

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Australian Literature and the Public Sphere

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My interest in the place of the literary within a public sphere increasingly shaped by the processes of promotion and publicity goes back to what must be 15 or 20 years ago, when I saw David Malouf interviewed about his latest novel by Liz Hayes on Channel 9's *Today* show. When asked what the novel was 'about', Malouf was clearly embarrassed at having to come up with a two sentence answer to what was, in the case of this novel, a complex question. Liz Hayes did her best but was nevertheless visibly discomfited before Malouf had got past the first phrase: 'It's about the Latin poet, Ovid ...'. For the viewer, it was discomfiting too, as it demonstrated both the inevitability and the difficulty of translating traditional formations of the literary into the discourses of the mass media. A more recent provocation to think about the relationship between literature and the public sphere occurred two years ago by which time some of these difficulties had, for better or worse, been overcome. I was delivering a series of lectures for the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies at James Cook University, Townsville, on the topic of 'Literature, Journalism and the Media', at the same time as my Department was being besieged by journalists searching for people willing to be interviewed about one of our graduate students who called herself Demidenko. While they were looking for me, I was in Townsville talking about them; as it happens, the person known as Demidenko was there too, in hiding from all of us. It has not been hard to find provocations for investigating this relationship.

Let me begin the task, then, by spending a little time with this notion of the public sphere. As I understand it, this is a term which has been widely adopted since the translation of Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989. Mostly it is used to refer to those features of the structure of social experience which regulate, administer, mediate or ultimately resolve the division between public and private discourse. The most specialised and systematic use of the term 'the public sphere' refers to the arenas of public discussion and debate; so they include government institutions which are publicly funded for the national interest, as well as commercial industries such as the broadcasting media which address the public as an audience but which are controlled by private interests. Habermas's analysis of the public sphere focussed on the quality or form of rational debate and the quantity of, or openness to, popular participation. While the

concept itself operates as an ideal within Habermas's work, its adoption in sociology, cultural and media studies has been a consequence of its practical usefulness in providing an angle of inspection onto the public workings of contemporary democratic societies, onto their openness, accessibility, and ultimately their rationality (Calhoun).

The starting point for Habermas's specialised development of this term is in early eighteenth century Europe where 'an emerging bourgeois class' created for itself an arena of rational discourse:

Within this cultural space, the first achievements of modern science were celebrated and disseminated, new forms of literature were produced and discussed, debates about the nature of the new 'commercial' society that was coming into existence were carried on, and the power of reason was mobilised against the forces of prejudice and reaction. (Poole 14)

Habermas located this in, among other places, the English coffee houses, salons, and clubs and in magazines such as *Tatler* and *The Spectator*; there he found an openness, universality and civility of debate that recommended it as an ideal cultural structure. In Habermas's account of its gradual dismantling and transformation into the mass-mediated and governmentalised public sphere of contemporary western societies, there is more than a little nostalgia.

Even Habermas's ideal public sphere had its weaknesses, though. For instance, it was not open to everyone. To participate, one was required to be literate, propertied, leisured and male. As Ross Poole puts it, this new bourgeois public sphere 'excluded most men and all women' (15). Furthermore, it was after all a *bourgeois* public sphere which necessarily expressed specific interests. Indeed, 'its claim to embody universal principles of reason and truth' must be regarded as 'no more than the characteristic attempt of any class to put forward its own interests and way of life as constitutive of what is best for humanity generally' (17). As competing class interests grew in number, power, and definition, it is little wonder that this coterie establishment fractured and diffused.

One of the features of Habermas's coffeehouse public sphere is the close correlation between the class position and cultural repertoires of those who produced ideas and those who consumed them – between writers and their readerships. This cultural gap widened dramatically as commercial activity expanded in the nineteenth century, producing a popular culture which often positioned itself in denial and defiance of elite cultural forms, spurning the objective of rationality as well as the forms of civility identified with the middle class (Ross). By the time the mass media emerge in the twentieth century, the public sphere is chaotic, ripe for the modern invention of journalism as a means of coordinating information and opinion and marketing it as entertainment.

Habermas is critical of the mass-mediated public sphere of today, in ways reminiscent of Adorno and the other pessimistic Marxists from the Frankfurt School.

For Habermas, once the public sphere is captured by commercial interests it ceases to be able to perform its proper public role of informing the citizen or of providing an open forum for civil debate. What it performs instead is a kind of mimicry: a simulation of debate. This results in a proliferation and elaboration of the generic features or the discursive attributes of democratic debate and the transmission of information, but performances within these genres serve private and commercial objectives rather than the pursuit of that elusive public rationality. (We have a television program which clearly demonstrates the process. It is called *Frontline*).

