



MALCOLM BOWIE

Malcolm MacNaughtan Bowie

1943–2007

WHEN MALCOLM BOWIE (MMB) was appointed from an assistant lectureship at the University of East Anglia to one in Cambridge in 1969, it was as a specialist in difficult poets in French beginning with ‘M’: his thesis published in 1973 as his first book was on Henri Michaux (1899–1984);¹ he was already working on Mallarmé.² These are writers of involuted complexity, to read whom both a sensitivity to how word play plays and to how French prosody in poetry or prose works were essential. Michaux’s mix of mind-altering drugs, literature, and amazing drawings produced under the influence of mescaline was not a common-or-garden choice for a thesis, even if this was the 1960s. These studies by Bowie were followed by work on mind-altering psychoanalysis: on Freud, and on Lacan—the latter also famous for a prose style not uninfluenced by Mallarmé’s. And Malcolm Bowie’s last full study, *Proust among the Stars* (1998),³ was itself a fine piece of writing, a book that, coming at a particular point in the mediatisation of this novelist through films and a new translation, brought off a *coup* of a kind which is rather rare: it is accessible to a wide public, and it is interesting to the specialist. It received the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in 2001.

This intellectual development is both full of surprises and truly consistent—it moves from the possibly minor to the undoubtedly major, via a concern with far reaches of the mind, with psychoanalysis and ‘theory’ (I shall comment briefly later on my guarding this word with punctuation)

¹ *Henri Michaux: A Study of his Literary Works* (Oxford, 1973).

² *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge, 1978).

³ *Proust among the Stars* (London, 1998).

and via a continuous thinking about aesthetics which is sometimes sub-jacent—for example, the title of the Proust book refers to a magnificent passage in the very last part of that huge novel, both directed and meandering, which avers: ‘autant qu’il y a d’artistes originaux, autant nous avons de mondes à notre disposition, plus différents les uns des autres que ceux qui roulent dans l’infini’.⁴ This glancing allusion in MMB’s title, so discrete, so apposite, is typical of much of his other writing. For his interests in psychoanalysis, as in difficult poets in prose or verse, are put forward in what is to my mind one of the two exceptional aspects of his life and work. This is his quite extraordinarily expressive and original style. The second exceptional aspect is the very great distinction of his career: the posts he held and his conduct therein. Here is found a noteworthy contrast: the firm integration into the highest reaches of the national academic system and his continuous forwarding of the marginal, the marginalised or the outright new, whether individuals, texts or ideas. I shall begin with the latter aspect, with his career.

His last post was that of Master of Christ’s College, Cambridge to which he was elected in 2002. He had been the Marshal Foch Professor of French at Oxford, and a Fellow of All Souls (1992–2002), having earlier been Professor of French at Queen Mary, University of London. He was elected to the British Academy in 1993, and was a Member of Council and Research Posts Co-ordinator there (1999–2002). It is seldom that such confidence as Christ’s showed has been accorded to a Modern Linguist, for languages in this country tend to be an unfavoured, when not disregarded, child of the intellect. How did this path evolve? Malcolm’s academic career, very distinguished as it was, had revealed early on his remarkable physical and intellectual energy and his capacity for renewal of himself and of institutions. He was born on 5 May 1943 in Aldeburgh, Suffolk, of parents who were both nurses. His father had brought back children’s books in French from France after the war, and this early seed possibly led at Woodbridge School, outside Aldeburgh, to his turning to French as one of his A levels (these were French, English and History), and his choice of French and English as his subject of study at the University of Edinburgh, where he took a First Class degree. He removed to the University of Sussex to do a D.Phil. on Henri Michaux with Christophe Campos, and while still a post-graduate student was

⁴ Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, éd. Pierre Clarac et André Ferré (Paris, 1959), vol. 3, p. 896.

appointed to an Assistant Lectureship in European Studies (French) at the University of East Anglia.

Edinburgh, the place of his undergraduate studies, has left several signs of its influence in his work, the National Gallery of Scotland in particular occurring at least twice, in subtle and crucial ways. In Bowie's *Psychoanalysis and the Future of Theory* (Oxford, 1993), the analysis of its wonderful canvas by Giambattista Tiepolo, *The Finding of Moses*, testifies to the repeated and reflecting visits he must have made, for he picks out a detail, a repetition of outline in the duenna's head and in the skyline, showing how the barely noticeable can pull together vertically the dynamics of a complex construction which at first glance might seem lateral. A detail from Titian's *Diana and Acteon*, also conserved there, appears on the cover of *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge, 1987). The disconcerted Acteon needs to answer for the analysis the psychoanalyst Lacan makes of his encounter with the goddess. So that the continuous sensitivity to the plastic arts, written about or when close up to, showed itself as early as his first book, and was it seems nourished by that remarkable gallery. And the appointment at UEA to a post in European Studies, though it was modish at the time to generalise the title of what was sometimes in fact a standard French course slightly revisited, in Malcolm's case mirrors what he was to do in his writing—always applying a geographically wide sweep, always thinking beyond the parish.

