

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

### LITERARY SUBJECTIVITY

#### *Simon During - University of Melbourne*

---

In 1748, William Mason began his literary career by attacking Oxford University in verse. "Alas! how chang'd....," he has the Goddess Isis—deity of the river that runs through Oxford—declare:

See! Gothic licence rage o'er all my coast.  
See! Hydra faction spread its impious reign,  
Poison each breast, and madden ev'ry brain.

.....

Learning, that once to all diffus'd her beam  
Now sheds by stealth a partial, private gleam (Mason 1810, 325).

A couple of months ago, Christopher Koch, took a similar line in a speech upon receiving the Miles Franklin Award, linking academic criticism to rampant factionalism: "We seem to have a growth in this country of professional anger, hostility and malice—an endless formation of lobby groups and factions. These things are eating away pleasure in achievement, the harmony that nurtures creativity and pleasure in our culture itself" (Koch 17).

The point of juxtaposing these lamentations on university learning is not to remind ourselves that there is nothing new under the sun, at least when it comes to complaints about academics. Clearly both Koch's "lobby groups" and Mason's "hydra faction" name a sectarianism, secreted in universities, supposedly destroying the consensus on which genuine literature is grounded. But what interests me is the historical relation of these passages to what we can call the modern institution of literature. In its context, Mason's anti-Oxford poem contains a glimmer of a new articulation of the humanities in England. The particular hydra faction he is objecting to is Jacobitism: the poem sets itself the project of reconstructing a genealogy for modern English liberty unsullied by those who resisted the Hanoverian accession and parliamentary hegemony. And Mason cannot strike a confident political tone: his poem ends with Isis turning away from public debate and indeed public poetry, proposing to "Calm and resign'd my humbler lot embrace./And, pleas'd, prefer oblivion to disgrace." The choice of an academic career is being articulated here as if it were a literary career—as a self-conscious retreat from the political sphere within an emotional and ultimately political framework which anticipates Mason's friend, Thomas Gray's, famous *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* which was written the next year.

Almost immediately, Mason triggered a critical poetic response, *Triumph of Isis*, from the young Thomas Warton, a writer about whom I will have more to say. Warton rejects Mason's arguments: first he implicitly accused Mason himself of Whig partisanship and of writing for preferment. Then he rejected Mason's strategy of retreat by arguing that at Oxford the Muses have long had a proud governmental function: they have been harnessed to glorify and refine the nation. In staking this claim, Warton made a move of considerable significance: the Gothic past, which for Mason had been a name for Oxford's archaism and fractiousness, becomes the emblem of a living tradition—literary and martial all at once:

Ye fretted pinnacles, ye fanes sublime,  
Ye towers that wear the mossy vest of time,  
Ye massy piles of old munificence,  
At once the pride of learning and defence (Warton 1810, 90).

What the two poems together begin to allow us to recognise is a rather complex and not altogether coherent assemblage of values, ideas and trajectories upon which the institution of modern literature will depend: the explicit rejection of politics, the flight from the public sphere towards the isolated private self, the call upon culture—or rather the Muses—for purposes of national unity and edification, the binding of current literary work to academic scholarship.

I am not implying that there is anything revolutionary about Warton and Mason's poems, far from it: after all they echo Latin literature as well as continuing a tradition of university polemics in verse. Nor is their articulation of modern literary discourse underpinned by any profound social transformation. These are poems by young men quite confidently looking for patronage, unlike poorer contemporaries—Samuel Johnson or Goldsmith, for instance—who worked in the literary marketplace. It is not any extension of the reading public, any commodification of print, any tightening of intellectual property laws, which pushes Mason towards a culture of apolitical subjectivity or Warton to re-configure Oxford history as a cultural heritage, at least in any immediate sense. Rather they imagine literature as they do sensing that the patronage system will respond to them, a belief that would seem to be based on the sense that the 1745 defeat of the Jacobite cause had finally secured a political and religious system stable enough to permit increased depoliticisation and secularisation in literary careers, and that the new dispensation had set politics and public life (we might want to say, modernity) in a direction from which they might choose to withdraw. Paradoxically they also imagine literature as they do because of the increased demoralisation of the universities in the mid-eighteenth century. For this permitted academics like Warton to work without supervision on their own projects at a certain distance from commercial and religious life. Not the least telling thing about Warton and Mason's poems is that, despite this, they take the universities seriously enough to suppose that they have real cultural and literary influence.

