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Taming the Contemporary

In 1965, at fifteen, I was appointed editor of the school literary magazine. The school was conservative and Catholic. Most of the teachers were Jesuit priests. With a dim awareness of a wider world and a naïve commitment to Christian virtues I wrote and published a poem about American soldiers napalming Vietnamese babies. The Principal of the school called me to his office and wanted to know what I had meant by publishing this poem. Was it a protest against American forces in Vietnam? Was it an anti-war statement? Did I understand the implications of associating the school with such a stance?

I was soon removed from my role as editor. What I had learned was that a student cannot simply use what has been learned. There is a politics of knowledge, sets of proprieties and defined permissions. When I watch the graffiti in my neighbourhood streets debate whether there should be more hairy middle aged lesbians on television, I am relieved that some people still don't care where they should and shouldn't use their literacy skills, or what words we can and can't use in public.

I begin here with the notion that education is a kind of domestication of the mind - and what a disturbance that is.

In 1857, the then young poet and Inspector of British Schools, Matthew Arnold, delivered the inaugural lecture for the Chair of Poetry at Oxford University, titled "On the Modern Element in Literature". Recognising his contemporary world as a modern one, he wanted to identify an ideal of modernity. It was an inspirational lecture. Modern epochs are characterised by the overwhelming desire for "intellectual deliverance" (Arnold 58), he said. By this he meant that in a truly modern culture space is made for the arts, tolerance is granted to a range of opinions and philosophies, and all public and artistic discussion is conducted with intellectual maturity. For Arnold this intellectual maturity comprised a critical spirit dedicated to reasoned thought and infused with a comprehension of the complex past as well as the present. He identified ancient Greek literature as the greatest example of a modern epoch, and in effect challenged his contemporaries to study the works of ancient Greece if they too wished to achieve the ideal of a true modernity. Throughout his writings on culture Arnold remained aware of the crisis of modernity for English culture and English public education. Repeatedly his call was to instil in writers, philosophers and teachers an intellectual maturity whereby beliefs and values would be based upon what he termed right thinking and firm knowledge. He was an advocate of individual liberty and of tolerance for difference as long as there was an overarching intellectual maturity governing the choices people made. With characteristic rhetorical flare, he wrote:

> Culture without character is, no doubt, something frivolous, vain, and weak; but character without culture is, on the other hand, something raw, blind, and dangerous. The most interesting, the most truly glorious peoples, are those in which the alliance of the two has been effected most successfully, and its result spread most widely. This is why the spectacle of ancient Athens has such profound interest for a rational man; that it is the spectacle of the culture of a people. It is not an aristocracy, leavening with its own high sprit the multitude which it wields, but leaving it the unformed multitude still; it is not a democracy, acute and energetic, but

> tasteless, narrow-minded, and ignoble; it is the middle and lower classes in the highest development of their humanity that these classes have yet reached. It was the many who relished those arts, who were not satisfied with less than those monuments (Arnold 120-21).

In 1961, Arnold's biographer, Lionel Trilling, published an answering essay titled "On the Modern Element in Modern Literature" (later included in *Beyond Culture* as "On the Teaching of Modern Literature"). While Arnold had urged the close study of Greek and Roman writers upon anyone interested in modernity, Trilling recorded that the recently liberalised universities now taught a canon of contemporary modern literature in response to demands by students that their literary courses be relevant to the modern world. Trilling suggested that if, like Arnold, we are on the hunt for the modern element in modern literature, then perhaps we might find it in the susceptibility of modern literature to being fashioned into an academic subject.

It had fallen on Trilling to devise and teach a course in modern literature at Columbia College. Much of Trilling's 1961 essay was an outline of the works he chose to teach (just as Arnold's lecture was an outline of a possible course in Greek and Roman literature). Trilling taught James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*), Nietzsche (*The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals*), Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*), Thomas Mann (*Death in Venice* and *Magic Mountain*), Freud (*Civilisation and Its Discontents*), Diderot (*Rameau's Nephew*), Dostoevsky (*Notes from Underground*), Tolstoy *(Death of Ivan Ilyitch*), Eliot (*The Wasteland*), Joyce (*Ulysses*), and Kafka (*The Castle*). As one teacher's attempt to introduce and encompass modernism nearly half a century ago, this list has its interest; and perhaps there is validation for Trilling in the fact that a good number of these works are still included in undergraduate literature and cultural studies courses.

