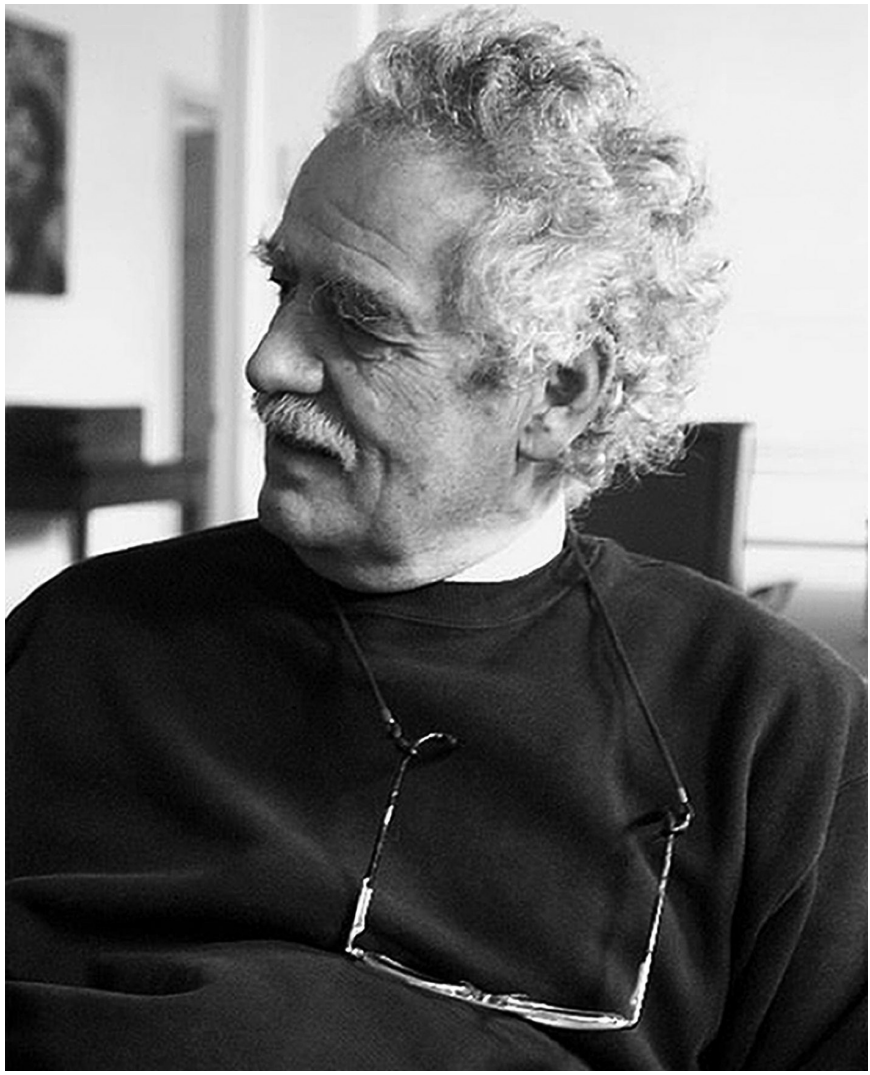

TONY NUTTALL *Richard Hamilton*

Anthony David Nuttall
1937–2007

ANTHONY DAVID NUTTALL, the second son of a schoolteacher, was born (on 25 April 1937) and grew up in Hereford. The first son was Jeff Nuttall, author of *Bomb Culture,* a leading figure in the counter-culture of the sixties—rebellious, hard-drinking, sexually voracious. Not the brother you would expect for the scholarly, highly intellectual, devoted family man Tony, yet he was known to say 'Each of us secretly wishes to be the other', and he dedicated his most scholarly book, *An Alternative Trinity* (Oxford, 1998)*,* to Jeff, the 'fiery Blakean', even saying in the Preface 'In a way my brother is the real author of this book.' Tony was Prospero, but he carried a Caliban inside him.

Tony attended Hereford Grammar School and then Watford Grammar School, where he received a thorough, old-fashioned classical education. He then went to Merton College Oxford, where he met his lifelong friend Stephen Medcalf. Both of them began by studying classics, then switched to English, and after graduating with great distinction (Iris Murdoch said they were the two most brilliant students she had ever known) they began on their theses. Nuttall's was a philosophical study of *The Tempest*, which eventually became his first book, *Two Concepts of Allegory* (London, 1967). His interdisciplinary subject did not fit comfortably into Oxford's academic patterns, and it is said that the then formidable figure of Helen Gardner prevented it from being considered for a doctorate.

