

From the Back Verandah

In the 1990s cosmologists started muttering that they had discovered a puzzling fact. (So what's new?) Their new fact implied that the universe was actually younger than some of its oldest stars. Which is absurd, as Euclid used to say.

Not to fret. As you probably know, the universe's age partly depends on that magic number, the Hubble constant, which is the rate of expansion of the universe. But what is its value? For those who really care, it's been measured as 70 kilometres per second per megaparsecond, give or take 10%. (I don't need to remind you that a megaparsecond is 3.26 million light years.)

With that figure under their astral belts, together with measurements of how far away certain extremely distant supernovae are, astronomers have been able to calculate that our dear universe is 12 billion to 15 billion years old, plus or minus about 1.5 billion years

Bear in mind, of course, they've now also discovered that the rate at which the universe is flying apart is speeding up, propelled by a mysterious force called "dark energy". This means that the

cosmos will expand forever, and never cease to exist. Quite reassuring, really.

But let's face it: the age of the cosmos isn't quite as important as the age of you and me, and how we feel about it. Take the case of the comedian George Burns who, once he reached eighty, felt so positive that he made a point of peppering his stand-up routines with self-deprecatory old-age jokes. A favourite of mine is the one that appeared in the *QQQ* of Issue 31 of *Bikwil* (May 2002):

You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and wonder what else you can do while you're down there.

How old is "old", anyway, in human terms?

Me, I've always believed that the word applies to people born twenty-plus years before I was — although as I expand towards 70 (with ever increasing Hubble speed, it seems), that "twenty" is having to be whittled away a little each year.

Now, I had intended to include something here on early-onset Alzheimer's, but I've forgotten what it was.

— Fizzgig

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Just in case you care, the age of the universe is . . .

Toast for Two

Have you ever run across the word *aliterate*? Not *alliterate*, with two *l*'s, but *aliterate*, with one. In its own way it bears a relationship to *illiterate* similar to the one *amoral* has with *immoral*. (There's also a noun meaning "an aliterate person".)

Aliteracy, it seems, is on the increase, particularly in English-speaking countries since the 1980s. Some blame computers (especially the Internet), others movies and television. In America, despite the widespread popularity of book clubs there, only 6% of those who do read belong to such a club.

I'm struck by the phenomenon myself whenever I enter someone's house where few or no books are to be seen. Sometimes there are more remote controllers than books. Not that this often happens to me,

because all the people I know love to read, but occasionally it does and I get a shock. It's happened in reverse, too: someone comes to my place for the first time and I hear, "Heck (etc.), you've got a lot of books! Have you read all of them?"

Studies of aliterate school children have shown that there are three distinct types: "dormant, uncommitted, and unmotivated".

Bikwil readers, on the other hand, are motivated, committed and, though a bit physically drowsy some afternoons, not mentally asleep.

So I propose two toasts today — one to you for your continuing literate support, and the other to all those teachers out there coping with their frustrating task of trying to persuade reluctant non-readers.

Colophon

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Back Issues Are Still Available

Laugh and the world laughs with you.
Snore and you sleep alone.

Anthony Burgess

I'm covered in love bites, you know, and most of those are
self-inflicted.

Basil Brush

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

I went to a restaurant that serves 'Breakfast at Any Time'. So
I ordered French Toast during the Renaissance.

Stephen Wright

I speak Esperanto like a native.

Spike Milligan

Nature, not content with denying him the ability to
think, has endowed him with the ability to write.

A. E. Housman

This Rain

How beautiful this rain
 this evening:
 so fine, like a curtain
 softly moving
 outside my window,
 trees, flowers, grass
 all quivering,
 under such a touch of tenderness
 reviving
 all in wait below.
 How bountiful this rain
 this evening:
 so delicate, a nocturne
 for heart's hearing.

—Bet Briggs

For Joan

My friend, Joan Clarke, has died. On Tuesday June 1 2004, the first day of winter, on what turned out to be an Indian summer kind of day, my writer friend, Joan, aged 83, let her life go.

Now I struggle to write of her life and her passing and Joan would have understood profoundly about the struggle with both writing and with life. She was, still is, will always be a courageous human being, and in the written works she leaves behind, that characteristic is reflected and burns brightly.

Bikwil readers will have met Joan, via her two memorable contributions: *Wagner's Revolutionary Years* (signed Joan Clarke), in the Wagner Fest issue No. 10, November 1998, and *In Memory of Oscar* (signed Joan Willmott-Clarke) in No. 20 July 2000. Both articles illustrate her fine writing skills, the first as researcher and social historian, the second as a memoirist and storyteller. Joan sent me a typescript of the latter; it's a gem and a true story told with gentle whimsy and

pathos. It is marked: "Dedicated to my grandson, Joel Clarke, for his 14th birthday on 30 January 2000". It may have been one of Joan's last pieces of writing.