Trilling made some broader observations about pedagogy, and even attempted a confession of failure as a teacher of modern literature. Firstly he made the point that the introduction of modern literature to university courses was part of a wider tendency, one that Arnold had addressed in his long work *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Arnold foresaw that the middle classes would soon become universally educated and inevitably more politically powerful. He was concerned that with democratisation of institutions the greatest danger for society would be in identifying and keeping to the "high ideals" of past classical/modern ages. Trilling faced a situation where immediate relevance to "Life Itself" had become the high ideal by which education was judged. And the other side of this trend, we could add, was that one could not be said to understand life itself unless one had an arts degree to prove it.

Though universities might have worked to revitalise perceptions of the subversive and shocking qualities of past literature, they tended to turn contemporary works into mainly literary-academic experiences, far removed from Life Itself. Trilling's own crisis as a teacher was linked to this dilemma. He chose, at first, to teach the canon of modernism as an esoteric, difficult and literary subject. In part this approach was calculated to demonstrate to undergraduate students that modern literature was not an easy option and that it was not necessarily more accessible than works from the more distant past. This was a kind of revenge-curriculum. Trilling's approach was not just vengeful, for it was responsible and cautious, and it reproduced the kind of education universities were expected to provide: ordered, scholarly, drily and carefully reasoned, with a satisfyingly specific terminology.

Trilling's disappointment was with both himself and his students. He recognised that the works he taught so coolly were the works that had shaped his own deep self, including the values underpinning his world view. These books had been the private and powerfully formative influences on his own life. To teach them as literary artefacts left too much out.

This seemed to be demonstrated in his students' reactions to major works of modernism. Though he thought he had given his students a strong dose of extreme states of mind in his selection of modern works, he found them too willingly engaged in the practice he called

"socialisation of the anti-social, or the acculturation of the anti-cultural, or the legitimization of the subversive" (26):

> When the term-essays come in, it is plain to me that almost none of the students have been taken aback by what they have read: they have wholly contained the attack... In their papers, like poor hunted creatures in a Kafka story, they take refuge first in misunderstood large phrases, then in bad grammar, then in general incoherence. After my pedagogical exasperation has run its course, I find that I am sometimes moved to give them a queer respect... The rest, the minds that give me the A papers and the B papers and even the C+ papers, move through the terrors and mysteries of modern literature like so many Parsifals, asking no questions at the behest of wonder and fear. Or like so many seminarists who have been systematically instructed in the constitution of Hell and the ways to damnation. (Trilling 26)

The students imagined that the purpose of this literature was to grant them well-rounded minds. Like the Parsifal of Wagner's opera they might be present in Montsalvat where the Holy Grail itself is kept, but in their innocence they do not think to ask the questions that will secure the Grail itself. Trilling lamented the outrage he had perpetrated on modern literature. His solution was to seek a more personal way of talking about this literature. Here he came up against what he called an oddness. Modern literature, as expressed in works by Kafka, Nietszche, Dostoevsky, Eliot and Joyce was, he considered, deeply anti-social, nihilistic, confronting, of no public, practical or spiritual value. Trilling told his students that modern literature

> had to be thought of as having reference only to the private life; that it touched the public life only in some indirect and tangential way; that it really ought to be encountered in solitude, even in secrecy, since to talk about it in public and in our academic setting was to seem to propose for it a public practicality and thus to distort its meaning. (28-9)

Both Trilling and Arnold wrote their essays with the crisis of modernity in mind. Arnold ended his lecture with a challenge to his contemporaries to meet the standards of serenity and openness displayed in Greek literature, and Trilling ended his with this half-despairing joke about the oddness of teaching publicly this fundamentally private experience of modern literature.

This oddness has to do with attempts to domesticate the uncivilised and anarchic. To shape and glamorise the strange logic of the unconscious. To install lighting in a cave: wonders are revealed but the frightening experience of the cave itself is eliminated.

Laura Riding and Robert Graves have provided an instructive example of this oddness in a 1928 book, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. Their chapter on a thoroughly modern poem by e. e. cummings can serve to demonstrate the deadening, enfeebling, domesticating effect a common-sense discussion can have on a work that depends for its life on a power to destabilise its readers. Far from being alarmed at what modern poets were doing with free verse, Riding and Graves tried to explain what was going on for the benefit of the bemused common reader. They were concerned that the plain reader (their phrase) was excluded by the sophistication of "advanced modern poetry". They took the following e.e. cummings poem as an example of the new advanced style:

> Sunset
> stinging
> gold swarms
> upon the spires
> silver
> chants the litanies the

great bells are ringing with rose
the lewd fat bells
and a tall

wind
is dragging
the
sea

with

dream
-S

For Riding and Graves this poem raised barriers against readers. There is no obvious grammar, no punctuation or sensible capitals; there is irregular spacing. A great many words essential to the sense have apparently been omitted. Riding and Graves suggested cummings did have a precise meaning and an actual poem in mind, but the poem appearing on the page was all he had "permitted to survive".