If, by this reading, these eighteenth-century poet-critics represent the emergence of that way of figuring literature which we now think of traditional, Christopher Koch's speech represents, crudely enough, the decline of that notion.

Or rather it represents literature's marginalisation in our society. To compare the genres in which each work is already to tell that story. Mason and Warton wrote in verse, for them verse is, as it were, literature's natural language. As they echo the classical tradition they direct it to new ends, being alert, for instance, to the experimentalism which was then leading Gray and William Collins to attach Celtic elements into anglophone poetry so as to produce a literature that was not so much English as British, an ur-postcolonial literature some might say. In his *History of English Poetry*, Warton will consolidate this move by pioneering a British literary historiography which posits a tradition of indigenous poetry independent of moral and civic rhetoric. Such history also helps push literature (as poetry) to autonomy.

Koch's piece, however, belongs to a relatively new genre: the acceptance speech for a literary prize award, printed in a daily newspaper. Literary prizes were first designed as a means of bolstering a mode of writing— art-writing— which is relatively low in market appeal and high in cultural capital. Though, typically, endowed by states or rich individuals, prizes effectively function as marketing tools for the publishing sector in its effort to compete with cultural industries richer and with greater reach than itself. Literary prizes are a way that the state and the market combine to sustain art-writing in order to accrue prestige, with the enthusiastic support of publishers who use them to win media publicity and sales. Koch's speech is haunted by the fear that academic criticism threatens this combination as well as the prestige which literary prizes conjure. It's all the more intense a fear because the educational system retains considerable power of patronage over art-writing both in economic terms (through the setting of texts, through controlling creative writing teaching positions which remain an important source of income to many art-writers) and in cultural terms (academic critics still possess the capacity to canonise in the long term). It is because art-writing is squeezed between the market, the media and the academy that its practitioners and supporters can so easily become furiously soft-headed in regard to academic criticism. Whereas Mason's and Warton's poems offer positive solutions to the social fractures they recognise (Mason in a retreat to subjectivity; Warton in a revaluation of the literary past which will 'humanize' the future), Koch ends his piece with a Chinese poem which also embraces isolation— but in despair not hope.

It is notable that the fear and aggression characteristic of contemporary anti-academic literary polemic is not matched by any close examination of the work it attacks or of the history of the structures which it shares with academic criticism. While Mason and Warton in particular helped usher in a new organisation of the literary field by appealing quite concretely (if inaccurately) to history and carefully (if not successfully) negotiating their way out of politics, current anti-academic polemicists invoke art-literature as a realm which transcends history and politics and which therefore requires no detailed historical, critical or political knowledge and judgement.

In this paper I want to trace certain complicities between contemporary art-writing and literature's marginalisation with the aim of encouraging literary studies to accept, and respond to, that marginality. First though: a little more detail on the

shape and pattern of current commentary on literature.

We can say in very simplified terms that today literary commentary revolves around three main poles: the traditional position which I have begun to outline; the political position and the sociological position. To draw attention to these three positions is also to imply that the traditional position has, despite itself, become politicised. It is now just one line of approach among others, connected as we have begun to see to particular sectors of the larger literary system—to the media and book reviewing, to the publishing industry and events like writers' weeks, to some class-rooms mainly now in the secondary sector and, though less so, to defences of literary studies directed at the politicians or the wider public, as occasionally articulated by senior university bureaucrats for instance. As traditional literary values have been detached from a historical sense, from critique, from research and experiment, they have become increasingly formulaic. In general terms, this sidelining of the traditional idea of literature is, as I have hinted, partly a consequence of the rise of competing cultural technologies, notably film and the broadcast media but it is also a consequence of the break up of the older British canon, which—to treat a long and familiar history in half a sentence—by the nineteenth century in critics like Coleridge and Carlyle began to be treated as a timeless canon of masterpieces produced by geniuses endowed with especially creative and sensitive "imagination", and which, by about 1970, had lost most of its commercial appeal except for the set-text market. So the break up of the literary heritage—which has meant, for instance, that figures like Warton and Mason have been forgotten outside of a tiny group of specialists—is a complex event with one important factor being the relative loss of political and economic power of the order which the canon legitimised (somewhat paradoxically as we shall see)—that is a world system dominated by white (mainly male) Europeans, predicated on highly differentiated and hierarchised gender roles and structured around what we can call monosexuality.