In 1962 he was appointed lecturer in English at the new University of Sussex, rising to professor ten years later, and in 1978 he became Pro-Vice-Chancellor. For three years he lived the life of an administrator. Student rebellion was then in its last phase, but this happened to be its most disruptive time at Sussex, and he learned to be hard-headed and

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realistic about the need to keep the university running. When this was over he was entitled to a year's study leave, which he spent writing two books, one on a narrow subject the other on a broad one: a monograph on Pope's *Essay on Man,* and his controversial response to recent literary theory, called *A New Mimesis* (both are discussed below). Later, when he was director of graduate studies in English, he frequently had to listen to laments from those who claimed that three years was not enough time to write one's thesis. He remarked that it was tempting to reply that he had managed to write two books in one year, but realised that this reply would not exactly make him popular. This makes a curious parallel with another anecdote about what to say to students. When reader-response scepticism was at its most intense among literary theorists, there was a tendency for students to believe that it was never possible to be confident about the meaning of a text, since texts took on their meaning from the process of being read and interpreted: Stanley Fish was the most brilliant and influential representative of such a school, and his epigoni would sometimes resist all positive assertions from their tutor by saying: 'That's the way you read it, but another interpreter could quite legitimately find a different meaning in it.' If a student said this in a seminar, Tony would ask a little later, 'Well, what do you all think of Joe's theory that a text has one clear meaning only?' Joe would protest indignantly 'That's not what I said, it was the opposite,' and Tony would observe 'But you said the meaning of a text rests with the interpreter, and that's how I'm interpreting it.' I expressed a mixture of admiration and disquiet over this tactic, and Tony remarked 'I've stopped doing it; it made the students too cross.'

His teaching was (as many have testified) enormous fun, but above all was totally honest: to argue with a student's views was to treat that student with respect. His enormous energy was visible not only in his teaching, but in everything he did: it would take him on long country walks, alone or with his friends, and then, occasionally, would burst out more violently—as when he once jumped downstairs and sprained both his ankles. But without that energy he could never have become so learned: he read furiously, and argued ceaselessly with the dead—and indeed with the living. There were few subjects that did not arouse his interest. He once began a lecture on some difficulties in evolutionary theory by saying 'This lecture is the boldest act in an admittedly rather unadventurous life.' He was bold but not rash, and actually knew a good deal about science.

Bold and confident, he nonetheless had a nervous streak that could suddenly invade his confidence. The anecdote that has always summed up his personality for me gave a sudden glimpse of this nervousness. I was a

member of the committee that elevated him to a chair in 1983. On the Monday morning after it met I walked into his room and said 'Have you been asked to go and see the Vice-Chancellor?' Yes he had, and was due there later that morning. 'He's going to offer you the vacant chair of English,' I said. Short pause. Then Tony said 'Well I shall certainly accept: we could do with the money.' Only later did he admit to me that he had spent the weekend in an agony of nervous speculation, wondering 'What terrible thing have I done? Am I going to be dismissed? How will I ever tell Mary?' I thought for a moment, then remarked 'In that case there must have been an even more terrible moment, when you realised that I knew you had been summoned to the Vice-Chancellor, before I told you why: that would mean that whatever terrible thing you had done was public knowledge.' He nodded: 'That's just what I thought.'

After twenty-two years teaching at Sussex, he applied for a fellowship at New College. He described his reasons for wanting to return to Oxford: 'I want to spend the morning in a library which has every book I could possibly want, and then have lunch in a pub not designed by Basil Spence.' The college was rather taken aback to receive an application from someone so senior, who was willing to take a drop in salary, but they had the good sense to appoint him, and he spent the rest of his career teaching at Oxford (almost exactly the same length of time, as it happened, that he had taught at Sussex). He was elected a Fellow of the Academy in 1997, and delivered two of its endowed lectures, the Shakespeare Lecture in 1988 ('Hamlet: conversations with the dead') and the Warton Lecture in 1999 ('Two political poems: Marvell's "Horatian Ode" and Yeats's "No Second Troy"').

When he retired he had the problem that confronts all College Fellows, of having to vacate his rooms and find somewhere to keep his books. He discovered that there was a comfortable room in college which seemed to be at the disposal of retired Fellows, and he asked the bursar if it was all right for him to use it, and even on occasion sleep there. Long may Oxford continue to be the sort of place where he would receive the reply he got: 'If I were you, I'd establish squatter's rights there.' It was in this room that he died, suddenly, of a heart attack, on 24 June 2007 at the age of 69: the sort of death we all wish for ourselves and dread for our loved ones, leaving his beloved wife Mary, two children and four grandchildren.

To read his books is to recognise a highly original and lively mind, able to bring his philosophical interests to bear on the way he discussed literature, without ever losing his wonderful literary sensibility. No active mind could read through his work without finding something to disagree

with, and none could do so without discovering new worlds of thought and sensibility. The best path to steer through his intellectual life, and assess his contribution, seems to be to discuss it book by book. (I shall omit his first book, *Two Concepts of Allegory*, which was based on his thesis, and three short studies of individual works, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and two Shakespeare plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *Timon of Athens*.)

A Common Sky

A Common Sky (London, 1974) was the book in which Nuttall emerged as a critic with a distinctive and compelling way of looking at literature. Its short introduction states the argument succinctly: 'This is a book about solipsistic fear: that is, the fear that the external world of trees, tables, bricks and mortar may not exist at all.' Two obvious responses will occur to the literary reader: first, surely no one believes *that?* And second, what has that to do with literature? Nuttall's answer to the first is that 'it sometimes happens that an idea which is in the strictest sense of the word incredible can prove a fertile source of disquiet (indeed, one of the ways of dealing with solipsistic fear is to stop flinching from the thought and try believing it instead)'. To the second, he observes (and this of course is the cause of the book) that at the time when philosophers began to worry about the knowableness of the physical world, something very strange happened among novelists and poets: '*Feelings* of unreality, *intuitions* of solipsism become more frequent, and the deepest scepticism of Hume or Bradley finds a distorted reality in the poetry of Wordsworth or Eliot.'