During her long creative writing years Joan wrote and published several books. Two were in collaboration: *Girl Fridays in Revolt* (with Zoe O'Leary) (1969) and *Gold* (with G. Weller). Her works as sole author included *Just Us: A History of the Association of Civilian Widows of Australia*; *Dr Max Herz: Surgeon Extraordinary* (1976), her excellent biography of the man who operated on her as a child with polio; and *The Doctor Who Dared: The Story of Henry Price, MD (Berlin)*; *MB, BS (Brisbane)*, (1982). Their titles alone indicate the breadth and range of Joan's interests, passions and vision.

Her last book, her autobiography, in which she describes dramatically her Depression childhood, her battle with polio and her years as a young woman working in Sydney during World War II, embraces all those

developing interests with clarity and compassion, enthusiasm and poignancy.

Joan was 73 when she finished and published *All on One Good Dancing Leg* in 1994. In an interview about it by Judy Adamson in *The Northern Herald*, August 4 1994, Joan said: "I've had a damn good life. I'm still having one. I'm not finished yet. Not by a long shot."

That "damn good life" was a busy and fascinating one. Joan ran her own secretarial business, freelanced as journalist and editor and, besides the books I've mentioned, she wrote plays, articles, radio scripts, poems, and worked tirelessly and passionately on behalf of writers and other disadvantaged people to overcome injustice and intolerance.

In pursuing her humanitarian and literary goals — inseparable it seems to me, now — Joan travelled widely in Australia and overseas to participate in writers' conferences and to do her research. That travelling was to be the subject of her next biographical memoir. Travelling was demanding, but she did it, as she said to me once, blithely, "all on one good travelling leg".

"That's got to be your title," I said and she agreed.

She was still planning to write it in 2000. But the fire expressed earlier in those words in the 1994 interview was burning low, particularly in the last seven years of her life, and was finally too low for her to write her sequel to dancing.

Yet, as I read these words again, as I write of her going and our parting, I'm thinking:

"What a mighty spirit! Joan, you're not finished at all. Even when, as you requested, your ashes are thrown in the Pacific Ocean, you will still be dancing, still travelling. And your words will be heard for us to hold and cherish for their truth, like those you wrote when you remembered yourself as a tiny child seeing 'the splash of colour' of the morning glory — it's a poem:

. . . purple, bell-shaped flowers . . . soft and silky, drooping towards me. I want to touch them but they're too high to reach . . . I can only look so I look and look and look . . . and the purple and the green and the sunlight are inside me forever . . ."

— Bet Briggs

Said Sir Christopher Wren,
"I'm having lunch with some men.
If anyone calls,
Say I'm designing Saint Paul's."

Edgar Allan Poe
Was passionately fond of roe.
He always liked to chew some
When writing anything gruesome.

Edward the Confessor
Slept under the dresser.
When that began to pall,
He slept in the hall.

When Alexander Pope
Accidentally trod on the soap,
And came down on the back of his head
Never mind what he said.

My first name, Wystan,
Rhymes with Tristan,
But — O dear! — I do hope
I'm not quite such a dope. (W.H. Auden)

No one could ever inveigle
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
Into offering the slightest apology
For his *Phenomenology*. (W.H. Auden)

Mallarmé
Had too much to say:
He could never quite
Leave the paper white. (W.H. Auden)

Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Lived upon venison;
Not cheap, I fear,
Because venison's deer. (Louis Untermeyer)

Each wife of Fibonacci,
Eating nothing that wasn't starchy,
Weighed as much as the two before her.
His fifth was some signora! (J.A. Lindon)

Readers who'd like to attempt an original clerihew or two are urged to send same to the editor post-haste. But beware: it's not as easy as it seems.

— Harlish Goop

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Do you read detective stories? Even if you do, you may not have heard of *Trent's Last Case*, by Eric Clerihew Bentley (1875 - 1956). Published in 1913 (seven years before Agatha Christie's first novel), this classic has always been highly regarded among aficionados, but is sadly not mentioned much today.

Bentley is equally famous for an even earlier invention — the clerihew, a unique type of wordplay in verse. It was 1905, in *Biography for Beginners*, by “E. Clerihew”, when he introduced the form to the world, although tradition has it that he devised his first effort long before that, during a boring chemistry lesson at St. Paul's School in London. The name “clerihew” was applied to his verse form by an unknown reader about 1906.

Here are some great examples, the first seven being by Bentley:

Sir Humphrey Davy
Abominated gravy.
He lived in the odium
Of having discovered sodium.

