

**‘WILD WORDS’:
The Condition of Language in Australia.**

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IN THE LATE 1960S JAMES MCAULEY WROTE THE POEM 'At Penstock Lagoon'. It is not one of his best poems, because it is not fully integrated, and some of its raw material has been left unrefined. It begins with finely-drawn images of night falling, the stars appearing and then vanishing behind cloud. Then it is dawn and the observer walks out into the mist, into the 'null element,' reflecting on loss—loss of content, understanding, meaning, innocence. The things we know are things without value:

We know all the moves,
The language-games, the ploys;
We jam the transmission
With a verbal kind of noise;

Called dialogue ... insights ...
Meaningful! relevant! —
Updated, Christ retires
Replaced by 'the Christ-event.'¹

We all recognise that complaint, and many of us continue to make it. We know that there is nothing Australian about these vogue words. We imported them, along with the ideas they represent.

Nor have we invented pedantry, purposeless experimentation (such as that of the language experts in *Gulliver's Travels*), or any of the dialects assumed by certain people at certain times for a variety of purposes from self-delusion to exhibitionism and the desire to manipulate, coerce and deceive.

So 'the condition of language in Australia' is hardly a defensible proposition. However you look at it we can be seen only as participants in a variety of word games which are played just as commonly elsewhere. It is not clear to me that these games have taken on 'a local habitation and a name', but here at the beginning I prefer the hypothesis that they might be more persistent and debilitating—as imported viruses sometimes are—in our community than in their countries of origin.

In introducing this symposium Gerhard Schulz remarked that in accepting certain kinds of language 'as legal tender we allow ourselves to think what we say rather than say what we think. Instead of liberating thought, language then creates prisons for it.' To follow this line of argument is to move into deep and possibly dangerous waters, and to desert scholarly investigation and analysis for speculative adventuring. It involves such questions as how strong

and resilient is our culture? Can our distinctive linguistic habits provide us with some resistance to the encroachments of alien dialects? Why raise the subject? is perhaps the hardest question of all. For if some contemporary linguistic habits are questioned, cries of derision come from those who remind us that language is continually changing. To criticise, let alone resist these changes is, so they say, pointless. Worse, it revives a long-discarded notion of correctness, and implies a good deal of arrogance in those who would wish to reassert correctness as a principle, or even merely as a guide to usage.

The fundamental weakness in the argument for linguistic libertarianism is that language does not change, but is changed by its users for many reasons, which include ignorance, inventiveness, and a desire to manipulate opinion. (The most extended essay on this last point is, of course, George Orwell's on Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, which has a special relevance for part of my argument.) There are words which undergo a sea-change by acquiring secondary connotations quite different from their original meanings. Who knows how the word 'sophisticated' became respectable, given its original meaning—a 'superficially plausible, but generally fallacious method of reasoning' and the accompanying notion of the debasement and impairment of purity and genuineness? There is much food for thought in the fact that the transformation of a person from naivety to sophistication comes about through education, which by implication develops the tastes and accomplishments which characterise a worldly-wise person.

On the matter of ignorance I shall be brief, because this lecture is not intended to be a catalogue of solecisms. Ignorance, however, is not an incurable condition, and we, as Fellows of the Academy, must be concerned that ignorance of the language is growing, not diminishing. As the experience of learning Latin recedes into the past it gains perspective; and I have no doubt that the sometimes painful acquisition of that language, and the demands it makes on memory, patience, concentration and thought are one foundation of the understanding of English, and in particular of a vocabulary not confined to the basic necessities of communication.

There seems to be no real prospect of a general revival of the classical languages, though there are some hopeful signs in the United States, and I meet young students from time to time who are enthusiastic about the pleasure and profit they gain from studying Latin. They are a privileged minority: for most students, linguistic

enrichment must happen in different ways, and one of them should surely be through etymology and derivation. When the BBC programme *My Word* was first devised, I remember coming to the dismal conclusion that such a programme could not be put to air in Australia, certainly not with a cast of people who were not professional linguists, and a general audience which showed remarkable (by our standards) understanding of the language games played by the participants.

