

The goddess allows herself to be seen But not forever; Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* (1980)

I began the previous essay by saying that writers belong to their time; Shirley Hazzard was born in 1931, half a generation after Jessica Anderson, yet they are alike, I think, in possessing a certain wariness about the times and places shaping their work. In Shirley Hazzard's case, this is most obvious in the satirical, indeed sarcastic way she treats the United Nations in *People in Glass Houses* (1967); after reading it I can imagine the famous filing cabinet not wanting any more writers within its walls. She's lived in Europe too, and before I get onto *The Transit of Venus*, her most highly regarded novel, I want to dip into *The Bay of Noon* (1970) because it contains a passage which I find evocative of an Australian writer's awareness of having found another, and very different, home. The book's set in and around Naples (the isle of Capri's visited frequently, in the Neapolitan way) but the passage I want to quote is set in Seville:

Watched over by a sombre waiter and one or two wintry guests, the two of us made up, from a dish of salted crackers formed in letters of the alphabet, love-words that we spread out on our little table. We had managed to compose an indecent phrase or two before the waiter's approach forced us to eat our words. Looking out our bedroom window before dawn we saw a group of cab-drivers in the street below warming themselves at a bonfire lighted on the pavement, while one of their number read to them from an outstretched newspaper. The following morning we were told that the Pope had died.

When I came across this passage I thought at once of Charmian Clift (1) and George Johnston (2), both of whom – but Charmian first, I think – wrote about a night when they went to sleep in a room above the festivities in an Italian street and woke, some hours later, as three bent-legged old musicians, two with violins and one with a pipe, let their music lead them away before a new day arrived. Clift's version is magical, while Johnston's account is about the instincts of a passionate woman who has magic in her blood, a magic perceived rather than felt by her observing partner. In both cases – Johnston/Clift and Shirley Hazzard – the reader knows that what's being offered is *echt*-European, and couldn't happen in the country these writers were born in. 'The following morning we were told that the Pope had died.' We'd hear about him too, but he wouldn't be the same Pope, would he? In Europe, we'd know him as a fixture, a landmark and very close; in Australia we'd know that something important, and European, had found its end, but our own, and very separate, because distant, world would be largely unchanged. The Pope's death, and the elaborate procedures for his replacement, would be matters reverberating on our shores rather than belonging to them. The relation between the people upstairs in bed and those still active in the street below is harder to define, but it suggests the greater density of life in Europe, the inability of its people to separate themselves from the political whole of which they are tiny parts. We are tiny, too, in Australia, but our awareness

of this comes when we set ourselves against the huge spaces that surround us, aware of our insignificance, not in a human power- or belief-structure, but when seen against a place that's too eroded to care about us. The land tells us we don't matter, whereas in Europe this is made clear by the demands and rivalries of other people.

Shirley Hazzard's books move easily in this European world. In fact she does so many things so easily that we're likely to overlook the scale of her achievement. Take the title of the book for an example. On page 15 of my edition (King Penguin, Middlesex, 1983), a character called Sefton Thrale tells Caroline (Caro), the second of three sisters, that she owes her existence to astronomy. He means that she, as an Australian, would not exist had it not been for Cook's mission to take the Endeavour to Tahiti in 1769 to observe Venus crossing the face of the sun. The discovery of Australia and its subsequent settlement can therefore be regarded as an extension, an outcome, of English science. The tidy-minded reader can move on feeling that the title's been explained, but will find as the book reveals more of itself that 'Venus' is not simply the planet but its meaning as the goddess of love, and love itself is shown to be the transitional phase of a woman's life in which she readies herself for the passionate exchange which will turn her into ... a mother, an older woman, a cluster of experience, a being who has worked through passion to reach a state of fulfilment. The reader will perceive – surely? – at some stage that most of us have to pass through a version of this change, and that those who manage to avoid it are to be pitied, or seen as lesser for the path they've taken. Very late in the book, when Caro's sister Grace has at last

come to feel the withering power of passion, she says, 'Women have to go through with things. Birth, for instance, or hopeless love. Men can evade forever.'

How true is this? Casting my mind over the events of the book, as put before us by Shirley Hazzard, I am inclined to think that men do not so much escape the consequences of their actions as try to avoid them by using the male-made levers of social control. The book's prime example is the use made by Christian Thrale, Grace's husband, of his temporary secretary, Cordelia Ware. Christian's regular secretary, Miss Mellish, is away for three weeks, so he engineers a 'relationship' with her replacement; for him, it's like turning on and off a tap when the bathroom's otherwise unoccupied. Cordelia, on the other hand, experiences it fully, as does the reader because by this stage we've learned how to read Shirley Hazzard's book; the more that Christian pretends to be tactful, reasonable and considerate with Cordelia the more, we know, he's hurting her. The greatest shortcoming of men is to not possess, or admit to owning, a language of emotion. We (men) won't admit our feelings and therefore won't or can't recognise their consequences. Are women, therefore, to be envied? Copied? No.

