Keynote Address

Cross-Cultural Challenges and Choices of Using Information and Knowledge in the Past, Present, Future or: What is Truth?

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The theme for this session is rather a lot to digest in one gulp, so I have given myself a shorter, if not more modest, subtitle: What is truth? However, I don't want to raise any false expectations: therefore, let me explain that even the subtitle bites off more than I intend to swallow. I take as my model here Anthony Trollope. Early in *Barchester Towers*, Trollope sets up his heroine with two equally unattractive suitors, the ne'er-do-well Bertie Stanhope and the appalling Mr Slope. Having established each man's aspirations and outrageous unsuitability, he stops for an aside on the craft of novel-writing. Most novelists, he predicts, would leave Eleanor's matrimonial destiny in doubt. While this would create a frisson of suspense through the book, it would also leave readers vulnerable to the ill-nature of others. Trollope rails against authors who violate all proper confidence between the author and his readers, by maintaining nearly to the end of the third volume a mystery as to the fate of their favourite personage.

He adds,

> how grievous a thing it is to have the pleasure of your novel destroyed by the ill-considered triumph of a previous reader. 'Oh, you needn't be alarmed for Augusta; of course she accepts Gustavus in the end'. 'How very ill-natured you are, Susan,' says Kitty, with tears in her eyes; 'I don't care a bit about it now.' Dear Kitty, if you will read my book, you may defy the ill-nature of your sister ... Our doctrine is, that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other ... I would not for the value of this chapter have it believed by a single reader that my Eleanor could bring herself to marry Mr Slope, or that she should be sacrificed to a Bertie Stanhope.

Following Trollope's admirable example, I shall hose down any suspense my subtitle might have created: you will not get up from your chairs tonight knowing what truth is - at least, not on account of anything I have said. Instead, I will aim to share some reflections about how we come to know things, and what kinds of things we know.

This week, I've read two newspaper stories which have haunted me in different ways. The front page of the current *Guardian Weekly* tells of a Kosovar family of 26 of whom only 3 are still alive, twelve children and eleven adults having been most horribly killed by their

smiling neighbour. A surviving woman describes how a 10-month-old baby was crying in the midst of the carnage. The killers shot him in the face. In last Thursday's *Age* there was a profile of Thomas Harris, the creator of Hannibal Lecter. With the sequel to *Silence of the Lambs* just hitting the bookshops, the promotional frenzy is selling up the intrinsic fascination of the quiet, gentlemanly author who invents a sadistic, cannibal protagonist. I have not read *Silence of the Lambs*, and I do not intend to buy the sequel. But the advance sales suggest that plenty of people will, and will do so for pleasure. There is no pleasure in reading about the murder of an extended family in Kosovo. Why is there pleasure in reading about the murder, dissection, cooking and eating of Lecter's victims?

Trollope's extended joke about the craft of novel-writing might help us to an answer. His joke - the idea of an author taking the reader into his confidence - works because we know, when we are reading a novel, that we are in two worlds at once. There is the real world of people who might read the book before us; and there is the world on paper, between the covers of the book. In the real world, things can be easily overset: a chance comment can give away a plot, an unintended action can destroy a friendship, a misunderstanding can start a war. A neighbour and friend can turn killer, perhaps without himself really understanding why. In the book world, on the other hand, nothing happens by chance. Even when the characters seem to take over from the author's intention or when the author deliberately aims for an anarchic structure, nevertheless apparently chaotic occurrences turn out to be part of a larger order. The novelist looks down from the sky and sees the whole action laid out at once; it is only we who, unless we cheat by peeking at the back or have our pleasure spoiled by a faster reader, must trudge along page by page, watching the story unfold. The knowledge that everything is under control (even if not our control) is reassuring.

If we pick up a novel by Anthony Trollope, the chances are that we know more or less what we are in for. We may not know the exact twists and turns that the plot will take, but we know that there will be some well-developed characters we can sympathise with and some less-developed comic characters we can laugh at. There will be some interesting moral dilemmas, thoughtfully resolved. The sympathetic characters will probably end up happy; and if suffer they must, will do so in a way that does not undercut the novel's humanitarian message. If we pick up a novel by Thomas Harris, we may expect substantially more gore than we would from Trollope, and perhaps less resolution. But however horrible the things described, we still know 'it's only a story' - we are safe inside a controlled world.

