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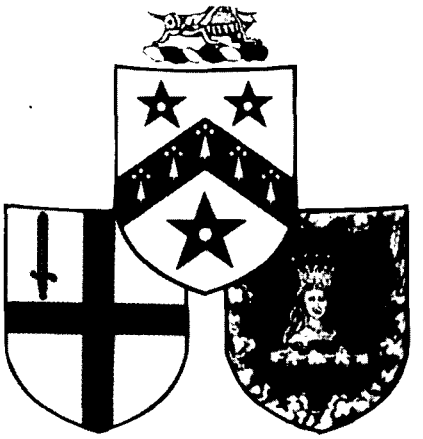

DO YOU TAKE RISKS WHEN YOU READ? OR RISK-TAKING IN READING

A Lecture by

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DO YOU TAKES RISKS WHEN YOU READ? OR: RISK-TAKING IN READING

Professor Lynette Hunter

In the preceding lecture I read several extracts from diaries, letters and autobiographies, and asked whether any of these extracts could be thought of as having literary value. With every single one of those pieces I carried out an short analytical and critical study precisely to address that question, and I would be happy to stand by any of that writing and defend its value in fairly conventional literary aesthetic terms. Any one of those pieces could be brought into a position in the literary canon used by the educational institutions in this country.

This takes me back to my very first lecture, 15 months ago, in which I was exploring the way that the educational canon was put into place by people from a particular social position and with particular aims. I pointed out then that the aesthetics and critical values for which they argued, answered their needs – but not necessarily those of other communities. The intervening lectures have looked at the verbal arts in theatre, poetry, song, prose, narrative, book art, storytelling, and electronic forms such as hypermedia, , which are today coming from places with rather different needs. And so in this lecture, I would like to look at some writing whose form seems to place it outwith conventional literary value, and ask IF we can read it, and if so, HOW? What risks are we willing to take? the risk of boredom? alienation? frustration? or other more complicated risks?

What I am not talking about here, although it's far more 'sexy', is the risk of shock. Shock is part of our aesthetic vocabulary. Artists of various kinds play with it all the time, often in egocentric pursuit of being 'the first' to do something, making it a hangover from the romantic notion of original genius. It has other functions too, but many of them are about the disruption of conventional ideas of 'beauty'. The kind of risk I'm talking about today is not the kind that comes from fear of someone doing something *to* you, but the kind that you yourself take on when you decide to take the time to read something that comes from outside your own aesthetic and social community. A risk of a waste of time perhaps, or more difficult, the risk of what you will need to give up in order to appreciate another way of expressing experience.

Words, above all else, bring us together – without them we cannot have a democracy. One area committed to extending the franchise on words is in life-writing, in areas of therapy, literacy courses, English as a second (or third, or fourth) language, in oral history, community writing projects, among many others. Yet traditional literary value teaches us to maintain a distance between our

personal lives and our art, as if it were bad manners to talk about ourselves. I want to suggest in this lecture that what is really at issue is the context for the way the story is told, rather than that it is told at all. There are innumerable communities in England and in the UK more generally that simply do not speak or write in the conventionally accepted way. And conventionally trained readers have more or less resistance to particular ways of writing.

Some would argue that this resistance is a good thing – or here comes the death of the English language! But quite apart from a wealth of evidence that shows that the inventiveness of precisely these communities is what keeps English alive and changing, these voices, these different verbal arts, are excluded from literary value. To echo a point I made in the last lecture: if the writings are excluded from recognition, from value, our society is denied the wealth of experience, the precious environments of existence and economies of survival that these voices have so painstakingly worked out in their words.

I would not want to get rid of the concept of value and have a free-for-all in aesthetics, after all aesthetics are there to introduce ethical and moral issues into skilled play or work. But I suspect this problem arises mainly from the absence of any common vocabulary for approaching and understanding these texts in the first place. The broader ethical issue is that our failure to understand these writings and oral stories means that we are kept apart from the communities that produce them and they are kept apart from us.