With his first post, he returned to the region of his birth, and remained there when in 1969 he was appointed Assistant Lecturer in French at the University of Cambridge and made Fellow of Clare College. In 1976 he removed to the East End of London, to the Professorship of French Language and Literature in the University of London, Queen Mary College, where he acted as Head of Department for thirteen years, creating in particular a remarkable graduate school. When the Draper's Chair of French at Cambridge was advertised in the 1980s, the electors, for reasons best known to themselves, steadfastly ignored his candidature. Even at the time, the problem seemed to lie with the structures of the committees and Modern and Medieval Faculty at Cambridge and not with him. A comparable mistake, for seen retrospectively this is what it was, would have been most unlikely to have occurred in the sciences at Cambridge at that time. In 1992 he moved to Oxford and the Marshal Foch Chair.

This bare statement of posts held does not convey what MMB actually accomplished. He became a kind of articulation in both senses of

that word—a pivot between different tendencies in French studies, someone who expressed the new directions the study of French was taking in the UK without losing sight of a long tradition of scholarly work. For, on the one hand, he was deeply involved in mainstream not to say conservative French studies. He worked closely with the Mallarmé scholar, Lloyd Austin, who himself had written a revolutionary work on Baudelaire, *L'univers poétique de Baudelaire: symbolisme et symbolique* (Paris, 1956), but who now, by the late 1970s and facing the effect on French studies of the great flourishing of thought and criticism in France in the 1960s (Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva *et al.*), had become openly hostile to critical innovation. MMB was for a while at any rate able to keep Austin's confidence, working with him on the main British journal in the subject, *French Studies*, while encouraging younger French specialists to found groups and journals which opened to the new work. In 1980, he succeeded Austin as General Editor of *French Studies*. From that position, he could unfold the journal, out towards a pluralism and an innovation which were sorely needed. He was in fact reversing the situation that had operated only a few years back, being able to keep the confidence of the younger colleagues while at the same time encouraging those whose work was one of erudition and scholarship. It was from the position that MMB represented that it became possible to publish in England works on Modern Language subjects which were at once speculative and learned.

To be as active as he was on both these fronts, he needed sometimes to be something of a democratic entrepreneur. He could have an idea and get the idea implemented by setting up attractive possibilities of shooting and scoring, to use a football metaphor. But not for himself, for others. He could give actuality to others' aspirations and intentions which were half formed, even half baked. He could persuade or encourage or manoeuvre the would-be baker into successful acts or thoughts, which then became the baker's own. This was intellectual generosity on a rare scale, even if it sometimes involved others ghosting for him in administrative duties. He could enable the right idea or the right agent or agency to emerge when it was needed—for example, the Modern Critical Theory Group, set up in 1983 in the late David Kelley's smoke-filled Cambridge room, A3, New Court, Trinity. This gave rise to the group's offshoot, the journal *Paragraph*, designed to publish work that was unlikely to make it between the covers of staid reviews, nor always into the *French Studies* he was currently editing. What made this possible was a strong strategic intention. MMB had a rare capacity to combine two senses of time: to work for the long term—the improvement of the quality and standing of

French studies in the United Kingdom, and indeed more widely in the Anglophone community by enabling it to move in the new directions; to act fast in the short term, that is, to seize without hesitation exactly the right moment as it sped by, as for the foundation of *Paragraph*. His commitment to the journal was demonstrated to the end—already very ill, he attended a meeting of editors in Dublin in the summer of 2006.

So, again for example, he used his considerable energy and powers of persuasion to react to the decision of the University of London and its Vice-Chancellor Brian Flowers to implement an idea conceived by the Romance Languages Board, by creating the Romance Languages Institute in 1989, and to appoint him its first Director. He showed not merely his persistence but also his vision here, for though some other subjects might have much more venerable intellectual pedigrees, Philosophy, for instance, it was only later that an Institute was created for it. The university could then bring these institutes together with yet other, more secure and ancient institutions, the Warburg for instance, or the Institute for Historical Research, into the School of Advanced Study. It is noteworthy that London already had an Institute of German Studies, founded by Professor Leonard Willoughby in 1950, which in a wonderful gesture of hope looking beyond actual horrors, had already been mooted in 1943, around the turn of World War II. This institute already had a remarkable library, and was to have a truly remarkable librarian, William Abbey. The founding of the Romance Languages Institute, now by a fusion the German and Romance Languages Institute, was not the jockeying for power or the marking out of a territory within a university that such ventures sometimes are or are taken to be. It was the creation of a cross-university, research-driven institution, which had networking contacts throughout the world. Looking back on this, one can only be struck by MMB's prescience, by his understanding of the cumulative effect of such institutions, and how they might develop and develop the subjects within them. Instead of confining his attention to his own subject within the narrow bounds of a single college, he gave to it a vigour and a sense of its own intellectual weight which was new for French. Above all, he gave it his time. In a disseminated university, with a subject, Modern Languages, which is essentially fissiparous, even quarrelsome, the engendering of the will to collaborate in this way, not to speak of thinking about the funding, is a remarkable achievement, and it was due very largely to MMB.