As a way in to understanding the poem, they noted a number of poetic features. There is the heavy alliteration of 's'. They saw a swaying between cold and warm words, and the word 'sea' they regarded as a climax, perhaps the last '-S' being a suggestion of the movement and sound of waves. The lengthening of gaps and the shortening of lines they regarded as an indication of the poem slowing down. In traditional verse this would mean lengthening the lines. There is one rhyme: between stinging and ringing; but there are many suppressed rhymes: bees with seas, bells with swells, spires with fires. They then rewrote the poem "embodying the important elements of Cummings' poem" to reveal what they called "the suppressed sonnet":

Sunset Piece

White foam and vesper wind embrace.
The salt air stings my dazzled face
And sunset flecks the silvery seas
With glints of gold like swarms of bees
And lifts tall dreaming spires of light
To the imaginary sight,
So that I hear loud mellow bells
Swinging as each great wave swells,
Wafting God's perfumes on the breeze,
And chanting of sweet litanies
Where jovial monks are on their knees,
Bell-paunched and lifting glutton eyes
To windows rosy as these skies.

And this slow wind-how can my dream forget-
Dragging the waters like a fishing-net.

The lesson they drew from this was that traditional poems about sunsets had become a tired, stale, worn out form. What cummings had done was to rejuvenate an old subject matter. Their argument was that a whole new set of poetic strategies was needed to keep poetry alive in modern times.

Their argument went in part like this,

> ...when conservatism of method, through its abuse by slack-minded poets, has come to mean the supplanting of the poem by an exercise in poet-craft, then there is a reasonable place for innovation, if the new method

> defeats the old method and brings up the important question: how should poetry be written? Once this question is asked, the new method has accomplished its end. Further than this it should not be allowed to go, for poems cannot be written from a formula. The principal value of a new method is that it can act as a strong deterrent against writing in a worn-out style. It is not suggested here that poets should imitate cummings, but that poems like cummings' and the attention they demand should make it harder for the standardized article to pass itself off as poetry. If we return to the two versions of the sunset piece, it will be seen just how this benefit is conferred. We may not accept the Cummings version, but once we have understood it we cannot return with satisfaction to the standardized one. (Riding 21-2).

Riding and Graves suggested that the plain reader would have to make a greater and more sophisticated critical effort if a poem like cummings' was to be appreciated. The question then became whether the poem had only a technical soul and not a human soul.

The Riding-Graves approach was an attempt to domesticate the new, the surreal, the tentative and experimental rather than exploit or celebrate it. They showed not only that this poetry was progressive but that it had become inevitable given the tiredness and emptiness of old forms. Modernism was a better way to go, but one that challenged plain readers to be more sophisticated and more technically informed. Though well intentioned and plain-spoken this educational approach was close in spirit to Trilling's revenge-curriculum. Both sought to impress the audience for modernism with this new literature's artistic integrity, sincerity and complexity.

The effect of this approach was odd. It deflected the revolutionary, disturbing, anarchic and troubling offensive of modernism. What was lost in the Riding-Graves discussion was a sense of shock in the face of the new. What was gained was perhaps the tolerance of plain-minded readers and writers.

In 1943 in Australia Max Harris published his first novel, *The Vegetative Eye*, after two volumes of surrealist inspired modernist verse. The novel's title was taken from William Blake - a poet who had abandoned rhyme and metre a hundred and twenty years before the surrealists and modernists made such moves an emphatically political and progressive strategy. A. D. Hope jumped at the chance to review the novel for *Meanjin*. He titled his review, "Confessions of a Zombie", and wrote, viciously,

> Mr Harris is morally sick and discusses his symptoms with the gusto of an old woman showing the vicar her ulcerated leg... Mr Harris himself writes like somebody who has heard about writing and thinks it would be fun to try his hand at it... the plain fact is that Mr Harris cannot write... He is completely at the mercy of his language, and it is to be assumed that the language, finding him lost and helpless in the field of prose, has taken a malicious revenge on him for the abuses he has so often committed upon it in his verse. (Heyward 116)

This response at least stayed with its sense of shock and came as a gut response to the work. Hope had no desire to make such work palatable to the plain reader, but by reacting with such feisty venom we can now sense Harris's real affront to traditional cultural and social values. Hope leaves us in no danger of regarding Harris's modernism as finally too bland, technical or deliberate.

