

RONALD HUEBERT AND STEPHEN BROOKE

## The Naked Bull and the Perishing Text

A PRINTED TEXT IS IN SOME WAYS a contract between author and reader. The author undertakes to provide meaning of some kind: cognitive meaning in the case of a scholarly or scientific text; narrative, aesthetic, and various kinds of social or psychological meaning in the texts we are accustomed to thinking of as literary. The reader's implicit undertaking is to make sense of the text: that is, to reconstruct its particular meanings in his or her mind. In most cases the reader is also obliged to pay for access to the text, either directly (at a local bookstore) or indirectly (through taxation or tuition fees or Cancopy transfers and so on). In some cases a little of the money will even trickle back to the author in the form of royalties, and in a very few cases the author will make substantial amounts of money.

The prospect of hitting the jackpot would suggest that the textual environment is also a lottery of sorts: many people make a small investment in it, with the hope of one day being declared a winner. Perhaps this analogy applies only to writers and not to readers who don't write, but even so it implies that the printed text is also in some senses a game. Think of it as a game in which the principal activity is interpretation. The author encodes a particular interpretation of the laws of gravity or the behaviour of the peasantry or the feeling of loss at the death of a child in a particular sequence of words, and the reader is placed in the position of decoding these signs in order to arrive at his or her own interpretation of the text. The rules of the game would then be the definitions of words, and the conventions of grammar, syntax, genre, and so forth, which control the ways in which words are combined

into structures. The analogy of the game is of special value because it implies that one of the great resources of the text is its ability to foster a particular kind of pleasure: nobody is forced into the game of textual interpretation, but many people enter and inhabit it simply because they love to play.

Whether you think of the text as a contract or as a game, you are in either case construing it as a rule-governed object. And this thought brings us to the first group of texts in the present issue: those printed under the heading *Reader Beware*. All of them are responding, though in quite different ways, to a perceived instability in the author-text-reader relationship. In "To the Reader" Peter Hutchinson encodes what I take to be the contemporary writer's anxiety about his (or her) relationship to the reader. "I have studied you," the poem begins, almost in the tone of voice one might imagine a stalker using in addressing a targeted person. Things don't get much more comfortable when the speaker says "Trust me!" and "I love you so." The point is that "To the Reader" imposes an artificial intimacy on the relationship between author and reader: an intimacy that in some ways is blocked by the text which interposes itself between them. That's why the "mutual bliss" of writer and reader is imagined as happening "Off in the margins," in the "emptiness" of white space, in the "nothingness" which the speaker begs the reader not to deface with writing.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when print was still a relatively new medium, it was fairly common for an author to prefix an address "To the Reader," under exactly that title, to a printed text. John Fletcher did just this when he published *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1609); in a brief prose statement "To the Reader" he explained how tragicomedy differs both from comedy and from tragedy, the two dramatic genres he could expect his readers to be thoroughly familiar with. Although Fletcher is in some sense hoping to renegotiate the author-text-reader relationship, he is nonetheless assuming its overall stability. He knows the tastes and predilections of the readers he is addressing; he thinks of them as belonging to a particular social class, of having similar educational backgrounds, of having shared cultural assumptions and values. None of this holds true for the writer in 1999, for whom the reader is at best a sort of hidden consumer, separated from the author by technology and distance at the very least, and probably by culture, education, and ethnicity as well. A radical instance of

the alienation of reader from writer occurs in “beware : do not read this poem” (1970) by the black American poet Ishmael Reed:

the hunger of this poem is legendary  
it has taken many victims  
back off from his poem  
it has drawin in yr feet  
back off from this poem  
it has drawn in yr legs

Few texts are prepared to threaten their readers quite as openly, but many are nonetheless committed to interpreting (or exploiting) the anxiety identified by Reed. Perhaps it's no coincidence that Reed's poem was published just when reader-response criticism became the academic paradigm for discovering the ways in which readers could be deceived, seduced, assaulted, betrayed, and abandoned by even their most dearly cherished texts.