With these prospects and impressions, Grace Marian Thrale, forty-three years old, stood silent in a hotel doorway in her worn blue coat and looked at the cars and the stars, with the roar of existence in her ears. And like any great poet or tragic sovereign of antiquity, cried on her Creator and wondered how long she must remain on such an earth.

Grace and her two sisters (strictly speaking, a sister and a half-sister) come from Sydney, hence the earlier observation about

them being outcomes of Cook's discovery of their country's east coast; it took the greater part of the book for this reader to perceive that they are affected more profoundly by Venus via the planet's metaphorical character. All the characters grow older. Time is not only registered by the movement of heavenly bodies but takes place inside each and every one of us. Transition is as natural a state for humans as transit for things above. The book's title is also in transition because it sums up a realisation, not only inside the characters themselves, but in the mind of the reader. *The Transit of Venus* is a book that changes its readers and this is a purpose of its author. Anyone reading the book closely will not fail to notice the very clear intentions embodied in the writing. One example of this can be observed in Hazzard's way of turning well-known sayings back to front:

Never did they dream, fingering those toys and even being, in a rather grown-up way, amused by them, that they were handling fateful signals of the future. The trinkets were assembled with collective meaning, like exhibits in a crime, or like explosives no expert could defuse. Invention was the mother of necessity.

Here's another:

"This awful place. So alone. If only we could get back to Sydney," Dora was howling, "where we were all so happy." Tranquillity recollected in emotion.

A third: Cordelia Ware, already mentioned, is brought in to take the minutes of a Cabinet meeting. She's new, none of the men have seen her before, and she's very attractive:

It fell forward, the flag of hair. An arm came up to pass it uselessly back over the shoulder. A page hastily turned. A gazelle in the room. China in the bull shop.

Shirley Hazzard has her eye on the way the world's going every bit as much as on the delicacies of her characters' feelings. From time to time she stands back from her people to show the world moving too: the start of Chapter 29:

In America, a white man had been shot dead in a car, and a black man on a verandah. In Russia, a novelist had emerged from hell to announce that beauty would save the world. Russian tanks rolled through Prague while America made war in Asia. In Greece the plays of Aristophanes were forbidden, in China the writings of Confucius.

On the moon, the crepe soul of modern man impressed the Mare Tranquillitatis.

The point, in that last line, could only have been made by someone alive to words as living things, having intentions of their own, one of them being to insist on their lasting character. 'The Mare Tranquillitatis' still has meaning, though the language that gave birth to it hasn't been heard for centuries. And as for soul (sole) and 'impressed', what can I say?

Another technique of Hazzard's that reveals her unwillingness to waste a word is her habit of cutting clichéd sentences short. Her confidence in her readers takes the form of flashing a few words and leaving us to supply what it is clearly beneath her to do more than grant a passing mention. Here's Christian Thrall confronted by a wretched Cordelia Ware:

Christian got up from his desk – and it seemed that year he was ever sinking down or rising up at that desk, as at some anchorage or place of prayer. “Cordelia,” he said, coming over to prevent her approach. “I cannot possibly. This is not the place for. The last thing either of us wants is.”

Words are not to be wasted, though most of us, including some of her characters, waste them all the time. Daily life is largely, though not always, a waste, because it’s used to subdue, or eliminate, opportunities for the passions that are inside almost everyone. Cordelia’s mistake, apart from being desirably sexual, is to believe that her potential for passion can be fulfilled; that is to say, her inner feelings tell her that love is about to flare in her life when she is seen, though she hardly realises it, as an opportunity by the married man who is her boss. She might have been cleverer, more cunning, but she was not. Shirley Hazzard, who’s also created Caro, sister Grace and the dreaded, awful, half-sister Dora, brings in Cordelia to show us as simply as possible what could have happened, and did, in a way, happen to Caro, the central character of the book. Paul Ivory, the playwright, is Caro’s lover quite early on and they’re still connected, in that remarkable way by which once-lovers can never entirely separate themselves from those to whom a sexual engagement has bonded them. Hazzard shows us the young Paul and the young Caro in bed one afternoon, and the use she makes of this situation is a measure of her ease with her characters’ sexuality. Paul is engaged to Tertia, who’s heir to a castle not far away. He’s in bed with Caro when Tertia drives up to the house of love and calls to Paul. He whips on a shirt, grabs a tie, and presents himself at the window to speak to her, on the ground