To discuss the literature of the last two centuries by exploring its relation to philosophy will at its worst be merely eccentric, at its best produce insights that could not otherwise have been discovered; this book does the second far more often, and even the eccentricities of the first are always worth pondering. The philosophers discussed are (inevitably) Locke, Berkeley and Hume; the main literary texts are *Tristram Shandy* (his favourite novel), Sartre's *La Nausée*, and the poetry of Wordsworth, Hopkins and Eliot.

Everyone will have their own favourites among Nuttall's books, and this is mine. This is not meant to suggest any decline in power in his many later books; but this seems to me the one in which he found his powers, took a poem or a narrative and showed how (Donne's line could have been written for Nuttall) its *body thought.* There are plenty of apprecia-

tive essays on *Tristram Shandy*, but none, surely, which so compellingly and lovingly shows that it is philosophically bankrupt, that it exposes the weaknesses of Locke's philosophy mercilessly, but has nothing to put in its place—and yet is itself something priceless. The discussion of Wordsworth begins, unexpectedly, with *The Old Cumberland Beggar.* He chooses it to show how 'Wordsworth is often at his best when at his worst', dwelling on the lines which describe how the villagers 'do not place their gifts in the old man's hand but instead—so submerged and decrepit is he—they *lodge* them in his hat. The verb suggests an action like that of fixing a message in the crook of a tree.' This is not just perceptive reading, it is perceptive reading in the service of a coherent vision of the poem and—beyond that—of Wordsworth's poetry: 'Wordsworth's lines are full of tenderness. But all the tenderness is lavished on the act of seeing, not on the human figure itself.' Anyone can damn with faint praise: only Nuttall, one sometimes feels, can damn with loud praise (if we are thinking morally) or praise with faint damns (if thinking poetically).

The book was originally to be called 'The Insider', a title which invites us to reflect on the very different but (the argument runs) disturbingly similar sense in which this word can be applied to the two discourses, of philosophy and literature; the decision to change to *A Common Sky* seems to indicate a change in conclusion, that instead of an argument that leads into subjectivism we are to be given an argument that rescues us from it. 'The degree of our privacy is of our own choosing', the book concludes; 'we live beneath a common sky.'

It would have been perfectly possible to think, after *A Common Sky*, that Nuttall's work was done: that he had brought together his literary and philosophical interests in just the way he had been put on earth to do, and everything else would be a kind of elaborating footnote. It would have been possible, given the way that book drew together his intellectual interests into a triumphant synthesis; and it would have been absurdly mistaken. His intellectual journey had hardly begun, and with every book and article he broke new ground.

Overheard by God

Overheard by God (London, 1980) is a little book on a huge subject. In one way, it is a book about George Herbert's poetry, but its first, riveting sentence displays the brilliance of its immodesty. 'Imagine, if you can', it begins, 'God reading this poem,' and it then quotes Herbert's *Dialogue*, in

which stanzas of humility by the poet alternate with replies of theological orthodoxy by God. 'Is God pleased with what he reads?' Nuttall then asks, and points out how, in our comparatively Godless century, the question seems slightly ridiculous, and how perfectly natural it would have seemed in the seventeenth. Nuttall writes as a member of the modern, Godless world, but as one who takes his intellectual history seriously, and who sets out to explore the nature of Herbert's theology by showing how, in logic, he has to paint himself into a corner. Clarity of thought and logical paradox have, in this book, taken the place of theology, and enabled it to confront the central contradiction of religious poetry, the fact that Herbert can play God in logic and remain the helpless human in belief. The whole book unfolds out of that opening sentence in the way the universe opens out of its initial singularity. (That parallel is mine, not Nuttall's, but I venture to think he'd have liked it.) It is the crudest and most brilliant discussion of Herbert's poetry I know, and then moves to explore the same paradox in Milton and Dante.

When I first heard the germ of this book as a lecture I was sitting next to a professor of history, who turned to me and said 'What on earth was all that about?' I said 'It's about the nature of religious poetry', and he shrugged: I realised that there are very different ways in which the present can confront the past.

A New Mimesis

'This book has been growing in my mind,' writes Nuttall in the Preface to *A New Mimesis* (London, 1983) 'with a sort of slow violence, for the past twenty years.' On one level, that is simply the introductory sentence to an explanation that much of the book had already appeared in the form of articles; on another level it is a declaration that what we have in our hands is his *magnum opus.* The Preface opens with a simple, bold declaration: 'This book is an attempt to show that literature can engage with reality.' Two or three generations ago this claim would have seemed innocent to the point of flatness; but in 1983 post-structuralism was riding high, language was not a window for seeing the world but a game for poets and philosophers, in their different ways, to play, and reality was a term that any sophisticated critic ought to feel suspicious of. Nuttall took this situation seriously enough to devote a book to examining it.