The people of Spain think Cervantes
Equal to half-a-dozen Dantes:
An opinion resented most bitterly
By the people of Italy.

“Steady the Greeks!” shouted Aeschylus.
“We won't let such dogs as these kill us!”
Nothing, he thought, could be bizarrer than
The Persians winning at Marathon.

(By the way, his son Nicholas became a well-known humorous illustrator. Remember “Nicholas Bentley Drew the Pictures”?)

So what are the clerihew rules?

- ◇ It's biographical in content;
- ◇ It's funny;
- ◇ It has four lines, rhyming *aabb*;
- ◇ The first line almost always ends with the subject's name;
- ◇ “The number of accents in [each] line is irregular, and one line is usually extended to tease the ear. Another requisite of the successful clerihew is [at least one] awkward rhyme . . . The humour of the form lies in its purposefully flat-footed inadequacy: in addition to clumsy rhythm and rhyme, the verse's treatment of the subject is either off the mark or totally beside the point, as though it were the work of a reluctant schoolchild.”
(*Encyclopædia Britannica*)

Researching Mary Bennet

When I started writing *Mary Bennet* I realized I'd have to research quite a few subjects. For a start, I'd have to carefully re-read and annotate *Pride and Prejudice*. And for the character of Mary herself, I'd need to do a fair bit of bible-study — Mary quotes liberally from the New Testament and the Psalms. I'd also have to read up on, and listen to, 18th and early 19th century music, songs and country dances. Plus I'd have to do some background reading on Britain during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) and the so-called Regency period when the then Prince of Wales took over during the madness of his father, George III. And more particularly, I'd have to find out about

the privileged world of the English country gentry — their houses and servants and horses and carriages, what they wore, what they ate and drank, how they (mis)spent their time, etc.

A lot of the material I could never use, at least not directly, but if you're making up a story set in the past — as well as stealing a set of characters from another author — it's as well to try and get your research right. Even so, I've made mistakes. Most of these I've been able to correct before they were immortalized in *Bikwil*, but a couple have managed to escape the net.

The first appeared in Part 1 of *Mary Bennet*, serialised in *Bikwil* in May 2002. I'd assumed that

the tradition of dressing baby boys in blue and girls in pink was a very old one. I'd read in Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* (a wonderful memoir of 1870s English rural life, the first volume of which was published in 1939) that the farm labourers' wives were lent christening robes by the local clergyman's daughter in which to dress their babies. The clergyman's daughter also made a new frock as a gift for every baby's "shortening", and according to Thompson, these little frocks were "made of flowered print, blue for the boys and pink for the girls".

But other books on children's costume maintain that this way of distinguishing the sex of a child only began in the 1920s or thereabouts. *The Workwoman's Guide, 1838* (quoted in Cunningham & Buck's *Children's Costume in England 1300-1900*)

describes how the baby's gender was usually denoted by the placement of a rosette of satin ribbon on its hood or cap. The rosette was worn on the left side if a boy, and in front, if a girl. I've decided to play safe therefore and exchange baby Elizabeth Bennet's blue blanket for a pillow and dress her in a cap with a left-sided rosette. (Mrs Bennet had of course anticipated a boy.)

The second mistake appears in Part 2 of *Mary Bennet* (published in No. 32 of *Bikwil* in July 2002) and concerns Lydia. It occurred because I had not read *P&P* sufficiently carefully. Perhaps an enthusiastic Janeite will find it out before I get a chance to correct it in a future issue.

— Jennifer Paynter

the "delightfully natural" roses she wore in her hair.

The rest of us stood about in little groups of two or three, content for the most part to keep our distance. Following on the mention of a Netherfield ghost, Mr Coates and Elizabeth had begun to talk of novels of phantasie with Mr Coates taking out his pocket book and writing down a list of horrid romances she was urging him to read — *Necromancer of the Black Forest*, *Midnight Bell*, *The Mysterious Warning* and the like. Laughing the while, their heads together, with Elizabeth from time to time taking his pocket book and pencil into her own hands, they seemed quite oblivious to their company.

Papa and Aunt Gardiner soon joined George and myself — Papa was always kindly disposed towards George — and after Aunt had re-tied my sash and otherwise assured herself that my gown was quite in order, she kept glancing (uneasily I thought) in Elizabeth's direction.

It was Nonna who overturned this state of affairs. She came rustling in and after apologizing for being late and vivaciously assaulting in quick succession Mama and Papa and Aunt Gardiner, she marched on her daughter and taking

her by the arm, told her in Italian that she was being extremely rude and to speak to other persons 'subito'. Short of making a public scene, Mrs Allardyce had no choice but to comply. And Mr Coates, perhaps conscious that he too had been paying attention to only one person, put away his pocket book and moved to talk to Mr Purvis.