One has to hope that it is not too late to rescue certain items from extinction; and that it is possible to generate some interest in the task, even if it will not elicit the same passionate responses as would a call to save endangered species of plants, birds and animals. I ask if we can or should sit idly by while people constantly confuse *militate* and *mitigate*, or, unerringly 'hone' in on a question. The correct version of that particular metaphor is in danger of shrinking to a technical phrase used only by pigeon fanciers. Both solecisms are symptomatic of a fundamental ignorance of, on the one hand, the origins of words, and on the other of their meaning, and the nature of metaphor. Nothing is more difficult than coming to terms with metaphor, and nothing is more crucial to the understanding of the cultural complexities reflected in a language, and especially in its poetry.

As for individual words, dictionaries can play a part in disestablishing meaning by inattentiveness to etymology and linguistic history. Take, for example, the word 'bureaucracy'. One dictionary (*Random House*) correctly has as its primary definition 'Government by many bureaus, administrators, and petty officials'—a definition marred only by the insertion of the word 'petty'. Its secondary definitions are 'excessive multiplication of, and concentration of power in, administrative bureaus or administrations', and 'excessive governmental red tape and routine'. The *Macquarie Dictionary*, however, implicitly denying the history of the word, and the neutrality of its origin has as the primary meaning 'Government by officials against whom there is inadequate public right of redress'.²

Random House receives my vote for its definition of 'disinterested', now almost universally substituted for 'uninterested'. It properly reports that the primary meaning is 'unbiased by personal interest or advantage; not influenced by selfish motives'; and goes on to report that 'disinterested, uninterested are not properly synonyms. Disinterested today stresses

absence of prejudice or of selfish interests . . . uninterested suggests aloofness and indifference'. This clear distinction, however, might not be enough to save the concept of disinterestedness central to Matthew Arnold's essay 'The Function of Criticism'; and, as Orwell argues, the loss of a word is the loss of an idea.

The invention of a word to describe a new object or idea naturally gives rise to the conviction that an idea exists which the word describes. But this might not always be so. A word can be created in order to generate an idea, or ideas, and I take the word 'multiculturalism' to be an example. In Australia much of the debate about multicultural policy has been caused by understandable confusion as to the meaning of the word. The word clearly signifies a deeper confusion, which has to do with the nature of culture itself.

In passing it is worth noting that the theory that there is no reality except language is nicely countered by the competing theory that language is at best imperfect, at worst useless. This latter proposition is exemplified in the theatre of the absurd, which is caught in an inescapable contradiction to the extent that it uses language, however minimal, to make the point that it makes no point. Ever-receding mirrors are as nothing compared with this as a source of anxiety.

But back to multiculturalism. The addition of a prefix to the word culture can define a specific entity such as horticulture or agriculture. But the addition of 'multi' produces a non-word. What would a multiculture be? So a suffix appears as well, which clearly signals an act of ideological creation, along the lines of racism and sexism, except that multiculturalism is a 'good' word, and the others are 'bad' words. The problem with the word multiculturalism is that it creates uncertainty as to whether there is such a phenomenon as a many-cultured culture (like Joseph's coat), or whether there are many cultures (which is self-evident). Horticulturalism, if it existed, would certainly be an institutionalised policy or ideology relating to horticulture. Just to think of it makes one realise that there are certain things we can do without. Multiculturalism, like many recently invented words, encourages imprecision and over-simplification. To say that we are a multicultural society is *not* to say that we are a multi-racial, multi-lingual society, which is true, but is to permit or require the creation of a new bureau within the bureaucracy in order to administer a policy based on a misconception of culture. Public confusion is inevitable.

As for racism—one dictionary definition (*Random House*) has ‘a belief that human races have distinctive characteristics that determine their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that one’s own race is superior and has the right to rule others.’ It’s a brave attempt at definition, and its failure is symptomatic of the problem of the concept. The first part of the definition about the distinctiveness of human races is not a belief but a fact. The second part about the superiority of one’s own race only partly fulfils the requirements of the word, which includes censure of people of one race (usually of white races) who are intolerant towards people of other races. This same dictionary’s definition of sexism is even more illuminating— ‘discrimination against women, as in restricted career choices, job opportunities etc.’ Thus is asserted the notion that there can only be discrimination in one direction, leading to the false conclusion that there is and cannot be discrimination against men. Meanwhile there is a real danger that the word ‘discrimination’ in the sense of ‘the power of making fine distinctions’, ‘discriminating judgement’ will go the way of ‘disinterestedness’. And is it too fanciful to suggest that taking ‘gender’ out of grammar (like taking Christ out of Christmas) and substituting it for ‘sex’ signifies neglect of and disrespect for the status of grammar in the world, while at the same time robbing sex of its meaning? What a blow this should be to those who proclaim the supremacy of the word in creating reality, and to the decoders of verbal statements. If the connective tissue is threatened, so is the well-being of the animal, and of its parasites.