He was the Institute's first Director, ran its vigorous seminar programme and gave this a strong international profile by his invitations. He enabled the appointment of distinguished Visiting Fellows, among whom

have been the important American critic, Leo Bersani, Berkeley, the cultural historian, Sander P. Gilman, Emory, the Italian writer Umberto Eco (author of *The Name of the Rose* and of much else beside), Bologna, and the academic critics and historians Vittore Branca, University of Venice, Cesare Segre, Padua, and Marc Fumaroli, Collège de France. He also founded the *Journal* associated with it.

The same pattern of activity was repeated once more on his move to Oxford, though with slightly different results: there he set up the European Humanities Research Centre (EHRC), followed by an associated publishing venture, *Legenda*. This move was an attempted solution to three difficulties: the first, the extent to which Arts subjects often operate in multilateral independence, not to say ignorance, and resist collaboration, or even any building of a sense of common purpose; the second, already mentioned, the disregard in which study of languages in the broadest sense has been held; the final difficulty, like the first affecting not just languages but all arts subjects, the difficulty for young scholars of getting their work published with a reputable publisher. This latter difficulty has grown, as has grown in importance the solution MMB's efforts offered, so that *Legenda* now publishes not merely work of intellectuals in the United Kingdom, but also those of the English speaking world. American academics turn to it and far from being the local publisher it might have been, it has earned respect both for the quality of its productions and for the geographic spread it has acquired. It has now been taken over by the Modern Humanities Research Association, the editorial centre however staying in Oxford. I personally regret that not all academics are as willing as was MMB to work to keep publishing ventures within the universities even if it means running the associated risks. In particular, in Oxford, one can regret that even the promise of a \$1million legacy to the foundation obtained by MMB from the US did not secure the support of the Humanities Division, nor prevent ultimately the splitting of the activities of the EHRC, which remain in Oxford, from those of *Legenda*. Be that as it may, the EHRC's activities continue: it recently for instance hosted an important conference on the transition from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century opera, and this is precisely the sort of cross-subject, cross-national enterprise that MMB envisaged, and that can strengthen all humanities studies.

In sum, however, it seems that collaboration between different Arts subjects, each with their own traditions and sometimes with their own research values, is very difficult to achieve. Retrospectively, the outcome of this latter venture in Oxford appears nearly inevitable, given the suspi-

cion of other Arts faculties in regard to what they deemed a modern languages initiative, and their unwillingness to spend money on it. The university policy is not to commit to large enterprises, which may potentially require in the future large amounts of further money, unless such an enterprise has already been decided on. One can well understand that with possibly the finest university press in the world already within its confines, it was felt that a much smaller, more fragile enterprise was surplus to requirements. But nevertheless, the outcomes of this kind of decision are going to be particularly important to the future of academic publishing, given the reduced activity of Cambridge University Press in some academic areas and the consequent transfer of much of its natural client base to the Oxford University Press. *Legenda's* growth in reputation as an active promoter of monographs within the language area, wherein in particular excellent short books developed out of these can be published, is an important activity. One might imagine that a university system the size of the UK's, with its contribution to the national economy, could sustain more than two academic publishers which have as a major part of their activity the publishing of serious monographs containing new material or views.

By the founding of *Legenda*, MMB had countered the then shabby response of Cambridge University Press to the slipping of modern languages in the academic importance scale, which was to wind down and then abolish the very distinguished book series he had founded in 1980 and to which he gave so much time, *Cambridge Studies in French*. Now, with the new possibility of reanimating their back lists through the web and 'print on demand', the dual problem of low sales for some academic works and the costs of stocking copies more than a few years has been addressed by CUP, while retaining their principal advantage: intellectually powerful editors, and a quite exceptional standard of copy-editing. Anyone who published in *Cambridge Studies in French* will know the combination of vision and grasp of detail that MMB brought to it, will have received back their typescript with several squiggles, queries, suggestions, worries, per page. None of these were trivial, nor the trivial power-playing that general editors sometimes display. On the contrary, they revealed their originator's deep intellectual generosity, and deep intellect.

What was common to his activity at the Institute of Romance Studies, and then at the European Humanities Research Centre, was the anchoring of a publishing venture onto a specially constructed institutional structure, one which tapped into several different organisms. This combination of institutional savvy and vision together with the energy and

patience to push the ideas through is uncommon. But there is more, and not surprisingly it is more complicated. The activity in publishing was in part product of an approach to modern languages which, although I never heard MMB express it programmatically, seems to underlie some considerable part of what he was and did. Modern linguists, good ones but not professional academics, have often been actors (the actors Eleanor Bron, Michael Redgrave, are examples) or spies: either those who can take onto their outward person the different being involved in fluent self-expression in a tongue not their own and, indeed, who can add the different body languages, the hand or eye or head movements which are essential parts of many languages, though not written down; or those who enjoy spying out in Jamesian fashion what they think they perceive going on under expression, the semi-revealed semi-hidden meanings, the social implications, the signals of emotion half suppressed. MMB's relation to French seems to me to have been not the first, that of the actor—he seldom if ever wrote directly in French—but perhaps the second. Yet—leavened not with aggressive scoping, but produced by a generosity, a turning out to others. And yet—once more a 'yet'—it is not certain that this was a willingness to understand them on their own terms but, rather, a meeting of one point of view from another, from what was in effect an original and inventive relation to his own language, as manifested in his style. It is this I shall address at the end of this memoir.