Now there is a lot of interest in this critique. It strikes a chord with those who see the mass media as the space where any matters which concern a relatively large number of people should be debated, thus contributing significantly to the shaping of views and political decisions (Hartley). This pluralistic view of the role of the media sees the need for open access, the capacity for specific interests to establish a presence in the media, as fundamental to a functioning democracy and the possibility of an informed public opinion. However, many of those who believe in the ideal of the public sphere also believe that it has been surrendered to commercial interests. From their point of view, public opinion is no longer the product of informed debate, but is now the specialised product of the advertising and public relations industries (Wernick). Of course, criticism of the media's role in the public sphere is often driven by competing interests or identifications – of politics, class, gender, ethnicity or taste. The elitism which leads Habermas, like Adorno, to underestimate the contradictory pressures within the media and the tactical resources of its audiences, is an issue here. The ideal of the public sphere overvalues the importance of the rationality of the educated elite while it exaggerates the implied irrationality of the rest of the society in order to argue that conditions were more favourable for popular debate in the eighteenth century than they are now. Habermas never asks for which social groups, precisely, this could be said to be true. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the mass-mediated public sphere of today is a long way from the public rationality to which Habermas aspired, both in terms of the quality of debate and for the quantity of points of access to it. Gaining space in the press today does not depend on the rationality of your ideas or on their importance for the constituency to whom they apply. Hence the interest in Habermas's critique and its application to particular contemporary institutions and cultural domains.

In Habermas's account, literature and natural science were the great beneficiaries, as well as the most significant intellectual domains, of the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century. The transformation of that public sphere into what we have today must have an effect on the conditions of existence for the national literature. In the rest of this talk, I want to range over some of these conditions: this will take me first to a discussion of the place of the literary in the context of cultural policy frameworks and objectives, then to some analysis of the category of the literary within a market-dominated public sphere, and finally to the relation between literature, celebrity, and the media.

Cultural policy and the national literature

In Australia, the establishment of a national literature has been directly assisted by public funding, scrutinised and organised by public institutions. While there is now a substantial commercial market for certain kinds of Australian writing, there is also a parallel system of direct grants and subsidies intended to protect writers and publishers against some commercial risks. This situation is the result of policy decisions taken over many years by governments of all colours, variously aimed at developing and supporting a national literary culture as a legitimate public good. This, in turn, is the result of successive federal administrations accepting the principle that government should spend public funds on certain activities which may be evaluated in other than commercial terms – as a national good. There is nothing new in these comments but I rehearse them now because I want to suggest that the hitherto bipartisan commitment to this principle is in the process of revision.

First, I would argue that one of the markers of current conservative thinking on the role of government is a withdrawal from social and cultural policy in general. Among the villains of the Keating years, the current targets of the Hanson critique, are the policy advisors: the social engineers, the protectors of special interests, 'the academic wankers' as Tom Burns called them on election night in Queensland in 1998. Labor's federal regime was notable for the expansion of the role of cultural policy and its increasing implication in programs and initiatives which fed into an explicit and strategic process of nation formation. This was, after all, a reformist government agenda.

The Federal Coalition's conservative agenda likes to refer to itself as reformist but it is in fact radically de-regulatory. The Coalition government has dispensed with much inhouse policy advice; this is particularly the case in the arts, some parts of the communication, and the higher education, portfolios. In place of the range of policy advice – political, economic, cultural, environmental and so on – previously prepared by permanent employees of the bureaucracy, government now prioritises economic advice from a more restricted group of sources – from the Department of Finance, Treasury, or semi-private conservative consultants like the Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics or Access Economics. When other forms of advice are required, they are commissioned, briefed and contained, their authors exerting no continuing influence on subsequent debate. There is, then, a decline in the ongoing and systematic provision of cultural policy advice to government. Not only does this seriously affect the quality of the advice that is sought by government on cultural policy, but it implicitly denies the structural significance of such advice. It is not hard to see a relation between this trend and governments' declining commitment to the principle of supporting activities which are considered a national good but which cannot generate sufficient funds to support themselves. The principle of what Ian Hunter calls 'governmental rationality' (34) has given way to a principle of economic rationality.