The writings printed under *Reader Beware* belong to a subsequent generation, but they haven't escaped the anxiety that results when the author-text-reader relationship is no longer controlled by a simple set of equations but is held to be open to constant renegotiation. Such anxiety would account for the narrator's intrusive commentary in Nadine Seepaul's "Notes on a Vacation." Just when the young female protagonist seems most sexually vulnerable, the narrator butts in with: "She's just having a good time, this girl." So we are in effect being told that we've been reading the story in exactly the wrong way. This game of deflating our expectations carries through to the final paragraph: "Still there? Hanging on for the spectacular finish? I hate to disappoint you. There isn't one." But the act of deflating expectations is itself an artistic strategy that postmodern readers may find more satisfying than if their first wishes had been met.

Blanca Baquero's "The Written Word" and David Fedo's "A Park in Toronto" reflect upon the relationship between writer and text but without addressing the question of the reader's position. In "The Written Word" the "I" of the poem longs for a "cystalline clarity" that could be achieved only by metamorphosis into pure textuality. The yearning here is for a Platonic text, independent of reader and writer alike. True, "some poet" would still be doing the mechanical work of "putting pen to paper," but the text itself, "peaceful and serene," would somehow transcend such mundane activity. "A Park in Toronto," by contrast, is a text which renounces

itself. The speaker comes across a found poem scribbled on the remains of a granite fountain. This work of undistinguished obscenity, of sad and trite malice, and of indeterminate authorship nonetheless strikes him as “more authentic” than the carefully crafted framing poem in which it appears. So the poet in effect disinherits his legitimate offspring and declares his allegiance to the foundling, the orphan text, the utterance that defies civility.

“On Deconstruction” by Leonard Ferry, “The Perfect Crime” by Harold Skulsky, and “Sort of Kind of Like” by Chris Andrews can all be described as verbal games in which the reader is called upon to supply what’s missing. “On Deconstruction” is a clever epigram in the tradition of Ben Jonson; it is also a sceptical rebuttal of a certain kind of scepticism. How can you dispute the validity of all intention when it’s obviously your intention to win the argument? How can you build the deconstructive enterprise except with the very materials you are proposing to discard? In “Sort of Kind of Like” Chris Andrews plays a game called one-sided simile. He gives us a virtuoso display of the kinds of qualities or sensations a poet might choose for purposes of comparison (“Fragible as a grain of incense on the anvil”), but never tells us what the object might be that calls this comparison into being. The trick here is to get over the need for an object, and to allow the unmoored similitudes to float free in their undeclared field of textuality.

Harold Skulsky’s “The Perfect Crime” begins by calling attention to its own artfulness. It is a perfect sonnet in the Shakespearean style: iambic pentameter, three quatrains and a couplet. This highly formal design is here used as the vehicle for creating surprise and awakening new perceptions. By the end of the poem the reader may have guessed that the perfect crime is really artistic creation, the bringing into being of “a masterpiece.” And if the text is a crime (however perfect), then the author has become a criminal and the reader, of course, the detective. Perhaps this is the ground on which to build a relationship both of trust and suspicion: “Hypocrite lecteur—mon semblable—mon frère!”

Luke Scott, one of many writer characters in *St. Urbain’s Horseman*, offers his friend Jake Hersch this brief lesson in literary history: “When they tote up our contribution,” he says, “all that can be claimed for us is that we took ‘fuck’ out of the oral tradition and wrote it plain.” In the years since then, sex has never lost its place

on the literary agenda, but writers today seem far less eager to write it plain just because they know they can. Indeed, the texts printed here under *Talking Sex*, though all of them explore sexual communication of some kind, are much more likely to proceed by indirection.

J. D. Taylor's "The Well" is remarkable for what it withholds rather than for what it tells. There is a man and a woman (we don't learn their names). He is a recluse; she is on her way to a retreat. He is writing a book (we don't learn its subject or title); she doesn't wear a ring. They are brought together by accident for perhaps an hour, part of which they spend drinking Orange Pekoe tea, part of which they share by examining a circular well cut into rocky terrain. In an environment so relentlessly spare the most casual gestures stand out as if they were grand opera. "Then her hand was on his arm and she was looking at his face steadily." That's the only contact between them we are given, but it is somehow enough.