The arrival of Sir William and Lady Lucas further helped smooth over the division, but no sooner had we all moved into the dining parlour than Mrs Allardyce found fault with the seating arrangement, insisting that she be placed next to Mr Purvis and as far away from Mr Coates as possible. There followed several minutes of musical chairs (during which Mr Coates jokingly offered to eat his dinner in the kitchen) before we were placed according to Mrs Allardyce's liking with Mr Coates at the head and Nonna at the foot of the long table.

And so began the last meal I would eat at Netherfield for six whole years — for I was not to dine there again until after the arrival of Mr Bingley. Even now, all this time later, I cannot think of it without feeling anxious.

— Jennifer Paynter

behind the hollyhocks,” said he with a swift sly smile at Elizabeth.

Mama, meantime, had caught sight of me and almost choked on her Madeira. “Mary! Good lord child, what on earth have you done to your hair? You look like a little nun!”

While I did not feel as humiliated as I usually felt when Mama spoke so to me — I trusted Smythe’s taste and believed myself to be looking tolerable — my confidence was a little shaken. Everyone else was at pains to reassure me however, and I heard Jane’s gentle voice (“I think Mary looks very elegant, Mama.”) and Aunt saying that she had never seen me appear to such advantage, before George spoke up, determined to be heard.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” said he to my mother (he was obliged to repeat himself several times before he could get a hearing) “Begging your pardon, but if Mary looked like a nun we should not be able to see her face entire, or the shape of her head — which I think very fine — because it would all be covered, don’t you see?”

“George —” began Mr Coates.

But George had not yet done. “Besides,” (He was no longer directing his remarks solely at my

mother.) “I think people pay far too much attention to appearances.”

And as if summoned precisely to illustrate his point, Mrs Allardyce and Mr Purvis now showed themselves in the open doorway. The sight of them together — the dyed-haired old dandy and the beautiful, still youthful, woman — was at once comical and shocking. I found it impossible not to stare, and they seemed to *want* to be stared at, to be jointly appraised, walking in arm in arm, bowing and smirking like a couple of players entering upon a stage.

There was no need for introductions — Mr Purvis was known to everyone present — and they moved directly, as if they had rehearsed it, to the end of the room and stationed themselves to the right of the great chimney piece. There followed an awkward pause with the footman going up to them with wine, but nobody else approaching more nearly. Again, they seemed to want to stand apart — exactly like the king and queen at court (as Mama afterwards described it to Aunt Philips). The only person whom they deigned to address directly was Jane: Mrs Allardyce complimenting her on her gown (“Did you make it yourself, Miss Bennet?”) and Mr Purvis on

I Can't Find Rhymes for My Couplets — and Other Catastrophes

Congratulating myself on my decision to leave the mayhem of the big smoke for the tranquillity of a sweet little town in the Hunter Valley, I was meandering along uncrowded thoroughfares, at one with myself and the world, greeted by all the gentle burghers going about their lives with the calm and repose of those who do not know the terrors of a metropolis.

Then I saw it!

I'd wandered into an arcade. On a red door, in bold, black, capital letters, outlined in gold, was:

THIS DOOR IS **ALARMED!**

Immediately I knew I was no longer safe, the terrors of the big city had followed me here.

With “fear and trembling”, I fled into the street.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, the citizenry were all smiling. God was in His heaven and all was right with the world.

Had I been mistaken?

Eager to prove I was in error, audaciously, I strode up to the door. I had not, alas, misread the notice, the message was still there, for all to see, in its momentous portent. I knew I must heed the warning: if a door is alarmed what terror did this presage for human beings, or for the poor creatures dependent on us?

Fortunately, my heightened sensibilities alerted me before pandemonium swept through the town. When it did, I knew I couldn't leave without a show of valour. Last time was still fresh in my mind.

I had been living in a sleepy little seaside village, keenly enjoying the sun, sand and serenity. After my post-prandial nap I'd take a daily walk, communing with my inner-self. At last I had found a place to rest my tortured soul and a time for reflection and quiet joy. This was the perfect environment in which to finish

writing my great oeuvre: a post post-modern novel in three volumes, in heroic couplets.

I was no longer vigilant, I had become complacent after basking in the sweet apathy of the locals who, in their endearing innocence, kept on suggesting that I “take my finger out and get a proper job”.