Or, more strictly, half a book. The first two of its four chapters discuss the present state of literary theory, the third is entitled 'Shakespeare's imi-

tation of the world' and deals with half a dozen plays, and the final chapter tries to join the two parts together. Although the heat of controversy has died down a bit by now, it still seems best to discuss the first, and more controversial, part: Shakespeare will concern us later.

The argument of Nuttall's books is usually beautifully but agonisingly complex, but *A New Mimesis*, though it does not cut any corners, advances a clear and summarisable position; perhaps this is because it defends a traditional view against what seems to Nuttall a clearly misguided modern view. It begins helpfully, by starting succinctly the post-structuralist positions it will oppose. They are:

1. The world consists not of things but of relationships;
2. *verum factum*: the truth is something made;
3. The ultimate goal of the human sciences is not to constitute man but to dissolve him;
4. Language is prior to meaning;
5. Verisimilitude is the mask in which the laws of the text are dressed up.

The quotations are all genuine (by Hawkes, Vico, Lévi-Strauss, Bloom and Todorov). What Nuttall opposes to them could be described as a sturdy common sense, but in an important respect the description would be misleading. We think of common sense as a brusque dismissal of sophisticated scepticism, but Nuttall is never dismissive. He takes the post-structuralist arguments very seriously—more seriously, one sometimes feels, than the post-structuralists themselves appear to be taking them; he is aware of the sense in which discourse can be said to constitute the world, and sets it next to the sense in which the world is prior to and independent of discourse.

The brusque good sense, without any crude oversimplification, of this opening chapter might not convince many committed post-structuralists, but cannot fail to impress the neutrals (no doubt more numerous now than they were in 1983). The second chapter turns to the question of mimesis, asking in what sense it can still be a valid criterion for judging a work of literature, and Nuttall's ability to offer us something we already knew with the freshness of a new insight is nowhere better seen than in his distinction between the two languages of criticism that he calls 'opaque' and 'transparent'. Opaque criticism 'operates outside the mechanisms of art' and takes 'those mechanisms as its object': an instance would be 'In the opening of *King Lear* folk tale elements proper to narrative are infiltrated by a finer-grained dramatic mode.' Transparent criticism operates within the

world of the literary work, and an example would be 'Cordelia cannot bear to have her love for her father made the subject of a partly mercenary game.' To many readers of his book, Nuttall believes, the former mode will look like 'real criticism' and the second like 'self-indulgent pseudo-criticism', treating literature as if it was real life. But this accusation is too glib: very few practitioners of the transparent mode are naïve enough to make this confusion. Nuttall's defence of the transparent mode does not find it necessary to denigrate the opaque. He remarks that the transparent is the form criticism has usually taken over the centuries, and insists that it is theoretically perfectly defensible. Those who write transparent criticism do not mistake art for life: they know perfectly well that Cordelia is not a real woman, 'but they are willing to think of her as a possible woman'. A few pages earlier he had offered a wonderful example of transparent criticism of the first scene of *King Lear*: 'Lear tries to play the old game, as if Cordelia were 3 years old and bouncing on his knee: "Who loves Daddy best".' Plenty of critics—and of audiences—have had an insight like this: it is Nuttall's talent that he uses it to make a point about the nature of criticism.

Pope's 'Essay on Man'

When invited by Claude Rawson to contribute to a series of studies of famous literary texts he was editing, Nuttall chose to write on the *Essay on Man* (London, 1984). At a first glance, this seems an eccentric choice. Hardly anyone today would consider this Pope's most important poem: it is full of quotable (and often quoted) couplets, but as a whole it may be his least read work. But for Nuttall, of course, it was irresistible, since it confronts (and enabled him to confront) the central questions of theodicy: whether God, if he exists, is good, what God's plan for the world must be, how much we can know about God. The core of the book, a detailed commentary on the text of the poem, needs to be read along with the *Essay on Man* itself, but this is preceded and followed by what are in effect two brilliant short monographs: the first about Pope's poetry in general, well aware that *The Dunciad* has a kind of brilliance beyond the range of the serious discussion of philosophic commonplaces; and the second about theodicy, moving out from Pope to a fascinating exercise in intellectual history that examines the difficulties, and shows the ultimate impossibility, of justifying the ways of God through philosophic argument. If he had written nothing else, this book would

have been enough to establish Nuttall as a distinguished specialist on Pope and the eighteenth century.

The Stoic in Love

Scholars are often persuaded by publishers (or they themselves might do the persuading) to put together some of their more interesting essays to make a volume. In Nuttall's case the publisher was the now defunct Harvester Press, which under John Spiers did much for the University of Sussex, and he called the collection *The Stoic in Love* (Brighton, 1989). The title essay is about *The Aeneid* (the Stoic is of course Aeneas) but the expression suggests something much wider, the encounter of emotion with reason that runs through so many of Nuttall's explorations.

