowed his head as he gave her the daffodils, and I thought, yes, that's what it was like. Very beautiful. He was very golden skinned and very tall -- I mean, he just moved like a cat. And he gave this laugh and moved slightly away, and she took the daffodils and just turned away and went inside. They had marvellous movement those women.

[The new novel] was very difficult to write because it's all changed. So I had to use old missionary diaries, and I wasn't too sure of what a Maori tribe would do in those days.

[Of the ceremony in the novel where Frederique meets the Maoris]. It's exactly the same. Even the greeting -- they breathe out: we breathe in. The kiss on both cheeks. And as you breathe in, you always hear the nostrils flare and they're taking in the smell of skin. That smell stays with you forever, and once you get back with the Dane, you sit in complete peace beside them and you can smell that strange wood-smokey, fatty smell -- they've got thick skin. It's always got a lovely clean, faint bees-wax smell, a marvellous smell, and woodsmoke. And your whole body just sinks down, and nobody from the outside can understand what on earth is happening to you.

Often if they're married to wives or husbands who are outsiders, they say 'look at you! Look at the two old Danes sitting in the corner -- they're not saying anything to each other. All they do is just sit -- aren't they stupid!' Or, 'aren't they slow', or 'aren't they silent! Why don't you talk to us?' And we don't want to. Every now and again, you smile -- women from Jutland still take your hand, put it in their lap and hold it between their own. And then they look at you with these marvellous slanting eyes, and you look back, and then they'll say, 'how are you now? You look so good, so well'. And then there's always a little mocking -- 'you think you're three inches taller?' And then you laugh back -- it's not too sentimental, they're very realistic. But it's that first smell you have of their skin, because they do handle you a lot when you're a baby. They always admire you -- 'look at this beautiful Danish child!' is one of the first things you hear.

When I was in Denmark, there was a little cousin of mine who was only two and she was being handed from one person to another around the lunch table, and every now and then she'd lie upside down and laugh. And her grandmother -- she was a fantastic Dane whose parents owned an island in the Baltic and had a summer hotel on it. She was a dark Dane, silver hair, and she'd just lost one of her sons -- he was drowned, and she hadn't got over it. This little grandchild was literally saving her life. She'd pick up the grandchild, and she never used words -- often, we don't, often we do it with sound. She'd pick up this kid and she'd go to the kitchen, and you'd hear her, she used the cries that the child made. We do that a lot when they're learning to speak -- sort of up and down. It's an empathy which is so close -- I used it often unconsciously with toddlers. There's a lot of eye contact, and they use hands. Often, I get people saying, 'you're not a mother are you, but you've got a way

with babies'. And it's just watching the Danes - they'll always get a baby to smile, to reach out to them. It's almost as though you're reaching out to life - I can't describe it.

The food was delicious in Denmark and they would give you food with a great deal of love so that the food - for example, 'fiske', specially marinated fish - it would sort of send a shiver right through you. So that you lived very intensely physically, and you understood things with your body. The French were just as sensuous, but they made sure that you understood things with your mind as well. They were exceedingly logical and exceedingly malicious.

Now in New Zealand, I think the young ones are so much warmer - I've discovered that my friendships are gradually slipping down a whole decade, and I have more quick rapport with younger New Zealanders now than with older ones. It's just the way they were brought up - they didn't touch each other much at all.

M.S. How did the suspicion of the English towards your people make you feel about them - did it make you question your own relationship with them, with the culture they had brought with them?

Y.duF. Oh yes, I became very ashamed of them, and I tried to tidy them up before visitors came. I always remember trying to wash my grandmother's hair - it was so heavy, like flax, not our flax but linen-flower flax. And I wanted her to have it like a permed lady and I wanted to get rid of her bones, they were too slanting, too dangerous. And she was very good - she laughed at me very mockingly, very gently, and said, 'you won't change me'. She said, 'what do you want to change me for?' And I didn't want to tell her that I wanted to make

her respectable. I washed and washed and washed her hair, and then I tried to curl it. I must have been only ten. And the curl didn't take because the hair was quite different -- it was like moor grass.

I fell over wearing my big boots on the moors in Jutland in the middle of winter two years ago, and my hands hit through the crust of snow on top and I found moor grass underneath. And I put my hands underneath it and lifted it up, and the moor grass even though it was half frozen, flowed over my hand and I thought, that's the same as her hair. It's like Danish women's hair. I couldn't curl her hair -- it just wouldn't go right. She just twisted it back and put a knot on top, and that was it.

She was very tall and her accent was so bad -- all their accents were. Sometimes I still can't understand them, and these are ones born in New Zealand. She wasn't, but the first generation also spoke English very badly indeed, especially the women. They didn't speak English at home. Have you ever heard a Danish accent? It's absolutely terrible. We have a glottal stop you see from Jutland -- we came from the heart of Jutland, we had a very harsh accent because we came from the South, it was very Germanic.

If I was a Danish lady in the old days talking to you, especially some of my very elegant cousins, I would say, 'Are you comfortable? Are you sure you don't want the heater on? And it would be so soft you wouldn't hear a thing, and every now and again, a soft polite chuckle. You know, if I said 'Jutland', I would say 'Yootland -- we kom from Yootland' -- and then suddenly a mocking aside to someone...

I've got Danish women friends who have only recently come out here. We chatter to each other and my voice immediately drops — I slip back into it, because that broken English was the English I grew up with. If I'm angry or very moved, it comes back. Sometimes if I was very angry with a child at school, I'd say — 'kom here! what have you done now? Oh, you naughty one!' And I would strive to get it back into English and it never happened. This happens a lot with people who have been brought up with non-English or Danish speakers.

