

**THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES
ANNUAL LECTURE**

Backstage at the Republic of Letters

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Delivered at
Victoria University, Melbourne
14 November 2003

Backstage at the Republic of Letters

This talk began life at the last Sydney Writers' festival. One of the usefully unnerving things about writers' festivals is that, there, producers of writing meet their consumers face to face. Here, in this room, we are both producers and consumers. A few are publishers; altogether too many of us are writers; every one of us is a reader. We all spend some hours every day, some of us most hours of every day, staring at or thinking about small oblong packages of paper, or at those packages unfolded and scrolled on a screen. Viewed from the right neurotic angle, the world can seem a conspiracy of secret readers bound together by an otherworldly faith that reading is good for you. The theme of this lecture is ourselves as a conspiracy of readers, writers and publishers — the people behind the Republic of Letters — and the protean capacities of the books we make.

Why do we think that reading is good for humans? Its survival value would seem negligible, even negative. When we are reading we are not usefully employed killing something, we are not making anything, we're not even being sensibly cautious. Tigers could sneak up on us while we sit deaf and blind, head down, at the cave entrance. So what's the use of it? To assess that, I will follow the time-honoured investigative strategy of the Humanities of taking myself as subject to assess grander issues.

First, an outline of my recruitment to the secret society. I grew up in what a linguist would call 'an impoverished oral culture with a severely limited speech-code': a lower-middle-class household in a provincial Australian town where the only acknowledged moral and intellectual aspiration was how to achieve respectable reproduction. Speech acts were emphatically instrumental: 'do the dishes, feed the dog, stop that, keep quiet, go away'.

While it would be classified as an oral culture, it was in actuality a largely silent one. The only voices I could rely on hearing were on the radio, the ABC, which would be left on all day by my hard-pressed mother until the men came home in the evening. There was an unforeseen and emphatically undesired consequence. In those carefully-spoken days it was rumoured that ABC announcers donned dinner suits to read the news. When I did at last begin to talk I spoke with much the same plummy accent and intonation as I do today, to the chagrin and enduring humiliation of my family, (if I did some research and listened to the ABC archives from about 1936 to 1938, I'd probably find the parents of my voice).

In my house I wasn't read to. If my father were home and sitting down he would be asleep, and I don't think my mother sat down at all. Life was hard on women back then. I put off talking until I was three or so, scuttling around silently while my aunts nobly strove to keep their conviction that I was backward from my mother, and failing on average three times a week. I wasn't backward. I was simply beginning to dread that what I saw might be exactly what I was going to get.

It was about then that I had my first experience of the book, as instrument of oppression. It was, as most things seem to turn out to be, my mother's fault. She told me that a little sprite or elf (its exact ontological status was obscure) lived behind the ventilator grill in the kitchen — you know the ventilators in those old weatherboard houses — and this elf had two books, one golden, one black. He would watch through the ventilator, and when you did a good deed he would write it down in his golden book, and when you did a bad one he would write it in the black book. For a while all my mother needed to do if I was engaging in some illicit activity was to flick her eyes up to the grill. I'd look too and think I'd seen a flash of movement, as you do, and desist. I did notice he was never around when I was executing a good deed, which didn't happen often, but did happen.

I came to hate that elf. For a while I tried going into the dining room to escape the spy in the ventilator, until I realised there was a ventilator in there too; that he could probably sneak all over the house. For a while I retreated under the dining room table to perform any serious acts of mischief, but my mother soon twigged to that.

And then I had a liberating insight. So this character kept his black book and his golden book. So what? What was it to me? I came out from under the table, performed my evil acts at will, saying, inwardly: 'Scribble, creep.' It was an early and permanently persuasive lesson that at base all religion is a method of social control. It was also a disturbing preliterate discovery: these things called books can be used for evil purposes.