I do not wish to argue, though, that the Riding-Graves approach or even the revenge-curriculum are altogether futile and misguided. Linking the present to the past in plain and intelligent and even technical language is always necessary and important work. This sort of teaching must be done. What I want to point out is that it is dangerous work because it can miss the soul, the excitement and the confusion of contemporary writing. Hope's outrage,

Trilling's recourse to technical analysis and the calming reasonableness of Riding-Graves are all reactions to a crisis.

This crisis continues for literature in the academy. It is not just modern or even contemporary literature that students want in their courses now. They want to study their own writing. In creative writing courses now students want to experience themselves as writers from within literature. They see themselves as the writers of the future. And they are.

It seems to me that both Arnold and Trilling were seeking in themselves those points of personal involvement in literature that made them creative readers and writers. They were struggling to make some of their fears and hopes clearer to themselves. Both of them, committed as they were to education and the betterment of students (whatever this might mean), wrote essays that were protests against education. We can live with despair, protest and nihilism within ourselves, but to teach these attitudes and ideas in a classroom in a university is, as Trilling wrote, "odd!!".

Now in the 1990s it is not just the case that students want to read and discuss dangerously modern and postmodern texts, but they want to do the writing themselves under the imprimatur as it were of the university. How can they be serious? Aren't they aware that the classroom and lecture theatre are more likely to be outrages against creativity than avenues to its strange territory? How can contemporary writing be taught? What is its curriculum? What aspects of its production can be contained within two or three-hour seminars and four-thousand-word term papers?

Both Arnold's and Trilling's dilemmas continue but with new twists in the late twentieth-century entrepreneurial universities which are becoming more and more like regional shopping malls where the control of crowd flow and increasing retail sales are the goals. Arnold saw true modernity as sane classical art open to as many as possible, and my experience of students is that they do want to produce the classics of their own time. They do still believe that some works will last, some will distil an essence and express a style. But classic now has other meanings. When radio stations promote their pop music as non-stop classic hits, and when *Seinfeld* and *X Files* have become classics while they are still unfolding on televisions around the world, the idea of "classic" comes close to the idea of a splash. Make a splash, make a classic. I am reminded of Trilling's awareness of how enfeebled modern literature can seem in an academic (or indeed commercial) context. I listened recently to a cultural studies academic complain that postmodern theory is not taught to first-year creative writing students. The complaint was that this lack of theory attracts students who are seeking an easy option. The pressure is on to shape creative writing as an academic unit like any other academic unit.

Within this, how are we to help students write like writers, and not students? How to make tough-minded sceptics of them while still keeping their attendance reliable and their assignments in on time? How to resist and negotiate between demands for bland professional training and a tendency to believe that creative writing emerges only from a study of sophisticated theory?

The real challenge for teachers and institutions is to remain open to the outrageous, the ethically questionable, the new, ugly, untheorised, badly theorised and awkward experiments of young writers.

One of the present dangers in the slide towards writing as professional training is the seductive promotion of writing courses as so many how-to guides. There is a booming publishing industry in the field of books on how-to-write. In recent catalogues and on my shelves at home I have found, for instance, *Writing in Flow* by Susan Perry, PhD ("A really exciting book. Whether you're writing a novel or a business report or a school paper, telling people how to write using psychologically sound principles is invaluable"), *Building Better Plots* by Robert Kernen, *You Can Write Greeting Cards* by Kerri Ann Moore, *The Writer's*