A few of the essays are on Shakespeare, a few more are on ancient literature, and some explore general critical questions. To write a sentence on each essay would not do justice to any, and I shall therefore pick out one for at least a semblance of proper discussion; and to avoid giving the impression that I believe Nuttall was always right, I will choose one to disagree with. (True, there is hardly another critic who seems to me to have been right as often as he was, but to agree with everything would suggest either that I was less than or that he was more than human.) The last essay in the book is called 'Did Meursault mean to kill the Arab?' and subtitled 'The intentional fallacy fallacy'. Professional literary scholars will immediately recognise that the subtitle is a reference to the famous essay by Wimsatt and Beardsley on 'The Intentional Fallacy', and will be struck by the odd strategy of using Camus' novel to rebut it. Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument was that the author's intention is not a legitimate criterion for arriving at the meaning of a poem, because poems are not the personal possession of the poet, they belong to the language; and the essay was written at a time when it was a frequent critical strategy—as among many readers it still is—to appeal to what the author said about his work in order to settle arguments about its meaning and even its value. The opening sentence of Nuttall's essay runs: 'This essay is an attempt to resolve a complex and sophisticated question—is the artist's intention relevant to a critical appraisal of his work?—by answering what is, at first sight at least, a much simpler question: Did Meursault, in Camus' *L'Étranger*, mean to kill the Arab?' The answer to the second question is Yes, because when we ask whether an action was intentional we do not examine the (anyway unavailable) contents of the agent's mind, but we look at the action itself.

This argument, which Nuttall quite properly attributes to Gilbert Ryle, is convincing and well argued: indeed it reveals the strange logic that no doubt accounted for the enormous success of Camus' book, and made Meursault, the empty man, an existentialist hero. Nuttall shows those who identified with Meursault just what they were doing; but its application to Wimsatt and Beardsley is altogether less convincing: I can see a path by which Nuttall's arguments could lead to the opposite conclusion, for if a poem corresponds to the action of shooting, then we could claim that to read the poem attentively *does* correspond to studying the action, and what the poet says about his intention has no more validity as explanation than what Meursault said about *his* action. The essay is very clever, but its own cleverness seems to have blinded it to other ways the parallel could be used: Nuttall has chosen, with some skill, one possible path from his one example to the other, but other paths can easily be proposed. As for the argument (important in my view) that Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay was a much needed corrective in an age of glib uses of biography in literary criticism, that could be seen as an argument from expediency. Nuttall the university administrator must have known all about expediency, though I expect he never cared for it.

The Alternative Trinity

The Alternative Trinity (Oxford, 1998) is probably Nuttall's most difficult book. It is subtitled *Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton and Blake* and before we begin reading we are likely to wonder whether these three poets are the alternative trinity (alternative, perhaps, to Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Eliot?), or whether we're being offered an alternative to Christian orthodoxy. It turns out to be the latter, though we need to wait until page 166 for a clear statement of the book's argument: 'The tyrannical Jahweh generates, mysteriously, a second self who wills all that the tyrant forbade. Here, if you like, is the alternative Trinity we have been seeking.' It is difficult to know how to respond to that use of 'if you like'. It could (and I suspect does) mean 'You are probably one of those tiresome readers who want to know what I am getting at, whereas I am just someone who enjoys the pleasures of the intellectual chase?' No one can doubt that Nuttall enjoys the chase, as he explores the fortunes—and the meaning—of Ophism (or Serpent-worship) and Gnosticism through the early Christian fathers, with diversions into Greek tragedy, the pastoral tradition, the poetry of Marvell and Wordsworth and Shelley, the

aesthetics of gardening, the Ranters, and a dozen other matters that his restless mind can't leave alone.

This is not a book for the intellectually timid or for those who believe that the scholar should stick to his specialism; it is a book to read slowly, stopping to think, or to look up a passage fifty pages earlier that we half-remember, only to discover that it didn't say what we thought, but is even more interesting than we remembered. Different readers will take different impressions from it, and here for what it's worth is mine: Nuttall was not a Christian and had no religious belief, but he explored the issues thrown up by Christian theology with endless and absorbed fascination; why should he have devoted such attention to questions which he cannot have believed mattered, and probably believed were all unreal? He was not a new historicist, studying past ideologies because they were the site of power struggles, and power struggles are always with us—indeed, he could be very impatient with what he saw as the cruder forms of historicism ('You can't understand this love lyric unless you know about the food riots that occurred a few years earlier' was the parody of crude historicism I once heard him give). What fascinated him was not the fact that power struggles are always with us, but that intellectual debate is always with us: and although past arguments may no longer concern us, there will be corresponding issues that do. And if we look at the way past issues appeared in imaginative literature we will learn why they were once taken so seriously. And so *The Alternative Trinity* concludes 'Marlowe, Milton and Blake are not obscure bypaths in the history of English literature. They are all major, central figures. If so much of their thought flowed from a different conception of the Trinity, then that different conception can itself no longer be considered "cranky" or negligible. It is always to be sure palpably adversarial. It is the running antithesis, not the primary thesis of our culture.' The running antithesis of our culture is, of course, something much deeper, and more enduring, than the radicalism of the moment.

