

Report on the meeting “Between the Writer and the Reader 5

with Maurice Whelan. 4/3/17

This report is written to provide those who attended, and others, an account of this now annual event held at Indigiscapes in Redlands south of Brisbane. “Between the Writer and the Reader” is sponsored by the AAGP and organised by Pia Hirsch and Judith Bore.

I have written, for the past four years, of some of the experiences that those who have attended have been fortunate to have had. (Some previous reports may be accessed on the AAGP website.) These occasions have included various celebrations of human creativity, including the screening of some of Shakespeare’s wonderful plays, the audio recording by Richard Burton of T.S. Eliot’s “Under Milkwood”, readings of Maurice’s (and other’s) poetry and even musical pieces, both recorded and live.

This day began with the screening of Richard II, poetic and prophetic in terms of politics. Shakespeare wrote this in 1595 two years after his Richard III, and even after such a short time we can see the evolution of a style that would continue to develop with a deeper and even more insightful exploration of human character. Maurice chose this play undoubtedly as a preface to his presentation and the day.

Richard II as a drama covers only two years from 1398, and according to historians is more or less accurate. Richard was a rather self-centred and un-wise monarch. The play begins with the threat of a jousting duel between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, both powerful noblemen, after conflicting claims and accusations. At the last minute Richard intervenes and halts the duel to banish each from the kingdom, seemingly reflecting his poorly informed understanding of what may, and did, unfold. Richard is self-focussed and unaware that his taxing of the noblemen and countrymen of England has made him deeply unpopular. Unwisely and unjustly he removes all of Bolingbroke’s properties and possessions to fund his escapades and bolster his weakening power. Ultimately Bolingbroke returns from exile and foments a popular uprising from across the land and involving all classes, while Richard is on a half-hearted and wasted warring jaunt to Ireland. Finally, a hesitant and weak Richard is usurped and deposed by Bolingbroke who seizes the crown, and ultimately Richard is killed. Bolingbroke becomes Henry IV.

Key to understanding the story is the absence of care for others that is so much a part of Richard. He seems obsessed with his own loss and epitaph, but here Shakespearian Richard demonstrates some insight: “I wasted time and now doth time waste me.” Despite all perhaps we must temper our critical understanding of Richard given the fact he was 11 years old when he assumed the throne.

Pia Hirsch then introduced Maurice’s paper with her perspective of what Maurice achieves in his poetry and what we have become familiar with via the “Between the Writer and the Reader” days. Pia suggested that our meeting on the day together allowed us to consider more deeply the opportunity that words afford us, to talk together and also to increase our access to our inner minds. She reminded us of Tim Minchin’s belief that...

“...we must think critically, and not just about the ideas of others. Be hard on your beliefs. Take them out onto the verandah and beat them with a cricket bat. Be intellectually rigorous. Identify your biases, your prejudices, your privilege.”

She emphasised Maurice’s use of words in pursuing and exercising their meaning, and as a means of connecting people. She quoted him: “...I write poetry to be spoken, read out loud, as it is...easier to attest to the underlying music...I am aware of the silent sound of the music of the words, the cadence of the sentence, the rhythms of the language.”

Maurice gave his presentation entitled “Seeing Things” with a focus on Trump and his new presidency. He drew our attention to aspects of character that are similar between Trump and Richard. He made mention of the opinions of certain commentators and indeed of Trump himself. Many of us share the concern for the future that was presented. We were invited to enter the strange world of attempting to understand the event of Trump’s election by a minority of Americans.

Maurice shared his immense valuing and appreciation of William Shakespeare’s plays when one strikes times of great strain, and in particular how such works allow a “travelling inwards”. He described how Ariel was helpful for Prospero in “The Tempest” in terms of offering an imaginative realm, and the Fool is helpful for Lear in confronting him with his lack of wisdom, and in effect his madness. It is as though we need to cultivate these qualities of Ariel and Fool in ourselves and in our lives to care for our psyche. Sometimes we need to counter or confront a tendency we may have to collude with our own “narcissistic omnipotence”. So courage is needed to deal with such developments out there or internally.

Maurice spoke of the importance of “using our spirit eyes” to look inside ourselves and to beware and be aware of being simply intoxicated by, or drawn into the horror of, the Trump phenomenon. Trump has totally rejected “analysing” himself and what is more has professed, it seems, a fear of looking inside himself for fear of what he would see. Maurice suggested there is a danger to our minds in allowing unfettered entry of certain traumatising experiences without some means of seeking refuge, understanding or metabolising them.

He suggested too that the phenomenon of disavowal (an example of damage to the mind) can operate in a turning away or blinding of the self from what was so clearly visible and needs to be faced. This was particularly the case for women who came out on the streets after his infamous comments about women; much was made at the time of their brandishing signs “Women for Trump”.