As that order has retreated, political criticism has entered literary studies. Literature was now re-historicised in a new spirit; canonical works were read in relation to the heterosexual white man's will to global power. It is important to remember, though, that political interpretation has taken two different forms: the first—let's call it poststructuralist—emphasised that in modernity there has been no clear cut opposition between hegemony and critique so that, in particular, the literary canon had always possessed heterodox potential, has always been able to dissolve the cultural-political identities and projects that it has also been used to legitimate. The second position—the politics of identity—celebrated texts, old and new, which could be interpreted to support hitherto repressed cultural identities: most obviously those of autonomous women, gays, lesbians and ethnic groups long subjected to WASP racism. Here new communities used literature's expressive power in ways developed by orthodox men of letters like Warton and Mason.

As political criticism exhausts itself, what I am calling the sociological position is finding favour. The sociological position shares political criticism's fundamental historicism but makes no claims to work directly within any political

movement. Rather it examines the institutional bases of literary production with quasi-scientific neutrality. Here too we can distinguish two strands, one inspired by Michel Foucault; the other by Pierre Bourdieu. For the neo-Foucauldians, the history of literary values is to be analysed primarily in terms of the ways that literature has been used governmentally—that is, to create good citizens. For the Bourdieuians, literature is analysed as a field which covers a range of readerly tastes as well as writerly techniques and career trajectories. These tastes and trajectories are themselves organised within a fundamentally divided socio-economic structure in which individuals are born with unequal capacities to acquire cultural and monetary capital. For Bourdieu, the hierarchised literary field helps maintain that larger social structure in its fundamental inequity.

The recent success of sociological approaches to literature in the academy is a further indication that the gap between creative literature and the media on the one hand and academic research on the other is widening. Admittedly, there are also signs that rapprochements are being opened up: to give some local examples, creative writing courses in university English departments increasingly invite exchanges with theory and in Australia a journal like *UTS Review* seems to be attempting to find ways outside of the divisions I have outlined. But what is finally at stake in any attempt to move beyond what is increasingly looking like the stalled and demoralised field of literary studies is a recovery of what has been lost in the three positions I have outlined: that is a commitment to a particular form of subjectivity—literary subjectivity—characterised by a love of literature, more or less disjunct from explicit identification with political programmes.

What is literary subjectivity? As I and my colleagues discovered in a recent survey we did on fans of the classics (a sub-sector of the wider field of literary subjects), a love of literature can take many forms: a retreat from social life into reading; a fascination with the materiality of language; a fetishisation of books and the reading situation, intense identification with authors, the use of fictions to supplement a limited social circle, for instance. At one level literary subjectivity involves a certain styling of a life around reading (and often writing too) at least for a period in an individual's life. It involves recognition of oneself as a distinct type who takes literature seriously. At a more general level though, literary subjectivity is a disposition to engage intensely with particular modes in two larger formations which help drive modern culture: the production of fictions and simulacra and the provision of spaces and occasions for individuals to be communicated to or to fantasise alone and without a belief in supernatural agency. Together these constitute what I will call the culture of secular mimesis which, as I shall suggest at the end of this essay, has undergone a profound internal disjunction—a metamorphosis of ontological commitment—since the second half of the nineteenth century, and whose full consequences are only now being felt.

Without exploring the full implications of rethinking literary studies as bound to literary subjectivity and secular mimesis, some points need to be clarified. By this move, English studies is conceived of as a commitment to, and enriching of, literary subjectivity through examining the machinery and history of that subjectivity (which, of course, requires examining the machinery and history of

literature itself) as well as through expanding what individual students read. Such a move would channel literary subjectivity back towards the past as well as twisting it towards self-analysis, that is towards the analysis of literary desire, institutions and techniques. This need not imply a return to traditional values. On the contrary. The traditional position has come to imagine that literature has a value, potentially available to all, which transcends its actual uses and pleasures. It supposes that the failure to know and appreciate great works of literature is a lack, and that judgements about what works are “great” are made on the grounds of autonomous literary value and have a quasi-objective status. But to argue that different individuals and groups have different degrees of intensity in their investment in literature and fiction in particular, and that, though this intensity may vary across an individual life, it does constitute a coherent enough formation to be called a “subjectivity” especially because it is embedded in specific institutions, is to resist any objectivism or universalism. Conceiving of literary studies as a commitment to a particular kind of subjectivity is to move past political criticism too, for literary subjectivity is not coterminous with any particular socially or politically formed identity. Similarly, to think of academic literary studies as supported by literary subjectivity is to move away from the sociological position which considers the love of literature as a social function, helping to stratify various, class-linked, taste-communities. On the other hand, to think of literary studies in this way is not to reject the traditional, political and sociological perspectives: there is no going back from the understanding that literature is a system that has been legitimated by, and partly organised, through the (historically unfolding) discursive practice I have been calling the “traditional” view, and that the traditional view has consistently been deployed in the construction of, and in struggles over, a social existence in which there are perceived winners and losers and into which individuals are born with unequal access to positions generally deemed desirable. And modern literature, as we know, has been used as an instrument in highly politicised contestations of the dominant social regime.