Ignorance has taken me a long way, to the border of, if not partly into tribal territory where different dialects are spoken for different purposes, and therefore can be roughly classified. This is a convenient way of ordering the documentation of my argument, but it needs a generous permissiveness on your part about the various classifications and what general title is appropriate to each. Before I embark on this exercise I must make it quite clear that I am not arguing in principle *against* dialects and technical language or against the complications of the language of theory. I *am* arguing against the language of obfuscation and falsification; and *for* recognising the difference between private interests and public needs. This recognition and its implementation by the Academy is vital to our reputation and our role in the community which, at present, knows virtually nothing about us.

I have divided my dialects into four broad categories. The first is the language of structure and classification, well illustrated by reference to business and management. The second is the language of evasion and propaganda (both frequently spoken and written in political circles, including bureaucracies.) The third is the language of television, which rarely escapes the twin vices of banality and sensationalism. The fourth is the language of criticism as exemplified by contemporary theory in the humanities and social sciences. There is another language which one might broadly describe as mathematical/ scientific/ technical which I set aside, not to revive concepts of the two cultures, but because (with the exception of computer dialect) it might not, regrettably, be as influential in moulding opinion as are the other four. Mathematicians and scientists do not easily or often escape their own technicalities, and that is greatly to their disadvantage, and to ours.

As I said in relation to ignorance, I don't intend to present a catalogue of sins. My method is to sample, and to choose, I hope, representative evidence which will convey something of my sense of the gap that has opened up and is widening between those who are daily, fluent speakers of the dialect, and those who are not, and who long for standard English. (In passing I simply note that the emergence of the Plain English movement is a direct reaction to many of the problems I am bringing to your attention, and therefore itself evidence of their existence in that most ambiguous of all places, 'the real world'.) If my examples are sometimes parodies, that is because parody is a useful shorthand.

The dominance of management theory is part of the contemporary burden for administrators and staff in universities as well as in businesses and industry. Mission statements, and the ability to distinguish between aims and objectives and to say something under each of these headings are for many companies and most academic institutions, part of the new imperatives for strategic planning. It is as though the institution is a battlefield, engaged in a long and arduous campaign to establish itself and gain occupancy of a corner of the available territory. In a way that is true, but the regimental nature of the language used creates a curious impression, since even while using it these same institutions claim that they are people-centred, (or, more commonly, people-oriented). These people whose interests are supposedly paramount, usually become, in the jargon of the trade, 'human resources', which is hardly (to use a term I have come to dread) a 'caring' image. 'We

have 15 human resources in this department' is a remark I have actually heard, and it indicates, as do the apparently rigid demands for statements of objectives, an attitude far removed from the aspirations toward flexibility and adaptability expressed by the very same people. As so often, there are contradictions between statements and their implications, and parody clearly reveals these.

It is interesting and encouraging, therefore, that reactions against this kind of linguistic prescriptiveness, often inspire comic definitions such as :

Mission statement : a pseudo-religious interpretation of a prior, usually simple, motherhood objective, by a zealot or follower of fashion, to obfuscate or cover up general incompetence.

Human resources : formerly people; now devoid of protection from Resource Security legislation.³

Such redefinitions recognise that stock phrases replace precise ones, and shift the emphasis away from the individual needs of enterprises to standardised formulas.

In politics and its supporting bureaucracies, however, there is even more opportunity for obfuscation and evasion. After all, if the art of politics is the art of the possible, what is possible is sometimes achievable only by pretending that everybody's demands can be met, and this is the path to evasion. The skilled evasions practised by politicians and their advisers are brilliantly parodied by the script writers for *Yes Minister*. Their language makes a fine distinction between the equivocation of the minister, always trying to balance his political ideals and his daily anxieties about his political competence; and Sir Humphrey Appleby's cunning and seductive evasions, which occasionally rescue the minister from disastrous mistakes, but always reinforce his own bureaucratic ambitions.