Openings

What can make Nuttall's writings, at times, very difficult? *Openings* (Oxford, 1992) and *The Alternative Trilogy* are his most difficult books, and to try and state why can tell one a lot about Nuttall. In both these books he is doing two things at once: exploring scholarly issues and conducting an argument. Because he was such a good scholar he was constantly aware

that his argument may be taking short cuts round scholarly disputes—on Greek drama, on Aristotle, and on the history of philosophy; because he was such a clear thinker, he was equally aware that there have been objections to the case he was making. Whenever this happens, he pauses to examine the dispute and to answer the objection, and the reader soon loses sight of the main argument. Nuttall's self-confessed fear of (in his own words) 'boring people with the obvious' did not help matters, and he admitted that 'you can bore people much faster with the unobvious'.

Openings is a conscious response to Frank Kermode's *Sense of an Ending*, and just as Kermode drew fascinating conclusions about the deepest meaning of a work from the way it ended, so Nuttall addresses the implications of the way it begins. Horace's famous injunction to begin *in medias res* is his starting point, and he soon shows how many questions this begs: how difficult it is to distinguish between the middle and the beginning of an action, since everything except perhaps the Book of Genesis must begin in the middle of something. The texts examined are *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Prelude*, *Tristram Shandy* and Dickens's two first person novels, and every one of these is illuminated. The chapter on *Paradise Lost*, after finding what seems to be 'an unmeaning contradiction' between Vergil and Milton, adds that 'for those who like following clues in labyrinths there is a thread to be followed even here'—and the reader realises that Nuttall has described himself! The discussion of *The Prelude* has the rare distinction of being a serious discussion of Wordsworth's poetry which does not talk about Nature; the discussion of *David Copperfield* treats Dickens's prose as if it is poetry—surprisingly and illuminatingly; but the greatest gem, for me, is the chapter on *Tristram Shandy.* Nuttall's favourite novel draws from him some of his most fascinating insights. Sterne sees the ultimate bankruptcy of Locke's philosophy, but he has nothing to put in its place: and this turns out to be not a weakness but a strength for the novel. Nuttall appreciates but resists the formalist case of Shklovsky, that *Tristram Shandy* is *the* typical novel because it exposes the formalist devices that other novels rely on; for him, on the contrary, it is possible to enjoy the formalist jokes while realising that the book is full of traditional novelistic richness, that is, of characters. The fact that the novel takes its title from a character who never really appears can be seen not as a formalist manifesto, but as an anti-formalist joke. If Sterne could have travelled to the future to read the discussions of his book, he would have found Shklovsky brilliantly misguided, and Nuttall a true disciple.

Why does Tragedy Give Pleasure?

Why does Tragedy Give Pleasure (Oxford, 1996) is a work of literary theory, not of literary criticism. That is a misleading thing to say nowadays, when 'literary theory' has come to mean 'post-structuralist theory' (or even 'post-structuralist theory with admixtures of neo-Marxist and feminist elements'). This book (originally the Northcliff lectures at University College London in 1992) addresses itself to the theoretical question posed in the title, with no prior commitment to a theoretical position, and a willingness to consider any. The theorists it mainly discusses include Aristotle, Freud, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dr Johnson and C. S. Lewis. The presence of the last is surprising but important: though I am sure Nuttall knew his Freud much more thoroughly than Lewis did, he is aware that Lewis's objections to Freud on literature are shrewd and perceptive. I once heard Nuttall say in a talk where he was supposed to make his theoretical position plain 'We disciples of C. S. Lewis are ashamed of our leader.' He did not elaborate, and I am not quite sure just what he was ashamed of: of Lewis's deliberately old-fashioned rhetorical stance, or of his Christianity—or (most of all, perhaps) of his flaunting of Christianity. I am sure he admired—perhaps even was envious of—Lewis's splendid clarity, but was never willing to acquire it by cutting corners in a complicated argument. Perhaps it would not be misleading to describe Nuttall's critical position as 'Lewis without the religiosity'.

The sense in which this book is a work of literary theory is of course indicated by the title, which poses a general question and for three of its four lectures discusses the main answers given by critics: actual plays are mentioned only in passing. The third chapter ends by proposing a conception of tragedy that might serve to answer the question posed by the title: that 'the special impact of tragedy lies in an eerie coincidence of depicted story and psychic effect'. The spectator, that is, recognises a necessary truth about the human condition, and so, almost by coincidence, does the protagonist. But is this true of the greatest of tragic dramatists? To meet the objection that Shakespeare's tragedies might not fit this definition very well, the last chapter discusses *King Lear*. That is to say, it deals with a particular play, not (apparently) because that is what literary criticism should do, but in order to deal with a possible objection to the theoretical position being advanced.

Yet that chapter offers a wonderfully subtle and perceptive discussion of *Lear*, particularly good on the awkwardnesses that critics are often tempted to gloss over: Cordelia's obstinacy in the first scene, and the

improbabilities of the Dover Cliff episode. (It is one of Nuttall's great virtues as a critic that he doesn't gloss over awkwardnesses.) So the discussion of the Dover cliff scene admits the manifest improbability of the whole episode, and explores the way in which Shakespeare *uses* the improbabilities to control the audience's response. This discussion is profounder and more brilliant, I believe, than the section he later wrote on *Lear* in *Shakespeare the Thinker.* Indeed, *Lear* is not the only play which receives briefer treatment than one might expect in that book: it is one of its oddities that it seems less interested in the great tragedies than in many of the plays that came before and after.

