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The culture of complaint, or 'Postmodernism, an ode'

Being an melencholly lament upon the death of Wm. Shakspeare & other master-peeces of ancient beautie and tragedie

Abstract:

The term 'postmodernism' persists in emanating a stain of disrepute, inscrutability and, in the context of this paper, odium particularly associated with its place within pedagogy in school and the University.

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> Virgil stole, Horace stole, Ronsard stole (though they mainly stole from foreigners) – F L Lucas, Fellow and Reader in English, King's College Cambridge
>
> Dark Ages never change / I can't comprehend – Red Hot Chili Peppers

Taste on the spurr of the moment

It would be nice to think that the bad days of so-called 'political correctness' are behind us, in both intellectual circles as well as the social milieu more generally. You know, a time when ideologues of truth, reminiscent of Aeschylus' vengeful Furies in the *Eumenides*, pursued wrong-doers and monstered *anything* social, political or cultural that dared to deviate from unchangeable norms and morals. Think of the Reverend Fred Nile's 2013 description of homosexuality not only as immoral and unnatural, but a 'mental disorder' to boot (Grewal 2013). Or American scholar Harold Bloom's outrage in *The Western Canon* (1994) at 'resenters' such as new historicists and 'assorted multiculturalists' of the ranting left finding their way into the academy. By the late twentieth century even second-rate Chicano writers of fiction, according to Bloom, joined Shakespeare and Dante on University curricula (Bloom 1994: 76). As it happens the *sine qua non* of Bloom's hand-wringing moral apoplexy is best articulated in the phrase 'Heaven forfend!' uttered by one Charles Montgomery Plantagenet Shiklgruber Burns in a 1990 episode of *The Simpsons*. Burns is told by one of his advisors that he is losing touch with the common man. A figure of impeccable taste and prominence in contemporary culture Burns, like Bloom, has no time for any sub-species of *homo erectus literatus*, whether it be the scribbling of Johnny Lunchpail or Raymond Barrio.

But regrettably things don't seem to have changed much. In 2014 Professor Barry Spurr, consultant to the National Federal government's English curriculum review, argued in his report that the University of Sydney should 'focus less on teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature and place greater emphasis on western Judeo-Christian culture' (Hare and Karvelas 2014). At face value Spurr didn't seem to be doing anything other than reinstate the universal values of the Western Canon mourned by Bloom twenty years earlier, suggesting that such intellectual conservatism had never really gone away despite what its apologists were assured was the case. To counterpoint the moral principle of truth underlying his judgement, Spurr preferred to send emails to friends to ensure that what he really felt was kept private. What motivated his hatred of the University English courses upon which he was professing was nostalgia for the halcyon days of the 1950s 'when there were not so many 'bogans', 'fatsoes', 'Mussies' and 'Chinky-poos' around' (Hare and Karvelas 2014). When outed and called to account for the derogatory nature of the emails he defended them by asserting they he and his online buddies were simply trying 'to outdo one another in extreme statements' (rape and female mutilation, apparently, being two of the more jocular and jejune codes of this language game) (Hare and Karvelas 2014). As a student of linguistics I can't remember Edward Sapir or Benjamin Lee Whorf indulging in such verbal frolics, nor did they have access to University email accounts with which to play them. Sounding deliciously like something the obsequious Mr Samgrass from Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*

would say, Spurr asserted that such language was 'part of a 'whimsical linguistic' game' that in no way reflected his views (Hare and Karvelas 2014). What the Chancellery of the University of Sydney clearly didn't understand when they booted him off the review board was the subtle irony and capriciousness of the literary conceit, an inexcusable ignorance that would have surely miffed the droll Don of deadpan. Somewhat miffed, indignant and agog at what the fuss was all about, Spurr resigned from his position, though not before taking the University to the Fair Work Commission on grounds of mistreatment. I believe in the world of literary figuration this is called 'hyperbole'. What a hoot.

