

HIGH PUNK & LOW SUAVE

THERE IS A PHENOMENON IN MUSIC called “enharmonic change.” It happens when a musical score alters a C#, for example, into a Db, in mid-composition. Nothing appears to change, except in theory. Nothing changes except the way listeners are asked to think of the tone they play or hear. The sound is the same, but the mental effect is different — at least if you have an ear for theory and can listen your way past pitch. That means, perhaps, that everything changes altogether. But you have to listen.

There are occasions when the significance of minimal distinctions seems less than consequential. Some political labelling is like that — a point for which the language has ready clichés: different bottles don’t alter the taste of the beverage inside them, garbage wrapped nicely is still garbage, plus ça change. . . . What effect, then, does appearance have? Of what consequence is style? Clearly it affects the image projected, and depending on quality it is sometimes the substance, sometimes just the wrapper. The problem is that the quality of the packaging often exceeds the quality of the thing itself, whether it’s merchandise, politics, or literature we’re actually talking about. We know that “image” can command attention and exert power whether it’s “real” or not. The trick for the observer is to tell substance and illusion apart, and as contemporary culture loses its ability or will to make any distinctions at all, the trick seems rapidly to be becoming a rare talent. Every generation appears to think this way, and given the recurrence of such generational *angst* it is a wonder culture persists at all. But the fact of its persistence says something about style as well as about culture — not about mythical “universals” of standard and judgment, but about the persistence of value. And about the persistence of a need for value.

The difference between *fad* and *fashion*, between *bizarre* and *suave*, as often involves marketing as excellence; for many, a thing becomes acceptable by the numbers of people doing it rather than because of its intrinsic worth. (Is there any such thing as intrinsic worth, their actions ask.) Value for them inheres in quantity, as for others it exists in the rituals of received tradition (rather than in

their significance) or in the latest pronouncements by the current power-holders. Indeed it seems that, without thought, it doesn't matter what the product or the activity is. Pierced ears. Jay-walking. Swallowing goldfish. Cheating on the government. Selling kiddie porn. Haircuts. Violence. Graft. Unless a community sustains its own power to make discriminating judgments, all such activities become one; but once they take on a uniform dimension (because a high moral outrage directed everywhere is effective in no direction at all), they become alike *inconsequential*. The process does not elevate; it trivializes, diminishes, negates, and nullifies. Except that we know there *are* still significant distinctions to be made — about human behaviour and about literature both. What matters is to remember that things *don't* all matter in the same way. Hence the need for a discriminating press — one which investigates and researches news and does not rely blandly on handouts (“*wait for the story*,” say the politicians; no: *find the facts*). Yet story sells, or story of a kind (is scandal alone newsworthy, because that is what provokes interest? is politics simply the art of engineering images? are serious issues of less consequence than their entertainment value, and therefore dependent on their packaging? is honesty predicated on survival, but survival so predicated on evasion that *survival* has become a synonym for *success* and honesty has become an unnecessary luxury?) People can be misinformed, sometimes even deliberately misled. They are sometimes naive, and often cynical — reactions which can get in the way of honest expectation. But they are also fundamentally committed to the value of truth and they have a great store of common sense. That works in their community's favour if they listen closely, watch critically, judge probingly. Hence their need, too, for a discriminating literature.

Like the more obvious trappings of fad and fashion, literature follows trends more often than it sets them, a fact which publishers frequently depend on, critics overlook in their immediate enthusiasm, and publicists blithely ignore. The publisher's economic survival depends more and more on marketing strategy than on the quality of publication — a fact that is *true* more than *right* if your heart is with “quality,” a fact that also suggests the further equation of *art* with *commodity* and an increasing difficulty for able writers to break into print. At least if their works depart from the form of the current “fashion.” Simply put, the distribution system works against them. It depends on quick turnover, fast review, instant appreciation, and almost as instant forgetting. It gives no margin for leisurely reflection, for the slow maturing of taste, the fascination of things difficult, or the education of understanding. A booklist has to keep its good writers available until they are absorbed into the reader's world, which takes time, but it relies on its “instant” products to make *this year's* profit; a bookstore has to be able to stock good writers long enough for browsers to find them — which the mass economics of stock and storage no longer permits. Paradoxically it is not

time that works against good writers, should they ever see print; it is the clock. It's not lack of quality; it's lack of familiarity, as Doris Lessing's "Jane Somers" hoax amply illustrated: the books she wrote under a pseudonym got little notice, and those she wrote under her own name got noticed everywhere. But at least they got published. In the meantime there are those less lasting writers who also stumble into print — mistaking fashion for feeling, platitude for style, obscurity for substance, and anger for art. They are packaged well, and they sell: to democratic enthusiasm and mistaken applause.