Who do I mean by 'us'? I mean *me* : living in England, middle class, white, educated, culturally Christian, heterosexual (at present), no marked disabilities (temporarily able bodied), middle-aged and a woman. I'm what used to be called a 'Sunday-supplement' person, nowadays a 'newspaper-supplement' person: targetable, you can sell me things, predict the commodities I will buy, I'm part of the market, marked out, a right good mark for the slings and arrows of advertising. In many ways I'm indistinguishable from that mass of people who corner culture, who hoard aesthetics as a 'high art' form which is not accessible to the many, and in which beauty is a rare thing. For people like me there is no real desire to look beyond the confines of our understanding of art and verbal communication in particular. We are closed up in our rooms of recognisable genres and values partly, at least in my case, because the variousness of the world is indeed overwhelming, and to let more of it in is, simply, terrifying.

But that's a significant phrase 'to let in', and I am aware that I am part of a group of people who can let things in or keep them out. What right do people like me have to 'let in' or not? what makes me think that other people want to be 'let in' to this world? in other words it's not necessarily their loss, but the loss of people like myself if we live in a closed world. However, it is the case that a

lot of unconventional writing is published, and the action of generosity explicit in publication asks for response as it offers a hand, builds a floor to meet upon.

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If we look at writing on the edge of convention, writings that seem so outside of aesthetic value, so specific to a small and intimate audience, we have to take great risks when we read. And the question has to be: why bother? why do we read this material? do we feel somehow guilty about it? inquisitive? prurient? proprietary? For me, being Canadian but English by birth, and having lived in a number of other countries, including, since returning to Britain, Scotland and Wales as well as England, I feel I responsibility to this country that now gives me a home. I need to find out about its communities, and not only to understand it in terms of a commodified tourist England, or the England of power. I feel the same way about Canada, and have talked in other lectures about the various literatures to be found there, but alternative writings in Canada are far more valued socially than they are here; there are, for example, more attempts to bring them into cultural common ground through teaching.

Among the many areas of writing I would like to explore today is that of communities moving between the oral and the written, and here the focus will be on texts written by Irish Travellers and by recent migrants to this country from further afield. There is also the area of writing carved out by those people moving from other literacies into English such as the Chinese, and those moving from other English verbal cultures into UK English such as the Caribbean community. And there is the kind of writing that is emerging from completely different aesthetic cultures such as those articulated in individual therapy or in community writing groups, of which there are very many in the UK.

Writing as individual therapy is such an intimate act that it is often inappropriate for publication. Yet it is the case that many of the experiences that are written out of the body and onto the page need to be told not only for the sake of the individual but for the general knowledge of the society. Here I am thinking of that growing field of literature written by survivors of abuse, where bibliotherapy has provided an immense help to the abused, yet whose accounts are essential to society if it is to deal with the longer running problems that instigate that abuse. Two weeks ago, here in Gresham, we held a conference located in the project Professor Cynthia Cockburn has been doing with women in war zones in Israel/Palestine, Bosnia/Herzegovina, and Northern Ireland. One of the speakers was a survivor of torture in Iran, whose writing speaks harrowingly about the experience, reminding us of humanity's capacity for inhumanity. Her own comments were that the experience of writing had stopped her nightmares. Bibliotherapy is of use to both individual and society addressing not only the systemic violence of ethnic and racial hatred but also of familial stress and breakage.

Larger community projects, such as the use of drama in Eritrea or Northern Ireland (another a contribution to the conference) to deal with broad ethnic and religious differences, have also proved vital to their societies, giving them, at times too briefly, hope. And these projects highlight the difficulty of bringing the activities and specific resolutions achieved by these projects into a political agency, a place where those strategies for resolution could gain a broader and more long-lived currency. One of the other participants in the conference, from the West Mercia W.E.A. in Stoke-on-Trent, spoke of the extensive programmes of writing in the area which encourage both individuals and community groups to tell their own stories, put them into words. The activities are a facilitating move that is not directive, but which extends democratic access to words and gives the writers the experience of writing themselves into existence. Most of the accounts are written directly to the reader:

'I hope you will enjoy them [the poems] and maybe relate to some of these emotions'[1]

'I would like to think that my grandchildren and great grandchildren would read this to find out what my life was like as a young person'[2]

'We needed to write about them so we could tell our stories to other people and because it was good to write them down'[3]

'I hope you will enjoy reading them as much as I have enjoyed learning of them'[4]

They invite an audience, they address their community of readers, whoever they may be, and in doing so they deal with their own identity, from which social definition and change comes about. This is slow but fundamental enfranchisement of the gifts of writing, of poetry and of other verbal arts.