one floor down, standing beside her car. He’s a playwright, this is a scene, and he’s playing it well enough when Tertia’s expression tells him something’s changed. Paul knows without turning his head that the naked Caro is now behind him, partially visible, and that she’s decided to cut through the play-acting to make a statement of her own. Everything’s changed without a word being said. What has Caro done? She’s played the highest card in the pack, the joker known as truth. The words between Paul and Tertia are annulled and voided by the sight of Caro’s body. Her body and the feelings it contains are a greater truth than any words. This is something that can’t be said very often because it’s too revolutionary to allow any platform to be built on it.

In the previous essay and at the start of this one I referred to the fact that Jessica Anderson and Shirley Hazzard predate the modern feminist movement, and yet they overlap it too, and I find myself again and again, in *The Transit of Venus* as in Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra*, reassessing the claims and achievements of the politically organised women’s movement against the claims and insights of these two writers’ work. It seems to me that the writers, Hazzard especially, undercut the arguments of the women’s movement because what they ask for their women is not a claim that men can grant, because both writers, and again I say especially Hazzard, by concentrating on how different women are from men, show us that women’s lives and men’s lives are led so differently alongside each other that considerations of political equality, rights and so on, barely touch the larger questions of making the two pathways compatible.

It is not as if either writer is in the least forgiving of men, or women, who can't or won't see the truths they are making clear, but are forcing us to withhold our actions until we know what it is we are actually going to do, and what benefits will flow to whom as a result. Let me put that question to myself. After reading *The Transit of Venus*, what changes would you – I – make to the world? None, except the impossible one: I would like the whole world to be a little more aware, all of us, of what we're doing to each other when we do those things we think are natural, but are natural only to ourselves. Does anything need to change? Yes, the limits of our understandings, our ideas of what's natural, need to enlarge a little, at least, and at best they could expand as far as they can. You will see at once how likely that's to be. Is Hazzard's writing any use, then? Is anyone the better for her work having been done?

Perhaps it's because I'm an incurable optimist that I think something has been gained from reading *The Transit of Venus* a couple of times recently. I can make a distinction which would not have occurred to me a fortnight ago. I would distinguish between what I will call a rich sadness – one that comes from an ever-broadening of the understanding – and its counterpart and cousin, which I shall call a deprivational sadness. Grace, Caro's sister, experiences the latter (see an earlier quote about her, above). Caro, too, experiences deprivation, loss, at certain times throughout the book, but it's her miracle, and Shirley Hazzard's achievement, that these losses finally come to enrich her. She marries, at last, a man called Adam Vail, and her life with him is good; when he dies, she's 'available' again, for a while, she re-meets Paul Ivory who tells her

how he murdered – really – a man by leaving him asleep in the path of a flood, and this is used by Hazzard as a way of re-introducing Ted Tice, one of the first people we met in this book. Ted Tice is married by now, and his wife Margaret is a sort of double for Caro's sister Grace because Margaret is shown as a fine woman who ought to be loved wholly and entirely by her husband, but isn't. She's living the form of a marriage but the passion that should enliven it isn't there. Can such passion – proper passion, I think Shirley Hazzard wants to tell us – be found for everyone, all the time?

No. It can't be guaranteed. Life's a hazard too. As the book ends, it seems that Caro will resume the connection with Ted which might have taken place right at the beginning. Were their two lives wasted, then? Who's to say? Will they be able to pick up what they once had, potentially, together? Possibly. Perhaps. Who knows? Human beings, as shown to us by *The Transit of Venus*, are full of passion, and these passions must – simply have to – be controlled, managed, which means that caution and custom will be brought in as advisers, counsellors, when passions take little notice of guidance or advice. To live a life of passion can only be a dream but to live a life without passion can only be seen, after reading a book such as this, as a dreadful, disfiguring loss. The book ends with Caro on board a plane taking off:

They wore devices to shield their ears from the roar.

The roar could be seen, reverberating on blue overalls, surging into the spruces. Within the cabin, nothing could be heard. Only, as the plane rose from the ground, a long hiss of air – like the intake of humanity's breath when a work of

ages shrivels in an instant, or the great gasp of hull and ocean as a ship goes down.