I am at war with *blancmange* here, looking for distinctions which *matter*, priorities with a purpose. But such a quest bangs instantly into the covert elitism of secure banalities and the sheer banality of automatic charges of elitism. It's got so that any effort to distinguish quality and so to *recognize* and *honour* quality is attacked as condescension — at least as far as art and academic skills are concerned (people make distinctions in athletics all the time and no-one blushes). Thus when Susan Sontag argues forcibly, in the Toronto Amnesty International anthology *The Writer and Human Rights* (Lester & Orpen Dennys), that it's time to reclaim the word "elitist" from its resonances of moral horror, she has first to attack

a kind of democracy of literature that destroys literature, that destroys the very notion of literature, which has an intrinsic relationship to excellence. We know that excellence exists, that some writers are better than other writers, and that only a few writers in any time are great. And that literature has to do with participating in activities which make it possible for there to *be* great writers — and not just writers.

She is not arguing that you have to *agree* with writers for them to be great, nor (worse) that they have to agree with you. Greatness is not decided by poll. What she's arguing for is not a hierarchy of literary management ("Who's to say what's good," shouts the automatic chorus), but a discriminating democracy — a "democratic elitism," so to speak — which honours the potential for quality in all but refuses to locate it where it does not exist.

The problem with reclaiming the word *elitist* lies less with such an argument than with the attitudes of those other writers, like V. S. Naipaul in his lofty responses to Bharati Mukherjee (her provocative interview is collected, along with a number of striking essays, in *The Salmagundi Reader* [Indiana University Press], ed. Robert and Peggy Boyars), for whom distinction somehow equates with class and expresses itself as snobbery. It is the kind of overlap that gives judgment a bad name. When a commitment to a fixed idea of cultural tradition cuts off any sympathy for anything else, any need to read or *see* anything else, or *anyone* — women, for example, or Africans, or Australians — the result is not culture but ignorance. The plain fact remains: some rarefaction does not elevate; it narrows. And some distillation just produces gas.

But the problem that accompanies the practice of *egalitarian* art is that nothing begins to matter at all: not style, not words, not skill, not ideas, not story nor purpose nor intelligence, not even the human experience from which, despite metafiction, art continues to derive. Theory tells us that there are reasons why writers turn their backs on tradition sometimes, and reasons why they sometimes appear to do so collectively, seeking signs in speech of their desire for significant change. Acts of verbal rebellion can serve as calls for people to break out of their unconscious biases, or to reexamine their conscious ones, to change the ways they see, hear, understand. But sometimes the signs themselves become familiar and lose their power: rebel punk becomes high punk, “fashion” merchants intervene, and high becomes suave. It sells. But it’s *low* suave, fad still, soon drained of its power to stir either outrage or enthusiasm. What then? The sales strategists say to go up market or down, to specialize, advertise, intensify. For some writers this impulse appears to translate into a kind of geometric repetition: *more* explicitness about gothic enthusiasms, *more* crudity, *more* violence, *more* degrees of victimization, as though the magnitude of the *more* somehow intensified the shock to the social system. Usually, however, the magnitude is merely boring. The system may still be in need of shock, but the verbal signs, once having lost their power, need as much regeneration as the system does if they are to serve value as well as shape meaning. That calls for readers to recognize what they champion. Of four contemporary Australian writers, Dorothy Green observes, in her quietly acerbic, highly articulate, continuously engaging collection of essays *The Music of Love* (Penguin):

McKie belongs to the row-of-asterisks school and, after a session with Drewe, Moorhouse and McGregor, a line of dots would be welcome. In deference to modernism, there is at least one obligatory reference to menstruation and vomit, but McKie’s heart is obviously not in it. It is in the right place, bless him; his medico is in favour of People rather than Things, and he is suspicious of ‘development’ as a synonym for ‘progress.’

It may be that, in literature today, there is more shock to the system in a vision of peace and possibility than in a surrender to the verbal theatre of “the way things are.”

Does this sound naive? There are moments I despair of behaviour and banality. But I refuse to accept that people must live their lives according to the limited talents and narrow aspirations of the humourless, the envious, the unimaginative, and the vengeful. There are priorities. Some things are just different from others, but some things are better. Some differences are more than enharmonic. And some things are *right*. There is such a thing as the public good; people have the right to expect the governments who serve them to recognize it, and to set their priorities accordingly. People are more important than packages and the neatness of paper plans; and of all people in our society, children need time and encourage-

ment and challenge and real support: they only have one chance at learning *while young*, and the best education we can imagine for them is the one we ought to be trying to provide. That means educating good, critical, demanding readers, among other things: readers who refuse to accept automatically and passively the exaggerations of “*more*” as the norms of a civilized culture. Here, still, literature does not by mandate serve the state, and we are freer because of that. But we must continue to ask — of writers, publishers, and readers alike — that such freedom be purposeful. Literature does serve human needs. It can be a radical force when doing so, radical even in reclaiming the existence of commonsense community values.

W.H.N.

DARWIN AND THE GALAPAGOS

James Harrison

I

What was it you discovered
on these enchanted islands
that so took you aback?

Oh, I don't mean your surprise
that newly created species
for a newly created, unique habitat
should be so routinely South American
in overall character (as those
on the Cape de Verdes had been African) yet differ
island to island in such absurdly trivial
detail. Nor even that glimpse,
the cloud lifting for a moment as when you had stood
on a high col in the Andes and seen
the sun glint from a thousand tributaries
meandering across the pampas toward some far
confluence beyond the horizon,
of how it would all come together
in a handful of years.