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Notes on reading, provocation (and disruption)

Abstract
This essay explores links between centos, the commonplace book, the essay and the weblog. In analysing the connections between past and present literary modes the article raises the possibility that the ancient cento (mosaic poem) may have a new life in the twenty-first century. While intentionally disjointed, the piece also attempts to discuss the practice of reading and writing. It looks at the roles of readers and authors, and readers as authors and makes a case for, in Edward Said's words, 'the liberation of as much territory as possible for discussion, analysis, contest'.
Nearly 500 years ago, Renaissance essayist Montaigne advised, 'You should no longer be concerned with what the world says of you but with what you say to yourself'. How should we interpret these words today, at a time when it seems that no one reads anymore but everyone writes? Does the revival of interest in the essay form - inquiring, meandering, questioning and open-ended - suggest that we are tiring of strident voices and singular opinions? What is 'good' reading, and can it challenge the status quo?
Through the prism of contemporary political arguments around nationality, censorship and religion, this essay attempts its own intervention into debates in which many of us feel we have been spoken for.

Henry James, writing on the art of fiction, counselled, 'Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!' (cited Clendinnen 2006: 35-36). Or, to put it another way:

> *Regard the moon, it hangs above the lawn;*
> *Regard the lawn, it lies beneath the moon.*
> (Dylan Thomas, 'Should Lanterns Shine')

To one who is perhaps compulsively analytical, these are welcome notions, as gratifying as Robert Louis Stevenson's assertion that only the idle possess the ability really to see what is around them. Distracted by the imagery that most strongly vies for our attention, we're liable to make automatic assumptions, a key one of which today might be that we live in highly original times.

But although technology continues to expand our notion of what constitutes a text - and an author - it's worth remembering that art has always been a collective enterprise and not much is really original. We all draw from the past. Postmodernism is defined by it. Virgil modeled his *Aeneid* on Homer; Roman poets lifted from Virgil; Aristophanes took lines from Aeschylus and Homer. There is no better example of creative 'borrowing' than the cento, an ancient form of mosaic or collage poem composed entirely of lines taken from works by other authors. Its literal meaning is 'stitched together' or 'patchwork'.

According to Wikipedia (the cento's modern cousin?), the Roman poet Ausonius (c310 - 395) established guidelines for composing these works. They could be from the same poet or several. Verse could be taken in entirety or divided in two and used in different places in the poem. But the 'rules' are different wherever you look. Many forbid taking more than a single line from another work; the poems might rhyme, but they don't have to. The cento is also linked to the number 100, so some centos are 100 lines long. The common denominator appears to be that authors are credited and that a coherent and new whole must be created while staying true to the original lines. Commissioned centos can be wholly original, authored line-by-line or verse-by-verse by numerous participants. Definitions of what constitutes a 'true' cento vary, but it is not random. The American poet David Lehman has suggested that 'Writing a cento may be a kind of extension of the act of reading, a way to prolong the pleasure' (2006). We see this kind of homage in music sampling and rap. Other forms of literary tribute are commonplace books: originally bound volumes in which aristocratic readers in the Renaissance would copy out works by their favourite writers. More visual were emblem books, filled with allegorical images that required knowledge of the Bible, classics, philosophy and history to decipher.

The active nature of the commonplace book - the creation of a personal anthology that is also a new work - emphasises the role of the reader/author. These books - prose and verse miscellanies; collections of political letters, speeches and aphorisms; devotional aids - can be regarded as precursors to today's weblogs. Never finished, they are a continual work in progress, responding to and quoting from the world around. A commonplace book 'is in the nature of a supplemental memory, or a record of what occurs remarkable in every day's reading and conversation' (Jonathan Swift, cited Academy of American Poets, n.d.). Foreshadowing the realm of hypertext, these books *elaborate*, just as essays do.

Phillip Lopate, in his wonderful introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, argues that the Renaissance essay partly grew out of the custom of keeping these books, which were filled with quotations. Quotation lends authority. No less a master of intertextuality than Montaigne said, 'I make others say what I cannot say so well, now through the weakness of my language, now through the weakness of my understanding' (cited Lopate 1995: xli). The essay form - questioning, conversational, digressive - has long been associated with experiment; it is by definition 'an attempt'. In privileging the fragmentary it mirrors our plural natures: 'Because we think, we're always in two places at the same time' (Auster 1995: 142).