A similar definition of identity is found in many writings from communities that have come to live in the UK over the past few decades. In Leeds there is a substantial population from the Caribbean, and one of the writing groups that emerged was the Chapeltown Black Women Writers' Group, who published *When Our Ship Comes In: Black Women Talk* (Yorkshire Arts Circus) in 1992. What strikes me most about reading this book is its cumulative effect. Many of the accounts are about similar events, yet each is distinctly different in its voice. The overriding effect is precisely that I am listening to a group of Black women talking, and that just as with an exchange that has acquired the formality of storytelling, I am listening acutely for the repetitions that betray / portray personal rootedness, for the shift in tone that adds another dimension to the speaking character. Some of the stories here do draw on traditional genres, particularly the writing of Odessa Stoute, and a few pick up

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[1] Ann Rigby, *My Life, My Reason, My Rhyme* (OEC Publications)
[2] Pat Rhodes, *From Victoria Street, Burslem, to Marriage* (OEC Publications)
[3] *The Trials and Tribulations of Being a Mum* (West Murcia W.E.A.)
[4] Chris Stewart, *Granny's Tales* (West Murcia W.E.A.)

a metaphorical or figural edge, especially when the women speak of religion or spiritual experience. Katie Stewart's 'What is you life?' begins:

> What is you life? Does it have meaning? Does it have purpose? A direction. What is your life? Is it a vapour? This is a question. What is your life?
>
> Well, what is a vapour? A vapour is water from the sea. We call it a fog. If it stays in the ocean nobody would have noticed it. But it climbed out of the ocean overnight and it gets noticed in the morning....So man is like a vapour that appear for a time. Today you are here, tomorrow.... (p 36)

But most of the accounts acquire their weight from the way the sentences are structured, the prosody and its rhythms which carry you both with ease and with difficulty through the thoughts of the speaker. Notice how Jean White in this extract lets the structure of the sentences reconstitute her own thinking:

> One of my achievements was starting a Sunday School in Roseville School. It was in the early 1970s when Enoch Powell was bringing the blood into the streets of Britain through the black people. We were scared. On the English people's side they were scared and on the black people's side we were scared. And my part in this was to ask the church to pray for the situation because there was fear on both sides.(p 37)

After her introduction there's that short line 'We were scared', followed by the recognition that the English were scared too which she balances with a repetition of 'we were scared', and then lets the next sentence expand out into what she is going to do. These are tiny architectures of meaning, easy to miss, yet when we pay attention to them, quite robust. As with the Caribbean writing I spoke of in my third lecture last year, one of the vibrant strengths of the book is its ability to bring elements from the English verbal culture of the Caribbean into the English of Leeds in the 1980s to 1990s.

Other communities that have come to England from non-English speaking countries present different kinds of difficulty in their writings. *Brushstrokes: A collection of British Chinese Writing and Drawing* from Liverpool, brings together a wide variety of written genres some of which are clearly part of a global media culture such as Paul Wong's 'The Adventures of Sidekick Shang'. Others, like Katherine Li's 'The Story of Mandarin Peel', have what I would call an allegorical focus (the multiple ambiguities that circle around the preparation and use of the peel), that also makes use of fable (embedding that ambiguity into the deathbed gifts of jewels and peel, the speaker taking only the latter), and yet situates the whole within a generational structure which moves in four paragraphs from the speaker's early childhood, to her mother's life, her mother's death, to her own children. What is difficult for me as I read this account, is my awareness that I know virtually nothing about the conventions of Chinese literature, and yet this is clearly a highly literary piece of work. My problem

arises from the ease with which I can appropriate the strategies and devices of the story, and while it may be appropriate to do so, it may not. It could be argued that this doesn't matter because at least some value is constituted from the reading. But my concern is that I am not listening attentively enough to the differences in the text, not learning about the values that it offers to me. The text brings us closer to the issues that surround the reading of world literatures in general that were discussed in these lectures last year.