One day when I wandered further afield than was my wont I was confronted by a large notice, on which was printed, in huge red capitals, outlined in gold:

THIS HOUSE IS **DEPOSITED!**

Aghast, I tried to work out the logistics. How did they do it? How could they have deposited a whole house, they must have done it section by section, from a helicopter. I could only hope the land had been vacant when they dropped the house on it. Some people have few scruples.

This depositing of houses on people’s properties had threatened my spiritual equilibrium, indeed my very sanity. I fled further into the hinterland to find sanctuary amongst the gentlefolk of the outer rural reaches.

I was at peace to pursue my calling.

Then the confrontation with the *door* eclipsed all the horrors that had gone before.

The nightmare had started with Sydney trains. They were always running late. I had suggested to the authorities that we authors rewrite the timetable in iambic pentameter. Fecklessly, the “powers that be” ignored me.

The unbearable climax came when one night the trains started to “*run out of timetable order*” and no one would tell us what order they were supposed to be running in, or why indeed they had decided to run in such an esoteric way, ignoring both the commands of State Rail and the expectations of the commuters.

With our worry beads in full play, the vast crowd of us stood rigid with terror.

Suddenly, an announcement was made by a man who had swallowed his tongue and was trying to retrieve it. “*The train to (tongue swallowing) is having difficulties.*”

I was shaken. Bad enough that the train had taken upon itself to ignore the timetable, but now it was really acting up.

In hindsight, that was a footling problem. Even the depositing

me he was unconcerned, remarked that we seemed to have wasted half the afternoon looking at lovers.

No sooner had he said this than the other pair of lovers—accompanied by my mother and followed by two footmen bearing trays of decanters and glasses—walked into the room.

*

Even had I not witnessed their earlier clandestine meeting, seeing Elizabeth and Mr Coates together now and observing how extraordinarily happy Elizabeth looked, I am sure I should have guessed their secret. I had never seen her look lovelier. She was like the gypsy girl in an old picture-book of mine, dark-eyed and vivid faced, almost wild looking. And Mr Coates, though he affected interest in what Mama was saying, seemed also happily abstracted.

All conversation was swamped in Mama’s effusions: “Oh Mr Coates! I am so happy to hear that you will not be leaving. I made certain when dear Lydia told us of Mrs Allardyce’s engagement that you would all be off. And Mrs Rossi also stays? Well that is certainly —” Pausing only to accept a glass of Madeira from one of the

footmen: “But I knew all along how it would be. I knew you would not willingly leave Netherfield. I must tell you, I have a presentiment about this place. When first I came into the neighbourhood — when Mr Bennet brought me to Longbourn as a bride — I said to him that of all the houses hereabouts, there was but one that truly *spoke* to me, and that one was Netherfield Park.” Turning to Papa who had followed her into the room with Aunt Gardiner and Jane: “Did I not say as much, Mr Bennet?”

Papa did not look to have heard her and contented himself with a bland, “Oh, undoubtedly, my dear.”

“It is the noblest old place in the world — exactly like what one reads about in books. And if it were not for the fact that the house is undoubtedly haunted (else why should the owner not choose to live in it?) I should dearly love to live here myself.” Turning to Papa again for confirmation: “Do you not recall my saying so, Mr Bennet?”

But this time Papa — in the act of accepting a glass of sherry — ignored her, whereupon Mr Coates murmured something about having heard tales of a resident ghost at Netherfield: “A maiden who haunts the kitchen gardens and hides

“No, please, I have been thinking about her — about the whole business.” He stopped but I knew I must wait quietly until he was ready to continue. “Look here,” he said eventually. “A girl like your sister — she would never do that sort of thing, I’m sure of it, unless she really cared for someone.”

“No indeed.” I was no longer interested in finding excuses for Elizabeth but if George was, then I would humour him.

“She must love my uncle very much.”

“Oh! certainly.”

“And when people fall in love you know, they go a bit mad.”

“Is that so?” I forbore to ask how he could possibly know.

“Especially a girl of spirit, like your sister.”

And now I felt the familiar pang of jealousy: Elizabeth it seemed had won herself another heart. If anybody had gone a bit mad, it was surely George. I turned away from him to look out the window. Another carriage was entering the driveway and I could pretend to be very interested in whoever was coming.

“What is it, Mary? Have I said something wrong? I have the greatest respect for your sister, I promise you.”

The carriage was a closed Berlin, bright yellow and highly varnished, pulled by a pair of grey horses — Mr Purvis’s, I guessed.

“Mary, will you please look at me.”

I turned my head. I saw a boy in a black velvet jacket and matching trousers, his dark hair neatly parted and damped down, his face flushed and anxious. And I saw — it was a revelation — that he did indeed care about me, that his concern was all for myself, for my feelings as a sister. The realization brought such relief I could not speak.