M.S. So even though you were born in New Zealand, you shared Astrid's experiences of suddenly blurting out things in Danish, lapsing into it very readily? Y.duF. Yes — especially when in danger. You'd suddenly call out a Danish word or a Danish sentence when you were very deeply moved like where Anna Friis teaches her. Anna has solved the school system, and she's not making up runes any more ... I can still remember the feeling of love and great pride when I got the pencil going on the paper and I put a dot and then I put a line and I couldn't understand how you wrote... So she [Astrid] is very proud when that happens — Danes are very proud of themselves, especially those old style ones. The modern ones aren't — they're much more casual. The modern ones get very moved when they see something that's Danish and good; you know, their eyes flare and they'll admire you, or you admire them — 'see now! Here's a good Danish girl! A true Dane — she understands! She can write!' And that was totally unacceptable because it was immodest.

M.S. So did you feel that the only way to get on was to be like Anna Friis — beat the system, put your head down and give nothing away, to do things their way — at least on the surface?

Y.duF. No, it was more damaging than that. Actually, looking at school photographs I realise I was a fairly petite child — I should have been proud of the way I looked. And somebody pointed out to me the other day that I'd had fantastic legs as a child. I said, 'what — was I showing my legs?' And he said, 'Nej — they were very beautiful legs', and I said 'beautiful legs?'

'Yes', he said, 'you were a beautiful Danish girl'. It was the first time anybody had said that to me. And if I'd only put my head back — I still crouch when I walk, because I'm still trying to hide myself.

I had a feeling of being ugly, tall, clumsy and with this terrible voice that was so deep and so loud it used to fill the hall. I also felt that I was very dull because I was not as quick as other children. That I was held back because we'd come from such a primitive background, you see. And if I managed to do anything, it was always hinted to me that I'd cheated or that it was just a fluke, or that I was lazy.

I can remember working out the 'Story of Twelve' one day — it suddenly all flicked into place in my mind, as it does when a child's happy. Probably somebody had said something nice to me — you do that with children and they can do very hard work. I must have got confidence and I floated in — I suddenly pencilled all the way down. It was lovely — one column was increasing in value and the other was decreasing, and it made a beautiful pattern. And I came up, I suppose with a little bit too much French flair — 'I've done it!' I said. And I got a telling-off for being boastful, and 'oh yes, you can do it du

Fresne if you try hard enough'. So I always thought I was wicked because I didn't try.

I couldn't understand that in those days, children had to try against great odds, and only the worst kind of children survive with that treatment, the ones who'll go out and fight everything in sight. This competitiveness — Danish children were never brought up to compete, and I was very interested when I taught in Danish primary schools to see it's still the same. They don't have proper tables — they have circular tables, so that everybody's sitting around equally with the teacher. And I noticed the teachers were constantly effacing themselves — they did not want their children developing into idiots who'd follow any leader.

It's just the same as it was in Viking times — they were very reluctant to follow any war leader, any king. There were always fights — they'd drift away to the king's brother or son, and even then, they'd suddenly agree that he was a fool or something or they'd get bored and go back to the farm.

In South Jutland, it's almost unexplainable — it's the way they walk. I went into our village with a very socially conscious French cousin who was terribly contemptuous of Danish farm people in Jutland. He'd been quite a successful architect and he didn't really want to go down to this little one-horse village that we'd come from, and I didn't realise that there's quite a feeling in Denmark against Jutlanders. If you say you're from Jutland, anybody from Copenhagen immediately looks down their nose at you — you're a real hick. We came across the church servant who was just walking along the road. He'd had his dinner, and he was going back to the church and we were looking for him. He walked along and he was golden — he looked exactly like my cousin. And we stopped

the car, and the French cousin went into a long flowery explanation of how we wanted to see the church and it was locked, and could he possibly show us and all the rest of it. And I could tell that his Danish was frightfully over-ornate, and we offered him a ride in the car, but the man just kept walking along the road -- and there was snow coming down. Old Poul du Fresne said, 'get in'. And the man, just with the slant of his shoulders, he just flicked one look and he said, 'I'll get there in my own time'. So we had to trail along in the car beside this bloke who just walked at his usual speed.

He suddenly flicked a look at me, and he said, 'you're from here?' And I said, 'Nej'. So he said, 'what's your name?' and I said the Danish name, Clausen. And he immediately stopped, put his hand out and said, 'I too am Clausen. Let us two Clausens shake hands'. It's a common name like Smith. And he said, 'one Clausen now shows another Clausen her church'. And he ignored the French cousin -- hardly looked at him, and I thought, yes that was what the Vikings were like. They moved like cats, highly intelligent and they didn't bow down to anybody. They'd get through anything -- I think it was probably the hard winters, the terrible hardships of life in those days.

That part of Southern Jutland has been under occupation, so they tend to bob out -- they're a bit different from modern Danes, they will not be humble to anybody. That was the only part of Denmark where, when the Germans came in 1940, there was one small detachment of troops, Danish troops who tried to fight them. When you think of that enormous army coming over the frontier, and we got the rumour back in New Zealand -- that's in another of the new stories, 'The Battle Charge' -- that fourteen young Jutland men had been killed, they were just mown down. But they still tried to resist, and the rest of Denmark -- the troops

just went through and everybody had been told not to do anything because they were scared it was going to be Poland again. So [the Germans] went all the way up to Copenhagen in one glorious sweep in the dawn, and people just drew their blinds and stayed inside. But down there -- they would have known it was stupid, but they did it. They wouldn't do it again.

M.S. But this tradition of Jutland resistance seems a bit ironic when many of the stories emphasise the militaristic nature of the English and of Astrid's school -- the runners in 'The Burial Mound', running in this awful warlike charge -- and this aggressive behaviour seems quite foreign to Astrid, quite incomprehensible?