Home Companion edited by Joan Bolker, *The Business of Writing for Young People* by Hazel Edwards, *Everything I Know About Writing* by John Marsden and *Handbook for Writers* produced by the Victorian Writers' Centre. I am sure that each of these books has invaluable advice and information. It would be the foolish writer who did not turn to one or other of them at some stage. There is another part of me though that protests: this is a distraction, this is not at all what writing is about or even how it is done. Writing, the sort of writing that matters, has something to do with never having thought about how to make a living from it, or how make its surface free of glitches, horrors, old scaffolding and tatty digressions. In a fourth year honours seminar early in 1999 I was present at a discussion of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. I have two strong impressions from that discussion. First, I was shocked to see so many identical copies of the book on the table round which we sat. Later I thought about this feeling of shock and oddness. This sight had forced on me the realisation that Dostoevsky's novels are not my own discovery and are not preserved in my own heart alone or on my own bookshelf at home, but they are preserved in thousands of hearts and in hundreds of thousands of near identical copies. Seeing copies of Shakespeare's sonnets out on the seminar table a few weeks before had not done this to me, but Dostoevsky's novel did. I was disturbed and troubled by the domestication of *The Idiot* in a seminar discussion. The second strong memory I have from this session was the conviction of one student that the novel needed editing. I agreed with him in principle but then pointed out one of the things I love about the novel is the many digressions that can be savoured for their own sake. The passage at the beginning of Part Four where the narrator discusses the importance and the taxonomy of minor characters in fiction (and in life) for instance might be one of those a good editor would put a line through, but it is one that brings me back to the novel. I would not want to do without it and could not trust any editor to leave it in. Just as Arnold was fearful of the levelling effects of democracy, and Trilling was worried by the university's diminution of literature's ability to provoke and disgust, I am worried about the glibness and confidence promoted by a tendency towards professional training in schools of creative writing.

It worries me that a magazine called *Fiction Writer* can feature on its front cover an article titled, "When to break *the rules of fiction*" (my italics). We live in an age of the manual. Who wrote the manual on fiction's rules that this magazine article so boldly turns against? When did the rules coalesce, and indeed when did they atrophy? I cling to the quixotic idea that *The Idiot* is manual enough for any writer.

There is a sense of haste and an ahistorical mental narrowness promoted through these magazines, how-to-do-it books and writing courses, valuable though they are. In the Autumn 1999 issue of the *Arts Leaders Bulletin* published by Arts Victoria there is a boxed item headed "On the importance of symbolism". Inside this box is an account of an exercise in symbolism at Parks Victoria on the anniversary of the merging of Melbourne Parks and Waterways and the Victorian National Parks Service. Staff surviving from the merger were asked to bring to a first birthday party a gift for the new organisation and any relics of the old organisation:

> It was actually a very powerful moment. People lugged along signs from out in the bush, policy manuals that were thick with regulations, old uniforms and other amazing stuff. We ceremonially had it taken away and burned. As for the gifts, management thought some would bring a gift and that it would probably be very minimal. In fact, staff put a huge effort into their gifts. The bays staff hand-made a miniature lighthouse, one group wrote a poem, another group made a sculpture. We had an amazing range of genuine efforts from people, so it was clear the symbolism for them was extremely important.

This breaks my heart. I am in awe of the effort put in to making those gifts while I am horrified that these park rangers who are also poets and sculptors can ignore the symbolism of burning relics of the past. Weren't those old policy manuals written with ideals in mind? How proudly were those old uniforms worn and repaired? Who painted the bush signs and

how were they phrased? What maps and local knowledge did they draw upon? Don't these people see that by burning the past they are offering their own gifts up to be burned by a future generation? Symbolism and corporate identity have become conflated. History does not exist in this world of emotional highs. It is this kind of over-confidence and blindness that can be engendered in students when they are treated as customers who purchase a product newly devised and slickly packaged.

What I would like to do is ask that fourth year university honours group to come back together in ten or twenty years and place their by then dog-eared, cracking copies of *The Idiot* back down on a table and discuss it over again. This would be a different kind of symbolism.

Along with the dangers of domestication through packaging in university writing courses, there is the continuing danger of the return of the idea that creative writing is a therapeutic, cathartic, uplifting and healthy activity. Recently (16 April 1999) the Melbourne *Age* reported researchers at the State University of New York's psychiatry department have discovered that if asthma or arthritis patients spend 20 minutes daily writing about their lives then within four months arthritis sufferers will report a 28 per cent reduction in disease and asthma sufferers a 19 per cent increase in lung function. Against this I have only anecdotal evidence. Writing has been disastrous for my posture. My spine is deteriorating, I have shoulder and neck complaints, pale skin, my eyesight is failing and my biceps are puny all as a result of spending hours writing each week. Writing is not a glorious or even a particularly healthy career. But if it is taught at universities and TAFE colleges, if it is an element of a broad arts and humanities education, then it must be making us better people and better citizens, mustn't it?

I am not sure. I am not convinced. As a writer, I am repelled by the notion. If I believed this it would inhibit me too much.

The book is a domestic ornament. It comes tamed to your hands. Perfectly shaped for a shelf in a room or for a table surface. But always our hope is that the writing will not be anywhere near as predictable or as manageable as the object we hold.

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