I believe he saw what I was feeling — and after allowing me time to recover, he paid me a clumsy compliment (“I must say I like your hair that way, all plain and severe.”) whereupon we both thankfully turned our attention to Mr Purvis’s carriage.

The horses had by now drawn to a standstill, and when the footman went to open the carriage door, Mrs Allardyce accompanied him. As Mr Purvis alighted, she flew to him holding out her hands, and for a moment I thought that they would publicly embrace, but instead Mr Purvis took her hands and made a great ceremony of kissing them — backs and palms. George made a disgusted sound in his throat, and then perhaps to reassure

of a house, while a bit cavalier, might have some redeeming features. To live in a town where a door is traumatised with fear, is quite beyond bearing, even if one is not a sensitive artist writing a seminal work.

I called an urgent meeting of the FAW*. It was there I heard about *negotiating tables*. While it is not common for tables to negotiate, I am neither narrow-minded nor politically correct, so I pleaded with the others, who agreed to a wo(man), to sit down and consult. We were fortunate to find a published writer of life stories adept at post-traumatic stress disorder counselling; she interacted with us in the stream of consciousness mode, where we role played.

Immeasurably relieved by our solidarity, I knew we would overcome. Between us we persuaded the tables to negotiate with the door.

At last, believing that my nightmare was over, I rejoiced that I had left the whole Kafka-Kierkegaard scenario behind until I was confronted by a newsstand with the huge bold black headline:

The Australian Arts Community is being Showcased!!

I am still in hiding from the media and praying that they’ll make do with composers and painters and actors and not put us in showcases!

We writers couldn’t stand up to it.

All these events have taken their toll. I thought I had plumbed the depths, that “worse there is none” (sic), but alas, even greater catastrophes have now overtaken me.

Post post modernism is “out”, post post post modernism is “in”, and I can’t find rhymes for my couplets.

— Eileen Marshall

* Fellowship of Australian Writers

Acknowledgements

The following authors have been quoted in the text

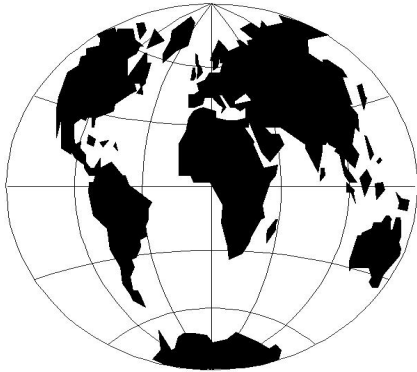
1. Kafka: *The Castle, The Trial* etc.
2. Kierkegaard: *Either-Or, Fear and Trembling* etc.
3. Gerard Manley Hopkins: *The Terrible Sonnets*.

Web

Since at least the 1890s, the lower house of the NSW Parliament has been known as “the bear pit”. The term arose partly from its shape (“a sunken enclosure for exhibiting bears”), and partly from the ferocious abuse exchanged by politicians of all persuasions, which at times does resemble the uproar of bears fighting tooth and nail.

As far as I am aware, NSW MPs have not yet actually come to blows. Nonetheless, the name has stuck and reminds us of how chalk-and-cheese the conduct of politicians in lower and upper houses can be. NSW upper house President Dr. Meredith Burgmann has said, “If the lower house is the bear pit, the upper house is the teddy bear pit!”

Such a distinction can be seen the world over. Even the honey-tongued American Congress, where decorum and respectfulness normally reign undisturbed,



Line

has had its moments:

War and Means Brawl: House Republicans and Democrats in Verbal Fisticuffs

(*Washington Post*, July 19, 2003)

It started with the mind-numbing reading of a 200-page pension overhaul bill, erupted into a remarkably bitter name-calling match between House Republicans and Democrats, and ended with a GOP lawmaker summoning Capitol Police to evict an outraged gaggle of Democratic colleagues from a congressional library.

Here are some other fine international examples to be had via the Internet:

Punch-Up over Press Law (*BBC*, August 6, 2000)

Scuffles between reformers and hardliners erupted in the Iranian parliament after a debate on amending the press law was called off on the orders of supreme leader Ali Khomeini . . . The speaker of parliament, Mehdi Karroubi, was forced to switch off microphones as deputies struggled to grab them . . . Reformist deputies staged a brief walkout.

footman went to open the door and let down the steps. Mama was the first to alight, followed by Aunt Gardiner, Jane and Elizabeth. And after them, to my amazement, I saw my father emerge.

Mrs Allardyce was equally surprised-- and more than a little displeased. “I’m sure I did not expect to see Mr Bennet this evening.”

“No more did I, ma’am.” (I was secretly delighted however.)