Y.duF. Yes, and to her cousin Kjeld. It's funny, there was a boy at that school who's now a lecturer at Teachers' College in Palmerston North -- we grew up together. He's English, and he read that story and he told this Danish friend of mine up there, Bodil Petersen who he works with on the Historic Places Trust, and he said to her 'I didn't know that Yvonne was frightened of our run'. And Bodil said, 'you ran?'. He said he just thought it was good exercise, but one year one boy tried to run the opposite way and was killed. My father knew this, and he saw it as barbaric. It was encouraged by the headmaster -- it was a way of proving your mettle. Pioneer New Zealand was very tough in many ways. Nowadays we'd wonder what on earth made them do it -- it was lemming-like behaviour. I'd be out there breaking it up in two minutes. I mean, kids wouldn't do it nowadays -- they wouldn't want to. But they just ran, and of course the playgrounds were unsupervised then.

I went to school with two of my boy cousins, Erik and Raymond Clausen, and they never joined in anything like that. They always smiled this deadly

detached smile, and if ever there was trouble, they melted through the crowd, they'd be beside you, smiling, about six feet tall — oh, they were so good. They'd hardly answer, and gradually people who had been having a go at me would just melt away. But I suddenly thought, if I saw those two on a Viking ship — I'd always wondered why on earth the English were so frightened of the Vikings, I couldn't see them as being bully boys, wolf packs. But I suddenly thought if those two boys multiplied by fourteen had been in a warship, I would have run like a deer. They'd never have hurried, but heavens, they would have poured in.

There was a very good English writer — she used to write for the New Yorker a lot, Sylvia Townsend-Warner. She writes well about the Vikings in a book called The Corner That Held Them. Oh, I loved that book but she was the only English writer I've ever read who wasn't frightened of the Vikings, who didn't start jumping up and down and saying how anti-Christ they were and barbaric. It was just a scene in which this marvellous dragon's head came in over the tops of the branches — the only sound was the slight crackling as it forced its way through, and it was going so slowly.

There was one film that did it quite well too. The Danes all over New Zealand laughed till they were sore at it, but they did say, 'ja, that was right I think'. You saw this army pouring onto the field to stop the English and [the Danes] brought in their raven banner which has got all sorts of names. The banner was designed so that when it flew with the wind through it, it actually looked like a raven. Ravens are very sacred birds to us — it's one of our symbols. Odin's got two ravens on his shoulders who tell him what's happening all over the world, and they put the raven in because it's such a wise bird. It's also very victorious in battle.

We've got a very strange cheer when we toast the Queen on her birthday — we form a circle and then you stamp your right foot, or the men do, and it's 'a-ho, a-ho, a-ho, a-ho! Hi, hi, hi! Margerethe-te! Skol! And then up go the goblets, and it's really startling when it's done by Jutlanders — they really get into it. But that's very old, and they had the extras in this film stamping their spears, and they were doing a sort of Nazi-Nuremberg 'heil, heil!'. And then they'd do a fancy thing with their staffs — that was when Danes in the audience were rolling on the floor. But suddenly the battle cry got quite genuine, and we saw this beautiful raven come floating in on the banners and all their faces were quite impassive. I was watching with Danes and they said, 'ja, that's right', and for a minute, they looked as if they could have moved in.

M.S. In the stories, it seems that Astrid has a very strong knowledge and sympathy for this cultural past, for her origins and this is something that worries the English, something they find hard to accept about the Danes?

Y.duF. Oh yes, and the other thing was that when I was nine, war broke out, and Hitler was using Wagnerian* music a lot. The Nuremberg rallies — we actually quite enjoyed them — well, not exactly enjoyed them. But I always remember a very patriotic Britisher — we saw a lot of news-reels of Nuremberg rallies and marvellous bugle and trumpet bands of kids, who really had been taught to play very well indeed. And she looked at it, and she said, 'you know, if I'd been a young man in Hitler's Germany, just the sound of those bugles would have taken me, I would have been a Hitler youth in two seconds'. And you know, they staged them very skilfully indeed, and nobody ever dared to admit that they were beautiful, but she came right out in front of the family and said, 'I think they're fantastic, I would have loved to see a Nuremberg Rally'. But it was the fascist thing behind it that everybody was frightened of.

You see, the Wagnerian plots are Norse mythology really, and we share a lot of gods with the Germans, except ours are a bit more dark, a bit more subtle, and a bit more silent. Our Scandinavian attitude towards Fate is like a shrug -- you know, you accept death with resignation, never going in there on a battle charge, but just, 'oh, I'm dying'. In some of the old legends, they go towards Death, and then just walk indifferently past. That sort of feeling, an obedient Fate. They move into patterns of life very gracefully, they don't fight -- they die. They become very close to the earth.

If something was bad, if something terrible happened, Danes would say, 'mm, it's very bad is it? What are you going to do?' And they'd get on with getting the lunch, and the way they moved from stove to table -- not hurried. They wouldn't fly to you and say, 'this is terrible! What are you going to do? It's absolutely awful!'. It was, 'oh well, we'll have to work something out, won't we? But first we have something to eat -- you need your strength'. And they would distance it for you.

They're very realistic too -- in the Occupation the English were always hinting to them that it was time they started an Underground. They had their Underground started alright -- I had quite a few cousins in it and it was a tough Underground. When they bombed the shipyards in Copenhagen -- the English were great ones for doing this in the Second World War as a hint to the Danes that they should do something. The Danish attitude -- I remember Bodil saying that the German troops were mostly North German country boys, farm boys, and they were terribly homesick.