Even when the real world does not have the horror of Kosovo, it is much more like the world described by the characters in a P. G. Wodehouse novel when the heroine, Jane, announces that she is going to marry the painfully modern novelist Blair Egglston. 'You think you are', her new acquaintance, Packy Franklin, cautiously replies, 'But my experience is that you never know who you are going to marry in this world.' Packy speaks from experience:

> I once thought I was going to marry a cabaret girl called Myrtle Blandish ... And then one day I got a letter from her saying that she had run off with a man named Scott or Pott or even - her handwriting was practically illegible - Bott. It just shows you doesn't it?

Of course, I am not suggesting that *Hot Water* is more real-life than *Barchester Towers*. I think P. G. Wodehouse, who described his novels as 'like musical comedy without the music' would be greatly annoyed if anyone did suggest that. In the passage I just quoted, Wodehouse is making his own version of Trollope's joke. Having been spared life with the present Mrs Scott or Pott or Bott, Packy knows he is destined for the terrifyingly cultured Lady Beatrice Bracken, to whom he is engaged. But the readers know even better: the boy-meets-girl structure of the story has already given away the plot. Of course Jane will not have to spend the rest of her life with Blair, the author whose 'novels don't have plots. He thinks they're crude'; and Packy will not have to spend the rest of his life with Lady Beatrice trying to turn him into an aesthete. Wodehouse does not need, like Anthony Trollope, to take his readers into his 'full confidence', because we are there already. I am telling you nothing you wouldn't have worked out for yourself by page 3 when I tell you that Packy and Jane are made for each other.

Putting the world on paper, then, is a kind of control. If not all writing is as transparent as the plot of a Wodehouse novel, yet it is always finite: even novelists of the Blair Egglston school, though they might scorn to give their products plots, cannot help them having back covers. If we read long enough, we will get to the end; and though one reading may not exhaust the meaning, eventually, if we persevere, we will either conclude either that we have now got on top of the meaning, or that there wasn't any. Of course, the meaning we find might not remain fixed: the great novels and poems, the great religious texts and even some great works of scholarship have the capacity to stay with us as we grow into them, so that the meaning we find in them today may not be the meaning we found last week or ten years ago or when we read them as children. But the words on the paper have not changed. The written word remains finite: it is we who have changed.

Challenges and choices

Putting things down on paper gives a text which is both under control and, as long as we stay in its world, controls us. We might, perversely, think that it would be best for Eleanor to marry the shiftless Bertie Stanhope, or even the shudder-inducing Mr Slope; but however much we may want her to, there is nothing we can do about it. As long as we keep reading the book, we are forced to watch the unfolding of Bertie's rejection and Mr Slope's humiliation. That is part of what makes reading pleasurable: we are in someone else's world. We don't have to drive, we just enjoy the scenery.

This way of putting information down in a manageable form has obvious benefits. Although I have been talking mainly about the world of fiction, arguably the same kind of limits apply in the world of academic writing. Of course, in neither genre are we purely passive passengers: we have to look, to see what the author is showing us, and to interpret it in the light of our own experience. But as anyone knows who has gone from the 'research' phase of a project to the 'writing' phase, there is a substantial difference between reading someone else's view of the world - however engaged as readers we might be - and having to write your own. The words on the page produce meaning; but they also set its limits - 'this, and not that' - so that having said 'this', a whole range of 'thats' are no longer open to me. If the benefits of writing as a means of storing knowledge include making it manageable and controllable, the limits offer some challenges.

Some of my recent research has thrown the challenges of a written culture into relief. Many

of you will remember that a few years ago, South Australia was in the news for months on end. It starred on the national - even international - stage as a result of the South Australian government's Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission. The Royal Commission found that a spiritual tradition claimed by the Indigenous Ngarrindjeri women from the State's lower Murray region had been 'fabricated' for political purposes. I and other people have written extensively about the Royal Commission as a gross misuse of the executive power of government and a gross failure of elementary logic. At the same time as the Royal Commission was going on, another government enquiry was investigating the same questions. Unlike the much-publicised Royal Commission, Justice Jane Mathews, appointed by the then federal Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, concluded that there was indeed an archaic, secret tradition associated with Hindmarsh Island. This finding, then, was potentially much more sympathetic to the Ngarrindjeri women concerned. But - and this is the curious thing for us and the devastating thing for the Ngarrindjeri women - she decided that even though she was convinced their claim was genuine, yet, she could not recommend to the Minister that the site in question be protected.