“They’re confoundedly early. You had better go to the kitchen and tell them to lay an extra place. And then let my mother know — Stay! I shall have to go myself — she will be closeted still with Smythe.”

She left with no good grace, and I remained at the window watching the members of my family as they crossed the gravelled sweep and passed under the roof of the porch. They all looked remarkably fine. Jane had on her new gown of blue Italian taffeta, and Mama and Aunt their best satins — violet and pink respectively — and my father had had his hair fresh trimmed. As for Elizabeth, although she was not wearing a new gown — she wore her favourite brown silk — I saw that she had on the little bronze beaded cap which Aunt had made for her and which suited her clear brown complexion admirably.

I felt a pride in their collective good looks — a new experience this, since I had always felt my own inferiority too keenly to appreciate my family’s personal claims. It was also a novelty to feel gratitude towards my father-- for overcoming his usual indolence on my account. I wondered who of Aunt Gardiner or Jane had persuaded him to come. Elizabeth, I felt sure, would have had neither the time nor inclination to think of me or my concert. By itself, the walk to Netherfield and back must have taken her at least two hours.

“Mary.” I had not heard the drawing room door open and started when George pronounced my name.

“I have been looking for you all over the house.” Closing the door behind him and approaching with mock trepidation. “You are not going to hit me again, are you?” And although not normally a demonstrative boy, he now gave me a swift kiss on my cheek. “I’m sorry, I ought never to have said what I did — No, let me finish! About your sister —” And here he broke off to assure himself that the door was indeed shut fast. “I did not lie to you, Mary, I swear —”

I interrupted him. “Oh! let us not talk about Elizabeth. She is not worth our concern —”

snub him — she has been saying some very cutting things, calling him *il bottegaio* and saying he smells of the shop — but if I do not object to how he has made his money, why should she for God's sake? When someone is as successful as Frederick, they should be accorded respect.”

I saw at once that her priorities had changed. For the present at least, there would be no more jokes about hastening Mr Purvis's demise. I took a breath and spoke of what concerned me more nearly: “George tells me, ma'am, that you and he and Sam will be removing to London the day after tomorrow.”

“Yes indeed, and not a moment too soon. I tell my mother she should be grateful. She may stay on at Netherfield now and have Jasper all to herself. Certainly I cannot live here any longer — that has been made *abundantly* clear to me.” A pause and then: “What think you of my pearls? Frederick bought them for me as a wedding gift. Are they not splendid?”

“Yes indeed.” (Privately, I thought them rather vulgar; some were the size of sparrows' eggs.)

“I confess I did not look to receive *quite* such a magnificent proof of affection. Although Jasper has certainly given me some very fine jewels in the past — this ring, for instance.” Showing me her

right hand, on the fourth finger of which was a large diamond. “Jasper gave it me when we were first together in Florence.” Contemplating the ring, head to one side. “I suppose I really ought to return it to him now. *Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind*. But then of course he might give it to some other young lady —” She broke off to peer out the window. “Here comes a carriage! Certainly not Frederick's — the horses look to be great lumbering farm beasts.”

“No, it is my family's, I believe.”

“Oh good God, I did not mean —” Laughing heartily. “But Frederick's carriage horses are particularly fine, you know — match greys and beautiful steppers, costing every bit of three hundred pounds.”

I marvelled how in a remarkably short space of time she had so immersed herself in Mr Purvis's world, informing herself about his business and possessions — particularly his possessions. But it would surely have been the same with Mr Coates. I imagined her in the early days of their love — sitting beside him while he wrote, mending his pens and admiring his prose.

My family's carriage had drawn to a standstill on the sweep meanwhile, and I watched as the

Fisticuffs Again Bring Venezuela Parliament to Halt

(Reuters, November 10, 2003)

Two Venezuelan lawmakers traded punches on the parliament floor Thursday, forcing a long-running and acrimonious debate on reforms to the Supreme Court to be suspended . . . It was the second time in six weeks that National Assembly deputies had come to blows and delayed debate of the reforms . . . Local television showed the two reeling across the floor of the assembly, grappling with each other and swinging punches.

MP in Punch-Up with Ministers in Zimbabwe's Parliament

(newzimbabwe.com, May 19, 2004)

Parliament exploded into a boxing ring on Tuesday when opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) MP Roy Bennett floored, then kicked out at two Cabinet Ministers Patrick Chinamasa and Didymus Mutasa . . . Bennett, speaking on Wednesday, refused to apologise but said it was “nothing to be proud of” . . . Some Zanu PF legislators, brandishing pistols, threatened to shoot Bennett during the brawl . . . Bennett was later escorted out of Parliament by the Sergeant in Arms.