They had to occupy Denmark, it was being preserved as the food-basket, and they had to visit farms and commandeer stuff. The Danes were starting to get

really vicious and they wouldn't speak to them and they'd hide half the pigs and they'd give deliberately wrong quotas of how much had been produced, how many eggs had been laid and what the milk production had been like that morning. And you weren't supposed to speak to them. I've just been reading a book now by an English writer who was very great friends with a Danish family, a farm family. And she traces the family from almost prehistoric times — their piece of land, and then how the house has grown. And the family told her that it was very hard when young German boys came and wanted to help with the milking, and all they wanted to do was to swap recipes for the best way of making butter and this sort of thing, and could they carry in vegetables and could they help with the washing up. Half of them were our second cousins. So they steeled themselves and shut the door on these kids when they came for Sunday lunch.

'The Cousin From Holstein' in the new book is like that, where a boy, who was a cousin of ours, did turn up at the end of the Second World War. He was one of the Hitler boys — you know, how he got them into the army when they were about thirteen. This kid had a huge army hat on that came down and covered his nose, and a great-coat and a silly old rifle that nobody could fire trailing over his arm. And one of my cousins was pushing a milk crate down to the creamery and this milk crate would never go in the heavy snow. So he was trying to push it, and suddenly felt it lighter — and he looked up and there was this boy pushing it, and droning on in fractured, strange Holstein-Slesvig-Danish-German, saying, 'I am your cousin from Holstein, I am hungry, cousin, please give me milk, I am your cousin from Holstein, I too push a milk-cart, I will help you push the milk cart'. And this cousin was a pretty tough bird, and I said, 'what did you do?' And he said, 'oh, I didn't talk to him

— he was a German'. I got very distressed, — I've just got over it, I used to almost weep when I heard that — and I said, 'but he was hungry'.
'That didn't matter — he was a German. We didn't speak to Germans. If he'd thrown away his uniform ...'

And this boy evidently — they went for fifteen kilometres without speaking, without the Danish cousin saying hello to him. And they got the milk there and the boy trailed back with him, and my cousin disappeared but he found out later that this boy had knocked on the door of the farm house and nobody would open the door. I put in the end of the story: 'that was a hungry boy, and he was turned away from his family's house. Such things stay with you for all of your life'. You don't forget them, and I remember screaming at this boy, 'you should have fed him!' And he just shrugged — that's another South Jutland gesture — and said that he was a German, he was in the uniform.

But close cousins of mine for three Sundays hissed through the keyhole at two young excited cousins all dressed up in the German Army uniform who had come for lunch — 'you have to go away, we can't give you lunch. You can come if you take your uniform off'. But of course they couldn't and they stood on the doorstep for an hour, calling out 'won't you let us in?' That's what happens around frontiers. I can sort of half-laugh about it now, but it wasn't very funny when I heard about it.

M.S. What happened after the war between the Danish and German cousins?
Y.duF. They all came back! Yes, the same cousin who shut them out when she was a young married woman is now an old woman and she has about fifteen to twenty cousins of hers from Holstein who all come and stay — she's got special

little chalets and she lives in the middle of a forest at Saltum. I stayed there in the middle of winter. She's got little summer houses there, and she says, 'ooh, summer's coming, the German cousins will be coming'. And they all sit there for about three weeks -- she's got millions of photographs of them all sitting around tables. She had a huge inn, and she is a very good cook, and she cooks her Danish delicacies and they cook their German stuff and in the end it all becomes indistinguishable. They always say -- 'that's war'. They realise that Hitler's fascism was just so terrible, they just would not agree that their family should join in with it. And the German troops, a lot of those young ones, didn't really have much clue about what Hitlerism was about anyway.

There's a few good German novels written about war up in the north, and there was a good German film in two parts -- 'The German Lesson'. Everybody was so mixed up in that area -- Slesvig-Holstein has lots of German and Dutch names.

M.S Why did you write the Farvel stories, after quite a number of stories which did not deal with the migrant community at all -- what compelled you to write these nostalgic Danish stories?

Y.duF. Well, we'd been encouraged not to show off about ourselves. We'd finally got the message that nobody wanted to know about us, we must become English. And my one ambition was to be an English lady. I used to long to have an English name and to have a hereditary tiara. Especially when the 1952 coronation came -- oh I did want to be English! I was married by that time to a New Zealander of English extraction, and I think he wanted me to be English too. He liked my Danish relatives very much, but I never spoke of them as Danish to him, we just accepted them as New Zealanders.

So I bottled all that stuff away, tried to write English stories from reading English books. It was always an effort because I would try and listen to the way New Zealanders spoke to each other, and turn English around so it was respectable. And I learned a lot from Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen and Elizabeth Taylor, American writers, Canadian writers — everybody who used English well. That was my task, to be an artificial English woman. It was quite hard — you had to do a sort of a back-somersault.

I was lecturing in Music and Related Arts at Wellington Teachers' College, I was there for seven years and I didn't write at all. In fact, before that I was a Music Specialist, and in all it made twelve years of non-writing, because I thought I was no good as a writer. I still feel that a lot really — I'm always appalled at what I've written. Sometimes — like this morning I thought, 'ah, got it', but I'll be as restless as can be about it tomorrow morning. Already after lunch I was correcting it. I get a lovely feeling while I'm writing, and I think, 'got it', but as soon as it's written, that's it. And I'm too careless about my stuff, I make too many jokes about it. I should protect it more, I should honour it more. But I always think everybody else is much better.