Malcolm did not then canton himself in the French language, nor side merely with French interests, either in his work in the academy, or in his writing. For instance, he was a vigorous supporter in Oxford of those who argued that 'modern European languages' should not just mean languages of the Congress of Vienna countries or in the purely national sense. He went to some trouble to build partnerships with a group of ex-Soviet Yiddish scholars in the town of Oxford but not in the University—they were running, for example, summer-schools for Jewish students. And it was characteristic of MMB that he was not interested in arguments about their status. He managed to establish and get funds for a biennial international Yiddish conference at Oxford. He personally did all of the development work involved, flying out to New York, etc., and becoming quite close to the endowers of the event. Characteristically, MMB did not do all this through the university development office (which, for reasons previously given in relation to *Legenda*, would not in any case have thought this a priority). The numbers attending have never been large—the field is still small—but the recognition provided by the Mendel Friedman conference, an endowed regular conference at Oxford, means a

great deal to that community. In addition, he created 'Studies in Yiddish' as a *Legenda* series.

He also saw much more widely than his own college—he was, I have been told, a faithful if sometimes impatient attendee at the endless meetings of the old University of London concerning its 'consolidation'. He did pick which meetings to attend quite carefully, I am told, and when he was there it was to get things done, rather than as a meeting and administration junkie. I crossed his path one morning in the Institute of Romance Studies, in the middle of a conference held other where, and where we both should probably have been. 'I can't bear being shut inside someone else's head for more than a certain time' was his remark, as we each sat down and each opened a book for a while. But where the matter was crucial he gave attention and time—he acted on the Research Assessment Exercise French panel twice, in 1992 and 1996, a time-consuming and important and blood-pressure raising activity if there ever was one. The list of committees, national and local, on which he sat at one time or another is extremely long and testifies to his sense of corporate solidarity with his colleagues.

At Queen Mary, and later at Oxford, MMB attracted an important and very numerous group of research students, *in toto* amounting to more than forty. He was, I have been told, extremely practical in the advice he gave on submitted work, examining students' work carefully and in detail, bringing to bear his own wide reading and sensitivity to the way his subject, French, was developing, to suggest topics, insist on further reading or on the contrary on the confining of a subject to the possible as opposed to the desirable to the graduate student. He was blind to age and gender and provenance so that at Queen Mary a highly disparate and extremely interesting group of Ph.D. students gathered, among them the wife of a rock star, a high-up civil servant, a flight attendant. Not all finished their thesis (but then none or hardly any were on public money, but were paying their way); all contributed liveliness and engagement in their subject to graduate discussions and out of these groups at London and then at Oxford did come work of real importance: on Foucault and his style, on the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, on necrophilia and nineteenth-century literature. On the other hand, he was perhaps less worldly in his suggestions about the mapping out of future career paths than he might have been—here, like some of his friends and others of his age group, he was perhaps simply out of sympathy with the pared down approach to research and the benchmarking, flagging *e tutti quanti*, which had started to go on and which in the long run is not likely to increase the value of

the intellectual life of the nation even as it increases some types of equity. His public persona was one with natural authority, the more easily accepted by others in that his manner, rather than his speech, was suspicious of hierarchy or simply of commonplaces too easily accepted. In public he was cautious and inventive about how to get round these. Moreover, his nature led him to negotiate rather than to draw a line, and in committees he had sometimes to leave that to others. He had no complacency, but no trivial tone of rebellion in what he said, either.

I have pointed to the two sides of his career: its great distinction in terms of posts occupied, and his helping on of the undervalued or the difficult new. I turn now to his own publications, which exhibit the same qualities. The importance he attached to a contribution to public thinking is evident in the time and care with which he constantly reviewed works not just for learned journals, like *French Studies*, but also for periodicals with a less limited readership, the *Cambridge Review*, for instance, and most especially, the *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)*. These reviews represent a very considerable amount of writing, and show clearly his encompassing mind, the way in which he takes in what is going on in the wider intellectual world around. His last review in the *TLS* appeared only a few weeks before his death. Its subject points to a very visible and important aspect of his work, so far not mentioned here: his writing on music. It was a leading article for the *TLS*, a review of Richard Stokes's *The Book of Lieder*.⁵

Music, for MMB as for two of his main subjects, Mallarmé and Proust, figures largely not just in his writings, but in his attitudes. Vocal music, especially. For Mallarmé, subject of his second book, the link with music might seem biographically obvious (he wrote on Wagner, and he knew Debussy) as well as intellectually evident: Mallarmé is a poet who does not press out in explicit themes and words what is implied in his poems. He leaves implicit or even unsaid in words some of the most important effects of those words. What Mallarmé means might seem abstract, in the sense of non-recoverable by other language, being suggested in ways which can seem either ponderous or trivial, too light, but certainly not certain. There is a sense in which Mallarmé is close to Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear, in that some of his finest poetry may have as a near-relative, nonsense poetry.