Second and at the same time, we are witnessing a decline in the legitimacy of certain traditional rationales for policy driven interventions aimed at shaping and

protecting the national culture. The revival of the film industry was underpinned by cultural nationalist (and I want to use this in a descriptive and non-perjorative sense here) arguments about its importance. Among the effects of the dominance achieved by the contemporary narrative of globalisation has been the devaluation of the currency of such arguments (Cunningham and Jacka). Despite the old-fashioned nature of their own definitions of the nation, definitions which are entirely compatible with such positions, current conservative governments are unwilling to allow cultural nationalist arguments to prevail over the economic internationalism they promote in all policy contexts. The evacuation of the national from arguments for government support to film, literature, music and other cultural forms has been proceeding for some time and does not begin with this current crop of governments; it is a symptom of the spread of free market ideologies which also dominated the latter years of the Hawke-Keating government. Over the last decade, submissions seeking government support for cultural industries have progressively integrated the cultural nationalist position with economic rationalist arguments, thus eroding its power. Gradually forced down the list of supporting arguments, it stood exposed when the climate of opinion about such activities changed. Once a central plank in Australia's claim to be a modern, civilised and progressive nation, government support for the arts has now become a key target for the Right as one of the locations of special deals for cultural elites. And yet, unfortunately, at a time when a broad-based defence is required, one of the fundamental arguments for the protection of Australian cultural industries has been effectively sidelined.

This is especially worrying for Australian literature because it is no longer at the front of the queue. While it might have been possible, a couple of decades ago, to see Australian writing as the cultural flagship of the nation, this is no longer a plausible position to argue. Film has taken over that role. But even in film's case, the cultural nationalist argument has lost its attraction against those arguments which place all their faith in the market.

The pre-eminence of the idea of the market as the preferred means for distributing public funds cannot be overestimated. While it might seem to us that the point of publicly funded cultural institutions is to perform precisely those activities which the market does not find profitable, the current government line on such institutions is that they must become financially accountable: that is, they must cease supporting activities that do not make a profit unless they can fund them with activities that do. This brings me to the next section, which deals with the relation between the market and the public sphere.

The market and the public sphere

What I have to say here is probably predictable and unexceptionable, so I will move quickly. It is clear that the alliance between the doctrines of economic rationalism and the merging of the values of business and government during the 1980s has profoundly affected how governmentality in Australia now operates

(Turner *Making it National*). The national interest and the public good have been reprocessed as entirely economic ideals as the interests of business and the sensitivities of the markets receive the highest priority in government policy. Contributing to this reprocessing is the flexibility of the discourses currently employed to represent the interests of the market and those of democracy. Government regulation and control in all its forms has been successfully portrayed by the political Right as anti-democratic and regressive, limiting access, choice and the rights of the individual. This has enabled a discursive link between the free market and the free citizen that reached its apogee in the destruction of the Commonwealth Employment Service in order to provide the unemployed with a 'choice' about the kind of employment service they wished to access (or in the Australia Post proposal, closing post offices so we have a choice about our 'mail delivery provider'). The ideological unassailability of the importance of 'choice' to both democracy (through its connection with the electoral process) and the market (as the signifier of the benefits of an expanding and globalising capitalism) has been used to enable a thorough merging of the meanings of capitalism and democracy. It is becoming increasingly difficult to disarticulate them. As a result, citizenship has been transformed into just another mode of consumption, democracy into a byproduct of market capitalism, and politics into shopping.

Given that discursive shift, it is not hard to see how cultural institutions which resist being assimilated into the logics of the market might easily be cast as elitist, anti-democratic, special pleaders. Most institutions have accepted the need to embrace a certain amount of this market philosophy and have actively sought commercial sponsorship while writing mission statements, business, and strategic plans. When all else has failed, they have downsized. It has been futile, in many cases, because while governments have increasingly required arts organisations to seek commercial support, the level of business sponsorship of the arts industries Australia-wide has actually declined. Nevertheless, notwithstanding such evidence and notwithstanding claims that the widespread adoption of business as a model for social and institutional organisation overlooks questions about the adequacy of this model even for contemporary business, the transformation of that part of the public sphere which is comprised of publicly funded cultural institutions has been largely completed. Although government still funds the Australia Council, the ABC, and so on, if we were to scrutinise the manner in which their performance is assessed and how their future funding is to be earned and allocated, we now have to say that we have a thoroughly commercialised public sphere.