The notion that literary studies ought finally to be based upon and directed towards a particular mode of subjectivity entails certain problems. The first concerns autonomy: to what degree is literary subjectivity independent of wider or adjacent dispositions—is there also a discrete filmic subjectivity say? This question requires empirical research for a full answer but since modern literature is a province in the empire of fiction and simulacra we would expect some overlap (as well as rivalry) between subjectivities organised around media like fine art, theatre, TV, photography, rock music and so on. The second problem concerns legitimation. In the current Australian situation particularly we have to ask: what is the rationale for a state subsidy for literary studies and research if finally they are about enriching and examining a particular way of living in the world to which no specific or calculable benefit for society as a whole attaches. There is indeed no overarching principle which might validate literary studies especially in terms that can be used to justify government funding. In the last instance, literary studies are taught in the university because there is a demand for them and the reason why the state should fund them is that access to this perceived good ought to be determined only minimally by individuals’ inherited status or capital. Of course, literature—and fiction in particular —is used by the education system particularly

at the secondary level as a stalking horse through which a number of competencies are disseminated, with university English in demand by would-be teachers of this form of English. Of course the creation of fictions across all media is big business and literary studies increases the national capacity to produce and consume fictions. But because modern literary subjectivity so often takes the form of a retreat from modernity, from instrumental reason and even from hegemonic forms of sociability—legitimations which treat of literature simply as a social instrument ring pretty hollow.

\*\*\*\*\*

I have argued that there now exists a chasm between academic criticism on the one hand and the notion of literature which circulates in the media and which is mobilised by much “creative writing” on the other. And yet despite the kind of rhetoric employed by Christopher Koch, creative writing, as caught up in the current literary system can itself work to marginalise literature. I want now to push my argument forward by reading Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, chosen not just because it is a superbly accomplished work but as a representative of the genre of prize-winning art novels.

It needs to be said at once that Carey’s novel is touched by the spirit of political criticism even though its politics are less than radical. It includes a description of a woman oppressed by, and flailing against, Victorian patriarchy; it encompasses a critique of British imperialism and the processes of Australian settlement putatively from the perspective of indigenous peoples. But *Oscar and Lucinda*’s relation to literature interests me more than its soft-left politics. Generically, the novel grafts a certain magic realist delight in chance and the marvellous onto the historical novel à la *French Lieutenant’s Woman*. It also rewrites a number of literary classics: at least one explicitly—Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son*—and others implicitly, maybe even unintentionally—*Voss*, and George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* for instance. Oscar’s boyhood comes from the pages of *Father and Son*; Oscar and Lucinda are bound together by the gambling that is demonised in *Daniel Deronda* and the glass church episode is a revision of that novel’s humanist Zionism. In rewriting these classics the novel revokes their conceptual presuppositions and values. By reworking *Daniel Deronda*, for instance, Carey is dragging literature away from the supremely ambitious ethical vocation it assumed with George Eliot. By rewriting *Father and Son*, he is decamping from Gosse, historically an important champion of the traditional idea of literature.

Thinking about Gosse’s book takes us far into *Oscar and Lucinda*. Oscar is a version of, or rather a departure from, Gosse’s presentation of himself in *Father and Son*—one of the few successful instances in the sub-genre, “a self-portrait of the critic as a young man”. Gosse was born in 1849 into a Plymouth Brethren family in which literature and particularly fiction were effectively prohibited; his mother died when he was young as does Oscar’s, and his upbringing was dominated by his loving, inspectorial father. His book tells of how an occulted personality develops in him:

There was a secret in this world and it belonged to me and to a somebody who lived in the same body with me. There were two of us, and we could talk with one another. It is difficult to define impressions so rudimentary, but it certain that it was in this dual form that the sense of my individuality now suddenly descended upon me, and it is equally certain that it was a great solace to me to find a sympathizer in my own breast (Gosse 30).