Another prominent Australian given to speaking without thinking first, Prime Minister Tony Abbott, also likes to unapologetically call a spade a spade. Adhering strictly to the script of mid-twentieth century Humanism in the following year Abbott announced that his government would discontinue 'subsidising' remote indigenous communities. Living in such conditions amounted to 'lifestyle choices' made by people that he felt his government simply could no longer financially support (Griffiths 2015). As the consensus of the right-minded would have it, Spurr had already anticipated Abbott's judgement on the living conditions of Australia's first nation, referring to Aboriginal people as 'human rubbish tips' (Hare and Karvelas 2014). Such is the wicked righteousness of certitude.[1] But putting the luxury of *lifestyle* aside, it was Abbott's Liberal prime ministerial predecessor who publicly crusaded for a return to the good olde days of Eng Lit so poignantly articulated by Spurr. In 2006 then Australian Prime Minister John Howard publicly denounced the type and quality of literature education being taught in Australian schools. Howard was both concerned and outraged that the traditional, coherent and universal truth-values of 'quality' English Literature had been 'hijacked' by political correctness and dumbed down by 'pop cultural commentary'. Howard's public pronouncements about the 'rubbish postmodern' teaching going on in our schools and universities insinuated that otherness is the death knell of history (Howard 2006). Things must be really going bad when lefty Professoriates prioritize Donald Duck comics over Shakespeare (another common, highly considered and deeply nuanced description of the postmodern).[2] Specifically, Howard felt:

> very strongly about the criticism that many people are making that we are dumbing down the English syllabus … I think there's evidence of that in different parts of the country ... when the, what I might call the traditional texts, are treated no differently from pop cultural commentary, as appears to be the case in some syllabuses (2006).

Zeb Woodpower, writing in 2013 on the parallel issue of Howard's Shandy-esque thoughts and opinions on the Australian National History curriculum suggested that as he approached the tenth anniversary of his Prime Ministership he delivered the Australia Day Address at the National Press Club in Canberra on 25 January, 2006. In this address he outlined his vision for the future, emphasising the necessity for Australians to be proud of their history. Howard despaired at the ordinary Australian's lack of awareness of what he perceived to be the nation's achievements. He blamed this on the 'stew of themes and issues' taught as history in schools (Woodpower 2013: 5).

'Spew of memes and tissues' is an apt misprision of Howard's guarded, over-generalized and preposterously silly phrase quoted by Woodpower, an instance of his distaste for all the things, such as the correct view of the nation's history, that he felt were being denied the future 'Men and Women of Australia' (a body politic less inclusive and different from Gough Whitlam's understanding of whom it referred to when he spoke those words in 1972). 'Australians' of course means all Australians, though not necessarily including those living lifestyle choices in tips apparently reading lots of trashy pomo literature (which by the by, are now politely called 'Resource Recovery Centres', demonstrating that righteousness and impeccably good taste go hand in hand). And 'history' is simply a WASP-like figure for certitude: *this* is what happened and nothing else. And literature, like criticism, 'real criticism' is, after Matthew Arnold, the 'best that is known and thought in the world' by great Anglo-Saxon non-black non-gay men (Arnold 1973: 247). Hence the title of this provocation you are reading, sampled deliberately from Robert Hughes' 1993 corrective homily against otherness and any kind of difference that questions or deviates from a universally understood, *a priori* tradition of taste. The 'new-found sensitivity', 'victim' pleading (Hughes 1994: 6) and 'atmosphere of prim, obsessive correction' associated with the 1980s' is a totally humungous *bête noire* for Hughes (25). America, in particular, he denounced as the 'enclave of abstract complaint' (64), as if scraping dog shit off his shoes having arrived at the BBC to profess upon the newfound privilege being given to 'black, female and homosexual artists' in University syllabi (6).[3] If he indeed was 'the most famous art critic in the world' (Boynton 1997) he should have though more carefully before puffing out his chest and dissing ideas that he is clearly ambivalent about. There are many moments *Culture of Complaint* where he avers to the substantive issues behind a prim and sanitized PC language he outwardly finds silly and sanctimonious. To whit: 'No amount of words is going to reduce the amount of bigotry in this or any society' (Hughes 22). But then again, as he robustly asserts, without any need or desire to use scare marks: 'What we learned of the world in school came through the great tradition (and I use the word without irony) of English letters and English history' (75). *Hic finitur lectionem*, or something.

Strange, I've seen that face before

I have for a number of years given seminars on this fraught topic in various classes I have taught at Swinburne. One such subject, generically titled *Reading, Writing and Criticism*, is predicated on the inevitability of change in theoretical trends and critical practice, taste and politics. The subject, while ostensibly dealing theoretically with the advent of appropriation, quotation, parody and the sampling of cultural codes in literature and the arts, is really concerned with performing the poetics of political correctness, pop cultural commentary and reading rubbish postmodern literature. One such poetic that we practiced in this seminar was the deliberate act of making something new out of the already said. This process that yielded the ode that gives this essay its name shall be described below, after a brief digression (having been forecast in the form of a comparative analysis of two canonical works by John Milton and Aerosmith, as well as all that issues from that unlikely union).