Literature and the public sphere

This is the public sphere within which literature must find, articulate and hold its place. To address the problem of what that place might be, at the moment, is actually quite complicated. While the theoretical developments of the discipline of English over the last two decades may have clarified the category of the literary

within the academy, they have not necessarily helped clarify the cultural significance of literature within either the policy domain or the wider community – where, after all, political support for spending taxpayers' money on literary production has to be sustained. Consequently, it is hard to decide just what the last ten years or so have done for the place of the national literature within the public sphere. The indicators are, at least, contradictory. On the one hand, the fact that changes in the discipline have proved difficult to explain outside the academy; has rendered literary critics vulnerable to attack from the bearers of commonsense, like Frank Devine. I would regard this as a strategic rather than a fundamental problem but it is a problem nonetheless. On the other hand, the profile of Australian writing, the status of writers and certain kinds of critics as public intellectuals, has probably never been higher, the market for Australian writing of all kinds has been healthy for many years now, and the visibility of literary debate suggests that it matters, culturally, a great deal.

A further contradiction in this complex of cultural shifts lies in the fact that a theoretical reorientation within the discipline which has pursued, among other things, the objective of uncoupling literary studies from a politics identified with elite taste cultures, has found itself exposed to criticism for the elitism implicit in its own discourse. I don't need to go into the changes consequent upon the interventions of structuralism, poststructuralism, feminism, postmodernism, postcolonialism and cultural studies into the discipline of English. Let's take it as read that these interventions have collectively succeeded in challenging literature's elite status and provisionalising the exercise of literary judgement inside and outside of the academy. However, one of the casualties of these critiques is that commonsense, traditional definition of literature which is most widely understood outside the academy. Within the public sphere, I would suggest, this definition, elitist and mystificatory as it may be, had fully established its authority and legitimacy. It was always going to be hard to revise and displace it with a more subtle and provisional set of definitions without losing some of that legitimacy. So one should perhaps not have been surprised that such a project would expose the discipline to attacks from outside, in the public sphere and through the mass media, objecting to the revision of the meaning of the literary, of the role of the critic, and what was usually regarded reductively as the displacement of aesthetics by politics. Hence the successive waves of criticisms of theory, deconstruction, political correctness, galloping relativism, postmodernism, and so on which have regularly appeared in the pages of the *Higher Education Supplement* of *The Australian*, in the features pages of the weekend press, and even in the program notes for David Williamson's *Dead White Males* (Wark). Keith Windschuttle, in particular, has had a wonderful time accusing postmodernism or marxism or just plain old French theory of killing off history, English, and most recently, the teaching of journalism. It is important to recognise that these critiques have actually been attacks on new directions in the teaching of English, not a refutation of the importance of the literature. The target is the academic critical establishment not the production or support of Australian literature.

A number of Australian writers have themselves contributed to this sort of revisionist critique and this may suggest they think of themselves as occupying a less contradictory position within the public sphere. A clear benefit of the reinvention of the discipline of English has been the broadening of the purchase of the protocols of textual analysis beyond elite literary forms. To attend writers' festivals today is to appreciate the benefits of a tradition of literary criticism which has been concerned with removing rather than policing the boundaries between the literary and other kinds of writing, other genres of texts. There is now, for instance, an Australian audience for a wide range of popular fiction; probably even ten years ago, there wasn't. The inclusivity which flows from the demystification of the literary is a factor in the expansion of the Australian audience and the commercial potential of Australian books, as well as in the higher public profile of local writers we see reflected in regional and metropolitan writers' festivals and so on. So, from this perspective, it would be possible to argue that Australian writing now has a more secure and dynamic role within the public sphere than perhaps ever before.

My interest here is not in provoking a debate over the legitimacy of the last couple of decades of literary theory. Rather, I am trying to draw attention to the fact that these debates, progressive though they have been within the academy, have at least ambiguous implications for the place Australian literature occupies within the culture generally and within cultural policy frameworks in particular. The category of the literary has been clarified academically, but problematised publicly. Its boundaries are now leaky and thus its claims to special significance more difficult to justify in the discourses of cultural policy. This has to be negotiated continually, it seems to me, and the problem is that the place where these negotiations proceed, and the place where the ambiguities seem most entrenched and volatile, is in the mass media. It is through the mass media that literature must battle for representation – for definition and for relevance – within the public sphere.