The minister's own comment on a draft letter provided by Appleby sums up the politics of linguistic evasion. The minister is delighted with the draft which is :

masterly because not only does it draw attention to the matter in a way which is unlikely to be remarked, but it also suggests that *someone else* should do something about it, and ends with a sentence implying that even if they do, they won't get anywhere.⁴

Under the heading of political/bureaucratic language I place the various ideologies associated with political life and the expansion of bureaucracies into relatively new areas of public policy. By far the most influential of these is the feminist movement, with its program for remaking certain features of the language. The Company Director's journal reflected one aspect of this influence in trying to deal with the 'his/her' problem. It came up with the totally ungrammatical but widely used solution 'The director who wishes to take that particular course of action should consult their legal adviser'.⁵ That this sentence could easily be put into the plural and thus avoid offending the logic of grammar is a minor problem compared with the false discovery that the word 'man' is not generic.

This and related revisions of etymological history cannot be dismissed as ignorant, because the feminist movement is astute. Its practice is both an exploitation and subversion of Orwell's argument about the power of language to create and abolish ideas. It is not an ignorant technique, but it relies on ignorance for its success; and if the dictionary and history of language are appealed to for support by the unconverted both are likely to be dismissed as man-made.

I do not intend to pursue this depressing subject in detail, except to say that acceptance of the falsification of the history of language and the distortion of its grammatical logic by academic institutions does not reflect any credit upon them. The Australian Government Publishing Service advises against (bans?) the use of 'man' even in the generic sense. 'The man in the street' becomes 'the average citizen' or 'ordinary people', thus drawing attention to the fact that these are not synonymous, and that the English language is particularly rich in such fine discriminations. 'Man of letters' is *not* the same as 'author', 'intellectual', 'scholar', 'writer' or 'literati', though for reasons other than the manipulation of language, he might be an endangered species. All the more reason, one might think, to come to his rescue. As for 'mastery'—how can and why should that be replaced by 'competence', 'expertise' or 'proficiency'? If you were a young pianist or flautist, would you aspire to attend Roger Woodward's or Pierre Rampal's competence or proficiency class, rather than his (and not, in this case, or hers) Master Class?

Let me not labour the point, but remind you of its pedagogical implications. Bowdlerising Shakespeare, I was taught, was an act of bigoted puritanism! Bowdler was rightly ridiculed for his

'purification' of the plays. I imagine that 'What a piece of work is a man!' is by some now thought to be the unfortunate observation of a 'dead white guy', and will be criticised along with 'The proper study of mankind is man' and :

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden.

(Did those lines *not* include Eve, or was she an innocent victim?) In case you think I am making a mountain out of a molehill, I heard recently of an incident in a lecture when two female students got up and walked out when the lecturer quoted from Slessor's poem 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' :

. . . so Cook sailed westabout,
So men write poems in Australia.

Suffice it to say that many of the words proposed as alternatives to the supposedly offensive ones (which include, of course, mankind) encourage a new kind of illiteracy. The new, politically correct lexicographers include governments, unions and universities, each parading fear of non-conformity by rewriting etymological history by means of style manuals.⁶

A different threat to the language comes from television, in whose philosophy language is, in any case, subordinate to image. For the most part, television language is merely a caption to the images, and the message is taken in through the eyes. With all their limitations, the imagist poets used language sparingly to give definition, clarity and preciseness to their observations. Television language is frequently superfluous to the image or even contradicted. The script of a television interview can read quite blandly, but its impact can be seen as hostile, fawning, biased or uncouth. A steady diet of popular television fills without nourishing. Or, as Samuel Johnson said of Pope's *Essay on Man* 'The reader fills his mind full, though he learns nothing.'⁷ It, too, therefore, greatly influences the level of language comprehension and appreciation in the community. Its vocabulary is simple, its sentences short, and it is, literally, unmemorable. The time spent by young people watching television reduces both time and incentive for vocabulary enrichment, and the desire to read.

Now I come to the most difficult—and for this audience—possibly the most controversial part of my argument. This is the condition of language in the educational system, particularly in the universities, and more particularly still, in the humanities and social sciences.

