A FREE FLAME

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A FREE FLAME
Australian Women Writers and Vocation in the Twentieth Century

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The poet's vocation – or, more precisely, the historical construction put upon it – is one of the single, most problematic areas for any woman who comes to the craft. Not only has it been defined by a tradition which could never foresee her, but it is construed by men about men, in ways which are poignant, compelling and exclusive.

Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons*

For it's not only a room of her own and an income that a woman needs – though that is often hard enough to come by – but the place in herself, the space in her soul from which she can withstand the onslaught of a world that cannot, or will not, take her seriously.

Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch*

This is a love that equals in its power the love of man for woman and reaches inwards as deeply. It is the love of a man or of a woman for their world. For the world of their centre where their lives burn genuinely and with a free flame.

Mervyn Peake, *Titus Groan*

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Introduction

For writers, painters and performers of all stripes to talk about a sense of calling is commonplace these days. The idea that art is destiny, that the artist has no choice but to follow their vocation, has become a well-established part of popular discourse. For this very reason, perhaps, the concept of the artist's vocation is easy to dismiss. It has been invoked too often, and in too many situations where it simply does not apply. As well, its romance has been used to disguise unacknowledged privilege, depicting an individual artist's success as entirely the result of their own personal qualities and glossing over the social and cultural advantages that readied the platform for them.

Nevertheless, the concept has played an important role in the way artists, and particularly writers, have understood themselves and their lives over the past century and more, and as such it warrants a closer look. Many writers speak in powerful terms of a sense of being

born to write, of feeling compelled to return again and again to their art, of being driven to become a writer against all obstacles. Their sense that their profession is at the heart of their identity goes well beyond the narratives that generally surround concepts like 'ambition' and 'career'. Even in contexts that are profoundly secular, their words evoke the religious origins of the notion of vocation as the life to which one is called by God.

Precisely why this concept is so important to writers, why so many turn to it again and again, what it means to them and what role it plays in their construction of their identities as writers are questions worth exploring – most especially in relation to women writers. If a writer's sense of vocation in general often seems unaccountable, it is more mysterious still for writers who are female, since until the last century almost all models of the literary artist were male. How does a woman come to believe that she is called to a profession – more, an identity – that specifically excludes her? Many cultural critics, from Virginia Woolf in the 1920s to Eavan Boland, Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers and Carolyn Heilbrun at the end of the century to, most recently, Drusilla Modjeska, Carolyn Korsmeyer and Toril Moi, have pointed out the ways in which the Western ideal of the artist is in direct opposition to the Western ideal of woman. The artist speaks, while the woman is silent; the artist is active and ambitious, while the woman is passive and self-abnegating; the artist's highest calling is art, while the woman's is motherhood; the artist drinks deeply from the well of experience, while the woman

is chaste, her life circumscribed. As these critics and others have pointed out, such conventions have meant that women have had to violate some powerful norms of female behaviour and, indeed, female identity, in order to create for themselves an identity as an artist. Because such conventions have been internalised as well as enforced and reinforced externally by their culture, this has sometimes led women writers into complicated psychological and social contortions that have been deeply destructive for them.

The concept of vocation, however, has the power to cut across such constraints. Vocation is an invitation into the space of the artist's identity, an unequivocal authorisation of the aspirant's ambitions. The person with a literary vocation asserts that, far from choosing a particular career path out of interest or ambition, she has been hailed into her role, even against her own will. She has been chosen, by forces too mysterious to be challenged, and this in itself is proof that she has a right to be an artist, that even as a woman she can have an artist's identity. In the early part of the twentieth century, when there was so little evidence that a woman could fill this role and so much hostility towards any attempt by a woman to do so, this was an extraordinarily transgressive thing to claim.

The aim of this book is to explore the ways in which four Australian writers – Tasmanian poet and librettist Gwen Harwood, West Australian poet, playwright and novelist Dorothy Hewett, expatriate novelist Christina Stead, and Sydney journalist, children's writer and

novelist Ruth Park – came to claim a sense of vocation, and the significance of this claim for their lives, identities and careers. My focus is on the stories they told about themselves as writers, whether overtly autobiographical or fictionalised. Thus I have drawn on their autobiographical writings, where they exist, including both published and unpublished letters, as well as on key poems, plays and novels. My aim is to tease out their narratives of vocation in order to establish a sense of how they were able to authorise themselves to become artists at a time when 'woman' and 'artist' were generally considered to be mutually exclusive terms.

Along the way, I look at the costs for these writers of aspiring to an identity so much at odds with their cultural identity as women. Deep tensions and anxieties are evident in their stories, which sometimes threaten to derail their vocation narratives, but which also help to illuminate the risks for women of claiming an artist's identity. For Harwood, the pressure points emerge around the old bugbear of selfishness, her fear that to give free rein to the artist within would turn her from devoted wife and mother to unconscionable monster. For Hewett, the fear was that the artist's need for solitude and single-minded devotion to her work would cut her off from the adventurer's life of love and passion that was itself the lifeblood of her art. For Stead, assuming an artist's identity was accompanied by a pervasive fear that she would be judged unacceptable as a woman, and open to the scorn and derision meted out to the 'old maids' of her youth. For Park, the tension was between

the idealised freedom of the artist to find her own voice and the commercial imperatives that constrain a busy professional woman with a family to support.

In these women's stories, there are no easy resolutions. All four struggled throughout their lives to make a place for themselves – as women, wives, mothers and lovers, as people bound in complex ways to others and to their communities – within the discourse of art and artists. But their struggles show both the power and the malleability of social and cultural ideals in the ongoing exchange within each life between the individual and their world. Vocation is one of the key points of intersection between the personal and the social, between what individuals feel within themselves and how they operate in the world. These women's stories show them using this point of intersection to change their lives. In the process, they also change the concepts of both woman and artist so that these two opposing ideals may begin to encompass one another.