Nourished by reading—first imperialist tales of adventure, then Baroque death poetry and last Shakespeare—this individuality forms the foundation of Gosse's literary subjectivity. Or one of the foundations anyway. It is clear not so much from *Father and Son* as from Ann Thwaite's biography (which Carey presumably had read) that Gosse was, as they were beginning to say, a homosexual, and there can be no doubt that his inner life was directed towards literature as a strategy for comforting himself in the closet. It can be no accident that the subject of his first book of criticism was Thomas Gray, who represents the emergence of literary subjectivity in interaction with shamed and concealed same-sex desire. One of the most haunting passages of *Father and Son* is the attack on Gosse's father's religion because it 'sets up an vain, chimerical ideal, in the barren pursuit of which all the tender, indulgent affections, all the genial play of life, all the exquisite pleasures and soft resignations of the body, all that enlarges and calms the soul are exchanged for what is harsh and void and negative' (Gosse 220). More than anything literature is for Gosse the domain in which the affections, the body and the soul can be expressed, against not just religion but those respectable, heterosexual family and social values in which puritanism survived.

Unlike Carey's Oscar, Gosse had no lucky break sending him up to Oxford: he was self-taught, managing to find posts in the British Museum and Board of Trade which allowed him sufficient time to study languages, read and write so as to set up as a poet and critic. These loosely managed, by current terms inadequately accountable, departments of state provided the institutional support for his work. By and large, in treating criticism as a mode of self-articulation, he was remote from academic English, a discipline that was not yet well established. In fact in a famous 1886 essay, "English Literature in the Universities", published in the *Quarterly Review*, Churton Collins attacked Gosse as the kind of dilettante who was preventing academic criticism attaining the seriousness and rigour required to prevent genuine culture being swamped by mass-produced bad writing.

Gosse's literariness is lost from *Oscar and Lucinda*—which comes closest to his life and values in its representation of Oscar's aquarium, strange as that may sound. Gosse's father was a populariser (and probably the inventor) of the home aquarium, that device for engaging the sea for domestic spectatorship and instruction, and in its own way an element in the culture of secular mimesis. It is the aquarium that stands as the strongest instance of Oscar's cultural heritage not religion, not literature, and it stands for this all the more strongly because it bursts into Oscar's consciousness as he drowns at the novel's very end:

The water rose. Through the bursting gloom he saw a vision of his father's wise and smiling face, peering in at him. He could see, dimly, the outside



world, the chair and benches of his father's study. Shining fragments of aquarium glass fell like snow around him. And when the long-awaited white fingers of water tapped and lapped on Oscar's lips, he welcomed them in as he always had, with a scream, like a small-boy caught in the sheet-folds of a nightmare (Carey 510-1).

Oscar's death is written as if it expressed his failure both to escape from his struggles with his father and to sustain a strong inner self. Yet although he fails and the novel's other good characters are trapped in colonial Australia, *Oscar and Lucinda* is not a pessimistic novel: it grants Lucinda a career as a labour activist and, more importantly, it transmutes Oscar's debacle into a celebration of luck, wonder and love, a switch organised technically here through the aquarium which is placed at a symbolic crossroads— being associated with water and paternal repression but also with glass and Lucinda's independence and love. In relation to Gosse's life, however, it represents an absence—the absence of literature as a form of retreat and liberation.

It is important to remember that the actual Edmund Gosse was not a gambler nor an apostle of luck and wonder. And he did not fail. He retreated from his father's world into a literary subjectivity which was made potent by his closeted sexuality and was embraced in the name of tolerance, the body and individuality and was given room to develop into a career in literary journalism by the relative inefficiency of the bureaucracy. By choosing to base his hero on Gosse only to expunge Gosse's literary values and career, Carey indirectly emplots the marginalisation of literature into his novel. Literature is what the novel displaces. And the cost is a certain projectlessness. Not only is Carey's novel not committed to the history and subjectivities of its own institution, it deliberately vanishes them. It is directed to no readership with particular commitments or knowledge (we do not have to grasp its literary references to enjoy it: they are there to take certain, relatively highly educated readers down the counter-literary path that I have been outlining). Yet, paradoxically, the values of luck and wonder which replace humanist or belle-lettristic ethics and literary interiority become all the more literary because they point to no institutional base. Borrowed from a globally popular genre—magic realism—they are what we would expect of a novel of its type and moment. Why do we read *Oscar and Lucinda*? It is barely unjust to say: because of its technical competence and because it won prizes; because it is available for consumption inside a literary system in which art-writing need engage no literary commitment even if it may pay lip service to traditional literary values.