The principal contemporary controversies in the humanities have been and continue to be not about values, but about competing theories and ideologies. In literature, elements of French theory, feminist ideology, post-modernism and post-colonialism have combined into a powerful cocktail. The exponents of any one or more of these theories appear to be disciples of their originators, and to the extent that this is the case, they are dedicated to pass on the gospel to the next generation. There is ample evidence that their commitment is infectious, and that they therefore tend to appear to be speaking *ex cathedra* even if this is not their intention. It seems to me that in these circumstances theory is treated, not as hypothesis, but as dogma, and there is evidence in student responses and staff defences of their position that this is so. Consider this statement from a research proposal in the health sciences :

The study was concerned with facilitating critical consciousness and empowerment of the research group. A qualitative framework was employed, based on emancipatory critical theory, feminist theory and Freirian empowering research ... Autonomy is associated with freedom, licensure and unconstraint.

The research proposal also refers to what became evident 'during dialogue with the data'.⁸

To say that the language of much contemporary theory is inscrutable is to say the obvious. The language of philosophy is always demanding, and in translation can be even more formidable, as the work of Immanuel Kant amply demonstrates. A difficulty arises, however, for students who are not (and most of them are not) students of philosophy, and who have to learn how to come to terms with the discipline. It is a problem, too, for their teachers, most of whom have come to theory through literature and not philosophy as the students are doing. Their capacity for strict analytical and philosophical thinking is very limited. Few of them—whether teachers or students—have mastered French.

In these circumstances certain items are like stick-on labels, and they have the power of magical words. Foregrounding and

marginalising mark out a territory in which the tribe talks earnestly among its members, but does not pass on its findings to the outside world, nor, for that matter to others in the same general field of scholarship with different interests. This is not a complaint, but merely an observation.

John Passmore once remarked that despite its record of innovation and inventiveness in science and technology, Australian thinking in the humanities is largely derivative. There can, of course, be debate about that generalisation. If, however, one looks at the history of education or of literary theory and criticism in Australia, there is a deal of evidence to support Passmore's view. Most educational theory which has influenced practical changes in schooling over the last 20 years has been imported, and rests on assumptions drawn from educational psychology, child development, and teaching methodology, and the nature and function of testing which have not been subjected to the analytical scrutiny they invite.

I believe the same is true of literary and now cultural criticism. Structuralism, post-structuralism, modernism and post-modernism, deconstructionism and all their derivatives, rest on a variety of largely untested assumptions. These concern the nature of creativity, the relationship between knowledge and power, social and psychological theory, especially about race, class and sex, and Marxist theory about capital and labour, and the exploitation of the weak (however defined) by the strong. They also accept concepts of relativity and subjectivity as given truths, and, in applying theory to individual works, effectively exclude questions of aesthetic and moral value. These theories can provide a variety of insights, but language, and imperfections in logic, make the insights difficult, and sometimes impossible to recover.

I am conscious of the fact that in referring to the 1991 Academy symposium as evidence of these fashions, I expose myself to the criticism of turning on friends and colleagues. I can only say that this is not my intention. I merely draw attention to the fact that the publication *Beyond the Disciplines: The New Humanities* offers ample evidence of the coercive use of language in writing about literature and culture.

One does not have to be a semiotician to infer from language, the direction of an argument. The word 'studies' is, of course, the key to the denial of the concept of disciplines. Yet the interdependence of the two is rarely a matter of comment. In the

Academy we have long encouraged interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary work in the humanities, but gradually the view that neither is possible unless one accepts that there *are* disciplines which can usefully be brought into a relationship with each other has lost ground to the notion of studies as metadisciplinary—beyond good and evil, one might say.

It was with amazement that I read the back-cover 'blurb' on *Beyond the Disciplines: The New Humanities*:

In the recent Theory Wars, the Traditional Humanities have taken a battering from radical critiques of their methods and politics. *In their place* (my italics) new types of knowledge are emerging as the New Humanities.

The tone of that statement is gloating and crude, and it is appropriately illustrated by the front cover which represents production and construction at its worst—a stark geometrical building with sharp angles, precisely reflecting the programmatic nature of the language of this 'brave new world'.

The 'meta' theory carries with it its own vocabulary—'difference and mediation: a dialectical collage'; 'a policy calculus for cultural studies'; and, more generally, the use of the plural in 'feminist categories of Western Knowledges', and 'the New Jurisprudences'. It is marked too by persistent assaults on the Western tradition and the Eurocentricity of literary and historical studies. The words 'construction' and 'production' especially in relation to knowledge have a particular importance, because they are a mechanistic metaphor for the ways in which knowledge is gained and literary works are created. They assume the instrumentality of knowledge and its calculated production by certain people (on the feminist view especially by men) for specific purposes such as social and political control, and the exercise of power over minorities of various kinds. Such theories take no account of the extraordinary complexities and mysteries of the creative impulse as writers, artists and composers have recorded them over the centuries.