Counter to its supposed ahistoricism, postmodernism is in fact obsessed with history. Traces of the past are embedded within any genre or form of text, from the 'Literature' of canonical writers to the lyrics of rock musicians. So a thought experiment. Imagine what follows as an exercise torn from the pages of a primer on appropriation and satire, in the formalist spirit of Stanley Fish's 1980 essay 'How to recognise a poem when you see one' (in Fish 1982). The phonographic similarities between *Areopagitica* and Aerosmith cannot be ignored and must immediately be taken hostage, providing a found object that brings unlikely things together. Think of it as a version of the Elizabethan conceit, the enjambment of different and contradictory things, or a performance of Gregory L. Ulmer's notion of heuretics; a portmanteau that combines hermeneutics and heuristic to describe meaningful acts of discovery through chance and unexpected encounter (1994). So we need not ask what does it mean to bring *Areopagitica* and Aerosmith together, but rather *what can be made* with the connection of the two things. The now jaded binaries of high and low cultures have more than adequately been outed as the ideologies that they are, whereby one is openly transparent about and the other hostile to any notions of otherness. Jim Collins' figure of 'taste cartographies' (Collins 1995: 157) liberated in the name of the postmodern what F.R. Leavis myopically corralled in his selective 'great tradition' as *the* modern. In his *Architectures of Excess* (1995), Collins astutely interprets the very notions of taste and tradition as forms of nuclear half-life that prevail in the atmosphere, mutate and are redefined throughout different historical periods. 'What have become the criteria', he asks,

> used to determine good taste when styles from Greco-Roman to High Modernist are recirculated as 'classic,' all reproducible at approximately the same cost, all promoted as the most appropriate choice for contemporary contexts? (1995: 157-58).

Areopagitica, as the mischievous imps of reflexive irony would have it, is a text that looks more postmodern than modern to a twenty-first century gaze in its polemical assertion of the right to freedom of expression. But its subtitle, *A speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, to the Parlament of England*, also suggests enlightened assumptions about publishing associated with the Creative Commons, Peer to Peer, as well as the Copyleft and Open Source movements of our own time. Such initiatives are indelibly linked to paradigm changes associated with the emergence of new and unprecedented global media paradigms like the Internet, just as Milton's defence of the imprimatur of freedom of expression articulated consequences of the then new media culture of his own time, print and the industry of publication. Milton's cyberpunk ethic was made more than two hundred years after the formation of the Stationer's Company and its mandate of the principle of copyright, which endowed ownership of a text to its author and explicitly forbade its re-use by anyone else.

So what's not *not new*? Aerosmith's 'Cheese Cake' (the last song on side 1 of *Night in the Ruts*) opens with the verse:

> I met a babe in a backseat drive-in
> Back in the saddle she'd sit
> Pulled on the reins just to keep me risin'

She loved to chomp at the bit

Daddy do it, ooh, just do it
Daddy do it, please let me see
Do it, please just do it daddy
Do it, do it, drivin' me crazy (Aerosmith 1979)

The literal meaning of most of the words and its Benny Hill style argot of carnal innuendo would certainly have been alien and unfamiliar to Milton. But in the spirit of his support for freedom of speech he may have politely and blushingly averred to silence if the import of the lyric's meaning were explained to him in the context of Rabelais, Chaucer and Boccaccio, or the *Heptaméron* of Marguerite de Navarre (1558). The counter culture of erotic and pornographic literature, suffice to say, runs parallel with but is not included in Harold Bloom's respected and revered 'Books and School of the Ages'. One of its most celebrated instances of casual bawdry, written during the latter part of Milton's life, is to be found in the lively and at times ribald pages of *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, upstanding member of the British Parliament and Chief Secretary of the Admiralty to the courts of Kings Charles II and King James II. The most infamous incident takes place in the evening of an otherwise ordinary day on Sunday the 25th October, 1668. Pepys' wife Elisabeth happens upon a scene in which Samuel is caught in a compromising moment with her household companion Deborah Willett. Re-written in the form of a lyric and imagined sung to the tune of a spinet, its affinities with the raunchy blues of Joe Perry's slide guitar and sleazy over-confidence of Steve Tyler's vocals become more compelling:

So home to dinner
And after dinner
All afternoon got my wife and boy to read me
And at night W Batelier comes and sups with us
And after supper, to have my head combed by Deb
Which occasioned the greatest sorrow to me
That ever I knew in this world
For my wife, coming up suddenly
Did find me embracing the girl con my hand sub su coats
And indeed, I was with my main in her cunny (Pepys 1979: 263-64).