I want to finish my argument by considering *Oscar and Lucinda's* recasting of *Daniel Deronda*, and, in this way, suggesting that the marginalisation of literature is part of a larger transformation in the conceptualisation of nature and being itself within the culture of secular mimesis. To do so let me return to Thomas Warton, whom you will not be surprised was one of Edmund Gosse's heroes—Gosse first made the case that Warton and his brother Joseph originate the modern concept of the literary (see Gosse 1915). After a visit to a country house—Lord Pembroke's Wilton—around 1750, Warton made literature of the experience by writing a sonnet. It is a telling example of emergent literary

subjectivity:

From Pembroke's princely dome, where mimic Art  
Decks with a magic hand the dazzling bow'rs.  
Its living hues where the warm pencil pours,  
And breathing forms from the rude marble start,  
How to life's humbler scene can I depart!  
My breast all glowing from those gorgeous tow'rs,  
In my low cell how cheat the sullen hours!  
Vain the complaint: for Fancy can impart  
(To fate superior, and to fortune's doom)  
Whate'er adorns the stately-storied hall:  
She, mid the dungeon's solitary gloom,  
Can dress the Graces in their Attic pall:  
Bid the green landscape's vernal beauty bloom;  
And in bright trophies clothe the twilight wall (Warton 1810, 119).

Here Warton has a relation to the house in which an interior capacity, 'fancy' (what will come to be construed as 'creativity'), as well as a particular kind of access (something like what will later be called 'tourism') substitutes for proximity and belonging. And the poem articulates a psychic economy of interiorisation and compensation: the subjectivity of secular mimesis. Fancy, with its interior power to 'dress the Graces', and, magic-lantern-like, to 'clothe the twilight wall' 'in bright trophies', pays Warton off for the loss he feels on the road away from Wilton back to dull routine. Yet the terms in which Wilton's glory are invoked begin to undercut this economy of compensation. Warton's Wilton is a triumph of animation and mimesis: its gardens are not grown but conjured up by art's 'magic hand'; its statuary are, preternaturally, 'breathing forms', its colours are not simply shaded by the sun but by an ur-photographic 'warm pencil'. Wilton here is not embedded in any geographically particular setting and history; it shimmers, like any of fancy's productions, between this world and another more dazzling, more vital, less 'real' world. It becomes the expression of an energy and meaning which underpins both culture and nature, and thus entangles them. And, at least in principle, its 'princely domes' become as portable as Warton's own compensatory and interiorised delight in mimesis and visual pleasure. The fabric of English culture, represented like this, could reappear, internally or externally, anywhere on earth. In this way, Warton's Wilton is a prototype of Oscar and Lucinda's transportable, symbolic, dreamlike glass church: and certain connections between the emergence of literary subjectivity, secular mimesis and colonialism become apparent.

To read Warton like this is to begin to see why Henry Fox-Talbot, the English inventor of replicable photographic prints and author of *The Pencil of Nature*, the first book ever to contain photographic illustrations, was also a Warton fan, using his poetry to epigraph two of his books (see Fox Talbot 1839 and 1847). For Fox Talbot photography was a means of not just of reproducing but of spiritualising and memorialising the world: it was a way that nature writes itself through sunlight: both a trace of a natural communicative energy as well as a form of mimesis. Which brings us closer to *Oscar and Lucinda* as a rewriting of another literary

classic: George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Fox Talbot lived in Lacock Abbey, the real-life basis for *Daniel Deronda*'s Topping Abbey. In Eliot's novel, Topping Abbey is an emblem of England's heritage, a la Warton, or rather of its desecration: Topping Abbey's chapel, once charged with spirituality, have been turned into stables. Eliot makes no explicit reference to the fact that the Abbey's original was the house where certain key photographic techniques were developed, none the less it seems likely that Topping Abbey is presented as an example of heritage vandalism because it was the birthplace of photographic replication. If for Fox Talbot, photography, as nature's graphology, had been coherent with literary subjectivity, by the 1870s photography meant something else. It was less an vehicle of nature's self-expression than of the ways which serial replication could threaten the *humanly* embodied articulation of nature's communicative energy, that is creative fancy or literary imagination. George Eliot, for instance, famously refused to be photographed and wrote of her "horror of photography" (Eliot 3, 307).