The reason rests on Mathews's understanding of the nature of religious belief, and I want to suggest to you that it has everything to do with the way our perceptions are shaped by a print-oriented culture. The Ngarrindjeri women argued that the area in question was sacred, and that it would be irredeemably violated if the government and developers went ahead with building a proposed bridge. Although Justice Mathews agreed that the tradition was authentic and had the force which its proponents claimed for it - that is, that it would prohibit the building of a bridge connecting the island with the mainland - she also maintained that a successful application would have to provide evidence not only that there was an authentic tradition, but also of *why* the tradition led to the prohibition. She found that the reason the Ngarrindjeri women felt the bridge would be such a disaster was because they have a tradition, called the Seven Sisters Dreaming, which relates to that site. They believe that, at this site, 'nothing must come between the waters and the sky'. But that, said Mathews, is not enough:

> The proposition that nothing must come between the waters and the sky is not a part of the tradition itself, but a rule deriving from it. The question still remains as to why it is that nothing must come between the water and the sky. The answer is that we do not know. The connection has not been made. Nor has a connection been made between the rule ... and the claimed consequence.

According to Mathews, Australian law says that if the claim were to be successful, the applicants would have to show not just that their heritage contains the tradition and the rule which derives from it, but they would also have to show that it contains a spelled-out explanation of how and why that particular rule follows from that particular tradition.

Thinking about Mathews's argument here, it is helpful to recall a distinction drawn by Ninian Smart, the scholar of comparative religion. Ninian Smart says that religious traditions have a number of what he calls 'dimensions'. Two of those dimensions are the 'mythical' and the 'doctrinal'. The 'mythical' dimension is the foundational stories, historical or not, in which the main images, themes and concepts of the tradition are summed up. The 'doctrinal' dimension, according to Smart, is where you find theoretical elaboration and explanation of the myth. To paraphrase Mathews in Smart's terms, she seems to be saying that for a tradition to qualify for protection under Australian law, the mythical dimension is not enough: there must also be a clear and strongly-developed doctrinal dimension.

But here's the catch: Smart goes on to point out that not all traditions have a 'doctrinal' dimension (Shinto is an example of one which does not); and of those that do, not all prize or emphasise it equally. A strong emphasis on the formal, analytical elements of a doctrinal dimension is a feature of religious traditions which have a written rather than oral culture. But Mathews held that an Indigenous tradition requiring protection would have to have a spelled-out doctrinal dimension. In other words, she was implying that an oral tradition would have to exhibit features which are typical of written, not oral, cultures.

Form and content

After more than a century of anthropology, we are quite used to the idea that the *content* of the information that our society values and stores is likely to shape our way of thinking and indeed, our experience of the world. We all know the clichés about Arctic peoples who have numerous terms for different kinds of snow. It is no surprise that if your environment gives you a reason to need to classify different kinds of snow then your society will develop ways of doing it, and consequently, you will experience a fall of white powder in a different, richer way than someone who simply looks out the window and says, 'Oh, it's snowing'. Similarly, we know that societies which value family and where social, religious and economic relationships are structured around who you are related to are likely to have a much wider and more detailed set of kin-terms than our society, where family is just one of the many ways in which you might relate to people. As a trivial example of our awareness of cultural difference, courses are now available for business people spearheading Australia's 'push into Asia' which alert the would-be entrepreneurs to the cultural sensitivities of the target country – lest an inadvertent breach of etiquette should scuttle a deal and Australia's current accounts figures suffer for a misplaced handshake. These are examples of differences in the *content* of information which the society values and stores.