Such ribaldry may have been beyond the pale for Milton (or made him reach for one), despite his determination that expression be free. The agon of Good and Evil is never far from his thoughts in the pages of *Areopagitica*, a strict binary he can never really undo or do without:

> He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian (Milton 1977: 167).

But despite his contrition he is nonetheless horrified at the prospect of the outrageous violations perpetrated by the Spanish Inquisition when they raked 'through the entrails of many an old good author, with a violation worse than any could be offered to his tomb' (1977: 160). The prohibition and condemnation of any subject 'that was not to their palate' found its way (in surely one of the greatest lines ever written in

English), 'into the new purgatory of an Index' (1977: 160). And who said Milton was a monster?

Meanwhile, back home in the democratic republic of Australian letters

Returning to the third of our Australian three stooges, John Howard, I can demonstrate another tactical response that draws on parody (the third P of the postmodern literacies alongside Pastiche and aPpropriation) as a polemical means of demonstrating a postmodern act, rather than describing one. I used the instance described previously, to do with misconceptions of what postmodernism is and is not, as subject matter for a didactic exercise in writing an original text working exclusively from appropriated material, as well as enabling a found method (found in the sense of both Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades and John Cage's chance operations). The exercise was didactic in that it served as an example or instance of the chance driven and appropriated method we were using in this class, but also polemical in that it was a specific response to familiar and erroneous claims that the postmodern is ahistorical (thereby giving us our topic or theme). While these misconceptions were all deeply shared by Spurr, Abbott and Howard (though to relative degrees of alarming ignorance and reactionary arrogance), I chose to take the Howard challenge, since he was on the public record for his moral and principled distaste for the 'postmodern culture of relativism' to which history and the humanities in Australian had succumb. Furthermore, Howard was egregiously concerned that such thinking was most responsible for the cultivation of modes of thought that question or repudiate any 'objective record of achievement' (Howard 2006).

My concept was to find source material around a specific theme (in this case the theme of love, a favourite of literary history and especially its 'Greats') and take a single line from a different author from specific historical periods (Elizabethan, Reformation, Romantic). My method was to weave this source material into a text that would flow and have the integrity and logic of a consistent, plausible love poem (it could have of course been any other poetic form, such as a sonnet or a piece of blank verse). The choice of the form is part of the conscious process of refining the method. For the method to work (that is, to yield a plausible poem that scans metrically and flows thematically), there is an element of trial and error (otherwise known in writing workshops as 'composition'). Some of the material that I gathered clearly didn't work, or jarred with the flow of the text as it emerged. So it was back to the font of source material, the archive of poetry written in English during the historical periods I had decided upon as part of my concept. Eventually I compiled a suite of discrete samples (database, inventory or lexicon would do just as nicely) into a text entitled 'Postmodernism, an Ode'. I have included it here in two forms. The first as a self-contained poem that contained my original text (original in that no one else in the history of English poetry had even published this discrete assemblage of words as an instance of writing), the second with annotations revealing the actual source material as traces of the words of others' haunting it. An iconic conceit of the duplicity of words competing for novelty was made famous by Shakespeare in his sonnet 86 in the figure of an 'affable familiar ghost' who puts words of eloquence into

the mouth of a sham poet seeking to rival another for the hand of a dark lady (1965: 126). So here, the second version of the text needn't be considered as a 'give-away' or spoiler. The presence of textual traces adds to its constitution as a reflexive text engaging with the notion that history is always present in culture, hauntological like Shakespeare's spectre, through its persistence as literature, philosophy, ethics, politics, etc.

'Postmodernism, an Ode' is a tactical strategy that dramatizes rather than explains this text I constructively sampled (*nota bene*, not 'wrote') line by line. And to be precise it is an instance of a non-rhyming Aeolic ode, the form upon which Pindaric and Horatian styles were variations. It critically draws on Howard's agonistic rhetoric as well as plunders the history of 'coherent', 'high-quality traditional literature' (2006) to assemble it (not dissimilar to the campaigns of Raleigh and Drake going to the new world to make them new old worlds). The study of Literature, from Leavis*ism* to deconstruction, new historicism to digital aesthetics, is predicated on the necessity of codes, genres and rules that presume repeatability, such as alphabets, grammars, ASCII algorithms and other myriad forms of DIY authoring software. But also after Jacques Derrida 'iterability', or repetition with a difference, forms the underlying logic of the syntax of cutting and pasting the already said into something never said before: what Leonard Lawler evocatively describes as a 'machine-like repeatability' (qtd in Attridge 2014: 136). Whether a love song, a novel, or nursery rhyme, any given instance of a particular genre is a remix of a finite set of conventions that mandate, simply by being instances of something, that to write is to always already work repetitiously, with a difference and, after Hugh Kenner, within a closed 'field of possibilities' (1962: xiii). It is an intervention into and transformation of the public domain of letters.