"Caught in the Headlights" by Christine Erwin is a less reticent story, but just as enigmatic. The problem to be solved is how to share a bed, and none of the solutions offered seems satisfactory. So the dissatisfactions of the female narrator are displaced, onto the old lamp inherited from her grandmother but never properly cleaned or repaired, onto a deer killed in a night-time automobile drive, in short onto metaphor.

Sexual reticence is the source of frustration for the speaker in Jess Bond's "Breakfast at Bembleman's." It is "the couple next to us" who are able to display their intimacy; the speaker, rather than acquiescing in the eyebrow-raising disdain of her companion, admits that she is "full of envy." Another kind of envy animates "One Day at Annan" by Joy Hewitt Mann. The young woman of the poem is represented by her mature observer as erotically desirable and inviting, as offering a sexual plenitude the observer (and speaker) feels "ebbing away" from herself. The beauty of the poem lies in the generosity of the older woman's gaze: in her vicarious enjoyment of what Yeats called the "sensual music" of youth.

The elderly make music too, as Jacqueline Karp-Gendrc shows with great tenderness in "Low Tide." The "elderly pair" of the poem seem at times more birdlike than human: he an "old oystercatcher," she a "tired gull." But there is a slow dignity in their avian dance, and a recollection of their sexuality in the gendered metaphors which assign a "long red proboscis" to him and a "grey fur collar" to her.

In the poems collected under *Talking Sex* it's women who do most of the talking. The notable exception is "The Joy of Sit-Ups" by Gilbert A. Bouchard. Here it is the male gaze that catches the woman in an "orgasmic" pose, and the male voice that retreats into momentary reticence ("i'm embarrassed / as if i'd walked in / on you") before regaining composure. When the woman's voice is in control, as it is (or claims to be) in Ann Marie Pincivero's "Edit," the man's role in her erotic life can be rounded off, simplified, at last reduced to "a joke." Or it can be rewritten as glamorous brutality, as in Susan L. Helwig's "Fantasies for Middle Age." Here at last is the one poem to use the word "fuck." Does this text answer, once and for all, the question that perplexed Chaucer and troubled Freud, the question of what it is that women really want? Only by supplying yet another enigma, because the speaker of "Fantasies for Middle Age" wants both a reckless sexual adventure and a "safe re-entry" into her suburban life. And this, come to think of it, is not all that different from what a lot of men want too.

*Indelible Images* brings together an eclectic assortment of texts, all of which depend on the human capacity to be haunted by a striking image. In a surprising number of instances, the significant iconography is associated with loss: disappointment in love, the sense of diminished opportunity, or indeed the deprivation of death. The most memorable image in "The Cracks Between the Boards at Christ's Table" is contained in the title, and repeated in the poem's final lines, where the speaker offers the "crumbs" he has found in these sacred cracks to the woman he is addressing. Elena Wolf's "Tikva" begins with an image of loss: "This year the mulberries / didn't even ripen in my absence." The rest of the poem is a cryptic reinterpretation of this event—a reinscription in which the Hebrew alphabet offers the signs that lead back at length to God. "Duck-Hunting Accident" by Linda Wikene Johnson offers no consolation for loss: the dead hunter's body is "graceless," no more than "a blued corpse hugging a gun." The refusal to grieve implicit in these words is itself a moving act of mourning.

"She'll Cry for Him" by A. Mary Murphy is more clearly a lamentation, but the tears are not the speaker's own, and even the third person of the poem (the "she") will have to wait until "she's and old woman / with grown-up grandbabies" before she can truly measure her loss. The object of the lament, the man for whom

“she” will eventually cry, is arrested in perpetual youth and therefore unable to escape the past, from which distant place his love nonetheless reaches out to her.