And Robin Dudding [then editor of Landfall] suddenly twigged — he'd been reading Isaac Bashevis Singer quite a lot and Robin's never travelled overseas and he was being a bit sentimental about midwinter in Europe. And he suddenly said, 'you come from a settlement, don't you?' And I became very wary because we'd been told not to talk about our background at all, that we must blend in with the English, with New Zealanders, and that we weren't to tell anybody that we were Danish and we were not to show off. It wasn't the thing, so I'd become very good, had permed hair and all that and I didn't wear the sort of

dresses that the older ones had worn — I wore Pringle and twinsets and tweed skirts and brogues. I wore the disguise, except I couldn't tone down my reactions to things. I talked too fast, I talked with the wrong intonations, I became enthusiastic about the wrong things, I became much too moved by music to be polite ... And I often wondered why I could relax very quickly with Europeans — you know I got that break that Frederique feels when she gets to the Maori pa and she suddenly realises they've got the same sea-faring background. Our knowledge of Maori was very superficial except that a lot of my friends were Maori friends, from that tribe I knew — that was one of the reasons why I'm writing that book. Susie Hakaraia — I loved her.

And so Robin said, 'you'd know a lot of stories, Von', and I said, 'what do you mean?' And he said, 'well, there'd be dramatic stories in your settlement'. I said, 'you don't want to hear about that' — I almost hinted to him that it was impolite, they were unacceptable stories he wouldn't want to know about because we all had to be New Zealanders.

My father had a very strange attitude — he was often ashamed by the fact that his mother would speak Danish in the street in Palmerston. And he can remember that one day they sold a pig — they were farming by then; my grandfather became very ill and couldn't keep up with his work and so they went on to a farm. They were all new to farming and they were not very good at it — they abandoned it after a while, because Grandfather du Fresne was a town person, he didn't really know anything about farming. But he'd managed to sell a pig, they'd done well at the sales, and his mother called over the street in Danish, 'we sold a pig and it was a wonderful price' or something. She knew that nobody else could understand her and she just called out, and he became very

ashamed. For years he'd say how disgraceful it was and how awful, and then would grin because it was a good Danish story. He would deny all that.

So I immediately thought of that. I mean sometimes very nasty stories about the family would be told by in-laws who were ashamed of the families, ashamed of their old fashioned clothing and their jewellery and the way they looked. They would tell pretty nasty stories and I now realise a lot of them were made up. Especially the women — they were not very pleasant, and they would tell them to you when you were a child and immediately you had this awful feeling of being disgraceful. 'Doll's-eyes — here comes old doll's eyes up the path' — that was you. The Danes are extremely polite — they won't tell anybody off, they won't have a confrontation with someone and say, 'don't keep making those racist remarks'. So within the family, if the family had married out, you got strife. Even now I sometimes speak to the husbands of these women and say that I think it's time they stopped telling their daughters that they look a bit queer and all the rest of it.

I've only become angry with one of them — it was at the launching of Farvel, and one of my cousins said to me, 'shall I wear black and look like a good Lutheran?'. And I said, 'do you know what a Lutheran is?' She'd never been up to the Manawatu, she'd never seen the Lutheran church — she doesn't know what the Lutheran religion is. And I said, 'it's the same as the Anglican religion; I mean what jokes can you think about that? Do they seem especially dreary and strange?' And she went a bit pink and I said, 'what a pity you haven't seen some of your elder relatives — they're some of the most elegant women I've ever seen'. And she became very offended — but she came along to the thing and did meet two old ones she'd never seen. She stayed very fastidiously separate from everyone. I could see she was eyeing these two old ladies who'd spent their lives

travelling between Europe and New Zealand and could run rings around her — she'd never been overseas. I said, 'do you see those two? There's even more beautiful ones than that who are dead now — it's a pity you hadn't seen them'.

So, my first 'migrant' short story — I knew this Danish woman in Eastbourne and she was a great grand-daughter of Bishop Monrad. He had been our Prime Minister who lost the Slesvig-Holstein War and he had come to New Zealand. Well, we liked him very much, our families in South Jutland had persuaded him to come to New Zealand and said the Manawatu's very like South Jutland farmland, which it is — almost as if they brought it with them. And [his grand-daughter] was living in Days Bay; she worked at Teachers' College with me and I used to go over there a lot. She was much older than I was and it was like having another Danish aunt. It was lovely being in the house because it was a Danish house, and she was a good person to write about — she was elegant and tall, and she had all the Danish movements. I used to love watching her cooking and things — I probably was homesick for the community when I was down here, and it was just healthy being with her and the family. I loved it.

She'd had a rotten time — she'd married a New Zealander and had a bad marriage. Every now and then she would get so homesick for Denmark, she would sit on the edge of the verandah and weep, especially when a new book about Monrad turned up from Denmark. And then a collection of his children's letters turned up, and I've never forgotten one Sunday I was sitting on the doorstep, and I was watching her. I couldn't comfort her at all. A lot of our Danish women were like that — we didn't have very good marriages, because we could never understand New Zealand men. We found them very tough, hostile and they couldn't understand us because we were so gentle. We should have stood up and fought them, slammed back at them, but we never did.

Anyway, one of Bishop Monrad's grand-daughters had written [a letter included in the collection] — she'd stayed on while he went back to Denmark. She was only nine and she'd gone out in the morning and they'd counted some violets that they'd brought from Denmark, these were white violets that grew around their farm and house wherever it was they lived. She wrote back, 'oh Grandfather, here is my surprise. Close your eyes — what do I put in your hand? The very first white violet'. It was charming, and that was all the letter was.

Poor old thing, she wept and wept and wept. Writers are cold-blooded creatures, and I was really cut up about her, but I suddenly thought — what a woman, a woman who is so homesick, a woman who is trying to adjust to life out here. A tall woman, a woman who's been widowed, in a house like this. And I thought I can't put Danish names in — nobody must know about Danes! I'll put German names in and I'll call her 'Frederique', which is a Danish name but it's also a beautiful German name, and it always suggests a good horse woman, a woman with her hair tied back, a rather eighteenth-century woman. So I thought, okay, and I started to write 'A Walk By The Sea'. It took me months, and I kept thinking, shall I put that in about refugees or perhaps that's impolite, that's not being New Zealand. So I'd leave a little bit out. But in the end more and more crept in, though I didn't call any of the food by its Danish name — I put all their family in and the woman gradually turned into me and then it was my friend again. I described her dressing table with a clutch of beads — she had lovely wooden ornaments from Denmark. It was like [taking] a marvellous holiday over there, and I loved it.