Now, non-vocal music seemed an even more far going exercise in emptiness of meaning to the eighteenth century. 'Sonate, que me veu-

⁵ *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 Dec. 2007, 3–4.

tu?’ demanded Fontenelle, and the question was repeated endlessly by music critics throughout the century. It was not until the development of theories about the origin of language out of natural cries, with Condillac and Rousseau, that musical melody could be seen as part of an evolution of corporal symptoms—trembling, dancing, crying out—in response to experience, and thus as a possible line of body reactions, the foremost of which were sign-sounds on a par with language in their ability to convey feeling, perhaps even ideas. This is a powerful ideological and aesthetic force in the development of early Romantic music.

Opera was of course a major eighteenth-century genre and, however implausible were the operatic plots, no one could or would have wanted to argue that the music in that context had no meaning. Fontenelle’s slightly impudent question devalues instrumental music even when, as quite frequently in the eighteenth century, as ‘programme music’ it is intended to convey the impression of a definite series of objects, scenes or events. When it is descriptive music, in fact. Fontenelle’s question cannot be posed of opera. There the drama supports the sense though the actual words of the libretto may be minimal, as could be argued even of such a great opera as Bartok’s *Bluebeard’s Castle*, indeed even of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, where the self-authored text is one of great beauty and theatrical effect. MMB’s programme notes to Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, a production first staged at Covent Garden, in 1994, are outstanding in the way they bring together in their argument musical and dramatic structure. No wonder they have been reprinted, reused at every almost-new production of that opera staged at the Royal Opera House since then. For in this opera, subtle, ambiguous, so much more is going on than the words sung, than the sense suggested by the music, than the quadrille performed by the two couples of lovers as they act out what the title suggests is already programmed before the machinations of the older man and meneur de jeu, don Alfonso, begin. MMB’s description of the interweaving of musical sound and theatrical sense as the lovers sing is quite exceptionally powerful, the set of brief paragraphs is simply the best account that this opera-goer, at any rate, has read of the opera. And the beautiful friction between the music, apparently so feeling, so deep, and the words and plot, so intelligently trivial, so worldly wise (‘we’ve seen it all before’) strikes at the certainties we might have, raising the problem that literature and great literary criticism turn to: what is there in what we feel and go through that is, perhaps not ineffable, but escaping imprisonment in words?

To this, the further, underlying question, pointed to by Fontenelle, provides some kind of answer. What does a sonata, wordless music, want

of me? he asks. In other words, what does it cause me to seek? What does it mean? (remembering that ‘vouloir dire’ means ‘to mean’). But what does it want of me? This is a question that MMB circles round in his many articles and reviews that relate to music. In a posthumously published article, whose title asks ‘Is music criticism criticism?’,⁶ we get an answer, of sorts, to both questions, Fontenelle’s and his title’s. Of sorts, because both raise in fundamental ways the question of relation between language and music.

This article shows a remarkable technical understanding of different types of music, Bellini as well as Chopin, for instance. But it argues for analysis which can ‘do’ not merely the technical, the style of construction (‘cantilena’ or ‘broken continuity’, for instance) but can describe what music experience is or has just been. Thus, MMB says, even Edward Said has stayed with a unilateral relation of the sonata form as practised by the late Mozart to imperial Vienna. But ‘Said has nothing to say about the extremes of tonal uncertainty and waywardness the great Viennese composers discovered there.’ The daylight, to which Einstein describes Mozart returning at the end of the last three symphonies, after their radical modulations, ‘still has’, MMB argues, ‘the dark caught inside it’. There is ‘a spoiled echo between start and close’. The whole article is an illustration of what it is arguing for: the use of the powers of style and of writing to open one art to another. ‘Good criticism is an art of translation’; ‘a willingness on the part of writers on music to use a more varied verbal palette can actually bring us closer to the real world of musical experience, and to the wonderfully impure acts of translation, of provocation, of risk-taking, and of abyssmanship that musical experience involves’.

This standpoint with its idea of danger, of risk, of the abyss, owes to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, its music at its end garlanded over the abyss opening down beneath the hero, and is somewhat in debt, however remotely, to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1871). Opera for its early proponents, the Florentine Camerata, was a rebirth of ancient tragedy: rich, stately, striking and striking home. It was not so for Nietzsche—tragedy had dwindled out of Greek tragedy as event experienced in common and beyond language, to a localised, personalised feeling, one privately maintained and maintained in private. That danger also became a lived one for Nietzsche, for the professor of classical philology. A century later, however, the danger is different. It is

⁶ In *In(ter)discipline: New Languages for Criticism*, ed. Gillian Beer, Malcolm Bowie and Beate Perrey (Oxford, 2007), pp. 67–73.

the risk taken first with subject: in an intellectual world which in many ways is the opposite of globalised, how to speak of subjects other than that in which one is trained, without touching the dilettantish? The personal solution with MMB lies in the very great quality of his response to music—more than to painting, to my mind. But there is a more important solution, intellectual this one, which lies with language: an exploration of how to touch the edge of the non-discursive without falling inwards into babble. And the solution cannot, by the very definition of the problem, be permanent. It can be obtained momentarily by style, by the quality of writing. He considers this difficulty in music, but especially in his work on difficult poets. In his writing on Mallarmé's 'Prose pour des Esseintes', for instance,⁷ he brings in composers, Bach and Schoenberg, who resemble each other more than would say Monteverdi and Debussy. They may be examples, but they are not ciphers, X where X writes music. So in the argument, we are being taken by the examples beyond music as non-vocal, as instrumental to a particular type of non-discursivity.