Literature and the media

I have dealt with this elsewhere at some length, but let me make a couple of points. One is that the relationship between literature and the media in Australia, or more specifically, between literature and journalists, has been particularly close over our history. Indeed, the fragility of the practical distinction between literature and journalism may be one of the defining attributes of the legend of the nineties (*Literature, Journalism and the Media*, 5). But, and as I implied in what I have just finished arguing, significant changes have occurred in recent years which have had the cumulative effect of emphasising the gaps between literary critics, professional writers, journalists and the media in general. Among these I would include the professionalising of the discipline of English, the development of a technical language and a relatively abstract theoretical framework, and the expansion of the purchase of the discipline from a narrow but well-defined concern with the British

literary tradition to a broad and less easily defined interest in all representational forms, including film and television. As these changes found their way into the public domain, a discursive process of selection and transformation came into play. Certain phrases, decontextualised and excerpted from the theoretical history of a discipline positively reinventing itself, hit the wall and stuck there, accruing new and often implausible meanings. 'The death of the author' came to mean that authors did not write books; 'language constructs reality' came to mean there is no reality, and 'aesthetic values are culturally constructed' came to mean (illogically) that absolutely everything is absolutely relative. Since the reading public is repeatedly told that literary critics actually believe such things, it is little wonder that the study of literature can look self-indulgent and arcane.

Writers, though, don't entirely escape. Working against their cultural legitimacy, we have the critique of the 'arts grants industry', and the public scandals which have dogged the recent history of literary prizes and writing grants. Lately, we would agree, the belief in the importance of public support for artists as a fundamental structural feature of a progressive culture has had to be maintained in the face of significant opposition. Feeding that opposition in the case of writing are a raft of embarrassing incidents: the adoption of bogus identities, accusations of plagiarism, the return of prizes years after their award when prizewinners admit to duping the judges, accusations about the politicisation of the judging process and so on. When the *Courier-Mail's* David Bentley received the Walkely he was awarded for exposing Helen Darville in 1996, for instance, he used his acceptance speech to attack arts grants programs as discredited, coterie structures that were in some undefined way at the bottom of the pathology which produced the book and its literary celebrity.

As the academic study of literature becomes more alienated from the language of public debate, and that is what I am suggesting is an unintended effect of the professionalisation of the discipline, some journalists have attempted to reclaim the territory for themselves. The contest for cultural authority between the academy and media is visible in the debates on 'theory' orchestrated in the opinion pages and higher education supplements by Helen Trinca, Jane Richardson and Luke Slattery; similarly, newspaper opinion pieces on the state of Australian writing do not come from the literary critical establishment but from Greg Sheridan, Gerard Henderson, Luke Slattery (again) and Ken Wark. These interventions indicate, more perhaps than is acknowledged within the academy, that the academy has lost control of the formation and establishment of literary reputations. They are now the concern of newspaper features and editorials, photo profiles in glossy magazines, lifestyle interviews in the press, on television, or Radio National's *Life Matters*. This trend has been visible for some time. Ten years ago, when Peter Carey published *Oscar and Lucinda*, he received more space in *Elle* magazine than in the *Australian Book Review*. Publishers now see literary reputations as within the grasp of their publicity departments, a desirable product of their promotion and publicity strategies: I would see the recent fashionability of the so-called 'dirty realist' writers as an instance of this.

A revealing sidelight is the apparent compatibility of literary biography with this situation. I have argued elsewhere that 'literary biography is virtually the only form of writing about Australian literature that is routinely and respectfully reviewed in the mainstream mass media. It is also, one has to say, the only academic writing about Australian literature that is comfortable with regarding writers as cultural products, as personalities, as figures who excite public interest through their celebrity or notoriety rather than through their specific skills or artistic credentials' (*Literature, Journalism and the Media*, 18). And it is tempting to see that as one of the reasons for its relative success as a publishing genre, as well as an understandable career move for academics who have been unable to budge local publishers from their hardened and rarely tested prejudice against developing and promoting important works of Australian literary criticism.

Literature, celebrity and promotion

A few years ago, I wrote an article which examined the public career of Peter Carey – not so much as an author in whose writing or ideas I was interested, but as a celebrity, a creation of the national media ('Nationalising the Author'). I had found that there was far more written about Carey in the mainstream media than in academic journals or the little magazines. I had also noted the suggestions in Karen Lamb's book which implied Carey had a very direct involvement in the construction of his persona through media interviews and other promotional forms, and that he resented critical reviews of his work for their potential to intervene in and disrupt this process of construction. I gather Carey and his publishers were not entirely pleased but I still believe that it is appropriate and legitimate, now even more than then, to consider the construction of the famous Australian author as a celebrity – and to closely analyse the promotional processes which participated in that construction. If we are to consider what is the place of the literary within a commercialised public sphere we have to admit that successful writers maintain their success by accepting their incorporation into the same processes of publicity and promotion – but not on the same scale, perhaps – which are used to market Kylie Minogue, Elle McPherson, and John Howard's tax package.