Theodor Adorno saw subversive potential in the anti-systematic nature of the essay and its power to open up philosophical discourse:

> Luck and play are what are essential to the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete - not where there is nothing left to say … the essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive construction. It revolts … against the ancient injustice toward the transitory … the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal. (cited Lopate 1995: xliii)

The essay is a form suited to our times - playful, accessible and 'tangential to the marketplace'. In 'An Apology for Idleness', Robert Louis Stevenson praises the loafer: 'Idleness … has as good a right to state its position as industry itself

… Extreme busyness … is a symptom of deficient vitality [people without] a faculty for idleness … have no curiosity; they cannot give themselves over to random provocations' (Robert Louis Stevenson, cited Lopate 1995: 221, 225).

I've been keeping scrapbooks, news clippings and books of quotes and poems for over 20 years. They're a (surprisingly consistent) record of what provokes me, of my interests and passions, and a way of synthesising experience. As a writer, it's pleasing to find they can be 'useful' as well. If the essay is a form of thinking out loud, commonplace books are a source of inspiration, a partial map of the mind and a means by which one might integrate the private and public spheres.

Montaigne advised, 'We must do like the beasts and scuff out our tracks at the entrance to our lairs. You should no longer be concerned with what the world says of you but with what you say to yourself' (Montaigne 2004: 107). But I don't advocate a retreat into Self (expression); I say things first to myself so that I may engage more clearly with the outside world. Edward Said argued that there is no distinction between 'texts' and the world, but rather that what is important '… is the liberation of as much territory as possible for discussion, analysis, contest' (Said 2004: 60).

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The reader became the book
(Wallace Stevens, 'The House was Quiet and the World was Calm')

On the subject of whether reading makes people 'good' a reviewer recently noted, 'Why is it that the really well-read can be such repellent people? Hitler was well-read' (Adelaide 2006). I'm not sure how one qualifies 'well-read' but this is a disingenuous comment, surely? Hitler is far more known for burning books than reading them. A dictator is not my 'ideal' reader. Cynical reductivism such as 'Is good reading really good for you?' denies the power of language; and asserting that 'texts', even fictional ones, have no purpose beyond that of 'creative escape' overlooks the issue of free speech. If books, words, have no power, why are they so often the target of censorship? Salman Rushdie was issued with a death sentence not for anything he did, but for something he wrote.

In contrast to 'good' writing is that which evades. Below is the opening paragraph of a panel that introduced an exhibition - about Palestine - at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum in 2003:

Beauty is all the more satisfying when its fragility is appreciated. Rich traditions of arts
and crafts sprout like flowers in a land torn by unrest.

The original copy read:

Palestinians and Jews have lived in the land now known as Israel for centuries. In 1948, with the creation of Israel as a Jewish state, many Palestinians became refugees exiled from their own homes.

A complex and controversial story of significant contemporary relevance was turned into a decorative arts pageant by partisan lobbyists operating behind the scenes. Australia's largest museum cited lack of space for removing posters and cutting 45 of 50 photographs intended for display. All images of Israeli soldiers

(including UN relief agency photos) were culled and of three documentaries only one, about embroidery, was shown.

The Powerhouse Museum's then director Kevin Fewster had refused to consult with the Arabic community on the content of *Treasures of Palestine* but took care to assure the *Australian Jewish News*, *before* the exhibition opened, that it was 'free of propaganda'. What is propaganda? Whose stories do our public museums tell?

After news of the censorship aired in the media (initially on the ABCs *Lateline*, 17.11.03) the museum received a flood of complaints. As one writer said, 'I am advised that this has been done out of concern about Jewish sensibilities … I wish to inform you that censorship is what offends my Jewish sensibilities'. A Hungarian-born Jew and the child of Holocaust survivors wrote, 'Like many other Jews in Australia and around the world, I believe very strongly that there can be no possibility for any resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict without open discussion and debate in the public arena'. Unlike the ABC, for example, the Powerhouse Museum has no formal and transparent process for handling complaints.

Texts that inform and demand an engaged reader/viewer have the power to make us better citizens - by which I mean more knowledgeable, sceptical and critical. In response to the notion of reading as self-improvement, with its prim Sunday-school overtones, I suggest good reading, and good writing, is that which encourages questioning. I agree with Paul Auster though, when he says 'Anyone with the wit to get his nose out of a book and study what's actually in front of him will understand that … realism is a complete sham … truth is stranger than fiction' (Auster 1995: 117). And doubt is often preferable to conviction. To paraphrase Adorno: while the essayist may not discover any dramatic certainties, neither is he or she likely to advocate any zealous falsehoods.