The concept of studies is based on the notion of inclusiveness. The disciplines, as we still recognise them in the Academy, are too confined for contemporary theorists. Literary 'texts' are the raw material for theoretical exercises, and 'text-like situations' (Jonathan Culler's phrase) should also be studied.⁹ This view encourages the use of special languages in the analysis and discussion of literature, which include the kind of terminology we

are all familiar with. While one might find reading criticism in the 'argot' a less than pleasurable experience, one can hardly quarrel with its practitioners for following the fashion. Let me quote a few examples from sources other than *Beyond the Disciplines*:

1. Bach's music is a social discourse which in its very compositional choices and inflections, produces socially grounded meaning. The continuo . . . enacts a service role which is not unlike the role of servants in the employ of the aristocracy. The genre systematically addresses the tensions between the dynamic individual and stable society—surely one of the most important issues of the increasingly prominent middle class.¹⁰

2. It is now perhaps a commonplace to observe that knowledge has become one of the major productive resources of advanced capitalism . . . critique is the dynamic core of any discipline . . . its task is destructive and it lacks all compassion, for only through destruction is new knowledge possible.¹¹

3. One of the implications of Foucault's work on institutions, power, disciplinarity, or sexuality, and on the way discourse produces concepts, practice and behaviours, positioning subjects by disciplining bodies, is that there are complex and difficult relations between the sexed body and discourse.

Discourse itself is relatively ill-defined, bandied about, re-appropriated as analytical metalanguage in metanarratives like Marxism which it was itself trying to rewrite, as if we all knew what it meant.

. . . discourse, in producing practices, produced subjects, whom it therefore spoke or wrote.¹²

There are serious pedagogical problems in carrying such theories with their underlying assumptions—not to mention their language—over into the classroom. I can speak only of (and I hope *for*) literature in remarking that for students the terminology is a very blunt weapon indeed. It is applied language, used to gloss a text, not, in spite of what the theorists say, to examine it. That is why I referred to theory as dogma. Few students have enough experience of literature to be able to decide for themselves whether theoretical positions are helpful to their understanding of texts or not, let alone whether they have, in themselves, any validity. So,

being prudent and remarkably patient with their teachers, they take the line of least resistance, and by imitating them, risk inhibiting the development of their own individual style. Most will take a long time to recover from their packaged responses. Some will not recover, and who knows how many will be able to find their own critical voice.

There is a curious irony here. The study of literature is one of the subjects at the very heart of the humanities. The hope of teachers of literature is (or was?) that students' own language would be enriched by its study, and that they would develop a distinctive style, a way of being themselves in language. The New Humanities is, by contrast, the product of, not a challenge to an increasingly technocratic age. Its dialect is a member of the family which includes the other dialects I have mentioned, and it seems to mimic the jargon of forms of scientific and pseudo-scientific discourse. If it claims immediate political and social relevance for its radical critiques, this might well be achieved at the expense of the lasting relevance of the texts it uses to further its own purposes. Its practitioners propose a new role for theory which is much closer to propaganda than to the disinterested critique of knowledge which this Academy, together with the universities, seeks to promote.

So in what I have said, I can't claim, except in a minor way, to have discovered in the condition of language in Australia, anything peculiarly Australian, except what I haven't mentioned at all—the heartening persistence of Australian colloquialisms.

So in the end, there is a question rather than a conclusion—or should I say 'closure'? Does the condition of language have a particular importance for us? The answer, I believe, is yes. As Fellows of the Academy we are understandably concerned at the continuing emphasis on vocational training, and the lip-service paid to supposedly non-vocational studies such as the humanities at a time when many of the problems of modern living can be analysed and understood only by people with a knowledge of the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. We must, therefore, accept a public role, and share our knowledge outside the Academy. How to do this most effectively is a question we have not yet satisfactorily answered, though encouraging others to participate in our activities is an excellent beginning.