Let us see why all this matters. *Daniel Deronda* tells a version of Christ's life. Daniel is a humanist Messiah: a young Englishman who discovers he is Jewish and sets out at the novel's end to establish a Zionist state. Daniel comes to recognise his Messianic vocation partly because its message is transmitted into his soul by a Jewish prophet called Mordecai—it is breathed into him, as Mordecai says (Eliot 1988, 695). That is to say, in *Daniel Deronda* nature, culture and history are all expressions of a creative energy: they form a still-to-be-completed world thought or soul. For Eliot, this energy is threatened by the gambling and chance to which Carey's Oscar is addicted: she considers gambling to be constitutive of modern capitalism and representative of its power to undermine security, heritage, progress—just like mechanical modes of reproduction (photography) which deprive mimetic representation of creative force. But Carey construes Oscar's addiction to gambling as a sign of his individualism and grace.

One way in which *Oscar and Lucinda* engages with Eliot's particular ontological commitment is by replacing her messianic plot with an expedition into the outback bearing what Oscar anachronistically calls a "pre-fabricated" glass church. The glass-church for all its romantic and liberatory signification (its refers back to Prester John's legendary and miraculous glass chapel which was always just big enough to fit the congregation) is a grotesque, mechanically-assembled collection of architectural tropes, and has no place in remote Australia where it falls to ruin. As I have noted, the church is a structure like Warton's Wilton—imagination's plaything—but now transformed into a replication as if it had entered into the logic of photography as George Eliot seems to have construed it. (It is worth drawing attention to George Eliot's attitude to the Crystal Palace, another inspiration for Oscar's church—she considered it to be a monument of the modern grotesque [Eliot 1988, 495].) In *Oscar and Lucinda*, *Daniel Deronda*'s ontology of progressive, spiritual expression has been replaced by this new technology of reproduction, hated by Eliot—with glass now a medium through which the new order can be presented as a teasing simulacrum of lightness and grace.

As Carey helps remind us then, literature in its heyday was sustained by an

ontology of expression and creative energy bound to a cultural system which was itself tied to a differently technologised system. Clearly a contemporary investigation and celebration of literature cannot assume commitment to an Eliotesque quasi-religious cosmology (or a rejection of contemporary cultural technologies) but without such commitment, literary studies are cut off from the past, just as they often are for political reasons too. These ruptures help make a historical interest in literature increasingly a minority taste—and that is another reason to make more modest, if more complex, claims for literature. We can gloss this more affirmatively: today more than ever literary subjectivity is not quite of this time and this place: it has become a minor form. Which may mean that it retains critical, if not necessarily politically critical, potential. At least we can say: never does the institution of literature have more energy than when it upsets official public culture and governmental rationalities, communicating its own complex ruptures and differences.

#### Works Cited

- Carey, Peter, *Oscar and Lucinda*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press 1988.
- Eliot, George, *The George Eliot Letters*. ed Gordon Haight. 9 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press 1954.
- Eliot, George, *Daniel Deronda*. ed. Graham Handley. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988.
- Fox Talbot, Henry, *Hermes: or Classical and Antiquarian Researches*, No. 1. London: Longman, Orme, Green, Brown and Longmans 1839.
- Fox Talbot, Henry, *English Etymologies*, London: J. Murray 1847.
- Gosse, Edmund, *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1970.
- Gosse, Edmund, "Two Pioneers of Romanticism: Joseph and Thomas Warton," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1915/6: 145-163.
- Koch, Christopher, "Beware Bullies who sap Beauty from Young Writing," *The Age*. Friday June 14, 1996, 17.
- Mason, William, "Poems of William Mason," in *The Works of the English Poets, From Chaucer to Cowper; including the Series edited, with Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, by Dr. Samuel Johnson: and the Most Approved Translations*. ed. Alexander Chalmers. 21 volumes. J. Johnson et al.: London 1810. Vol 18.
- Warton, Thomas, "Poems of Thomas Warton," in *The Works of the English Poets, From Chaucer to Cowper; including the Series edited, with Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, by Dr. Samuel Johnson: and the Most Approved Translations*. ed. Alexander Chalmers. 21 volumes. J. Johnson et al.: London 1810. Vol 18.