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Primitive figure of a cosmos in which the dominant star, the sun, was the mouth.
(Hélène Cixous)

'Nine in ten Americans believe in God - but how they vote or see the US war in Iraq depends on the different views they have of God's personality. The most detailed survey of religion in the US found Americans hold four different images of God' (Reid 2006).

Authoritarian God
Angry with sinners and willing to inflict divine retribution - including tsunamis and hurricanes.
Believed in by 31.4%

Distant God
A faceless cosmic force that created the world but leaves it alone.
Believed in by 24.4%

Benevolent God
Sets absolute standards for humans but is also forgiving.
Believed in by 23%

Critical God
The classic bearded old man, judgmental but doesn't intervene or punish.
Believed in by 16%

Sixty-three per cent of authoritarians support the war in Iraq; an invasion based on certainty (that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction) rather than reason.

The opposite of religious belief is not atheism or secularism or humanism. It is not an 'ism'. It is independence of mind.
(Martin Amis)

Charlatan cultists are tolerated - and often encouraged - by democracies increasingly willing to curb the freedoms of other citizens. Members of the Exclusive Brethren (a fundamentalist Christian sect with about 20,000 members in Australia) are forbidden to use computers and mobile phones, watch TV or listen to radio, attend university or vote. Fathers and husbands rule. As Adele Horin pointed out, 'When Peter Costello next decides to tell Muslims that Australian values are "not optional" and that migrants who don't share them should be stripped of citizenship, he should keep the Brethren in mind ... When recalcitrant Christians defy mainstream standards, the cheerleaders for conformity fall silent' (Horin 2006).

In September 2006, Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali gave a sermon at Sydney's Lakemba mosque comparing 'immodestly' dressed women with lumps of meat and blaming them for rape. The sheik's claim that he was 'misinterpreted' was unconvincing and his words received the outraged response they deserved.

The *Australian*'s Inquirer section ran a reasoned full-page story headed 'Islam's Gender Crisis' (Hope 2006). No problem there. But here's what ran across the top and tail of the page: 'Clint Eastwood's new war movie, Frank Brennan on mixing religion and politics, David Uren, Matt Price, Greg Sheridan, Noel Pearson, Christopher Pearson, Chris Masters.' Gender crisis indeed.

And scrutiny is selective. While the sheik received days of bold face, multimedia criticism for his offence to women and contempt for Australian values, Israeli Ambassador Naftali Tamir's reference in October to Asians as 'the yellow race' virtually escaped attention. A tiny column in the *Sunday Telegraph* quoted his comments in an interview with the liberal *Ha'aretz* newspaper:

> Israel and Australia are like sisters in Asia. We are in Asia without the characteristics of Asians. We don't have yellow skin and slanted eyes. Asia is basically the yellow race. Australia and Israel are not - we are basically the white race. (*Sunday Telegraph* 2006)

So, at a time when it seems we can't stop talking about race how did this particular episode play out in the press? After two weeks of silence, with the Hilali and 'Cronulla riot' stories still receiving strong coverage, a small article buried inside the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the ambassador 'has been cleared to return to work after the controversy over his alleged comments about Asia' (Banham 2006). But the comments were clearly not about 'Asia', they were about Asians? Why was the ambassador not recalled? Where were the cartoons?

Truth *is* stranger than fiction: he simply denied the comments and his denial was accepted. It's not credible that a career diplomat could be so misquoted. Why would an Israeli journalist simply *make up* those several detailed

sentences? (In Sweden in 2004, another Israeli diplomat got himself into trouble for physically attacking an artwork, *Snow White and the Madness of Truth*, in a Stockholm museum. He defended his action by claiming the work - created by a member of Jews for Israeli-Palestinian Peace - condoned terrorism against Israeli civilians.)

By now, we're used to hearing calls for 'moderate' Muslim voices to be raised. But, to paraphrase one newspaper letter-writer, who wants to listen to a Muslim in a suit and tie? Similarly, although many moderate Jews and Jewish organisations oppose Israeli policies in Palestine, the media is rarely interested in their views.