But it is perhaps less usual to stop and think about the effects which might come from the *medium* through which knowledge is stored and transmitted - the idea that a culture whose orientation is essentially oral may automatically come to value different kinds of knowledge, and to structure knowledge differently, from one whose orientation is towards written storage and transmission. Not that people with written cultures don't talk to one another - of course we do. But central to our view of what knowledge is, what truth is, is the expectation that knowledge can be controlled, made finite and manageable by committing it to paper, that it can be contained between a front cover and a back cover, that when you have read all the words you know the whole story, that Eleanor will never marry the ghastly Mr Slope, no matter how many times we read the novel or how perversely we might wonder what would happen if she did.

In the world of religion, that orientation towards writing seems to go with a love of having things spelled out. Perhaps the extreme end of that tendency to embrace the control which writing gives over knowledge is seen in religious fundamentalism, where the literal meaning of the text on the page is taken to be its only possible meaning. 'Literal' after all, derives from the Latin 'littera', letter. If you want to take your stories 'literally' it helps to have some 'letters' on the page to refer to. If you want then to explain why your reading is right and someone else's is wrong, you need a key, authoritative text to argue from; or, to put it more accurately, if you don't have that kind of authoritative text, the idea of arguing in that way is much less likely to occur to you in the first place.

The textual control of knowledge can take many forms. If fundamentalism is one end of that, we might see philosophical elaboration as the other end. By philosophical elaboration I mean the kind of approach to knowledge which wants to break it down into ever-smaller pieces, debating the precise connection between each piece. Fundamentalists may despair at scholastic dissection of the connections between one idea and the next, the philosophical obsession with laying the foundations out for all to see. But both groups, fundamentalists and philosophers, build their enterprise on the textual control of knowledge, the conviction that once it is down on paper knowledge is defined, framed, contained: 'this and not that'.

In oral cultures, such as those of Indigenous Australian communities, not only is it much harder to be a literalist, but philosophical connections are much more likely to be left implicit. On the other hand, great amounts of effort and detail are likely to be invested in other areas - for example, in developing numerous different versions of the same or related myths, to bring out different subtleties of meaning suitable for different people and different occasions.

In other words, differences in the *ways* knowledge is developed, stored and transmitted are likely to produce differences not just in the *content* what is known, but also in our most fundamental expectations about what kind of thing we think truth is. Do we expect it to be something controllable, limited, this and not that? To have clearly-demonstrable connections between one part and the next? Or do we expect those connections to be more fluid, with room for numerous possible thises and thats?

Now, the words I've been using to describe the relationship between writing and knowledge – 'limit', 'control', 'define', 'frame' – all have negative connotations. 'Stop limiting me!' we might shout, 'Don't be so controlling!' 'How dare you define my experience?' or even 'I've been framed!' But I don't want those words to give the impression that written forms of knowledge are somehow bad. Even if that was what I thought, I would hardly come and say so to a room full of librarians. And in fact, having spent over a decade in the study of theology and philosophy - not to mention having left more of my hours than it would be decent to admit lying between the covers of novels - my own life has been substantially shaped by a love of written language. Since becoming a mother, one of the greatest joys I have found is seeing my daughter discover the same pleasure in books, while her father (who happens to be a writer) has got her identifying written letters before she can clearly say a single whole word. I'm no advocate for losing the love of writing.

But that's just the point I want to make. Our love-affairs can become so absorbing that we forget there are other ways. I might become so engrossed in my beloved that I lose sight of others around me. My way of loving and the one whom I love may seem so right and natural to me that I see others' loves as perverted, twisted, even dangerous. Or perhaps I simply fail to notice that they exist. That is how it can be with written cultures' love-affair with written knowledge. Entranced with our own recognition of truth, absorbed by the game of philosophical speculation or dazzled by the clarity of literal reading, we can fail to cultivate the ability to see others' ways of knowing and the kinds of knowledge that go with those ways.

In the part of the Hindmarsh Island story which we've visited tonight, Justice Jane Mathews did not set out to be culturally imperialist or blind to others' ways of knowing. Quite the reverse: her inquiry was part of the process of activating the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Is-*

lander Heritage Protection Act, which was enacted to make sure that sacred and otherwise culturally-significant Indigenous heritage is not lost beneath what Aboriginal theologian Anne Pattel-Gray has called 'the Great White Flood'.