This works in the following way. The example from Bach's *Musical Offering* is of a *ricercar* (see the Appendix to the present Memoir). (A *ricercar* is an early form of fugue.) The fugue, in spite of its name, 'flight', is of course a highly constrained musical form in which the voices or parts enter singly and where each refers to each other in precise ways. This fugal relation of an internally created necessity between the variants of the theme, allowing us to follow the way they are being bound up into a whole, is not present, we are told, in Mallarmé's 'Prose pour des Esseintes'. Here with Mallarmé, we are told, the parts to be related are already independent, and could be self-standing. MMB does not develop this at this point in the book, but what we have is a major pointer to a new kind of technique of composition, one that will be resolutely modern (we only have to think of Cubism, soon to develop—the date of *Prose* is 1885—and its strictness of structural organisation within the picture plane, together with its strong visual impression of fragmentation).

MMB goes on to defend this holding of diverse non-dovetailing systems in one's head (with the backing of quotations from William Empson, Michel Serres, and Julia Kristeva, omitted in the excerpt given in the Appendix to this Memoir). Here there is a distinction between musical and propositional argument. To hold diverse propositional systems in one's head and then act would surely involve an ethical lapse: schizoid action, double-mindedness. It is through poetry that one can do

⁷ Bowie, *Mallarmé*.

this and stay sane and same. The Empsonian answer is close to that of Nietzschean tragedy: ‘the two systems of judgement are forced into open conflict before the reader. Such a process, one might imagine, could pierce to regions that underlie the whole structure of our thought.’⁸ The Serres answer describes a setting up of continuous translation between systems and from their difference are generated a network and knowledge. The Kristevan response allows for a contest between reduced syntax and repeated phonemes, from which develops a new unity, bearing a meaning not located in individual words and phrases, a ‘polymorphisme sémantique’.

You notice that the last paragraph I have given in the Appendix puts on a kind of brake to the unifying operated by Serres and Kristeva, especially to the latter’s joyful, triumphant polylogicism. It starts with a Heideggerian ‘und dennoch’, room is made for a quite different underlying tone, a hardly audible sound, that of intellectual defeat and bodily death. This is a modulation noticeable in Malcolm’s criticism, as very occasionally in his conversation: and it is again found in a magnificent paragraph, further on in the book:

Mallarmé writes about death with unmatched intensity, but its role in these poems is not easy to characterise. For although death is not just immanent to them, neither is it a detachable theme, issue or debating point. Rather it arises urgently within the plural poetic texture as an uncrossable limitation placed upon meaning, or as an arbitrary cessation of meaning against which there is no appeal.⁹

The importance of this stabilising tonality in an account of a poet like Mallarmé cannot be overestimated, for it allows a shadow to cross and vary the light, meaning and definition to dapple the loss of meaning.

Was Bach, in the passage reproduced in the Appendix, a fleeting mention, designed to introduce the possibility of a fully harmonised structure, where different parts respond to each other both simultaneously and in temporal succession? A closed structure, in other words? The example’s function is stronger than that. Its similarity to Mallarmé, the highly complex, abstract even, organisation, the ‘multitude of over-lapping and intersecting structures’ makes more strident its difference: Mallarmé is relating the unrelatable (as Derrida will say, we have a ‘rapport sans rapport’). As a result, any structure the poem creates, however strong, is not closed—and I would argue, though will not do so here, that this analysis

⁸ MMB quoting *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, second edition (London, 1947), p. 192.

⁹ Bowie, *Mallarmé*, pp.152–3.

of MMB's helps us to see that this is true even when Mallarmé writes in the ultimate closed form, the sonnet. MMB here could seem to be offering the reader a trenchant 'either/or': Mallarmé's poem as existential meaning OR salonard triviality. It is the reference to death in the last paragraph given in the Appendix that undoes the simplicity of the alternatives. It is here that one begins to understand the importance of the way MMB writes. The quotation from E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* now in our days turned into a social slogan is given in the negative ('only disconnect'), a drama is being put on for us, not just an account of Mallarmé being given. But this drama is being staged with a tact, a quietness which presses the alternatives without allowing them to swing noisily. The tact and quietness arise at least in part from the reprise in their expression of Mallarméen themes—the vanishing and the rising up: 'je dis une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets'.¹⁰

Perhaps the most important part of MMB's writing is that on psychoanalysis.¹¹ But he does not remain an expositor. It is the same problem that drew his attention to difficult poetry that urged him towards Freud and Lacan: how to speak of what is more than or less than verbal in discursive speech. The poet, Mallarmé, can touch the edge of the unsayable without making ways into the portentous or descending into babble, though suggesting both moves, in what is at once a kind of trammelling of discourse and a pluralising of it. But where the 'talking cure' is a making verbal, how can a descent into the banal, the repeated or the rigid be avoided?

