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TEXT Special Issue: Literature and Public Culture

Introduction

The literary academy is a frequent target of criticism within public literary culture. Writers, 'ordinary' readers, journalists, festival organisers and publishers love nothing more, it would seem, than to accuse academic literary criticism of being jargon-ridden, politically correct, theory-obsessed and simply out of touch with the reality of the literary world, however that reality is construed. Academics are sometimes regarded as parasites, making a comfortable living out of an art form the creators of which are struggling to make ends meet. To judge by the applause he received, V.S. Naipaul may have voiced the thoughts of many when he declared from the stage of the Hay-on-Wye literary festival that 'Literature should be read by people privately. English should be abandoned as a silly course, and all the professors should be put out of a job' (note 1). Academics have not been slow in answering back, in their turn accusing public literary culture of being fuelled by everything but a serious engagement with books and ideas: the publishing industry is driven by commercial imperatives and has little regard for literary value; journalists and literary events promote personality over writing; and today's 'common' reader is motivated by celebrity and lifestyle to view literature as little more than a means to attain an elevated position in the hierarchy of consumer culture. Authors, for their part, have been declared dead - a rather awkward position from which to take part in public literary conversation.

There is little evidence to confirm that such polarised positions, however strongly affirmed, ever had a solid basis in the complex realities from which participants in public literary debate speak of their roles, and that of their interlocutors. As David McCooey reminds us in this volume, universities are also public institutions and cannot be neatly distinguished from other parts of the public sphere. While there may be some truth in the view that the public sphere has segmented and can no longer be regarded as a single space for public debate, there is ample evidence that its different segments are increasingly fluid, marked by interpenetration and cross-fertilisation. In literary culture, the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' texts have eroded, and one is likely to find these discussed side by side in the literary press, in festival sessions and on university courses. In the academy, a quiet revolution is under way (perhaps not so quiet for the readers of *TEXT*, but not always noticed by outsiders) whereby an emphasis on reading and interpretation is replaced by writing: enrolments in literary studies are in decline or stagnating whereas creative/professional writing courses are recording spectacular increases. This development has produced significant shifts in the nature of the literary academy as the 'conventional' literary academic trained in theoretically informed critical practice is replaced by practitioners of various kinds: writers, editors, and other 'industry' professionals (note 2). Frank

Moorhouse remarked recently that the most common question asked when writers meet these days is not 'What are you working on?' but 'Where do you teach?' (note 3) In this climate, it will be increasingly difficult to sustain an 'ivory tower' view of academic work as fundamentally divorced from the real world in which literary texts are written, published, bought and read, or, for that sake, visions of a 'real world' into which the various activities of the academy have no reach.

The research project which forms the basis for this collection of essays grew out of a long-standing interest in the nature of public literary debate, the rapidly changing realities of the literary industry and the seemingly paradoxical discourses employed to make sense of these developments. It also grew out of a sense of frustration that the literary academy had failed to catch up with many of these changes, even those that directly affected its own role as the custodian and transmitter of literary heritage. With the support of a grant from the Australian Research Council, my colleagues Michael Meehan, David McCooey and I embarked on a number of case studies (surveys of literary festivals, literary journalism and websites, interviews with writers and publishers) in a bid to gain greater understanding of the Australian literary scene which, as we suspected, was considerably more complex and conflicted than previously accounted for (note 4). This work is yet to be concluded. Most of the essays in this volume were originally presented at a symposium at Deakin University in October 2004, in which literary practitioners and academics were invited to speak of public literary culture from their own professional perspective, and to reflect on the state of Australian literature in the current cultural climate.

The first four papers, by well-know figures in Australian literary culture, contain personal reflections on their roles as writers, journalists and festival organisers, on the dilemmas facing them in their professional practice and the nature of their own commitment to great writing. Peter Craven, describing himself as a 'hack' journalist, defends his (sometimes controversial) opinions of books and writers. 'The job of a critic is to say how good a book is', he states categorically, dismissing academic relativism or excessive critical self-consciousness as simply irrelevant to the critic's task of passing judgement. Sylvia Lawson offers a different 'take' on literary journalism, distinguishing reviewing and other reporting of literary news from the journalistic essay, which she describes as a literary genre in its own right, central to the intellectual health of a community. Lawson laments the increasing focus on celebrity in literary journalism, which in her view distracts from writing and stands in danger of producing a new cultural cringe within Australian literary culture. Frank Moorhouse does not deal directly with public culture but instead considers the impact of recent technological change (the introduction of the word processor) on literary writing, more specifically the short story. The formatting choices made available in even the simplest word processing packages may tempt the writer to play with graphic design, which in turn may result in conflict with editors or publishers, who in some cases insist on a 'house style', or who simply disagree with the author's choices. Caro Llewellyn admits that she is sometimes torn between her role as director of Sydney Writers' Festival and her passionate love of books, which makes her recognise that writers occasionally need to turn down public engagements in order to get on with their main job. She also writes of the success of her own and other literary festivals as proof of cultural vitality in a nation often regarded as culturally and intellectually disengaged.