There is also the vain hope of the dis-affected and alienated that he can make “America great again”. The fact that such a tiny fraction of the global and US population continues to become rich whilst the position of so many others, especially the poorest, deteriorates is an “inconvenient truth”. Maurice moved between the inner world and the external world in terms of reflections and informed speculation on Trump’s inner life and his documented childhood and later experiences. I think there is another link here with Richard II. Trump seems to have suffered as a child, and makes others suffer in a vainglorious life with members of his family. Maurice highlighted an aspect of the play where the Queen opposes the significance of the loss of care for the common people as expressed via the lamentations of the gardener. It is a touching and painful scene and we were invited to reflect on how fundamental this care and concern is in any civilised society. Again and again we were invited to consider the meaning of “Seeing Things” at so many different levels.

The second part of the day started with celebrating the launch of Maurice's latest book, a collection of poetry entitled "Spirit Eyes" which is accompanied by a CD of him reciting most of the poems in his characteristic Irish brogue. We listened to a piece of music: Arvo Pärt - Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten, a haunting and transcending experience inviting personal reflection. I had been invited to introduce this aspect of the day and speak.

I recited two of his short poems from his book "Excalibur's Return":

Real Presence:

Your spirit at my side
absent footprints
in the snow.

Mirror Image:

Don't look away
I wasn't staring.
I saw my youth in you.
That's all.

I used these two poems to highlight his use of silence – or saying just enough - which had been mentioned by Pia. Sometimes such a lot can be conveyed in the spaces between or around words, but it requires skill, and a gift, to enable this. These two poems say something about this...a sort of psychological minimalism. It is the same in good psychoanalytic work, pure and applied, whatever the context: talking and listening, or rather it should be listening and talking, with the emphasis on listening. Pia had mentioned thinking, and our responsibility to value and develop this facility. Related to this is how our emotional self is accessed and enlivened by poetry when it "hits the spot". A remarkable feature is that words and the poetic space can allow us to feel much more than the words themselves in perhaps a grammatical sense are meant to convey.

Another feature I referred to was the importance of psychological pain. Much of Maurice's poetry is set around nature and human experience, and there is often much joy in living in which we can join. However, frequently the pain of life and the grief it entails is expressed without shame in his poetry and I think in the work of all important poets. Indeed a lot can be said for the value of exploring with courage the areas of pain in all our lives, both personally and professionally as psychotherapists. At this point I read a poem entitled "The Fall" (see later).

I had been invited to read a poem penned by Richard O'Neill-Dean entitled "The Shipwright". In Maurice's earlier book "Excalibur's Return", a poem, "Mount Cargill" is a poetic response to their running up Mount Cargill in New Zealand together. "The Shipwright" is Richard's response to this poem, and is printed on the back cover of this new book.

Shipwright

for Maurice Whelan, poet.

He might look out the odd plank,
let it season slowly,
covered from the rain,
so that frames, ribs, stringers,
in the imagination, slowly form,
the particular twist or warp or grain
of a thought
favouring the idea of a hull,
sensitive to wind and wave,
to keep out storms,
to manage strains.

But, beyond all, the keelson,
massive, strong,
it must permit of no bend,
take long keel-bolts,
going down through heartwood,
to fasten the lead weight
of a real thought,
many tons,
to keep a good poem upright,

and carrying on,
tied in tight, to bind
all between the sweet lines
of its stem and stern,
to make a fine entry,
to set its wake
upon the oceans
of the mind

The discussion which followed included seven successive readings by Maurice of his seven sonnets in the new book. Each sonnet was introduced by the “gong” of a bell. It was interesting to consider in what way the readings influenced the discussion. Sometimes this seemed readily apparent and at other times difficult to “see”.

I think you can see the richness of this day that those who were fortunate to attend shared, and perhaps some of that is made available for all in this report.

Those interested may contact Pia, Maurice or me for a copy of “The Fall” which is about a tree falling, but also much more. Or you could purchase the book.

I want here to express my gratitude to Pia Hirsch and Judith Bore for organising this unique event and of course to Maurice Whelan.

Postscript: Civilizing and Decivilizing influences according to Norbert Elias, Sociologist. The Melbourne reading group have for some time been considering the prescient theoretical work of Norbert Elias. In 1939 (not translated into English until 1988) he wrote his book on Civilizing Processes (and by default decivilizing influences) which included a concern for what was happening in his native country of Germany. His publications and the related work of others are of particular value in developing a group analytic understanding of the global developments afflicting society in recent years as opposed to an individual analytic view. Have we entered into a profound “Decivilizing” period in global terms?

Paul Coombe