

AFTER Dinner talk for RIBA
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24 June 2010

Electricity comes from the Greek word for amber, elektron, as many of you know I'm sure ; two and a half millenia ago the empirically minded thinkers of that culture noticed and marvelled that if you rubbed a lump of amber things would stick to it – but they didn't know how to use the observation for 'maximum impact'. At that point it was just another way of playing, like sticking a balloon to the ceiling after rubbing its against your hair. But playing is where many deep ideas spring.

It took long and patient play - imaginative projection and experiment - to arrive at generating, harnessing, storing electricity and many more discoveries about its properties and its extent that have made our world the zapping, bleeping, humming cyber world we know.

This is IMPACT over the long term – research eventually turned to use, making money, making modern times.

When you kindly invited me to give an after dinner speech, I was told that speakers are expected to give some thoughts about what they do; so in the week of a budget which strikes at the vision of culture that has generally dominated post war civilisation - I thought I would talk about money. I thought that if I looked at myself in the light of the changing financial circumstances which as a writer I've experienced over forty odd years, I might be able to convey an historical picture, even a kind of graph, of the changing fortunes, survival strategies, and horizons of the arts here more generally. Statistics are often recognisable, I find: I belong to a generation, even a cohort, of great luck and privileges - and, according to David Willetts, the new gov't's Minister of Universities and Science, of great insouciant greed. According to his recent book *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – And Why They Should Give It Back.*, we – wrinklies or even crumbliies - born in the late forties and early fifties - occupy the houses and have enjoyed the education, the opportunities, the general feast of theatre, the architecture, visual arts and music – free milk, museums, cheap mortgages, and now bus passes, etc. Our Feast, their Famine – Yet Willetts – and Michael Gove - seem to be heedlessly rushing forth to exarcebate this trend , and by leaching money out of education, esp. higher education. to be happy to entrench the scarcity of means and opportunity for the young who need educating in the arts and humanities, investment in their ideas and technical knowledge – as well as jobs.

So Money: the sciences are still safe, or more than safe - the title of Willetts' new ministry makes that priority plain. As Sir Martin Rees expressed v. judiciously in his Reith Lecture this week, a society needs engineers, biologists, chemists, physicists , astronomers, and mathematicians if it is to keep any claim open to vitality and civilisation. Wealth creation thrums underneath these affidavits, but it is absolutely not the only rationalisation for spending vast sums on space exploration or the human genome. The humanities have not found equal champions or, to put it more accurately, willing listeners in high places, since many individuals and many august bodies have pleaded and are pleading passionately for the arts and their essential place alongside the sciences in the country's activity, intellectual and social. But so far their pleas have gone unheeded: two crucial, historical institutions of learning - the British School at Rome and the Warburg Library here in London - are threatened by economic exigencies that are simply not feasible if they are to fulfill their long established and inspiring purposes.

Architects don't need to be reminded how artificial the distinction is between scientific knowledge and the arts and humanities: more evidently than any other what you do shows how both scientific understanding and inventions are intertwined with aesthetics, as well as with social sciences and psychology, and that all these disciplines are rooted in learning from the past, and need reciprocal interchange between them like the firing of brain synapses themselves in order to build in the present – and for the future. Computer-generated modelling has brought forth astonishing and marvellous architectural forms and engineering feats: science working with art to realise lasting works – buildings that can revitalise a place, and its population's experience of living there.

Writing like building abolishes the border that so arbitrarily - for economic purposes - has been set up between sciences and humanities. Darwin would not be Darwin without his lucid and lyric style, the literary recorder of his thought, filled with wonder and dynamism that underscores his argument but also reproduces his theme – a match in literature of form and content. Freud would not be Freud without his storytelling genius; from Aristotle to Pliny, D'Arcy Thompson with Growth & Form, to Stephen Jay Gould, questing scientific minds have needed to write well and have triumphantly disseminated knowledge by this means. When I first met my partner, Graeme Segal, who is a mathematician and does pure maths – entirely theoretical stuff all written in impenetrable hieroglyphics – he surprised me tremendously by exclaiming now and then at the mathematics he was reading, "Oh, this is so dreadfully written. I wish students could write today, the computer has made them so prolix" – exactly as if he was reading an essay – or a novel. Or, of someone he admires, 'Oh, he writes so beautifully.' And this of pages covered in squiggles that nobdoy outside the field – and some in it – can read.