Writer, theorist and remixologist Mark Amerika has given us a kind of mantra for riffing off found material as a mode of creativity in the age of the Internet and its various *posts*: 'surf, sample, manipulate'. That is 'surf the culture, sample data and then change that data to meet the specific needs of the narrative' (Amerika 2011: 139). The assumption that any text can be re-purposed, is concentrated in one of his many manifestoes as 'source material everywhere' (2011: 5). The world of culture in all its forms is to be conceived as a storehouse of material for re-use. The challenge of the appropriationist approach to composition is to see how original works of literature can be produced from working with the already said. The theoretical premise we worked with in these writing workshops is that to 'make it new' (after Ezra Pound) is how culture progresses from generation to generation, how new art continues to be produced as variations on previous variations of variations on a theme.[4] So as Jorge Luis Borges observed, after Francis Bacon (the 16th century essayist, scientist and 1st Viscount, St. Alban, not the twentieth century figurative painter, gambler and lover of rough trade) '*all knowledge was but remembrance*' (1964: 105).[5]

And with James Brown rather than Sir Thomas Browne in mind, I attach the following for your consideration.

May God have mercy on my Soul.

Postmodernism, an ode

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse
First, rob'd in White, the Nymph intent adores,
And all delights did harbor in her breast.

If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
I grieve and dare not show my discontent,
Study me then, you who shall lovers be
For I, alas, acknowledging do know
Those strokes which mates in mirth do give.

Jorge de Burgos

Postmodernism, an ode

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'
Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse
William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*
First, rob'd in White, the Nymph intent adores.
Alexander Pope, 'The Rape of the Lock'
And all delights did harbour in her breast
AEmilia Lanyer, 'The Description of Cook-ham'

If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
William Wordsworth, 'It is a Beauteous Evening'
I grieve and dare not show my discontent
Queen Elizabeth I, 'On Monsieur's Departure'
Study me then, you who shall lovers be
John Donne, 'A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day'
For I, alas, acknowledging do know
Mary Sidney, 'Psalm LI : Miserere mei, Deus'
Those strokes which mates in mirth do give.
Isabella Whitney, 'A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Poesy'

Jorge de Burgos

The 'venerable Jorge', fictional blind librarian from Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (along with his avatar chillingly animated by Feodor Chaliapin in Jean-Jacques Annaud's 1986 film), is a thinly veiled palimpsest of Jorge Luis Borges, hyperreal writer and, after Michel Foucault, 'author function' nominally responsible for '*Postmodernism, an ode*'.

Endnotes

1. American rock/funk band Red Hot Chili Peppers' song 'The Righteous and the Wicked' speaks of the 'The killing fist/ Of the human beast', an unredeemable viciousness that

underlines both Spurr's and Howard's statements and beliefs. They both don't want to hear the call of those 'playing for a better day'.

2. See, Darren Tofts, 'Shakespeare, Donald Duck and the School of Resentment', review of Bloom's *The Western Canon*, *UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, 1, 2, October, 1995.

3. When I was an undergraduate student of English at La Trobe University one snooty, truculent Don dismissed the inclusion on course syllabi of such exotic and disreputable writers, critical theory and anything not written by Englishmen as 'a lot of solemn nonsense' (name withheld).

4. In a delicious irony that both Joyce and Wyndham Lewis would have found to their taste, Pound's rallying catchcry of the modernity of letters as re-use was itself a borrowing from an 18th century Shang Dynasty poet. See Michael North, 'The Making of 'Make it New''.

5. As the vagaries of etymology and genealogy would have it Bacon the painter is reputedly a distant and ambiguous relative of Bacon the writer. Paternity as a time-based practice of regeneration is notoriously complex not only to research, but also to write. James Joyce demonstrated the blurriness of patronage, of difference and sameness, in the 'Ithaca' episode of *Ulysses* as Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom walk the streets of Dublin *en route* to 7 Eccles Street in the early hours of the 17th June, 1904.

   Bloom, avatar as well as descendent of Homer's Odysseus, is related distantly and mythically to all travellers, different and self-similar, such as 'Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer and Whinbad the Whaler and Ninbad the Nailer and Finbad the Failer and Binbad the Bailer and Pinbad the Pailer and Minbad the Mailer and Hinbad the Hailer and Rinbad the Railer and Dinbad the Kailer and Vinbad the Quailer and Linbad the Yailer and Xinbad the Phthailer' (Joyce, 1993: 689).

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