We do, however, have an additional responsibility to preserve the cultural inheritance which brings us together, and which, like learning itself, is universal. At the centre of all our activities is

language, and we all recognise that each one of us has various languages within and beyond our disciplines. There is, however, a language such as men do use which is our most important possession; and our public reputation depends on our willingness and ability to speak and write that language. *Beyond the Disciplines* is promoted as a means of escaping the supposed exclusiveness of disciplinary boundaries, even while it establishes itself as a cult, speaking the language of the high priest. It occurs to me that there might be a reflection here of one tendency in Australian language. While we have a tradition of taciturnity, we also have a record of pomposity in official speech, and conversely of semi-literacy.

The question I leave you with is: How will future Australian cultural historians read the signs when they come to characterise our times? The age of barbarism, for its unprecedented enactment of man's inhumanity to man? The age of hypocrisy, for pretending that Robert Burns's eloquent statement excludes women? An age of sensibility without sense, or freedom without responsibility? An age of incomprehensible contradictions, of freedom fighters and thought police, where democrats have legislated to deprive us of freedom to use our own language as we please, and where Milton's passionate defence of freedom of the press has been invoked in support of extremes of license he could not have begun to imagine?

Perhaps these future historians will settle for the age in which there were remarkable advances in communications technology, enabling the remotest places to possess information, but where these wonders arrived just as people were losing their ability to talk across the back fence.

'What so wild as words are?' asks Browning, who had personal experience of their insubordination, and who was far from being the only writer to complain of their intractability. The struggle for meaning engaged by all great writers is one of the reasons why attempts to depose the disciplines deserve to fail. Intellectual traditions are the great achievement of the human race, and have survived the follies and destructiveness of centuries. Barry Oakley coined the phrase 'a revered constellation of knowledge and experience' to describe the canon of great works, which is not to say that they are beyond criticism.¹³ On the contrary they are pre-eminently critical as well as creative. It is the understanding of language which provides access to them—the language of exploration, not of ideological mimicry. Stephen Jay Gould, who is

skilled in making scientific concepts intelligible, is helpful on this point :

The concepts of science, in all their richness and ambiguity, can be presented without any compromise, without any simplification counting as distortion, in language accessible to all intelligent people. Words, of course, must be varied, if only to eliminate a jargon and phraseology that would mystify anyone outside the priesthood, but conceptual depth should not vary at all between professional publication and general exposition.¹⁴

Emerson's statement about the descent of ancient works of value is not to be dismissed, despite its curious conviction that there can be only a few recipients of their message :

There are not in the world at any one time more than a dozen persons who read and understand Plato:— never enough to pay for an edition of his works; yet to every generation these come duly down, for the sake of those few persons ...¹⁵

Let us hope that our age will not prove to be the weak link in the chain of linguistic understanding that permits us to read our way back into our own past, taking with us not the few, but the many who can find there both sustaining nourishment, and a way of rediscovering the present, and knowing the place for the first time.

Notes

- 1 James McAuley, *Collected Poems* (Angus & Robertson 1971) p 216.
- 2 Macquarie Dictionary editorial policy is to give the current usage of a word as the primary definition.
- 3 These examples are taken from a letter to *Quadrant* by Neil Buchanan (October 1992) p 9.
- 4 *Yes Minister* (BBC Books, 1984) p 467.
- 5 *The Company Director* (February 1992) p 25.

- 6 'Non-Sexist Languages' in *Style Manual* (Australian Government Publishing Services) §8.24, p 119.
- 7 Samuel Johnson, 'Alexander Pope', *Essays in Criticism*
- 8 The source of this quotation cannot be referenced.
- 9 Jonathon Culler, *Framing the Sign : Criticism and its Institutions* (Blackwell, 1988) p vii.
- 10 *Music Viva* Program for Sydney 22 October 1991. The program notes are by Sally Macarthur. The first sentence is quoted by her from Susan McClary's article 'The blasphemy of talking politics during Bach year' in *Music and Society* (CUP 1987).
- 11 John Frow, *The Social Production of Knowledge and the Discipline of English* (UQP, 1990) pp 1 and 16.
- 12 Terry Threadgold, 'Legislators and Interpreters : Linguists, Feminists and Critical Fiction' in *Meridian*, Vol II No 1 (May 1992, La Trobe University Press) p 79.
- 13 Barry Oakley, 'The Shelf Life' in *The Australian Magazine* (Oct 31-Nov 1 1992) p 6.
- 14 Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life : The Burgess Shales and the Nature of History* (Penguin 1991) p 16.
- 15 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays* IV 'Spiritual Laws'.