Most of my life, I lived as an independent writer; I write history, fiction, and criticism. I like collaborating - with musicians, and with artists and composers [CUT for two operas and, last year, at the Bath Music Festival, Joanna Macgregor the pianist and the festival's director asked me to write a story for musicians and artists from the Royal College of Art to interpret. A retelling of Rapunzel, called The Difference in the Dose, was the result. I've often collaborated with contemporary artists for books they are making and catalogues of their exhibitions. I am currently writing an essay about Anselm Kiefer for a huge show in New York at Gagosian this autumn, for example. The artist Tacita Dean about whom I've written before ahs asked me to work with her on a new book. I've written about Nursery Rhymes and Jane Eyre for Paula Rego's illustrations inspired by those works of literature, and recenety I wrote the introduction for Bobby Baker's harrowing account of her mental illness, in a beautifully produced volume called *Diary Drawings.*]

Writing is silent and solitary and I'm v. sociable so I am easily diverted by such commissions from the main task in hand because projects with artists involve friendships as well as intense acts of projection into someone else's imaginative strivings: empathy and projection are obviously key to fiction but to essays and other supposedly factual writing too – as some of the most brilliant exponents show – De Quincey and Virginia Woolf for example.

Most of the time the main task in hand is a book. I've had a book or books on the go all my life. At the moment, I'm writing about flying carpets and magic talismans and other oriental themes for the study of the Tales of 1001 Nights and the influence of the stoires on modern concepts of enchantment. And for the last ten years, since my last novel came out, I've been reconstructing, through fragments and relics, the experiences of my

parents in Cairo after the war. My father opened a bookshop there in what was - unbeknownst to him - one of the last stands of imperialist civilising ambition. The bookshop was burned down in 1952 in nationalist rioting against foreign interests - this is a powerful and poignant legacy for a writer.

We lived in an Art Deco penthouse overlooking the Nile with a view from the verandah of the pyramids in the distance: one of my earliest memories is climbing the Great Pyramid and finding the blocks too high for my four year old's legs and being sweetly lifted up them by one of the guides.

But I began by saying that in the light of the cuts, I was going to talk about money and the survival of literature and those who make it. There is another way I am a statistic typical of my generation: I am one of hundreds of writers of approx my age who have taken refuge in Academe and now teach - often Creative Writing the most popular course and the most vocal demand of literature students. My livelihood used to be sustained through journalism, feature writing, book and other reviewing, occasional commissions such as an opera libretto or a story for the radio - and even sometimes an expert opinion on a case of plagiarism - for example I once had to give a judgement whether one film script about Joan of Arc had copied another, earlier, discarded version?

But about ten years ago, a great gulf opened between the cost of living and the fees on offer. Something like the TLS still seems to pay what it did in 1963 when I first wrote for it - and I'm not talking in today's money. Set aside the fall in demand for the kinds of articles I used to write - on little known artists and writers: for example, I went to interview for the Daily Tel colour suppt. the optical puzzle maker and print maker M C Escher in Hilversum in Holland just before he died and long before he became so ubiquitous.

Above all writers like me found that publishers' advances suddenly shrivelled - unless you had another idea for a speciality cook book. .

I was lucky that the Uni of Essex employed me - at the age of 59. I had not had a salaried job - some might say a 'proper job' for forty years, since I'd been features editor of Vogue in 1971- which I left to write books - about the cult of the Virgin Mary and my first novel which came out in 1977.

There are other reasons why writers have found shelter in academe - we are useful in a specific way. Analogously to musicians, architects, and athletes, we know how to do something - something which has always been necessary but has now become essential. In the hubbub of email and iphones students find the shift from texting and tweeting rather hard. Coherent, composed, sustained pieces of writing - few know how to go there. Almost every university now holds classes to help them - classes called Writing Skills which are basically remedial English. It's shameful but true that the foreign students are stronger in English than many of their home-grown counterparts. Writing is not the same thing as speaking - even a mother tongue.