Soon after that the tribe of giants who ran the place decided to teach me to read, and when I was about eight they finally succeeded. Once I'd got the knack of it I couldn't believe that reading was legal, because, while I didn't yet know the word, the whole enterprise was so subversive. The tall lady behind the tall desk at the Geelong Public Library would stamp anything I took up to her — there didn't seem to be children's books in those days — and I'd be out the doors, down the stairs, onto the tram and home free. With the books. It was as if this whole massive edifice I had thought so solid was riddled with tiny burrows like a Swiss cheese, and in each burrow was a book, and in each book was a voice ready and eager to talk to me, at length and about anything. I discovered there were books at home, a whole

dark shelf of them stowed away in the hall cupboard. There was a Bible inscribed by the minister who officiated at my parents' marriage, which I read with stunned attentiveness, a volume of Shakespeare's Tragedies, another implausible wedding present, and half a dozen or more small red volumes which had been my mother's school prizes dating from the first decade of the century just passed. They were mainly nineteenth-century British novels, I suppose because they were classics, and thought to be uplifting, but Smollett had somehow got in there too (there's a legacy: I don't really like large, beautifully-produced hardbacks. My taste runs to small books with muddy print on stuff like blotting paper, with the dye on the cover coming off on your hands, like *Lady Macbeth*. But don't tell Michael Heyward).

Between library and home I became a passionate reader, which took me out of my depressed social class and to the University, which was free and open to passionate readers in those far-off days, and there I wallowed in the joys of promiscuous reading, as I wallow still.

There are legacies from those secret childhood experiences. I worry about children these days. I hear them sunnily discussing the last Children's Book Award list with the Children's Librarian, I watch them coming out of the libraries with their arms stacked high with their week's reading, and I worry: how will they cope with the rigours of solitary grown-up reading, after all these lucid, friendly books, eager to please as puppies? Where is the murk? Where are the intoxicating mysteries? Why does *Macbeth* call himself by that list of different names? Did *Lady Macbeth* see *Banquo's* ghost and pretend she didn't, or couldn't she see it at all? Was the ghost there or wasn't it, and what difference would that make anyway? Troubling, — intoxicating (let me say for my 9-year-old's money, and possibly still, *Macbeth* beats the other plays hands down).

There is another legacy: my aversion to polemical writing. The aversion is partly pragmatic: when did you last change your mind because you were yelled at? It is partly principled: as a practising democrat I think people have both the capacity and the right to make up their own minds, especially on important matters. But while preparing for this lecture I've realised it goes further back. It springs from my childhood notion of books as burrows with fine things at the end of them. I spot a promising burrow, I slither hopefully down — and there is this fellow (it usually is a fellow) wagging his finger and ranting at me, and I fall over backwards getting out of there. Of course there are some intricate and deep-branching burrows like the ones I've been re-exploring lately called *The Making of the English Working Class* or *Gulliver's Travels*, written with passion, and from which you

emerge changed; but they are designed to beckon you further and deeper, while giving you at least the illusion of choosing your own way. There is no finger-wagging at all.

My next experience of literacy as liberation came from the experience of teaching, first at the University of Melbourne, later at the then new La Trobe University. I've always been sceptical of people who claim to have been around during a golden age, but the seventies and eighties at La Trobe still look golden to me: a young, eager staff, a marvellous mix of students of all ages and classes and ethnic backgrounds, most of them the first of their family to be at university and therefore with no idea what it was reasonable to ask of them. And all of us revelling in the new pleasure of reading about knotty matters in private, then discussing those matters with ten or twelve other people in a classroom over three hours; then reading more, and meeting again, talking again.... Golden days.

Then came Dawkins and the Age of Iron, in which we now live. As teaching conditions deteriorated I used illness as an ejector seat to escape from academe and into the independence of full-time writing.

I had begun to write, or to try to, as my children grew older and because I knew I should, but at first I had been paralysed because I could only imagine my potential audience as a handful of scowling academics. Then suddenly I began to write quite tough, specialist history, deciphering documents, reconstructing episodes, with no anxiety about audience at all. Why? Because I realised I already knew them. They were my students, or kin to them. There they were, still shaking their heads, refusing to dance to my tune, even trying out steps of their own, but now on the other side of the page instead of the table. So for my wider audience I simply did the same things I used to do with my students: laying out the issues, telling them why I thought they were worth thinking about, introducing and evaluating the sources, then leading what were now my fellow investigators through different analytic procedures, testing the usefulness and the limitations of each one as we went; at the end summing up how far we had got, how far we still had to go, and what sources and analytic techniques might get us there. However exciting the texts, the core narrative was always the process of the inquiry.