Novelist Ian McEwan has spoken of the:

> habits … of multiculturalism that … close down important arguments we ought to be having about an open society …I think all religions should be criticised, atheists should be criticised … I am very short-tempered about religion generally … If I heard a mullah or, for that matter, a Christian, express his deep respect for the traditions of the secular, humanitarian atheist point of view, I'd feel good. I don't see that a Christian deserves more respect than an atheist. Why should they? (cited Fray 2005)

In an era of growing fundamentalism, violence and absolutism, when people are murdered for making films, threatened for producing offensive cartoons, forced into hiding because they produce fiction that makes people think, it's more important than ever to locate 'the energy of resistance' (Said 2004: 65). Totalising movements and systems of thought, whether political or theoretical, are ultimately disabling; they should, and can, be resisted. A carceral matrix of power/knowledge is not 'all there is'.

In 1999, Salman Rushdie expressed concern that the new millennium showed signs 'of being dominated by consistency of all types: the great refusers, the wild quixotics, the narrow-minded, the bigoted, and those who are valiant for truth' (Rushdie 2002: 67). My interest is to find a counterpoint to these censors and silencers. It is vital, as Baudrillard has put it, to have things in which not to believe.

In dreams begin responsibilities. *The way we see the world affects the world we see.*
(Salman Rushdie)

It may be delusional to think that the 'right' words can change anything, that books can 'do good', but it's a delusion I cling to. In a democracy, the only reasonable way to re/claim territory is through language (including the law) and art. In response to the increasing politicisation of religion and the absurdity of the values debate I thought it would be interesting to create 'communal' centos that dealt with these subjects, to gather some views that might serve as a counterpoint or challenge to the perceived mainstream.

With the obvious exception of the selection process (I wasn't looking for the mythical 'man in the street'), I wanted to keep the responses as unmediated and spontaneous as possible. To this end I employed email, writing to 22 friends and asking each of them to contact four others, simply requesting a line on their concept of 'God' and their view of the term 'un-Australian'. Stating nationality was optional. I explained only that the result would form part of a writing exercise. The responses appear in order of receipt. Authors are aged from six to over 70 and their backgrounds span five continents.

God

God is the tragic and hilarious idea that breaks all the rules and changes everything long before we know it.[1]	[1] David
I don't have one but happy that others do.[2]	[2] Sacha
The scapegoat for man's inhumanity to man.[3]	[3] Maree
Forcefully imposed order on human existence eternally ending in the chaos of human nature.[4]	[4] Olga
The notion of one almighty male figure does not appeal or make sense. The notion of gods or spirits related to nature does. Spirituality is more important than any God; it resides in nature and all of us.[5]	[5] Anni
The deity quoted by bigots and demagogues? A product of Unintelligent Design.[6]	[6] Karin
A spiritual presence that can provide one with great liberty and understanding yet also restriction, division and tragedy.[7]	[7] Andrea
God is the spirit of all creation but never an excuse.[8]	[8] Kristina
God is love.[9]	[9] Annabel
God, wasn't he that cool guy with the white beard, wearing a dress at Woodstock … or was that Hendrix?[10]	[10] Terry
The powerful feeling that I am not alone when I have experienced profound joy and great sorrow.[11]	[11] Catherine
In George Bush's America: the moral authority for crimes against humanity.[12]	[12] Tracy
A greater power than myself, a source of consolation and support.[13]	[13] Marie
Ideological construct used to invoke divine will, ie 'God's will'. Usually 'his' will. 'Nature' (being capricious) may be a mother, but God is usually a Dad.[14]	[14] Peter
I went to church until I was 18 because I had to. But now I don't know - there may be something there.[15]	[15] Belinda
No concept at all, a big blank, a ball of dust.[16]	[16] Lyn
My Gran believed in him, my parents less so, me not yet … and then my kids who knows?[17]	[17] Ashley
The spirit of nature at its highest level of creation.[18]	[18] Zora
God is a constant, mysterious presence which guides, sustains and comforts me.[19]	[19] Eileen
Three-letter word for fear that undermined my self-confidence from a very early age.[20]	[20] Michelle
Uuummmm I don't get it - bad?[21]	[21] Nino, aged 7
I work for the other mob.[22]	[22] Mark
I am agnostic.[23]	[23] Alan
Somtims when i feel sad or lonely i talk to god in my hart we are under a tree.[24]	[24] Annie, aged 6
God is our perfect nature.[25]	[25] Yvonne
God transcends religion and faith.[26]	[26] Kylie
I think God is the most important thing in heaven and	[27]

can look down on earth. There is only 1. [27]	Thomas, aged 11
I do not subscribe to the dominant belief in a single powerful (and patriarchal) spiritual entity.[28]	[28] Rebecca
God is someone through who we explain the unexplainable.[29]	[29] Julia, aged 13
Laughing.[30]	[30] 'The Man'