Dead from the Waist Down

Dead from the Waist Down (New Haven, CT, 2003) is subtitled *Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination*, but its subject is much more specific than that wording suggests. Plenty of people have written about *Middlemarch*, and some of them have explored the suggestion (without ever coming to a firm conclusion) that the figure of Casaubon was based on the Oxford don Mark Pattison; others have noticed that the name Casaubon was obviously taken from the sixteenth-century scholar Isaac Casaubon—on whom Pattison wrote a book. Nobody but Nuttall would ever have thought of writing a study that dealt first with *Middlemarch*, then with Pattison, then with Casaubon, and surrounding it with reflections on the morality of scholarship. The result was a quirky, brilliant and controversial book, which met with much praise and some condemnation. Certainly it was unfortunate that a book in praise of accurate scholarship was full of typographical errors, and Mark Wormald's long review in the *Times Literary Supplement* pounced both on them and on some carelessness in wording. If we reply that these are only details in an otherwise brilliant book, we could be told that the book itself is an invitation to realise that such details matter.

The book opens with a scrupulous analysis of Browning's poem *A Grammarian's Funeral*, the tribute to a Renaissance scholar by his pupils as they carry his body to be buried on the hilltop: 'Lofty designs must close in like effects: | Loftily lying'. Does this poem describe a hero of the intellectual life, deservedly raised above the common herd, or a pedant who wasted his life studying trivial grammatical details? It is a wonderful poem, but the poet, Nuttall suggests, could not make up his mind about this. The last chapter contains a probing analysis of Stoppard's play *The*

Invention of Love, about Housman, a similarly ambiguous figure who raises the same question. These are perhaps the two most brilliant things in the book, but the three substantive chapters between are full of insights—and controversy. For me, the *Middlemarch* chapter is spoiled by its claim that Dorothea represents an anti-feminist strain in the novel, that all Dorothea Brooke 'needs to put her right is some good strong sex from a man': this is to see the book through the eyes of Mrs Cadwallader.

What I have just done is what most readers of this book would do: pounce on details in the *Middlemarch* chapter, because that is what they are most likely to know about. But since this is a book about the importance of knowledge, the chapter on Isaac Casaubon, who knew so much, is in one sense the most important, and the one which most naturally leads to the book's main point, which is the value of scholarship, and the fact that it is valuable because it shows you something outside yourself. The book therefore concludes with an attack on the modern insistence on 'relevance'. The reason this insistence is pernicious, according to Nuttall, is that it can turn the study of literature into 'a mode of narcissism'. The advocates of relevance 'might be pleased to be handed not Milton but a Miltonised version of their own features. But to receive ourselves is to receive nothing, and those who provide such stuff are fraudulent. In contrast the real scholars have been generous; the editors, the *editores*, the givers-out-into-the-world: the givers of good things.'

Shakespeare the Thinker

Nuttall's last book, and his longest, was called *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, CT, 2007). He allowed himself to be persuaded into writing it, and admitted that he was glad that he did. It made a fitting crown to his career, though he did not live to see how well it was received. In a way, it looks like any other book on Shakespeare, one section on each play, arranged chronologically, grouped loosely into chapters. You don't need to read far to discover that it is like no other book on Shakespeare.

It begins with narrative. Nuttall is attending the International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford-on-Avon, and finds that the clotted discussion is getting too much for him, so he goes for a walk—first in the street outside, then all the way to Mary Arden's farm. He starts to think about William Shakespeare as he was in life, then about the ways one can talk about him. This kind of opening is in one way very old-fashioned ('what Shakespeare has meant to me'), but because it is by Nuttall it is

also very sophisticated: he finds himself reflecting on what has happened to literary criticism in the course of his career: how the formalism he had been so opposed to has now been replaced by a historicism that seems to him equally crude and anti-literary. He is therefore going to ignore intellectual and critical fashion—no, not ignore it, for this is a very well-informed book, but cast a cold eye upon it.

The book however is to have a general argument, as the title indicates: it is that Shakespeare was both very intelligent and interested in ideas, rather like a brilliant student of philosophy—cleverer than his teachers, and with the same interests. Since Shakespeare was not a student of philosophy but a playwright, the approach is obviously slanted, and the aim of the book (in the words of Emily Dickinson) is 'to tell the truth but tell it slant'. No other critic could have brought to it the individual blend of literary response and interest in ideas that had by then become Nuttall's hallmark. Since I have tried to give a general impression of most of Nuttall's other books I will now look at one essay only, in the hope of doing it something approaching justice. I have chosen—almost, but not quite, at random—the essay on *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