So I sent this down to Landfall and I didn't even know who the editor was, but it was Robin Dudding. I forgot about it for a year, and then I was going out to a Danish cousin's house for lunch one very rainy Sunday. It was a southerly and I was living in Kelburn and I had twenty-five steps to creep up, and I could see the car and I reached a hand into the letter-box and there was a letter from Landfall. I thought, what is Landfall writing to me for, because I'd stopped writing again and I'd forgotten about this story. I sort of half-opened the thing, and I was Mrs Hitchings in those days, and I saw: 'Dear Mrs Hitchings, I'm terribly sorry that I've taken so long to acknowledge receipt of your remarkable story "A Walk By The Sea". I'm afraid this has been one of my most extreme examples of my slowness in confirming my earlier favourable impressions of a piece of work. Because of my interest, I have held it and read it and re-read it with growing pleasure and admiration. Now I would like to use it in Landfall, the current September issue. I find this a sensitive interesting careful piece of writing which rewards careful reading. I would like to suggest only a very few minor changes, mainly in the punctuation and should be pleased to have your comment ... The only place where I feel your sense of style has momentarily deserted you is on page four ... [quoting the phrase in question] ... the phrase has an overly conscious, overly literary feel about it, while elsewhere you walk successfully a delicate razor-edge of rightness... This is why I feel strongly about it. I might be wrong — the decision is yours.' This was 1969.

I thought, well he's mad — I took it to lunch and I said to Karen, my cousin, 'there's a crazy bloke who wants to print that silly old story'. And she said 'how lovely!' and so we had some schnapps for lunch, and I forgot about it.

Then the other one, 'The River', I sent to him soon after ... These two were love stories, and then I suddenly realised that not many New Zealanders were writing love stories. They were writing social documentary stories, but not love stories. So I sent him 'The River', and that was two years later.

Now, I'd never met this guy — I went to a literary conference at Massey in 1974, I think — I don't know why they invited me. Oh I'd had quite a few more stories printed. But I'd never met Robin Dudding, but somebody warned me that he had discovered Barry Crump, and they said — 'be careful, he's not your kind of man'. I went there, and thought — gosh, Robin Dudding, he's printed those stories and he'd had a beautiful picture made for 'The River', and there was a long stream of affectionate letters [from him] about what the flax looked like — he really loved New Zealand. I looked over, and there was this incredible looking Kiwi with this jumper that was hanging round him like an awful bell — he'd been wearing it for so long it'd lost its hem. He was sort of stomping around the middle of the floor holding a beer bottle and every now and then he'd drink out of the beer bottle, and I said to somebody, 'is that Robin Dudding?' and they said, 'yeah, that's old Rob.'

So I went over, and he was sitting down and I said I was Yvonne Hitchens, and he said, 'Giddyay!'. I'd written back saying I was very honoured that he'd published 'A Walk By The Sea', that I came from a Danish community, that I was sorry there were so many German names in it and did he want them changed or something. And then I'd written [to him] something about love stories and this had been too much for him. I heard him say, 'Gee, she wrote me this letter you know, it had all this stuff about love in it'. And there'd been about one sentence, 'I'm glad you've got a New Zealand love story at last' or something

about New Zealand literature — [that it] doesn't seem to be even admitting that there's any relationship between sexes, something like that, and [that] I was glad there's a bit of a European flavour, that we can at last write about our sort of love. And this had been too much for him. I could hear these ghastly comments and I thought, that is a bad man, that is a rough New Zealander — I must keep away from him.

And Robin suddenly said, 'Tell me the last bit of 'The River'. 'The River' was an overt love story about a girl whose husband has had a very bad heart attack and is taken on a picnic down to the river by her parents. She's English and her name is Eleanor, but the whole thing is European for the first time.

[Quotes from the end of 'The River']. She addresses her husband directly — well, this is a European device, not done by New Zealanders then. So I said, 'what do you want to hear that for?' And he said, 'oh I'd just like to hear you say it'. I thought, oh he's drunk or something, but I couldn't get away. He said, 'that bit about the Greek women and the young horse in the meadow' — very Barry Crump-ish. So feeling an utter fool I sort of stooped over and muttered it into his ear, and he said, 'I just wanted to hear that, Von'.

And I thought, what a funny bloke, and I went back to the people I was with and I said, 'is he tight or what?' And they said that he had unexpected soft bits. They thought he had this tough exterior ... and I suddenly realised that he'd built around himself a sort of shell of New Zealand toughness, that he was quite a sensitive person inside all of that — but I sort of couldn't be bothered finding out. But he was a good editor — he knew what I was thinking about, and I was very apologetic about what I was writing.

He seized on that bit from 'The River' and it was then that I realised that was our dilemma with New Zealand men. They were extremely attracted to us, our extremely strange colouring -- so strongly attracted that it frightened them, and so they rejected us. And we could never get used to this to-ing and fro-ing; one minute somebody seemed wildly in love with you, and the next moment they were insulting you in front of people.

I realised that when Danish men and women are together, we say things to each other like:

'You look very good today' 'You look rather magnificent yourself. Have you always had your hair like that?' 'Oh it's only my old hair -- your hair looks very nice. You look an ordinary Danish woman'. 'And you also look an ordinary Danish man'.

It's a sort of to-ing and fro-ing.