Un-Australian

Un-Australian has a narrow and partial view of history, talks through his nose and can't say 'sorry'.[1]	[1] David, permanent resident, parents British
Person or act devoid of humour, compassion and a fair go.[2]	[2] Olga, born in Poland of Communist parents
To declare something un-Australian is in itself un-Australian as it implies exclusivity. [3]	[3] Mark, born and raised in England of English parents
John Howard.[4]	[4] Caroline, Australian
Un-Australian is summed up in the beliefs and practices of one man: John Howard.[5]	[5] Anni, Australian
Shifts constantly; anyone 'the community' feels like excluding at any time.[6]	[6] Karin, Australian-Estonian
To attempt to simplify complexities for the sake of political gain.[7]	[7] Andrea, British-Australian with Indian-born parents
A word used to close an argument when one has nothing of substance to say.[8]	[8] Kristina, Estonian-Australian
Hot roasted turkey on Christmas Day.[9]	[9] Annabel, born in England
A term used by overpumped white boys and racist politicians that implies you are not Australian, whatever that is.[10]	[10] Terry, Australian
In John Howard's Australia: honest, compassionate and open-minded.[11]	[11] Tracy, New Zealander
Any heterosexual act or attitude of petulant bastardry borne of impotence related to our convict past.[12]	[12] Peter, Australian
Ooh, I think that might be me.[13]	[13] Lyn, Australian
Not to 'live and let live'.[14]	[14] Zora, Australian of Serbian-

	Slovenian-Italian background
Un-Australian: good.[15]	[15] Nino, Australian, aged 7
I agree with Nino - un-Australian is good.[16]	[16] Mark, Australian
Mining on the Kokoda track is un-Australian, gas pipelines that destroy Aboriginal rock art - now that's Australian! Roadworks in Gallipoli are un-Australian, crapping on the environment by diverting five kilometres of the MacArthur River to expand a Swiss-owned mine that has never paid a cent in royalties to the Australian government is super Australian. Democracy is un-Australian - that's why Australia undermined the bothersome elected government in East Timor.[17]	[17] Michael, Australian
People who were not original Australians.[18]	[18] Daniella, aged 11
Not to accept people of all races, religions and beliefs - or at least it should be.[19]	[19] Bob, Australian
I really don't know what un-Australian is.[20]	[20] Kylie
People who have never been in Australia.[21]	[21] Thomas, aged 11
Australian (however I did stand for my club's song when they won).[22]	[22] Rebecca
Religious nutters are un-Australian.[23]	[23] Julia, aged 13
It's not that Australians don't like 'tall poppies' - it's just that they don't like people who think they're tall poppies. You have to be able to 'take the piss' out of yourself and everyone else - that's what being Australian is.[24]	[24] 'The Man'

I'll take all your books. But the cathedrals I'll leave behind.
(Hélène Cixous)

Edward Said talked about the way great works *make their way* in the world and reach out to other works, how in their anti-metaphysical quality they are about some form of engagement. In opposition to Foucault, whom he described as 'ultimately … the scribe of domination', Said saw opportunities for intervention everywhere (Said 2004: 138). It is not necessary to 'begin at the beginning' - we can complete pictures that are partial (histories of the dispossessed and marginalised), take advantage of ambiguities and exploit contradiction to transgress boundaries and posit alternative viewpoints.

To take another perspective, it is salutary to look beyond what is 'in' books and to consider, as Jonathan Franzen does, what we can bring to them. For those who remain unconvinced that certain types of reading can make us better in any way it is perhaps enough to accept that books can *preserve* something. At the very least, they remind us that throughout history people have firmly believed things that were later proved to be wrong.

To cultivate doubt, to express equivocation and uncertainty, can challenge the status quo. As one of the cento contributors said after reading a draft of this essay, 'Ya gotta remember Socrates was eliminated by the state for asking too many questions'. Roland Barthes warned that those who don't re-read are condemned to read the same text for the rest of their lives. The commonplace book provides continuity with the past and the opportunity to (re)order fragments in play.

If things are splinters of
The knowing universe,
Let bits of me be me,
Unfocused and diverse.
(Fernando Pessoa)

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TEXT
Vol 12 No 1 April 2008
http://www.textjournal.com.au
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