Murphy’s second poem, “If You Wore Wool Socks,” is not about loss, but about the odd quotidian memories out of which a relationship is built over time. There’s no reason why the speaker should remember her companion’s “emerald scarf,” except that it marks a moment of communion between them. In sharp contrast, “Powder Princesses” by Jean Jones asks us to consider the carefully turned-out women who pose as the living embodiments of the beautician’s art in the appropriate up-market venues. Here nothing is left to chance: the smallest oddity, like “Untidy eyebrows,” is “Plucked without trace.” The female speaker finds these living icons intimidating: the only alternatives are to “sneak by” without attracting notice, or to submit and “be grateful.” The manicured image has to be suffered, the speaker implies, as a constant reproach. In this poem it is suffered, but not without irony.

The one work of fiction printed under *Indelible Images* is Madeline Sonik’s gothic fantasia, “The Villa.” The story celebrates the image-making power of the girlish collaboration between the narrator and her sister. The girls require only the distant sight of a large estate to provoke them; soon the villa (as they designate the estate) has been populated with romantic personages, ravaged by fatal disease, plunged into despair, and rescued from catastrophe. When the narrator undertakes to visit the villa in person, we are tempted to think of the journey as a real one, but its semiology is the stuff of dreams. And when the whole edifice falls into ruin at the end, we mourn for the loss of childhood fantasy.

Jody Greek’s poem, “First Trimester,” takes on the assignment of protecting a very young foetus against all of its real or imagined risks. Writing a poem about a foetus is itself a bit of a risk, especially for a male writer; you’d think that a storehouse of images would be largely unavailable. When the speaker wishes his child “were like / the cod larvae / the scientists picked out of the plankton net,” you might suspect that he’s reached the limit of his powers. But the point here is to offer protection: to put the cod larva into a petri dish with a sign marking it as “SAFE,” and to monitor it “ritually / like a rising cake.” The fear of loss, and the desire to prevent it, is the source of these clever imaginings.

“Lot’s Daughters” by Elizabeth Brewster is a reinterpretation of the biblical story in which Lot’s two virgin daughters, the only

remaining members of his family after the destruction of Sodom, get him drunk and seduce him, *seriatim*, on two successive nights, in order to “preserve seed of our father” (Gen. 19.32). The poem is a strikingly close rendering of the source material: Lot and his daughters have found shelter “in a cave”; the girls believe they may be the only human beings left, and they plan their “virtuous incest” for the survival of the species. True, the psychology of the daughters is amplified, partly because they are given memories: “They remembered those old stories” about the world “having been destroyed by water.” This image of annihilation is what offers Brewster the best argument for condoning their actions. In the face of absolute loss there are no absolutes, other than the hope of survival.

The poem and four short stories under the heading *Growing Pains* all map the uncertain landscape between childhood and the adult world. The passages they trace through this territory are far from sentimental journeys. We might, indeed, see these texts as sharing a bracingly unsentimental perspective on adolescence.

In “Should Have Known” Claire Mulligan explores the lack of empathy between adolescents and adults, and the failure to achieve such understanding. Cruelty and miscommunication instead occupy the space between the narrator, Sparrow, and her teacher, Tasha Verleen. Sparrow’s dreams of escape are not just from a house in which the rooms are locked once their occupants enter adulthood, but from the idea of any affinity with the adults she sees around her. The frustration of Miss Verleen’s attempt to reach out to Sparrow, to establish a community between them, underlines the harshness of this world. Commitment to Miss Verleen’s values is not an option for Sparrow, because for her adolescence is about preserving possibility, and hence about denying or resisting the disappointments she sees in the adult world.

Leah, the narrator of Kelli Deeth’s “Pet the Spider,” evinces the curiosity and confusion of a teenage girl teetering on the verge of adulthood. There is a moment of breathtaking complexity in the story, when Leah forcibly bathes an older, disabled woman. It is a masterful scene of both power and shock, in which the childlike urgency of Leah’s fascination with the mortality of the female body is interwoven with her knowing cruelty, her enjoyment of the act of humiliation. A sense of vertigo runs through the story, capturing the dizzying ambiguities and uncertainties of growing up.



