Introduction to *Reading the Letters*

The building block of the book is the page, of the page the paragraph, of the paragraph the sentence, of the sentence the word, and of the word the letter. Books are made up of letters then in the same way that the universe is made of atoms. *Reading the Letters* is a book that is organised around letters and uses the alphabet as an organising principle. It helps me to make sense of what I read, and because of that, how I write. What I read matters for what I write even as there is no formula for what that may be specifically. If one reads Tolstoy, one might write about family dramas, war and potatoes, but one might also write about love, trains and the gospel. In other words, writing is an act of translating our reading, all of which are creative acts. We do not write from reading alone though, but we must always write through the compost of our reading. This book, the book you have in your hands, was built from the letter up, from the compost of the alphabet itself. It presents the library that has influenced my writing by sharing a love of the books that have kept me company as I ate damper in the outback, as I sat in cafes in metropoles, as I made a home in the suburbs. These are my classics. The point however is not to promote them uncritically, but to critique them productively.

In his essay ‘Why Read the Classics?’ Italo Calvino lists fourteen conditions, or ‘suggested definitions’ of the classic, and these are engaging, charming and astute, as one would expect from Calvino, who, it must be said, I was very fond of in my youth. His essay itself is a classic in that it is a recognisable touchstone that has:

never finished saying what it has to say.

Calvino’s essay rewards re-reading then. But his examples are, with the sole exception of Murasaki, all Western European with a dash of the Russian. They are the dead white men whose bones become straw men in our arguments today. This is not to deny the importance of this library or this reading, but to suggest that in my tradition, a tradition that is still becoming, I wish to look to the whole of my world for the classics. This means I want to read what Calvino suggests as well as a whole host of Other texts.
What a classic is depends on the text itself as much as the interpretation and definition, definitions that include what the world might yet become. We might add to Calvino’s definitions that a classic depends on collaboration, that through voting and jockeying, pork barrelling and branch stacking, a text becomes a ‘classic’. It is political in the way that all social relations are.

As a writer though, one has touchstones that one returns to, has classics that come back when one thinks they have been left for dead, books that seem free of those political considerations. This is where one makes up one’s own tradition. This is a relationship to history that helps us determine what we read tomorrow. In his essay ‘The Argentine Writer and Tradition’ Jorge Luis Borges argues that:

I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have.

Now, writing this as if in an airport between nations or in a country that is a world but not a destination, I want to ask: what is ‘tradition’? What is ‘the West’? What is ‘culture’? But, of course, we must not get bogged down in basics – that horse has bolted back to the stables in the philosophy department where it belongs. We are in literary territory where the silkworms are spinning stories of their own making. Our tradition might be one we share as readers, and writers, or, because the nation cannot be avoided, as ‘Australians’, or even as ‘Argentinians’. We might know somehow what a ‘culture’ is in the way that we know what socks are as opposed to leggings or even stockings, or even our naked feet crunching on beaches at the edge of the Pacific. We might though decentre this, might extend the gaze back past the gauchesque poetry to what is Indigenous in this here place, however we define it.

For Borges it might have meant looking past Martin Fierro or Hidalgo, Ascasubi and Estanislao del Campo to what is the human condition in his world. Here, now, there is a tradition of myths and legends and a still living practice of oral storytelling. We have a traditional literature that is classic and worldly not simply ethnographic or of passing interest. This is where our classics must become part of a tradition that is itself
a building block of world literature, from the letter to the universe in a dialectical second. It is, after all, world literature that we are speaking to and for.

This idea of ‘world literature’ or *weltliteratur* is something Johann Goethe discusses in his conversations with John Peter Eckermann. He thinks of this as the epoch that was at hand, an epoch after the nation state, but such a view might have been to misplace both the particular and the universal – the nation is not a small organisational unit inside a larger one, but a different category altogether. For Goethe though, one could read and digest what was from ‘out there’ even as he knew that one should always come ‘home’. As he says:

> While we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to anything in particular, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Serbians, or Calderon, or the Nibelungen; but if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented.

As much as the Greeks are exemplary, they are still part of a system of value that need be flexible, mutable, historical. They are of ‘the world’ and not the cosmos where the gods dwell. They are the mythic origin of ‘the West’, but not the mythic basis for a world literature in a true sense. That might not come in any single origin story, but in the questions that are proffered by genealogies. This is the search for questions not for answers, questions that Arjuna asks of Krishna, that Naroondarrie asks of Biame, that a child asks of himself, that a reader asks of a book that is in their hands as they read on. These are the questions a classic asks of us even if the bread has been broken and the silkworms are eggs once again.

*Damper from the Muse* is, of course, a book like any other, a book that is *by the book*, written by the letter and made for the reader to hold in their hand or turn with their foot. It is about the 26 letters as an organising principle, as a way to make sense of the world. I have walked thousands of kilometres in my life on every continent, sometimes in socks that I have been given, sometimes in socks that I have seen made, sometimes in bare feet. I have eaten damper and sat round fires listening to stories and arguments that go back to the earliest eras. I have fallen off horses and got on

Robert Wood
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them again. But I have learned from books most of all. There I have journeyed. I have heroes in the pages that go back to the paintings in caves. I have heroes in the sky-ghosts of legends. I have heroes in the poems that make up the lifeblood and narrative of the waters that cover the whole globe.

This is a book about that, a book about books, a book about the world as it relies on a historical present, a present that sees the past return as if it cannot be repressed but must be lived with, a past that must be fired like clay from the place where we make the bricks for the oven in which we bake the bread that we sit down to share at the end of the day.

This is a work of world literature then, a work of literature for the world, my world, which is still being called into existence (and question) by the nature of this work itself. It makes a reader and a library from the archive it writes into being as a bulwark against forgetting. It is an aid to memory if not a memorial of aid. World literature is still being made, a literature that takes as its birthright, as it humus, the whole library of Babel and the universal alphabet as its middle name.

A work of world literature is a work that gets to the spirit of the author, which is to say it finds its country in the body of the author. The body, the history of the body, is, of course, part of a language game, a fish trapped in the network of discourse that thrashes and seeks its release into the wild oceans that know no bounds but travel the world round. It is free and the only way to the universal is through the particularity each body has from its crown to its toes. But before the body there must be another body, there must be a parent or an ancestor further back, back before we even knew what it was to be an author. The origin of this book then is in my body and my alphabet, in my parents and their parents and back from them to the ancestors who dreamed of this future before they were even allowed in the world. What I hope you gain though is tarruru, a moment of enlightenment or moksha, a release from the suffering that is the habit of our world, and in that, whether you hold this book with one hand or two, whether you eat damper or bread or rice, I hope that you will begin to see that our letters are the building block of something truly beautiful.