I remember when I was at Aarhus University, a young man said to me, 'you've been away from us for a hundred years and now you come back to us as beautiful as ever.' It was a young boy of about eighteen. I had two hours with a class and they'd been studying Farvel because they've got that as a set book, in the English class. And I was eleven stone, had a dreadful hair-style like a cottage loaf on top of my head, and I looked like a dreadnought I was so fat. And I had jetlag -- nothing could have been more unattractive than the great writer walking in. They were still very old fashioned at Jutland University -- they still stood up to ask questions and they still bowed. It was a great relief because I knew how to behave with them -- they were just as old-fashioned as I was. We got to the end, and we were talking about the 'Sleeping Beauty' in Ester -- that mad story that my old cousin told me and almost made me believe

that she'd known the Sleeping Beauty. For her, it had all just happened in a farmhouse down the road. And the class was just as startled as I was, and they started talking about parts of Jutland that Sleeping Beauty had been in. And [a student] suddenly remembered the story of Sleeping Beauty, and we came to the end and I stood up to go, and he suddenly stood up and bowed and said, 'I would like to say, Madam, you have been away from us for too long. You have been away for a hundred years, and now at last you come back to us, more beautiful than ever, a beautiful Danish woman'.

And that's just a normal compliment, so I said, 'Tusind Tak, a thousand thanks'. And I said something about that now I had come back, I find the people had only been asleep for over a hundred years, and so I find them the same. And we bowed to each other, and it was time for dinner. That's normal — you don't elope with someone who says that, because it's a usual thing. They admire you over the dinner table, and a compliment comes your way and you pay a compliment back. But with a New Zealand man it's very different — or it was very different.

When I was starting to write Ester — do you remember Fune in that book, that nut who comes out and says 'I sing very bloody good back home in Funen'? He was a real young man. He had jetlag, and I was with a Danish family and I was sitting there very, very homesick for Denmark, I'd really had New Zealand and I was very, very unhappy and eleven stone. I was sitting on the floor looking like a lump and I must have looked pretty desperate. Suddenly this young boy with blond hair who was only about twenty-two and had just turned up from Denmark about three days before — he'd been asleep and had suddenly woken up and looked around and seen me sitting like a lump on the mat. He

leaned over towards me and he said, 'are you married?'. And I said, 'nej -- I have been married'. He said, 'where is he?' and I said, 'oh, he's gone'. And he said, 'what is wrong with the New Zealanders that they do not marry a beautiful Danish woman?', so I said, 'come off it -- I'm not a beautiful Danish woman at all, I'm a lump of a New Zealander'. He said, 'you go back to Denmark -- in five minutes a proud Danish man marry you'. And he just collapsed back onto the sofa -- and I thought, that was a nice thing to say. I've never seen him again, but he was good -- he really made me feel good. But that's the difference.

So Robin wanted to get into this European world. I finally pinned him down, and I said, 'what do you want to know?' And he quoted me a little bit which he later wrote down on a piece of paper and I had it pasted on the wall for years. Every time I got insecure about writing, I'd just look up at it -- I think I had to throw it away in the end, the writing had faded. But he quoted a bit from Singer -- 'in my stories, all I want to give you is the gutter of the story-teller's candle, the story-teller's voice, and outside the mid-winter snow'. And that's what [Dudding] wanted -- he wanted Europe, because he'd never been overseas and he wanted it.

So he said, 'could you write down memories?' and I came home and walked round in circles and talked to myself. I sent him up some real stingers, absolutely full of Viking ships and eyes and the lot. Poor old Robin, he was bombarded with these damn things and he said, 'I think Von, you could put these together in a book you know. You could have this sort of narrator going around, two feet high, you know -- the eyes, the ears. It could be a kid -- a girl, you as a girl. Call her something, and you'd just string the memories together'.

So I laboriously wrote out these kind of memories, and half of them didn't have any point at all. I typed it all out on my old typewriter, and sent them up and he said, 'you'd better come up here and we'd better talk about it Von, I think it's got promise'. So I went up there, and he became extremely excited at the stories, and I'd look at him and say 'it's just an old family story, there's nothing exotic about that'. And he'd say, 'oh, I like them Von'.

I remember he had to go down and get the car mended in Takapuna and he came back and I was in his hut, desperately trying to put into readable English something he'd suggested I might change. Suddenly all the windows creaked open, — they hadn't been opened for years — and I could vaguely hear the sound of Sibelius roaring out from the main house. And he said, 'my mind's full of Viking ships and swans, and I've got some music to go with it' and the whole family put on Sibelius, and I heard it roaring out. He'd got some sort of drink that he thought was like schnapps. I was very bewildered by all this, but he said, 'I can't get enough of it!'. And now I realise it was just a trip he wanted — it was like going over to Europe.

M.S. Is that the reason that the book became popular, that it sold well?

Y.duF. Oh, that was Radio New Zealand. All those stories in the back, all those serious ones about death and old ladies lamenting and so on, are all the stories I wrote for Robin, and he published the lot. I was looking at them the other night, and I'd forgotten that he's really extremely witty... He was a fantastic editor ... Other editors stay a great distance from you, but Robin would come into your territory — he knew how you worked. [Reading from his letters] ... Now this is interesting about 'The Jutland Wedding Crown', which he hated: 'I

think there's a story here, but again, I don't think it's matured yet. There's the usual nice touches ... but the writing generally seems to have dead patches that verge on the sentimental. The bird on page five for instance seems pretty irrelevant'. Well that was a Danish touch, and I couldn't write it any other way -- he doesn't realise [about the story's ending] that that was the end of the race, that she was marrying somebody outside ... [Reading from Dudding's letter]. 'Again in the story, I feel you grind away at the seriousness of what you have to tell, and so that which you want to tell escapes, wings away. Ah, dear Yvonne, yes you have stories and a unique talent to tell them, but I think you want to tell your stories as you write your letters... Tell a story, but let your real story jump up and say "boo"'.

