

What Maketh a Man

KATE GRENVILLE*

This is Albion Gidley Singer at the pen, a man with a weakness for a good fact. The first fact is always the hardest: you must begin somewhere, and such is the nature of this intractable universe that you must start with a thing admitted but undemonstrable. Myself, for example. I am a thing admitted. I close a drawer on my hand, or slice my chin with my razor and admit myself to be, but it is a source of grief to me that I am undemonstrable. Hands scarred by drawers, blood spurting from my chin: these do not demonstrate me in the way I would like.

I inspect the things I own, but they do not give back myself. I grasp a poker, or the Dresden shepherd on the mantelpiece, and snap off the flute in his silly pink hand, but I do not own these things, they remain strangers to me. I am a hollow link in the endless chain of proof which stretches back to a time when Albion Gidley Singer could not be imagined, back to simians swinging through branches, back to leathery flying snakes with oily eyes, back to the jellies eddying in the currents of brand-new seas.

I can feel the bumps on my skull, under thick hair, now a splendid silver. Under my fingers I can feel a fact, a bump on the skull which might be the part of myself concerned with love, or philosophy, or the part that reads the paper, or the part that has a weakness for a good fact. But where is my self?

What makes a man? What fills up the shell so he can strut and pose and posture, loving himself, watching his reflection in a doorknob, or in an apple if nothing better is at hand? I have looked into doorknobs, and apples, searching for myself. I have looked into mirrors, too, of course. I trim my moustache, shave my chin, clip the powerful hairs sprouting from my nostrils, but what I see tells me nothing. I see nothing more than a moustache, a chin, a pair of nostrils. I see myself in the glass, knowing how convinced others are of my reality, and I am frightened, because I am not convinced. I am a husband, I remind myself, and a father. But I am still not convinced.

I have been so many things, I should be starting to convince myself by now. I have always been a philosopher and a gentleman. I have been a husband, I have been a father, and was once a son. I have been a brother, and seven times a cousin. I

* *The prize winning novelist Kate Grenville, a graduate in Arts of the University of Sydney, was writer-in-residence in the English Department in Trinity Term 1986.*

have been a schoolboy, a bully, a suitor, I have been a customer in shops where long yellow gloves have been laid out before me on glass, I have been a drinker on sawdust, and in the hushed leathery air of the best clubs. I have been an eater, and on occasion an invalid. I have been a man in plus fours, a man in a wing collar, a man in a nightshirt, a man in bathing-trunks of an unfortunate flesh-colour. I have been a gazer at the stars, and a reader of the lesson for the Third Sunday After Trinity. I have been a praying man, staring at the dust between my knees and looking forward to lunch. I have been all these things with exceptional completeness.

Mirrors, though, show me a stranger, and there are long dark nights of hissing emptiness, of the voids between the stars, when I am hot with the panic of nothingness. *God!* I cry silently then, into the quality down of my pillow, which has swallowed so many cries for help. *God! Mother!* In the morning, with yellow sun lying silkily over the end of my bed, the hissing voids retreat beneath the sound of sea and kookaburras. I don my wing-collar, that keeps my head on my shoulders, and remind myself that I am a philosopher and a gentleman.

I thank God, too, for those wing-collars, and on those mornings when any amount of sunlight cannot quite dispel the darkness, it is to my tailor that I turn, poor Dingle who must wonder, surely, why it is that I need such an extravagance of shirts, of suits, of beautiful starched wing-collars. He cannot know, simple Dingle, and although I toy with him, I know I am safe: he cannot guess.

Well, I say jovially and loudly, for Dingle is of the artisan class, needing to be spoken to jovially, and is deaf, needing also to be spoken to loudly. *Well Mr Dingle, you must cover up my inner void, I say*, and we laugh together, old Dingle and I, at the idea of the fine cloth that is going to cover my nakedness. We laugh, although I laugh at the way Dingle is laughing at something he does not understand and perhaps has not even heard, and Dingle laughs because he sees from my laugh that I have made a pleasantry of some sort, and many years of covering the nakedness of gentry have taught him that gentry's sad jokes must be laughed at. Even the yellow-faced thin youth beside him, holding a bolt of cloth, smiles with his bad teeth into the bolt of cloth, because he is an apprentice, and learning along with everything else how to laugh at gentry's jokes.

It saddens me, so that I am suddenly enraged at all this laughing, and demand: *Mr Dingle, why are you laughing?* Poor deaf Dingle, who is only a few years away from doddering, closes the laugh on his face like a door and peers at me, saying *Pardon sir? Beg yours, Mr Singer sir?* But I am bored with Dingle now and make my face frown, and hold out my arms for him to run the tape measure around my chest, and there is no more laughing.

So it is a well-dressed Albion Gidley Singer who steps out into George St in his new suit, his new cambric shirt, his immaculate waistcoat. Anyone can see that

Albion Gidley Singer is a man of substance, no hollow man. What a chest fills that shirt, and swells that waistcoat so there is not a pucker! I know of the flesh and hair of that chest, its flat brown nipples, I know the blue pallor of the skin, and the mole, my secret mark of beauty, beneath the breast-bone. Dingle knows too, of course, but Dingle has seen the chests of all the gentlemen of Sydney, as well as that of his wife (a chest hardly worth seeing, in my view, judging from the glimpses I have had of plank-like Mrs Dingle), and the secret of my chest is safe with Dingle. And not even Dingle knows of my other secret, although when he kneels in front of me to measure my inner leg, he cannot fail to remark the gentlemanly swelling on a level with his nose. But the secret of Albion's manhood is safe with me, and with various adoring women.

Now, promenading Albion Gidley Singer, gentleman, down George St, I am a man of satisfaction and reassurance. No wrinkle or pucker in Albion Gidley Singer can betray me, and I see the long lusting eyes of women, pretendint to be demure, following me, and running me up and down with their eyes as their slender hands would love to do. I smile at them all, those secretive saucy wenches, for I can understand their admiration for the fine personage of A.G. Singer Esq. *Any of you could be mine for the asking*. I think as I smile at them, and they know my thoughts, and hide their faces behind fans, or look away. Teasing coquettes! Women! On my deathbed I swear I will think of your scheming smiles, you delicious vessels of ecstasy! And I, I am hollow no longer, but a man filled by good Mr Dingle and his cunning tricks with seams, and made whole by the admiration of so many strumpets.