The last words are a reminder of what's only mentioned at the beginning of the book; Caro's parents were drowned in a shipwreck, when the girls whose lives we've been following were residents of Sydney, in far-off and little-known Australia. Is it an 'Australian' book? Is that a category we can use? I think – *think* – Shirley Hazzard would give the question little thought, but would say, 'If it helps you to think of it that way, why not?', meaning you're wasting your time and you've wasted my book. It's perhaps time to mention that before I re-read the book under discussion I read *The Great Fire* (Virago, London, 2003), and I'd read almost a hundred pages when I decided I needed to start again. There was something wrong with my reading. So I began again and greatly admired the book, but even so I hardly knew what to say when someone asked me what 'great fire' was being referred to. I was going to say the scorching of Hiroshima, and I suppose that's a distantly feasible answer, but in fact Hiroshima's more firmly referred to in *Transit of Venus* ... so what was the great fire? My answers grew broader the longer I thought about it: it was the second world war, it was human history in the twentieth century, it was life itself, that all-encircling, strangely restrictive presence which, in being greater by far than any human passion, has the effect of making it unlikely, most of the time, that human passion can have any satisfactory fulfilment. I swing these thoughts to Caro and, to this reader, they feel correctly applied. She might have had a child, but she miscarried. She might have been chosen by Paul Ivory the playwright, but would that

have meant she had a better life? Probably, almost certainly not. Paul Ivory is talented and skilled, as his successes in the London theatre make clear, but he chose Tertia, her castle, her class and all its luxuries, hypocrisies and successful ways over the life he might have had with Caro.

Remember Caro coming to the window, her body bare beside Paul Ivory in his shirt? Tertia, Paul's fiancée, was too clever for Caro; she knew her man, and probably most men, better. She got in the passenger seat of her car, and Paul ...

... do I need to finish? He went down and drove away with his fiancée, and on the way they stopped, and, we are told many, many pages later, she got him to make love with her. If we'd learned this at the time it happened – that is, a page or so later – we'd have been amazed that Paul could succumb so easily, but, told about the choice Tertia imposed on him after we've had time to absorb the effects and before we learn the cause, it's clear enough. Paul Ivory, the playwright, knows how social choices are put in front of people in order to make them decide, and he decides. He wants to live on a certain level of English society, and he makes the enabling decision. Caro, though, comes out of this much the better in the way Hazzard shapes her writing. Caro forces Paul to show himself for what he is, and she does it without a word. She rises from her bed as naked as the day she was born and intrudes her reality into the situation. Tertia gets her way. Tertia gets Paul. Not a bad match, thinks the reader, quite appropriate, really. We're not silly enough to think that they'll be 'happy' together, but neither do we expect that that's what they want. They want life on a certain social plane and they

know, both of them, how to get it. But so too does Caro. She wants life to not only be true to, but also to fully express, dramatically, the passions inside her, and that means, in my view, that she's the right person to be at the heart of a novel by Shirley Hazzard.

If this is wisdom, it comes late to Caro, and is very hard won.

So Shirley Hazzard's writing strikes a balance, quite a traditional one really, between the inner demands of her characters and what's going on around them. Whenever she feels the need she shifts our attention to the politics of the wider world, leaving it to us to make the connections she intends between the personal and the public. Sometimes I feel her smiling as she gives herself a page to show us that the things she's told us are happening to her characters are happening to others, too, in places we mightn't expect. Chapter 17 is largely concerned with a woman called Valda who works in the same office as Caro. Mr Leadbetter, the administrative officer, asks Valda to sew on a button for him, and she does so, very deftly. There is a suitable exchange of courtesies:

"Thank you, Valda, I am not handy with such things. And would jab myself to pieces." It was important to show appreciation.

To this, Valda replied, echoing his own benevolent thoughts:

"These are small things to do for one another."

So far so good; but a week later, Valda asks Mr Leadbetter to change her typewriter ribbon. Women are not mechanically minded! He tells her to get one of the girls to help; she says they won't want to dirty their hands. Mr Leadbetter is furious, and he puts a note in Valda's file that she 'tended to be aggressive over trifles'. "'Tended"

was official code for going the whole hog.' Shirley Hazzard tells us a good deal more about Valda's warfare on men's privileges and stupidities, and it's amusing, and pertinent, but she brings it closer to Caro all the time, as if Valda's real challenge is to women even more than to men.

"You feel downright disloyal to your own experience, when you come across a man you could like. By then you scarcely see how you can decently make terms, it's like going over to the enemy. And then there's the waiting. Women have got to fight their way out of that dumb waiting at the end of the never-ringing telephone. The receiver, as our portion of it is called."