With Lacan, it can be through his inventive, not to say show-off way of writing. In 1993, MMB wrote an article in which he brought together two things in the title: 'Mallarmé and Lacan: theory as word-play'.¹² The importance of Mallarmé for Lacan, as for Derrida, was no secret. But what fascinated MMB here, as elsewhere, for instance visibly in the passage from the Mallarmé book given in the Appendix, is the way the rubbing up together of plenitude and triviality is allowed. The self-generation of Lacan's prose is what MMB makes for in his *Lacan*, not as

¹⁰ Mallarmé, 'Crise de Vers', *Mallarmé Œuvres complètes*, éd. Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1961), p. 368.

¹¹ Citing books only: *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge, 1987); *Lacan* (London [Fontana Modern Masters] and Cambridge, MA, 1991); *Psychoanalysis and the Future of Theory* (Oxford, 1993).

¹² *Dalhousie French Studies*, 25 (1993), 69–77.

do most works aiming to be short guides to that elusive thinker, for definitions of ‘little a’, of the signifier, or of the signified. It is worth examining how MMB does this. He shows how Lacan overwrites Freud, so to speak, and does this with the most remarkable writing of his own which is at once descriptive and analytic, speaking of ‘the delicate task of disengaging the essential Freudian message from the words Freud actually wrote. It is one of numerous formulations in which the signifier becomes a versatile topological space, a device for plotting and replotting the itineraries of Lacan’s empty subject [. . .] It is a series of events within language, a procession of turns, tropes and inflections’ (p. 76).¹³ The reader remembers that ‘theory’ in Greek has ‘public spectacle’, often a procession, as one of its meanings, and here begins to understand the fascination Lacan held for MMB. Language is an ‘endlessly mobile space in which the Subject and its Other are made, dissolved and remade’ (p. 82). And MMB hooks this into ‘the main provocations’ not just of some of Lacan’s work, but everywhere there: ‘Woman is not all there’, she is (poor soul) ‘an endless sequence of projections and fabrications.’ MMB hints at an analogy, perhaps more, between Woman and Language for Lacan: ‘for the discussion of his cancelled Woman, Lacan has invented a language that is weighty and flashy, solemn and mischievous, mythopoeic and disabused’ (p. 151). Reading his work, it looks as if MMB’s remarkable renewal of the language in which psychoanalysis can be written about appears as a response to the challenge of music, and the need to face, or to face off Lacan. And ultimately, this renewal is also of his own critical language.

For he can run close to a text, picking for instance on a particular use of rhyme, but so that it means without being driven into significance, indeed so that it can spread meaning and yet remain as if with a needle moving round ‘empty’. ‘The argument of the poem [“Prose pour des Esseintes”] is such that the lacunary character of rhyme becomes as it were the minimal index of a lacunary cosmological scheme—the unbridgeable gulf that exists between metre and syntax.’¹⁴ These close commentaries are often brilliant but never just left there nor hung out like some writing on a signpost. This is not surprising—one cannot but note that the word ‘theory’ appears in the title of two of MMB’s books.

‘Theory’ in much cultural studies or present day literary criticism appears as the *bloodless phantasm* of philosophy.¹⁵ Philosophy has a two

¹³ The page references here are to Bowie, *Lacan*, see above, n. 11.

¹⁴ ‘Mallarmé and Lacan: Theory as Word Play’, p. 71.

¹⁵ Frege quoting Virgil, applying the phrase to Husserl.

and a half-thousand-year old tradition, complex, multilingual; while it appeals to many as being a kind of bedrock of thinking, it is also difficult, it can be technical, and it has revered and worrying producers, from St Augustine to Derrida. 'Theory' seems 'philosophy-lite'. Spinning attitudes rather than weaving thought. So why does MMB use it? One reason may be sought in his writings on music. Discourse and other forms of mental experience and expression, music or poetry for instance, can never match each other feature by feature. The mental activity which can map that misalignment is 'theory'. MMB gives a sympathetic and yet genially amused account of Freud, the self-proclaimed objective scientist, who yet ceaselessly theorises, who constantly starts up his theorising again after each new development of a new major concept. And against this, he salutes Lacan's 'demythologizing intelligence' as his 'most remarkable legacy'.¹⁶ Lacan, for MMB, fragments, refuses easy unity, or perhaps any unity, of the psyche. Yet MMB never in his amused and wilfully magnanimous comprehension of Lacan, takes himself and his own writing into a logic-less land 'where differences of a logical kind are simply talked away'. On the contrary, he can invent analogies where Heidegger for instance, seen in a deftly indicated but not at all spelled-out relation to Lacan, is said to 'invent [. . .] here in these paradox-laden formulæ, [. . .] a respiratory system for Being in time'.¹⁷ Far from being history, history of Being, or even history of psychoanalysis, we ourselves get a wonderfully sharp, wonderfully allusive piece of help in understanding these three most difficult thinkers. 'Theory' then seems to be what MMB's own use of language will enable him to construct as duck-boards between one thinker and another, preventing us from sinking through the unsafe clarity of the greenhouse shell that our culture, or at any rate our buzz of commentary and commentators, has spun out around them.