Habermas's public sphere was a closed, internally homogenous, cultural group which produced and marketed the products it consumed. It was a discrete taste culture, distinctive in its habits of consumption as well as in its systems of circulation. While they may try very hard to create them as markets for identifiable genres of writing, publishers have to accept there is nothing like that kind of discrete taste culture today. The absence of a strong reviewing culture in the press, the infuriating caution of publishers declining to invest in the development of a local critical culture which might develop some degree of specificity, the sporadic career of book programs on television and the persistence of the cultural cringe in the ones which do appear, the decline in profitability of local academic publishing, have all exacerbated those trends towards concentrated mass market compe-

tion that were already in play internationally. Literature has its brand name established all right, but it has to compete in the mass market against all other kinds of cultural forms and it does so at the level of the individual 'product'. The cover design for the paperback edition of *Jack Maggs* looks exactly like a John Grisham novel, aimed at the airport newsagency. While the work of identifying and targeting specific fractions of the audience still goes on, the commercial publishing of literature has to accept that it is enclosed within the mass mediated promotional world of fashion and celebrity.

If I were to suggest that TV is now the most powerful medium through which writers can reach their audiences I would not be referring to the book shows. Rather, I would have in mind mainstream entertainment programs into which authors must find ways to insert themselves. So, we do see David Malouf on the *Today* show, we do see Tom Keneally on *Burke's Backyard* and Linda Jaivin on *McFeast*. This does not always automatically trivialise or reduce the cultural importance of literary debate. Indeed, in recent years, we have seen literary debate become front page news, a major issue precisely because of the absorption of the literary into the mass-mediated public sphere. The debate over the Demidenko novel was anything but a coterie affair; arguably the high point occurred on the ABC's *The 7.30 Report* when Darville (or Demidenko as she was then) challenged Gerard Henderson's right to speak on behalf of the Jewish community. Similarly, the debate over Garner's *The First Stone* assumed the dimensions of a major cultural issue because it was prosecuted through *The 7.30 Report* and *Lateline* as well as through the letters columns of the quality press. It is possible, I want to suggest, that what literature has lost in the way of credibility through its acceptance of the need for promotion and publicity, it has gained in terms of visibility. This may be uncomfortable and embarrassing for the individual trapped in the chair being interviewed by Liz Hayes, but it is not self-evidently a bad thing for the culture. We have the example of the extraordinary success of *Oprah's* book club, with its promotion of books most of her audience would never dare to try and its unashamed admission of its objective: to encourage more reading and to bridge the gap between writers and *Oprah's* audience. The absorption of the literary into promotional culture does not necessarily have to be a systemic problem.

Nevertheless, it is also true that promoting books in terms of fashion, personalities or news values is not going to give every book its due or help it reach its audience. Further, the mode of representation most commonly associated with the production of celebrity is one that crosses the divide between the public and the private in order to displace the public activity and reveal the 'authentic self' beneath. This kind of treatment disconnects authors from their work. Successful writers are offered as celebrities or personalities, interesting because they are famous, and fair game for the intrusion into their private lives. Less often we are reminded of the fact that writers are interesting not only for what they think but for the fact that what they think is expressed in a specific form, which is itself worthy of close attention. Form slides off the agenda, displaced by a features-type distillation of the personality, the 'profile' piece. It is a mode of promotion which adopts the same

tactics, and necessarily produces the same genre of result, whether the subject is Tim Winton or Kieren Perkins.

Which brings me back to David Malouf, embarrassed and tongue-tied in the face of Liz Hayes's banal questions, and the ambivalences one feels watching such a spectacle: good, to see his work receive such prominence; bad, that it is a kind of prominence which easily overlooks the best qualities of his work. This, however, is the kind of public sphere we have. Within it, it seems to me, Australian writing still prospers and asserts its significance. Things could get better. There is quite a lot that publishers can do – more than they are doing – to sustain a critical culture within which Australian writing can be discussed. There is a lot that government can do – more than it is likely to do – to wind back economic rationalist mutations of cultural policy. As for us, as 'knowledge workers', we need to understand and use the public sphere better. That may mean we find that much of what we do in the future, we do in public.

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