The six essays following on from these are by the main participants in the 'Australian literature and public culture project' at Deakin University and their associates. These essays are more academic in style and argument, but they

are by no means confined to conventional academic literary analysis. In fact, the authors draw on their own roles and experiences in the literary industries - Michael Meehan and Frances Devlin-Glass as festival directors, Robin Freeman as editor, Michael Meehan, David McCooey and Maria Takolander as writers of fiction, poetry and literary journalism - to present a picture of contemporary literary life as variously vigorous, anxious and under pressure from the social, cultural and economic forces of a globalising world. Michael Meehan goes back to the tradition of satire and high farce of the eighteenth century to locate 'the epic analogue to the modern literary festival', highlighting the complex interplay between word and flesh acted out in the festival context, at the same time asking what may be the cost, for our literary culture, of the current obsession with authors and performativity. Frances Devlin-Glass reports on Bloomsday in Melbourne: its brief but distinguished history, its faithful audiences. Reflecting on the commodification of literature in contemporary culture she asks whether Joyce is 'the BMW of literature', but, on the basis of a survey of Bloomsday audiences, goes on to question the notion that Joyce is the exclusive preserve of a literary élite. David McCooey writes about the marginal status of poetry in public literary culture, but also about its seemingly 'permanent comeback'. What, he asks, does the frequently voiced nostalgia for premodern models of the poet suggest about the cultural status of the margin: 'Might it be more accurate to regard poetry as a 'minority' art rather than a marginal one?' My own essay on literary tourism highlights the industry's investment in the symbolic value of the writer's body, noting the odd combination of fiction, history and touristic discourse used to sell writers' homes and haunts as tourist attractions. Based mainly on a tour of literary sites in Britain and Ireland undertaken back in 1996, the paper concludes with a reflection on ways in which tourism and the heritage industry harness writers to the task of defining national and cultural identities. Robin Freeman's case study of popular publishing examines a seeming paradox: the commercial success of book on the bleak subject of the Holocaust. Tracing the history of Mark Baker's *The Fiftieth Gate* through the different stages of the publication process, she identifies the publisher's efforts to orchestrate the book's reception, at the same time noting the cultural climate which made this book 'right' for its time and place: the Demidenko debacle, to which Baker's book was presented as kind of antidote, the hunger for authenticity, the differential needs for identification within Jewish and non-Jewish readerships. In the final paper of this collection, Maria Takolander revisits literary hoaxes in Australia, examining the claim that they are symptomatic of particular pathologies in Australian literary culture. Her reading of Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake* brings out his interpretation of the Ern Malley hoax, and beyond that, his novel's faith in a 'hallowed vision of literature' which survives the spectres of fake authors, fake books and misguided modes of reception.

The papers collected here do not present anything like a single or unified vision of the complex and contested domain which is public literary culture. Each author speaks for her- or himself, and for the perspective gained through professional perspective and personal predilection. At the same time, a number of common themes emerge, undoubtedly signalling dominant cultural trends and certain shared concerns among our contributors. There is concern about the impact of celebrity culture, its potential to distract from writing and to trivialise literary art. There are worries about the effects of globalisation in the publishing industry, and about the commodification of books and writers. Australian literature, it is argued, may be experiencing a renewal of the cultural cringe as a consequence of these developments. There is a rekindled interest in 'common' audiences for literature: who are they, what motivates them and what is the nature of their encounter with texts and authors? There are also notes of optimism. In spite of dire warning from various quarters, the

book is not dead, the novel is not dead, poetry is staging perpetual revivals and even rumours of the death of the author seem to have been greatly exaggerated. The success of literary festivals and events signal not only a hunger for ideas, but a willingness to tackle the most demanding books and writers. The 'magic' of literature has not, it would appear, been written out of existence by popular culture, literary theory or cultural materialism.

The 'Literature and public culture' research project does not conclude with the publication of this collection; if anything, this marks the beginning of our reflections on the project's findings. The project's website (*www.deakin.edu.au/arts/alpc*) will be updated to contain results from a major survey of festival audiences, lists of festivals and events, as well as publications and reports based on our research. Readers of this collection are invited to visit the website, and welcome to send their comments and suggestions to members of the project team.

Notes

1) Hay-on-Wye Literary Festival, June 1996. For further discussion see my paper on literary tourism in this issue. Return to text
2) One may cite as an example the recent appointment of Simon Clews, long-time director of Melbourne Writers' Festival, to the University of Melbourne's new Writing Centre for Researchers and Scholars. Return to text
3) Speech given to the 'Australian Literature and Public Culture' seminar at Deakin University, 15 October 2004. Return to text
4) Our work would not have been possible without the considerable contribution of our research assistants Maria Takolander, Rebecca Vaughan, David Sornig and Jennifer Kloester. Return to text

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