The die was cast: I would write serious history, but I would not write for the eight other experts in the field. I would not take it as my duty to rehearse the historiography, or to advance the particular discussions dominating my field at the time. Instead I would write in the hope of seducing an intelligent, non-specialist audience into giving me a large slice of their uncommitted

time; into thinking about the issues I most cared about; perhaps into reading more about them, and even going back to the texts themselves.

I could do that because history is a democratic discipline. We have no esoteric skills, although we might pick up some peculiar habits, like deciphering ancient inscriptions or reading Nahuatl, along the way. We have no esoteric language, despite occasional attempts to invent one. We have to live with the fact that ordinary people are practising historians too. They have to be, to manage in the world. They have to learn to assess the plausibility of the stories other people spin to them; to reflect on motives overt, covert or hidden even from the tellers. They have to make decisions about what they will do next, based on their analysis of past experience. And enough of them are deeply curious about other people, including people who might live very differently, if they think there's a fighting chance of finding out something authentic about them. Academic historians' only professional advantage is that we have the time and the accumulated experience to guide them.

From my own experience I'd say that guidance emphatically does not mean simplification. There may be an issue in source criticism or a dispute over word-meaning best relegated to a footnote, or even to a scholarly article. But time and again I've been tempted to slide over something difficult, to make something look simple when it was not. I resisted the temptation, and time and again readers have demonstrated that I was right to do so. I now think my readers are as enthralled by the tough issues as I am — provided the expression of the difficulties is as clear as I can make it. 'Popular' history need not mean — must not mean — dumbed-down history.

I think my strategy has worked. My first book, now fifteen years old and seriously elderly in academic terms, has just come out in a new edition after multiple reprinting; the other two published with Cambridge University Press have gone into the series they call Canto, which theoretically at least means they won't go out of print; all of them have been book-club choices (while the last of the three, *Reading the Holocaust*, was written after I left academe and had been expelled from my home research territory, it mimicked the others in technique and aspiration).

When I was asked to do the Boyer lectures for the ABC, friend of my youth, I had to make a sudden dive into Australian history, which I enjoyed. Giving the lectures was a seriously weird experience, sitting alone in a tiny room reading out words I'd written while sitting alone in a rather larger room, and hoping but not believing that somewhere out there somebody — anybody — was listening. I was made to realise how dependent I was when

writing about imagining audience response; that for me, writing was a kind of (admittedly one-sided) conversation.

Then I wrote *Tiger's Eye*, or rather wrote the words which became *Tiger's Eye*. I had written those words to hold my self together through difficult times. It was not an act of communication, but, if you like, of private therapy; a continuing demonstration of the power of writing to focus and steady consciousness and so to maintain the continuity of one's being. My publisher/editor Michael Heyward made the book, *Tiger's Eye*, out of that disorderly pile of private jottings, and kindly put my name on the cover. I then discovered that 'reader response' was much more protean, much more explosive than I had thought. For the first time (at the Adelaide Writers' Festival, when *Tiger's Eye* was launched) I met some of the people who had sat silent and alone reading the words I had written as I sat silent and alone — and received a fast and bruising education in reception theory.

I realised that through all those earlier years I had been imagining a pre-trained audience: one which shared my academy-based expectations as to what was going on on the page. You notice that even on occasions like this, when we meet face to face to talk, we talk within the conventions in which we write. We complain when a writer's conventions don't fully mesh with ours, which is one reason why we give renegade academic popularisers such a hard time. And if we have a dispute over meaning, we typically rush back to scrutinise the text.

Even as academics we are sometimes brought to acknowledge that we do not control how our work will be read: when, for example, it goes into translation. A book of mine went into Spanish, Italian, Portuguese. Fine. It still looked like the same book. I could even read bits of it. Then one went into Polish and into Hebrew. Well... that was OK. They were unintelligible to me, but they were European languages. Sort of. Then *Aztecs* was translated into Mandarin, and I felt deeply queasy. I knew it wasn't likely — but what would happen if a billion Chinese read my *Aztecs*? I had no idea, and I did not want to take responsibility.

So... while the uncontrolled audience response to *Tiger's Eye* was thrilling, it was also scary. People read it as their individual experience dictated: as a book about childhood, or about being ill or about dying; about family, about dealing with mothers. I did not want to take responsibility for what reading it led some people to do. For example: one woman wrote to tell me she had made up a list of questions she was taking to her obdurately reticent mother, who happened to be on her death bed at the time, and that this time she intended to get some answers.