Politicians Spark Uncivil Debate On Public Decency

(Johnson's Russia List, February 12, 2003)

Civility in Russian public discourse has in recent weeks become the subject of a debate that is itself

breaking new ground for its lack of civility. Two legislators exchanged insults and punches days after parliament passed legislation banning officials from . . . swearing and using insulting words, as well as slang and vulgar language.

MPs come to blows in Sri Lankan Parliament

(The Hindu, July 25, 2002)

. . . Sri Lanka's politics hit a new low today with backbenchers from the two main parties . . . trading blows in Parliament . . . The pandemonium broke out after the Leader of the Opposition, Mahinda Rajapakse, made a statement demanding an apology by a Minister, Ravi Karunanayaka, for levelling baseless charges that the Sri Lankan President, Chandrika Kumaratunga, had brought bombs in her handbag to kill Cabinet Ministers . . . None was injured in the brawls — punctuated by parliamentary papers flying across the House and dominated by personalised physical and verbal attacks by MPs — that suspended proceedings for close to an hour, sources in Parliament said.

Theatre of the Absurd

(Financial Gazette, Harare [Zimbabwe], May 28, 2004)

A few years ago, while reading the Afrikaans news bulletin on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's Channel 2, the newscaster, Rian Cloete, collapsed in a heap of uncontrollable laughter as he tried to introduce a particular news clip . . . The video clip that reduced Cloete, a seasoned newscaster, into fits of mirth before the cameras was about

an incident that had occurred in the legislative assembly of an Asian country . . . Apparently things got so heated in that august house that two members of parliament came to blows. In the ensuing pandemonium, more MPs joined in . . . Looking at that mass of humanity, it seemed that everyone was manhandling someone else without really caring who they were. No wonder Cloete lost control completely.

Finally, one of many examples from what might well be that “Asian country”:

S. Korea Leader Impeached after Parliament Fisticuffs

(*Arizona Daily Star*, March 12, 2004)

Parliament voted to impeach President Roh Moo-hyun on illegal

electioneering and incompetence charges today following hours of scuffles and dramatic protests . . . The impeachment passed by a vote of 193 to 2, well above the 181 votes needed for the measure . . . Many pro-Roh lawmakers had been forcibly removed from the chamber by Assembly security and were unable to vote . . . A shoving match was sparked earlier when pro-Roh Uri Party members tried to stop Assembly Speaker Park Kwan-yong from taking the podium, the only place he can call a vote . . . Assembly security officers then moved in to begin removing lawmakers trying to block his progress.

So much for the “inscrutable Oriental”.

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.godlikeproductions.com/news/item.php?keyid=5174&category=26&scategory=42>

<http://members.tripod.com/~ARAZ/brief2>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/868244.stm

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<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2002/07/25/stories/2002072502361200.htm>

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Mary Bennet

16

Smythe clearly believed she was conferring a great favour upon me — not that her manner was at all condescending, but as a highly paid and experienced ladies’ maid, volubly valued by Nonna, she knew her own worth. As her ministrations were tactful as well as skilful however, I was soon reconciled to being so intimately waited upon. Such attentions rarely came my way at Longbourn — Gil’s time being almost entirely taken up with Lydia and Kitty — and I reflected that while psalm-saying undoubtedly soothed the soul, luxuriating in a tub of warm scented water with Smythe working up a lather with the best Naples soap was equally restorative for the body.

Smythe was not happy with my hair, however. My smart new haircut still incorporated my old ringlets and now as we both gazed at my reflection in the glass — my hair still dripping from the bath — she drew back the wet strands into a small knot, twisted it up to the top of my head, and spoke just one word: “Better.”

Even without the aid of my spectacles, I could see that she was

right. Unframed by frilly curls, my face seemed less pathetic, less plain. “Much better,” I agreed, and we both smiled at my reflection.

An hour later when I entered the drawing room Mrs Allardyce exclaimed: “Good God, Mary! I didn’t recognize you.” She was alone in the room, standing before one of the long sashed windows overlooking the driveway and looking quite magnificent in a gown the colour of old gold with a great rope of pearls about her neck. “Come let me look at you. Smythe’s handiwork, eh? A vast improvement, I must say.”

When one is not a beauty, to receive even lukewarm personal praise is gratifying and I was eager to hear more. But she had turned back to the window, saying: “This promises to be an interesting evening.”

After a moment’s mental rehearsal, I said: “I have heard the news, ma’am — the news of your betrothal. I’m sure I wish both you and Mr Purvis very happy.”

“Why, thank you.” She glanced down at me, smiling her unsatisfactory smile. “I am on the watch for him now as you may gather. I do not want my mother to