So the situation is that universities and colleges have increasingly become the mainstay of writers who are making a serious attempt to continue literary traditions - poets, fiction and experiments with memoir and other forms. Even v. successful writers - Martin Amis, Will Self, Salman Rushdie - have posts at universities. This tracks trends in the US - in fact Rushdie's post is in Texas at Emory, and that takes me to a historic change and a sharp difference. Emory has Coca Cola money. Unlike the US, the universities here are pretty much funded from the public purse, and writers' move out of the market run by publishers, agents, PR companies, and booksellers into higher education, represents a move out of private finance into the state support - the same survival strategy that the banks took last year when they were bailed out. But in the case of writers, it's been less widely recognised, though as little examined or understood; consequently, no redress has been put in place. Rather the opposite: libraries are being starved, and education is being squeezed and squeezed hard. This will damage the entire fragile state of culture for those who do not already have the advantages of money. 20% cuts every year for three years, at the RCA, for example, where I have a small role as a visiting professor in the Dept of Animation. Joan Ashworth, the film maker and professor of Animation there invited me to come and tell the students stories, give them myths and fairytales to think with. [CUT: again, hugely enjoyable for me to have contact with these v. gifted young artist-film-makers, but more importantly, a real insight into the interconnectedness of the arts and sciences that I was stressing earlier: animated films - and all that entails - are born of brilliant independent minded technological innovators and experimenters beginning only just over a century ago - people like Robert Paul here in England and Thomas Edison in US.]

One of the most lucrative and vigorous strands in the huge entertainment industry, animation is bursting with new ideas - cybernetic and aesthetic - narrative and nerdy. Walt Disney started with animal stories from the US Indian and African variations on trickster legends, Br'er Rabbit and Uncle Remus stories which are versions of Aesop's Fables and of the Arabic-Persian wisdom tales, Kalila wa Dimna. Disney was into literature - it may not seem so but he was a reader and he depended on writers and their stories. As Joan Ashworth realises, the new talents need be able to write too. It can't be assumed as a skill, and it can be taught - like drawing, like the piano. There is material to grasp, there are methods to acquire. You practise your scales in making up a story just as you have to when learning to play the trombone.

With my colleagues we think of Creative Writing as a way of teaching literature - reading and the pleasures of the opening views on experience that literature brings. We don't observe those boundaries between ways of knowing things: one course, for example, called Wild Writing, combines with the biologists to stimulate expressiveness.

So to conclude - I hope I'm not plunging you into too serious a mood on this perfect summer night under the moon at the full! Derek Walcott, the Caribbean poet, writer of magnificent epic and strong lyrics, was here recently - visiting Essex as our Prof of Poetry - and he said some fine things about literature - about the 'desolating honesty' of some poets, and the affinity of reading with praying, with that emptying of the self and communion of the spirit that forwards you in yourself - to borrow from Walcott's close friend and fellow poet, Seamus Heaney, who has written that we go to poetry - we go to all literature 'to be forwarded within ourselves'.

Literature isn't a thing apart - an exclusive pleasure. It binds culture's different activities together by means of the language from which it is made: it inflects and it shapes the relationship we have with every experience and the it should be given a place at the heart of policy, and its students and practitioners.

Herodotus tells a story about a king of Egypt called Psammetichus, who wanted to know if the Phrygians or the Egyptians came first, and so, to discover the 'natural language' of humanity - he conducted an experiment, a cruel experiment. He took two babies and isolated them, and forbade their carers to speak to them - and then to wait and see how they communicated. But they did not communicate - instead they only pointed to their mouths and made a sound, which the king decided was the natural, original human word for 'bread'. But I don't think it was, do you? I think the two pitiful objects of his inquiry were asking for language - for ways to express themselves and they'd been deprived of words, carefully chosen words arranged in thought out structures and built into patterns through stories.