"Easy Pickings" by Burns Foley-MacMillan has similar qualities of shock and power. The poem entwines two kinds of childhood memories, one expected, one transgressive. The shock comes in the unjudged balance the poet strikes between the two. The apparently innocent delights of cherry and orange pop, of strawberries and blackberries, or of bathing in a stream, segue into the description of sexual contact between a young boy and an older man. The poem's pervasive sensuality ("What would I have abandoned / To sizzle my tongue / In effervescent citrus?") destabilizes our understanding of childhood.

These texts are more, not less compelling for their lack of sentimentality about childhood and youth. In "According to Hoyle" by Scott Randall, the world of card games and rules illustrates the tensions between a father and the rest of his family. The story's movement between particular games, from "Bloody Knuckles" to "Solitaire" and "Poker," also follows the competitiveness and emotional distance which leaves a father isolated from his wife and family. At the end, he is left with the casual brutality of the invocation to playing poker, "Let's not fuck about."

Perhaps the most poignant representation of growing up is Vivian Zenari's "Next-Door Neighbour." If "According to Hoyle" used card games to tell a story, "Next-Door Neighbour" deals to the reader an episodic series of snapshots, chronicling the friendship between three girls over thirteen years, from the age of five to eighteen. Zenari offers a precise observation of the boundaries constantly drawn and redrawn in childhood friendships, the small intimacies given and denied, and the myths we nurture about such relationships. As a study in the loneliness of an outsider, "Next-Door Neighbour" also brings out one of the more profound aspects of such alienation: that Lizzie can only tell her story through the stories of people who continue to exclude her.

The texts gathered under *Growing Pains* are all, by definition, retellings of childhood and youth, the tracings of personal histories. Those gathered under *Pasts and Presents* are likely to cover a longer or wider trajectory. In "Aid Worker on Independence Day," Martin Bennett writes of "History's long arm, its cunning fingers." The texts in this section all bear witness to the way in which history and the past reach through the present, whether in reference to the public or the private.

In some cases, the cunning of the past is all too evident, whether in the cruel contrast between present and past or in the slipperiness of history itself. Memory and old age are two themes illustrating this. Ronnie R. Brown's "Family Ties" deals, in a very personal way, with memory as a currency between a dying mother and her children. A photograph album stakes claims upon the mother's waning mind, becoming another text in which the children "each recreated / history." But, as the poem shows, history escapes such ends, proving not a comfort, but a confusion, spiraling into someone else's story, a story resistant to interpretation. "The Mentor" by John Ditsky also shows the cruelty of time, not only in wearing away the ability to master language itself, but also in relentlessly foregrounding the contrast between what was and what is. In a gentler fashion, Mary Frances Coady's short story, "The Rose Garden," also chronicles the disabling and confusing impact of time and change, in this case of the post Vatican II world upon a Catholic nun. The story ends with an extremely moving gesture as Sister Adeline, whose confusion has just reached the boiling point of violent rage, is firmly but gently restrained by one of the senior girls in the convent school: "They remained like that for she didn't know how long, but as a matter of fact it felt rather comforting just sitting there, with the girl's hand on her shoulder." It's as if we're in the presence of that always evocative moment when the torch is being passed from the old order to the new.

Two of the poems printed here reflect upon the confused and sometimes painful dialogue between public and private, past and present. They dwell upon the restless ebb and flow between such categories. In Martin Bennett's "Aid Worker on Independence Day," we find a rueful portrait of a past celebrated in a national independence day, a future "heaving like a lion at its chains," and a present filled only with corruption. In this temporal confusion, we also find the narrator's uncertain complicity reflected in his own roles: "rebel, accomplice, or helpless helper." Leanne Averbach's "Reading the Signs" is a chilling exploration of the interdependence of private and public history, moving from a woman putting on underwear to memories of the laws against Jews in 1930s Germany ("when the stars fell / onto sleeves: yellow points of dark / identity for Jews and other / degenerates") to the notorious slaughter of suspected left-wing supporters of Chilean president Salvador Allende by General Pinochet conducted in the Santiago sports stadium in 1973. The poem presents a quietly nightmarish history in

which flutes become bones and stars become points of darkness, against which one can only lament, "Who can read the signs?"