So, Fiona Kidman had a writing session in those days [on radio] and she asked about three writers if they wouldn't mind writing a story... So I wrote 'The Jutland Wedding Crown' because I remembered that cousin getting married and wearing the old wedding crown And I remember being very frightened that this was going to offend New Zealanders, and I remember saying to this other cousin, 'do you think I should use that?' and she said 'now's the time'. But I said, 'do you think I should put in all that bit about the English family?' and she said, 'why not? It's not going to harm anybody'. So I wrote it, and it was very Gothic, because it was a Gothic day. And I sent it to Fiona, and she was very pleased with it and so was Michael King.

And when that came over the radio, it had the most enormous effect around New Zealand. I got dead silence from Robin -- he never commented on it. I got telegrams, letters -- incredible, like a sort of cult of 'The Jutland Wedding Crown'. And people said 'have you got any more stories like that?', and then Radio New

Zealand rang up and said would I consider [writing] thirteen. They'd already done the old stories, which [also] got a lot of response from film-makers, and I was quite dazed by all this ... Bu the old stories had made a lot of impact ... a lot of the old Danes heard them.

And then Chris Hampson, who was a very light-hearted young man, was editor of stories and plays [at Radio New Zealand] — he was a good editor, because if I wrote a good story, he'd actually ring me up in the middle of the night and say, 'I've just finished crying, Von' or, 'I've just finished laughing, Von', and he'd been just reading one of those stories. And he said, 'I think you could do another thirteen stories — have you got any ideas for any more?'. And I was getting terribly homesick about my primary school ... I said, 'I wonder if I could write thirteen stories about my primary school?'. And he said, 'yeah — got any plots?'. And I said, 'no, I just want to wander around the classrooms' and he said, 'yes, I remember my old classrooms too'. I said, 'I bet you don't know what we used to call those pictures of English kings and queens on the wall', and he said, 'what do you mean, English kings and queens?'. I said, 'you know, King George the Fifth, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, King George the Sixth and all those!'. So he said, 'what did you call them?' and I said that we called them the robber barons, the English robbers. He asked why they were English robbers, and I said, 'because they were robbers — they robbed all that treasure and never let it out.' We used to say that they'd got all their loot on them, all their diamonds and things.

And he said, 'you thought that? What was your school like?'. I said, 'it was hell! It was terrible — why do I want to write about primary schools?', and he said, 'do you mean you saw New Zealand schools from the other side?'. And I said, 'ja, we were the outsiders. We were the spies ... it was a different culture'.

So he said, 'could you write, could you be yourself?' and I said, 'well what would I call her?' He said, 'what about Astrid -- that's a safe name, it's not too Danish. Could you write from the other point of view?'. And I said, 'I don't think we should broadcast them -- they're too exotic'. Then I started to tell him about the teachers -- about the grey headmaster with grey teeth, and laughed and laughed and laughed. He sent me home on a real high, and I wrote the first story, 'The Spy', in twenty four hours -- I laughed all the time, and it was the first time I'd been able to write a story quickly. The others had taken months and that was why I was loading them up with all that Viking ship nonsense and fire and ice.

So I'd go to Broadcasting, and I'd leave the copy for him on his desk, and then he'd ring me up about them -- he would've saved it up till the end of the day, then he would've read it rather apprehensively and sometimes he was hysterical and other times he was deeply shaken. And so I'd get the energy to write the next one. That's how they got written, and they got written so fast -- I was writing the novel at the same time, I had the Scholarship in Letters ... That gave Ester a lot of publicity, and it gave Farvel a lot too.

When they came out on the radio I got these incredible phone calls till two o'clock in the morning. Some people would be crying, others would be laughing -- still if I go out in public, often people will say, 'that's the woman who wrote Farvel.' And then I realised that there were a whole lot of New Zealanders longing for a European mythology ... and they want to know where their own roots are. A lot of them don't know where their own grandparents come from, and then I suddenly discovered that there's a New Zealand that I really love.

M.S. So you feel that the stories were reaching and speaking to a wide audience , to a lot of New Zealanders and not just Europeans?

Y.duF. Yes -- I did get a lot of letters from Europeans, and phone calls from them. But the majority came from everyday New Zealanders who wanted to have their backgrounds filled in, who wanted a bit of romance -- a sort of Mills and Boon bit. They loved the snow bits and the love bits and the war bits, the Viking ships. I did a lot of lectures and really got out in the public a lot. I still do ... it becomes a bit of a chore, but then you go on with your writing which is more important. But I think some people get as high as kites and it does affect their writing. At school, I got about three very flattering comments ... I had some very unflattering ones too, really nasty. But not very many.

I didn't about Ester because I think people thought it was going to be an extended Farvel, and it's not -- Ester's a hard book, it's a difficult book to get into. I've got people who just about carry Ester round with them and have almost made it their handbook, especially immigrant groups -- the Dutch use it a lot with new settlers when they feel homesick. I met a Dutch woman in Palmerston in the holidays and she was buying another Ester, and she said, 'oh, you're Yvonne du Fresne ... I've been buying Farvel and Ester for the immigrants who are homesick'. And I said, ' Ester? It's so sad!' And she said, 'oh they need that when they're sad -- we all go through that, don't we?'. And I thought, thank God there's at least one group who find something in that book. Some people didn't like the book at all, though lots did -- it had a very mixed reception.

And now, Frederique's so different. Her young man is nearly killed in the Slesvig-Holstein War -- the story is very Gothic. I'm enjoying writing it so much.

I want her to like New Zealand — she's the survivor in Ester and I want her to be really dug into it, and have a delicious love affair!

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