I discovered from all that that books do make things happen, but not always what you had in mind; that reading is a creative activity, and most

creative, I suspect, for people who read little. When I was nine and reading *The Mill on the Floss*, one of those red-leaking books, I thought the pivotal scene was the division of the jam puffs between Maggie and her tyrannical brother, with everything before it a slow-build up and after it a slow decline (I still think I'm essentially right).

So this is a dangerous activity we are all engaged in. I'm also beginning to suspect that the person we as readers meet on the page will always be in part of our own making, though the variation will depend on the writer. For example, I think Montaigne maintains a pretty stable personality on the page for most of us over all his writings. But the writer called 'Nabokov'? Sometimes I can't even read the sentences of the person going under that name. Others of his books are essential to me, and the voice one of the most comprehensively compelling that I know.

Reading. Writing. And now to publishing. With my most recent book, *Dancing with Strangers*, I have gone back to writing serious history for a non-professional readership, but this time I have learnt a lot because, this time, someone has been teaching me.

I have never properly understood what an editor did before. I'd always had good relations with mine — my editor at Cambridge has become a dear friend. But while they might correct my grosser grammatical errors or question my more gothic constructions, I expected them to leave my prose pretty much alone. Essentially I saw them as publishers: people who would take my manuscript, correct minor errors, and then co-ordinate a great chain of people unknown to me to convert my manuscript into books, with covers and pictures and indexes and acknowledgements, and then (even more remarkably), to persuade enough passing strangers to buy enough of them to keep us all afloat and paddling.

Then I met Michael Heyward. The value for me in reading *Tiger's Eye* after it was published has been immense — having my own text to analyse. But what its making also did was let me watch the uncanny skills of a great editor in action. It seemed he took that private heap of jottings written when I was ill into his own head, where he re-ordered it, so he could tell me 'no, this bit has to go HERE, and you simply have to have a bridging sentence THERE.' I think he was discerning a structure which was in a sense there, but only implicitly. I certainly hadn't seen it, until he showed it to me. It was uncanny because it felt as if this stranger was wandering around loose in my head.

With the making of *Dancing with Strangers* much the same thing has happened, except that this time we occasionally discussed the book in the course of its writing. We would have strange, probing conversations, each straining to hear what the other one meant by what they were saying. In

fact it was very like what happens when you are deeply engrossed in writing, and you wait with a sort of trepidation to see what you will write next, because you don't yet know; when the act of writing itself becomes an intense and illuminating process of thought.

Reading is a social transaction, not a private one. It is a trade in words, and the words have to be sound currency. Another editorial talent revealed itself. Throughout the several stages of editing this editor could read the evolving text again and again, not only with multilevel intelligence, scanning for a number of different things, but also as a first-time reader would read it. He could read, and read again, with washed eyes.

On top of all this rather mystical stuff there was the business of the making of the physical book. To watch Michael and the team at Text brooding over what illustrations to use and how to deploy them was to watch a whole new branch of the creative imagination at work. This shaman of an editor could transform into the naive potential buyer gazing wide-eyed around in a bookshop looking for a christmas present for his aunt. What book-cover might catch his eye? What subliminal promises could the cover legitimately make (legitimately, I was impressed to see how austere a morality inflects this commercial project)? The how of all this is closed to me, but I can recognise it when it's done.

If I'm making you jealous, me having this great editor — well, so you should be. It is a rare talent. He leadeth me into green pastures; he restoreth my soul by confirming the magic of the book, which is the only form of spirituality which interests me.

Reflecting on the editing, publishing and distribution of books has led me back to the work of a great historian: work long familiar to me, but which I think I have not properly understood until now (which, by the way, is how experience interacts with literacy: in lurches). The historian Robert Darnton prepared for his later career by spending a number of years as a crime reporter, first in Newark, then in New York (he was graceless enough to suggest this was useful, even necessary preliminary training). Darnton began his academic career by writing the biography of a book — not the ideas in it, but the physical object: how it was put together; what happened to it after publication. The book was Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*. Darnton then moved to uncover the systems of the commercial production and distribution of books — all kinds of books, from pornography to philosophy, including some which were classified as both — during the years before the French revolution. Again, not the ideas in the books, but of the books themselves, and all the people who had a hand in their making: as he says 'printers, paper makers, smugglers, booksellers, publishers, people who

made the ink, people who made the type, bankers, authors, everyone imaginable...'¹