Some of the texts in *Pasts and Presents* exhibit a close kinship to those printed under *Indelible Images*, for the simple reason that the vehicle by means of which history is kept alive is often the recalcitrant memory, the memory which comes to inhabit the present, which cannot be wiped away by the force of time or indifference. "Watermelon Seeds" by Laura Best features an indefatigable character, Bernice, who once in the narrator's life, never leaves. As in all of the works in this group, past and present are inextricable.

If history and the past haunt most of the texts in *Pasts and Presents*, like constellations around which we uncertainly orbit, some contributions also illustrate the pliability of the past and the constructedness of history. Two poems are written, for example, out of past texts or events, using history consciously and evocatively. David Winwood's "Sutton Courtenay, 1917" alerts us not simply to a painting by Sir John Lavery, but to the First World War. The contrast between its pastoral imagery and the sharp reminders of war ("The pond / smells of decay, but not the stench of slaughter. / That's elsewhere") brings echoes of other, older poems. We might be reminded of the metaphoric association common in First World War poetry between decay and the destruction of the male body in the trenches: the "mess of things unclean" as Robert Graves wrote in "A Dead Boche." The echo of war within a pastoral English landscape is reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's "Channel Firing" and "The Discovery," in which such pastoralism is disrupted by the distant sound of explosions. The enduring presence of the past and its pliability are caught in "You Said It Was Five Years," by Carl James Grindley. Playfully, the poet debunks any idea of an unchanging or sanctified past ("did you / Suppose that your words would / Remain as they were . . . two / Hundred wheezy years"), while at the same time showing the inescapability of that past: "Lovers in our new time / Themselves become palimpsests." This last word, which is also the last word of the poem, refers literally to a parchment which has been written upon twice. It should alert us to the notion that there may be another poem, not quite erased, over which Grindley's text has been written. This original text (and the target of the new text's parodic gestures) is surely "Tintern Abbey," in which Wordsworth claims that "Five years have passed" since he last visited his favourite spot on the banks of the Wye.

And since Wordsworth dates his poem 13 July 1798, an interval of two hundred years (“wheezy” or otherwise) is just about the distance between his text and Grindley’s. The ironic relationship between present and past has been captured in the very construction of the poem, in its reflexivity and dependence upon the earlier text.

The recovery of pasts, real or fabricated, is a recurring motif in *Pasts and Presents*. Places or things trigger memories or imagined histories, as we find in “The Klepper” by Joy Ross, in which the history of a kayak threads through a man’s life, holding the meaningful events like so many beads on a string. The quiet power of Jeffrey D. Clapp’s “Return” lies in the re-creation of the relationship between an ageing woman and a house—a re-creation which depends on images which are both caught in the past and alive in the moment of remembering. “For an Only Child” by Deirdre Dwyer similarly constructs a past, albeit a landscape of emotions rather than things or events. In this case, it is a way for a child to understand a mother’s loss, by re-enacting unknown emotions and gestures. Such re-imagining can even include a sensual journey through the smells of the past, as traced in Ben Murray’s “Smelling Lilacs.” The ‘seven ages’ of Jaques in *As You Like It* become the twenty-one odours of man from the excrement of a baby to the lilacs of middle age. History has been reconceived as a guided olfactory tour through time.

If a text is a contract or a game, as we proposed at the outset, it can also be a great many other things: a crime, an enigma, an act of mourning, a reinscription, a recollection, a palimpsest. Where then should the editors stand in relation to these various textual configurations? Perhaps an editor should be thought of as a witness (to a contract or a crime), a referee (in a game), or a curator (of reinscriptions, recollections, palimpsests). In any case, the editors should occupy an unobtrusive place: when the game is played as it should be, nobody notices the referees. We’ve already given greater visibility to ourselves than a strict application of this criterion would permit, and we therefore announce our own disappearance from these pages.