Proust, Lacan, Freud are all of them great alterers of experience for MMB. Their works act as transformers, changers of voltage, connections on our cultural grids allowing transition, metamorphosis, movement. These flickering variations become conquered alterations in our awareness. This in spite of the depredations of their followers, their varnishes of 'self-righteousness', their lack of ingenuity, their sorting and carding and indexing, when faced with the 'realms of competing drives, incompatible systems, irreconcilable agencies and dispositions' that were those of these great masters. In his writing on these masters, MMB can both act

¹⁶ *Lacan*, p. 203.

¹⁷ *Psychoanalysis and the Future of Theory*, p. 32.

in surveying mode, and home in on a detail to unfold it and force it momentarily at any rate into meaning something. And in all this later writing, he is conscious of the wavering sea shore, constantly moving between the truth and the lie. The materials fashioned by Proust, Lacan and Freud are constructs, and the ‘panoramic spectacle of fiction in human affairs creates both an extreme scepticism about their own constructs and an extreme appetite for styles of awareness and philosophical vantage points that would allow the notion of veracity to be rescued and rehabilitated’. So that theory, as Terence Cave, in the finest obituary for MMB (it will be published in *Paragraph* in 2009), pointed out to discuss after quoting him, is ‘theory tinged literary criticism’. There is, for MMB, a deep connecting tunnel between theory and fiction.

The passages on the writing round death in Mallarmé that MMB wrote for a lecture given to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Institute of Romance Studies’ founding,¹⁸ are very moving—‘Mallarmé’s Last Things’ were in a different sense of those last two words, MMB’s also. Many years earlier, I had learned how sensitive to death he was, especially untimely death, the death of the young, in something he said about his time as a tutor at Clare College. Many of us have strategies to deal with this kind of untimeliness, pushing it or fraying it so that we can forget. His remark showed that he did not do this—perhaps, as he says of Mallarmé, he had ‘already paced out the ground of human mortality from many different directions’.¹⁹ He was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in 2004. He died on 28 January 2007.

MARIAN HOBSON
Fellow of the Academy

Note. This Memoir is greatly in the debt of several people for much of the information and advice on which it is based, and for discussion of it at an earlier stage: principally, Alison Finch (Mrs Bowie); but also Terence Cave, Lisa Downing, Stephen Forcer, Michel Jeanneret, Graham Nelson, Ritchie Robertson, Naomi Segal. It was written in thought of Jonathan Young, †2005, aged 22.

¹⁸ *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies*, 8 (2000), 1–11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Appendix

Excerpt from Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult*, p. 86

... the sheer unlikelihood of Mallarmé's achievement: how is it that passion so intense, thinking so incisive and virtuosity so insolent and ample could have found their way into exactly this alliance? Admirers of Bach will often find themselves asking the same sort of question when listening to, say, the six-voice *ricercar* in the *Musical Offering*. The fact that the multitude of over-lapping and intersecting structures which these works contain should continue throughout to animate and variously connect a whole range of feelings is itself a source of wonder and places such works in a small and splendid category apart.

The texture of Mallarmé's poem may be thought of as fugal, although in a strictly limited sense. The poem gains much of its structural coherence from the delicate play of its merely implicit internal relations, in the course of which a pattern may be many times suggested and many times questioned or deferred before its moment of completeness is reached. But whereas Bach's thinking in the great fugue I mentioned above is *essentially* relational—the fugue subject revealing its full expressive riches only when played against alternative versions of itself—Mallarmé is concerned to relate propositions and systems of thought which may each claim to philosophical adequacy in themselves. At the end of *Prose*, we may find ourselves asking questions about Mallarmé's co-present and inter-acting systems which would in no way be appropriate to musical structures proper. Why live between systems? Why refuse the safety of single vision? Why refuse to bring a single self-consistent train of thought to its awaited term? The very 'overlappingness' of structure which helps to create a sense of depth and plenitude in musical argument can easily, in propositional argument, appear as a lapse from decisiveness into caution, or from candour into duplicity?

Why live between systems? The question as raised by Mallarmé in *Prose* is uncannily difficult. Of the many answers which are available, three seem to me specially relevant to the present case.

[Quotations from William Empson, Michel Serres, Julia Kristeva, omitted here.]

[. . .] for each [of these] writer[s] the interaction of systems is a guarantee of mental creativity; co-present systems within a text deflect and disrupt each other and in so doing compel us to become producers and arbiters of meaning. [. . .] *Prose* is contradictory and, in its contradictions, illuminates a fundamental mechanism of mind. It is disruptive and, in its disruptions, creative. It is plural and constantly in process.

And yet . . . how slender the partition is between semantic plenitude and semantic vacancy. The minutes change or perspective may bring the cessations of the poem into terrifying prominence. Only disconnect, the poet may suddenly seem to be saying. The optimistic, multiple poem may vanish as we read, and an aggressively self-cancelling poem take its place. This risk could have been avoided. But Mallarmé has chosen not only to run the risk but to spell it out among his themes. The poem ends on a note of creative affirmation beyond which other notes—those of intellectual defeat and bodily death—continue to sound.