Back along the edges of conventional literary value are the texts from writers living in, or in the process of moving from, oral cultures. There are a number of books that have brought together writings from Irish Travellers and from gypsies[5]. I would like to talk about just one of them, the collection *Moving Stories* , which because of its structure, placing stories by older women first and then accounts by younger and younger contributors, takes one imperceptibly from firmly oral devices into increasingly literate ones. As story after story attests, the fact of the traveller's way of life interrupts and prejudices so much of society's response, particularly for the younger writers in the key area of education where they come into extended contact with settled people. This is nowhere more obvious than in the stories themselves which could easily be dismissed as digressive, occasionally ungrammatical, and poorly shaped.

Yet the opening account by Kathleen Joyce draws clearly on orature. The writing starts with the immediacy of 'The most important person in my life was my mother' and moves swiftly on from there through an extraordinarily compressed narrative of her mother's relationship with her, that serves to delineate the mother rather than the speaker, and comes to rest in her mother's death. This movement is all within one fairly short paragraph that is full of tightly knit parallel phrases, pointed syntax lightened with conversational devices and colloquialisms, the speed of which is arrested in one of the final lines as it expands into, 'She loved the black apron with all the colours of the threads going through it and embroidery like flowers on the pockets' (p 11). Just as the First Nations oral stories I looked at last year always begin with an acknowledgement of their source, so Kathleen Joyce tells us first of her source, and in doing so also offers us an enormous amount of contextual material that can help us to position the narrative that follows. It is a profoundly moving account whose the focus is unusually not upon the individual, but upon the community, and once the introduction is complete, once the speaker is located for the audience, Joyce proceeds with her history, 'One hundred years ago Travellers used to...'(p 11).

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[5] See for example:
Moving Stories: Traveller Women Write, intro E Laing, pref B Gaffey (Traveller Education Team (Southwark), 1992)
Static: life on the site, eds I Daley and J Henderson, photog N Meek (Yorkshire Arts Circus, 1998)
Traveller Ways, Traveller Words, The Traveller's Cultural Heritage Centre (Pavee Point Publications, 1992)

There are, of course, many different kinds of oral cultures, and orality itself is no guarantee of democratic access to words. One group of writers quite aware of the problems that beset the oral is the MAMA East African Women's Group, from one of the Somali communities that have built up in England over the past decade of civil war in Somalia, who also visited Gresham two weeks ago. Their collection *Shells on a Woven Cord*[6] offers a mixture of legend, fable, realist life story, lyric, epic, prayer, testimony – an overflowing bowl of verbal diversity that has been transposed with exceptional sensitivity and craft onto the page. One of the points made by the collection is that the entire life of these women is infused with poetry, as one woman put it in seminar, 'You need the words, the poetry, to put one foot in front of the other, to walk from one place to another'. Poetry can be used to oppress, to humiliate and shame. It can also be used politically. One extract from the collection says:

> East African women organise events where we actually invite the tribal chiefs and show them the brutality. We do performances and sing to reveal the extent of the brutality. (p 80)

Within oral culture too we find a hierarchy of power in the world of aesthetics: poetry by men about men's lives, about heroism and fighting, is the valued verbal culture. In contrast, the poetry of women is kept out of public view, rarely circulated in the larger society, kept to the gatherings of women.

What is impressive about the collection is the range of activities that are addressed through working with words: Business, spirituality, survival, family patterns, racism, refugee camps, Bedouin lifestyle, personal behaviour. It's a fundamentally democratic approach, that accumulates density as one reads through it. In common with all the other collections of work that I have spoken about today, we can't just dip in or out of them, we have to spend time with them. This is partly for the very good reason that the communities of speakers may not be familiar to us, and we have to learn about them and the techniques and devices that are being used. But it may also be because much of what is talked about is in a sense too familiar, the domestic detail that can appear to be banal on its own, and needs context to throw forward the depths and particularities of its difference.

Repetition gives us structures for reading, not only in the generic which we know about, but in the small details and skeletal architectural features that hold writing together and that we glimpse in passing. It seems to me that as we read more, these elements acquire significance as we begin to notice them in a variety of different environments, but we do need to take that risk. I firmly believe we need new democracies of words, we need to learn how to engage with the arts in everyday lives, to engage with other people's artistic skills in order to value their lives. Working with words is one of the central strategies for displaying difference, and one of the central strategies for valuing difference. If words may keep up apart, without them we never get together.

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[6] MAMA, *Shells on a Woven Cord*, trans A Souleiman (Yorkshire Arts Circus, 1995)

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