That is what the *Act* was made for - but you could never say it was a tearing success. In the fifteen years since it was passed into law, there were only ever four successful applications to the Minister to use the emergency powers to protect a threatened site. Of those, three (including Hindmarsh Island) were overturned in subsequent legal action. The successful stalling of a proposed dam at Junction Waterhole, near Alice Springs, remains as the solitary evidence of the responsibility to be a protector of last resort for Indigenous heritage which the Australian people placed upon the Commonwealth in the 1967 referendum. Why has so important an *Act* proved, in practice, so ineffectual?

We find one answer in Justice Mathews's argument about why she could not recommend protection for the Hindmarsh Island area, even though she was convinced that the applicants were telling the truth about their tradition. How you protect religious heritage will be shaped by what you think religious knowledge is. On Mathews's reading of Australian law, European-derived tradition thinks religious knowledge is something that has a lot to do with philosophical elaboration, with spelling out connections and explaining one component of an intellectual system in terms of the other components. That is certainly a good description of the religious traditions which tend to go with written cultures. But the religious traditions which tend to go with oral cultures are not like that. They are much more likely to look like what Justice Mathews found when she started to learn about Ngarrindjeri tradition: a rich mosaic of stories, developed in different ways for different people and different situations, but where the connections between the parts are left fluid and implicit, where there is always more to be told, more meaning to be drawn out of stories which are not confined on paper. The stories themselves live not in written texts, but in the relationships between the people who tell them, and in the relationships between the people and the landscape. The law which is set up to protect Indigenous traditions depends on an interpretation of religion in which religious truth is established through textual proof and philosophical argument. But the traditions it is meant to protect see religious truth quite differently. If the law which is set up to protect Indigenous traditions depends on an interpretation of religion which is essentially foreign to the traditions it is meant to protect, we've got a problem.

I'm speaking to you as someone who is still in the grip of culture shock. I have made a major cross-cultural move: I have gone from working in a university to spending a year in the public service. A bit like Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* – but I doubt that *A Year in the Public Service* is as marketable. For one thing, there are no truffles. Instead, there is a whole new language to learn: something called 'Superflex' governs my days off, while 'Spirit', which I used to think was the theological name for the ultimate source of freedom, I now know is the name of a computer program which charts how long I spend on any particular task. I have been surprised to find how much the expectation that I'm employed to do certain things for certain hours shapes the way I work - as opposed to the more vocational expectation which governs academics - even when the kind of work I'm doing, in this case writing a book about the religious beliefs of politicians, is very similar to the research I did as an academic. Even within the same written culture, I'm finding out, there are vastly different assumptions about what knowledge is, how it is generated, how it is transmitted and - importantly - who owns it and what they can use it for. I could imagine that similar kinds of culture shock might be ex-

perienced by people moving from largely paper-based kinds of information to having suddenly to embrace the digital age. As workers, we move from one set of assumptions and ways of doing things to another relatively easily, because we believe the different tasks are worth doing, or because we welcome a challenge, or because our livelihood is at stake if we don't.

As a society, too, we are constantly told that we are moving into a new era of communication - one where, for example, all kinds of knowledge will be available at the touch of a button to those who can command the technology, but where a new gulf will open between the 'information-rich' and the 'information-poor'. Some have even suggested that the new information technologies will break open our writing-imposed limits and frames which currently contain knowledge and make it manageable. According to these prophets, the digital age will take us to newly-fluid, newly-flexible ways of knowing which perhaps have more in common with oral tradition than at first we might think. There is probably by now a virtual *Barchester Towers* in which you can make Eleanor marry Mr Slope if you want to: authors no longer control their texts. I must say that I remain skeptical of such extrapolations: to me it seems that the Internet and associated technologies, anarchic as they may seem, are just bigger and more intricate means for reproducing the written culture we know so well. Be that as it may, whether the new millennium spells the end of the written era or its elevation to a new level of complexity, a society that wants to honour all its members and benefit from their contributions to an overall cultural richness had better not let one, dominant love affair blind it to other ways of loving other kinds of knowledge, other ways of pursuing or embracing other kinds of truth.

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