We start from the most famous speech in the play, Theseus' sceptical response to the lovers' tale. Its refusal to believe all the stuff about magical herbs and adventures in the wood opens the final act and is delivered by the highest ranking character in the play, so it has a good claim to be Shakespeare's own judgement on the magical story, and that is how conventional critics have often taken it. Nuttall knows this, and does not dismiss the conventional response; but he does not accept it either. 'Although I grant that the speech actively invites such treatment,' he writes, 'I want to resist the invitation, to insist on the modifying effect of its context.' And what is this 'modifying effect'? Theseus may be the boss, but he is too well aware of this, and is inclined to strut. *Strut*: the verb announces that Nuttall is looking at the play with his characteristic steely glance. Theseus, he tells us, 'is characterised from the beginning as owning a sort of insensitivity that is perhaps peculiar to males. That is why it is important to listen carefully to any woman who is present when he speaks, even if that woman doesn't make it into the anthologies.' I can't think of any other critic who could have written just that: blending an awareness of character (what sort of person is Theseus?) with a nose for what Shakespeare has to tell us about gender difference, and how he knows about the rank of the characters, the deference that entitles them to from the other characters, but not necessarily from us. Turning to Hippolyta's answer, Nuttall becomes jesting Pilate, asking what is truth, but willing to

stay for an answer. There are, he points out, two theories of truth among philosophers, the correspondence theory and the coherence theory, and Hippolyta inclines to the latter: 'she is thinking about the way in practice we do trust propositions that cohere with other propositions'. Being Nuttall, he could not introduce this philosophical point without digressing to explain not only what the point of this distinction is, but also why he himself inclines more to the correspondence theory (having introduced a philosophical controversy he has to tell us where he stands). And Hippolyta, because she is so intelligent (he even speaks about her 'alpha brain' and contrasts her with 'her stick of a fiancé'), then 'checks her own thought' and goes on to concede that there is much to be said for the correspondence theory too.

Next he turns to what (for an intellectual historian) may be the most important word in the play, 'imagination'—used of course by Theseus to describe—even to stigmatise—the lovers' story. What Theseus stigmatises as imagination is, of course, what we've just seen, so in one sense (within the play, that is) we know that 'fancy's images' are *true*. So now to another philosopher, Dorothy Emmet, and her discussion of the sense in which fancy's images are true leads back to Hippolyta and forward to David Hume. 'Hippolyta and Hume are thinking about the same problem in oddly similar terms.' But is it not absurd to consider Hippolyta as addressing the unborn Hume across the centuries, empiricist to empiricist? Of course it is, Nuttall concedes, and then claims that it isn't: 'conceptual affinity is not the same as immediate influence'.

Nuttall has jumped not only across the centuries and across the disciplines, but from play to play, since this discussion is shot through with a glimpse of how very similar issues are raised by the way love is treated in *Romeo & Juliet*. Everyone knows that this play is closely related to *Midsummer Night's Dream*, if only because it is parodied in the Piramus and Thisbe story, but no one, I think, had ever seen this as a philosophic relationship. 'Take away the love of Romeo and Juliet from the sum of things and the world is less than it was before, *absolutely* reduced. Or are we kidding ourselves? Shakespeare, I submit, is *thinking*.'

This brief account does not do justice to Nuttall's discussion of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, one of the best essays in the book, but it does, I hope, give the flavour of it. It shows that he takes the ideas very seriously, and is interested in asking whether the characters do so too. It shows that he links play to play not only by finding the same story in both, but by finding the same ideas in both, and that he expects these ideas to be explored. It shows, too, that he is genuinely interested in the

characters: his essay on *Antony and Cleopatra* contains a blistering dismissal of L. C. Knights' famous insistence that we ought not to speculate about the offstage lives of the characters in a play: 'I propose now', he says, 'to do something that Knights would have thought even more scandalous, to speculate about the possible alternative *later* lives of characters who actually die before our eyes.' (I am not sure that Knights would have disapproved much of this, but I love the breezy tone with which Nuttall sets out to do it.) And the essay on *Midsummer Night's Dream* goes on to show that Nuttall has nothing to learn about social awareness in Shakespeare, since he then explores the very different way in which the same ideas are explored (explored? misunderstood? groped at?) by the mechanicals: 'We laugh at Bottom's misplacings, yet they have a resonance that is not ridiculous but haunting.' Plenty of critics have said that, though few so neatly. But no critic has applied this insight to modify his awareness of how Shakespeare *thought*.

No doubt Nuttall's insistence on telling us what to think about theories of truth, his summary of Dorothy Emmett's view, which really has nothing to do with *Midsummer Night's Dream*, could properly be considered the weaknesses of someone who can't leave philosophy alone. Weaknesses? We could not have had the strengths without them. And I am sure that no one had ever written about *Midsummer Night's Dream* in quite that way.

Coda

Of course Tony Nuttall died too soon. His death was terrible shock, and a deep loss, to his friends and family: 69 is not really old nowadays. Was it a loss to literary studies? Perhaps not, since *Shakespeare the Thinker*, appearing posthumously, might in any case have been his last book of criticism. But he did leave two typescripts that have not been published, and perhaps never will be. They were works of fiction: not realistic novels, for though he enjoyed every kind of literature, his interest in narrative with no philosophic implications was always limited; they were stories that insert mythical or supernatural elements into very matter-of-fact narrative (not unlike the stories that C. S. Lewis wrote): one inserts an episode of time travel into an otherwise matter-of-fact story, the other inserts the myth of the Minotaur into an equally matter-of-fact narrative of Oxford life. Many less entertaining works of fiction have seen print.

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