I like the way he puts authors last. He shows us why. They are the least important, the most replaceable figures in that huge, largely invisible structure, and without it the ideas we associate with the French Revolution could not have got off the page. Darnton demonstrates how this vast network, much of it illegal, not much motivated by idealism — most people in it were out to make a quick livre — nonetheless created a Republic of Letters before the French Revolution, with its speeches, violence and blood, even began: a Republic of Letters which would survive even after the Emperor Napoleon had trampled the political republic into mud.

Darnton shows us that literacy is liberation; that these little oblong packages are worth fighting for.

Or are they? After all, why books? Why not film? Why not television? Surely books are superseded now?

Well... not for me. I hate the sense of being pre-scheduled: of being imprisoned in someone else's notion of time, sentenced to fifty minutes, ninety minutes, three hours, whatever it might be, as a pre-formed structure unfolds at its own inexorable pace (at this moment, you are sentenced to five more minutes). For that reason I find television dramas almost impossible to watch, and it takes something like cinematic genius, like Claude Lanzmann and his Shoah, to keep me involved in a film. Documentaries are better, but if they become arguments I mistrust the inscrutable process of selection and presentation too deeply to be persuaded to anything, or even to be moved.

The form of the book gives unique freedoms. You can read at your own pace, some pages holding you for minutes, others rippling past. You can go backwards or forwards; and a page read one day can look quite different the next. You can hold the book, you can possess it, but the form itself is secretive. Its pages close like a bud. It seems obliging, but it won't let you look at three pages at once. I do not understand our passion for narratives that unfold page by secret page, with the rest of the story concealed, but I know the passion is real.

So...what are my conclusions after this magical mystery tour we've been on together? You'll notice that, whatever the discipline, a humanities academic's conclusions are always moral. I'll give you three.

One: given all the above, to deprive any child of the opportunity to achieve full literacy in a world language is to do them grievous injury. I know there is the issue of the conservation or retrieval of eroding cultures by giving priority to the teaching of the local language. I know that right now there are embittered young people in what we call under-developed

societies who have achieved literacy, and gained no freedom from it except the knowledge of their exclusion from the opportunities it ought to have brought. That is a terrible thing. But the answer is not to withhold literacy.

Two: given what we now know about the birth and the resilience of that tough, dynamic multi-celled creature, the Republic of Letters, so remarkable in its origins, so unpredictable in its effects, which has survived so long, we must not allow it be destroyed, as it is now being destroyed, by a tinpot mafia of corporate Napoleons.

Three: I think the primary survival value of literacy for the species is that only literacy can persuade us that people not personally known to us are fellow humans, and therefore proper subjects of our moral concern. Literacy overleaps boundaries political, cultural and temporal. It also corrects the exaggerated status we temporary beings are tempted to give to individual life, and to individual death. It connects the living both with the living, but also with the great company of the dead. Firmly lodged in its articular time, literacy nonetheless declares humanity's triumph over the fact of death, and denies the immutability of time. Of course humans die, but I have a friend called Michel de Montaigne who died more than four hundred years ago, and he is still alive to me.

If we historians enjoy an unfair advantage within the academy because we are (willy nilly) democrats, poets have an advantage over us all. Only the very greatest prose writers can make the reader read at a pace and a rhythm of the writer's choosing. Poets do that often. They make us adjust our breath, our heartbeat, to theirs; to exist with them within the same small slice of time.

Poets also have a knack for the economical statement of complicated matters. I end with a poem by John Keats, found buried among his papers fifty years after his body was buried in the earth. I found it buried in a literary review, I don't remember where. As you will realise when you hear it, the poem was probably written a few months before his death:

*This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
that thou wouldst't wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd — see, here it is
I hold it towards you.*

Endnotes

¹ Robert Darnton, *The New History*, edited by Maria Lœcia G. Pallares-Burke, Polity, 2002, pp.158-83; p.167. Darnton has spent most of his professional life trying to understand ‘the power of print and the printed word — or just any words, including the spoken and sung word, but basically the printed book — as a force in history’. Ibid. p.169.