Such meeting of the minds as takes place between Caro and Valda is not repeated elsewhere in the book, and Caro, one senses, is a little jolted by Valda's ideas, against which she defends herself:

All this was indisputable, even brave. But was a map, from which rooms, hours and human faces did not rise; on which there was no bloom of generosity or discovery. The omissions might constitute life itself: unless the map was intended as a substitute for the journey.

These at least were the objections raised by Caroline Bell.

Valda, for her part, 'considered Caro as a possibility lost. Caro might have done anything, but had preferred the common limbo of sexual love. Whoever said, "When you go to women, take your whip," was on to something deep, and deeply discouraging.' I am inclined to think that Valda's office warfare and her reaction to Caro and vice versa is included in the book to give a perspective on the

way Caro and her sisters – all the other women – live their lives. They are, perhaps, unlike Nora in *Tirra Lirra by the River* in that they don't arrive in England with alternatives in mind. One may reasonably say of Caro, turning back to Ted Tice as the book draws near its end, that she's unliberated, but the counter to this is that it's been clear from the beginning that neither has she been enslaved. In this sense *The Transit of Venus* is a very challenging book indeed, challenging in the sense that a feminist movement based on the novel would not so much urge women to claim what they've been denied as urge men to see what they've denied themselves. That's to say that the effect on one male reader is to show that our ideas of what's male and what's female are interactive, rather like chemicals that are inert as long as they're kept apart but potent indeed when brought together. It's the interaction that counts, but what interaction? Valda with her tricky forms of office protest – making the men's tea according to their many and varied instructions – rather frightens the other women in her office, so she talks to Caro ... and Caro's different. Caro's aware of her own passions, her desires and wishes, and she knows all too well when they're being satisfied and when she's at a loss. Caro's is the central awareness of the book, and in that sense Valda is a reminder, helping to define Caro via the form of a challenge rather than to unseat her. It's worth reminding ourselves that Valda doesn't reappear outside the chapter that's hers, while Caro's there from beginning to end.

The reader may feel that I'm over-emphasizing the feminism or otherwise of the character Caro, but I feel that the theme of whether or no people live in a way that can be called ideologically

correct, and whether that gives them any greater or lesser likelihood of happiness or any other form of success is one that's not only threaded through *The Transit of Venus* but can also be found in *The Great Fire*, published two decades later (2003). Here are a few lines from the later book:

'Look ... I was seventeen when I married. It's true that Jason was on the way, but we'd have married anyway, Geoffrey and I. Also true that it didn't work, and that Geoff was a drunk. However that may be, one is surrounded by unhappy couples – divorced, separated, shackled together by children – who had the appropriate ages and were sober as judges. Brides who were photographed in *Country Life* flashing their radiance and their rings, and in their right minds. There is no greater lottery.'

In the work of Shirley Hazzard the issues I am raising are linked with others even closer to her way of seeing and thinking. One such issue is the alternation, in the life of any one person, of what I called before the personal and the public. From *The Great Fire* again:

The man, instead, went to his own room and to his table – to those papers where the ruined continents and cultures and existences that had consumed his mind and body for years had given place to her story and his. He could not consider this a reduction – the one theme having embroiled the century and the world, and the other recasting his single fleeting and miraculous life. Having expected, repeatedly, to die from the great fires into which his times had pitched him, he had recovered a great desire to live completely; by which he meant, with her.

Close to the end of the same book, the character Helen is waiting in New Zealand for a moment of readiness to take her to her lover, the man whose thoughts we've just shared. Helen sees the same things in a slightly different way:

From the day's sensations, Helen could retrieve the solitude that never now completely left her. And was able to think of how they had read about the past, which was full of desires and dreams and delusions, so that the planet seemed entirely charged with human wishes, existing for the most part silently and in vain.

Silently and in vain? It's one of the wonders of Shirley Hazzard's writing that she is thinking always of everybody while also of the person she's drawing in front of her. All her people matter because they're all in that lottery she mentioned, whether or not *Country Life* featured their photos, whether or not they've sat around glossy tables for meetings of their country's Cabinet. Society's important and without it we can't exist, but all of us, each and every one, have to strike our own bargain, balancing what's expected of us with what we want, and dream about, for ourselves. Few writers have a better sense of this balance and where it is at any given moment than Shirley Hazzard. I find myself in a state of sadness at concluding this series of essays, but I'm pleased – relieved, really – to be able to end where I do.

1. 'Three Old Men of Lerici', by Charmian Clift, 1953
2. See pages 108 – 110 of *Clean Straw for Nothing*, George Johnston, Collins, London, 1969