

# Truth, Beauty and Goodness

## Transfiguration of the commonplace

*Address to a conference of the Values Education Council  
at the University of North London, 1998*

### **Introduction**

Do you know Ayemenem House? Have you visited, do you sometimes work in, teach in, maybe lecture in, Ayemenem House?

That is a key question, a cluster of key questions, for today's conference on the connections between aesthetic values and ethical values, and on the implications of such connections for education:

It was a grand old house, the Ayemenem House, but aloof-looking. As though it had little to do with the people that lived in it. Like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life.

In all cultures and cultural settings, art is a strand in the play of *homo ludens*. It gives us images of elation, celebration and joy, and of what the author here (Arundhati Roy) calls whole-hearted commitment to life. 'I always want to write erotic music,' said Toru Takemitsu. 'I want to write sensual/sensuous music. Not only about love between men and women, but in a much more universal sense - about the sensuality of the mechanism of the universe, about life.' And art is to do with delight and elation in spite of humans' knowledge of transience, in spite of rheumy, cynical and despairing eyes.

"What is the greatest marvel?" asks a mysterious voice in the forest in one of humankind's great epics, *The Mahabharata*. "Each day," replies the protagonist Yudhishtira, "death strikes and we live as though we were immortal. This is what is the greatest marvel." Living with whole-hearted commitment *as though, in spite of, anyway*, is the marvel celebrated in art: play *despite* untidiness and wickedness, *despite* the certainty of endings, betrayals, partings and loss. But always within particularities of time and place, scandalous particularities, and therefore of cultural ordinariness: art involves the transfiguration of the commonplace.

Herein lies the importance of artistic creativity for the moral life, and the importance of art education ('Creative and Cultural Education', as a newly current term is) within the wider field of values education. Thus runs the argument of this lecture. The lecture has three parts. The argument is introduced in the first part, entitled thesis, through a series of four main points or propositions.

The second part of the lecture is antithesis. Sorry, says the second part, but this really

won't do. Whole-hearted commitment to life, the play of children, elation, particularity, *sensuality*, these are fundamental and essential values in the moral life? - Absurd, says this lecture's second part. Morality, it says, is to do with knowing and following the difference between right and wrong, and anyone claiming or implying otherwise must be banished from the land, or at the very least from any contact with children, or with teachers, or with members of the Values Education Council. The second part of the lecture raises various other questions as well, each leading to the claim that I am wasting the Values Education Council's time.

The third part of the lecture is a synthesis, though in the admittedly idiosyncratic sense that it is a continuation and refinement of the thesis, but mindful of objections to it. It presents three further points or propositions.

Throughout this lecture I take it as axiomatic that as moral beings we live, and that as values educators we teach, in a multicultural world - we live and teach impurely, that is to say, at the edges and frontiers between, not snugly cradled and embraced within, the world's traditions. I do not keep labouring this point, but it is the backdrop against which I speak. Also, of course, the arts exist in a multicultural world: in all the arts there is increasing cross-fertilisation across cultural traditions, and between 'high' and 'popular' genres and prejudices within cultural traditions. Hybridity is the name, more than ever, of the game. Cultural diversity and hybridity exist within structures and uneven distributions of power, in other words in political particularities. This point too I do not labour or foreground, but treat as axiomatic: the lecture is concerned with political values as well as with values in personal life.

### **Part one, thesis: the arts make us morally better people**

Let us start, in this consideration of the links between aesthetic values and ethical values, with two pieces of testimony. "I must never again listen to Beethoven's *Apassionata* sonata," said Lenin, "because when I do I feel like stroking the heads of children instead of smashing the heads of my enemies." Lenin's distinction between children on the one hand and enemies on the other is not one which all of us in education would readily recognise all of the time, alas. But basically we recognise the claim that Lenin is making here, even if we do not necessarily agree with it: art gentles us, it gives us feelings of tenderness and generosity, good art makes us into good human beings. How, and in what circumstances, art may (perhaps) make us gentle and tender is the recurring topic throughout this lecture. Before I elaborate it, here is another piece of testimony that makes much the same claim, but with regard to a different art form. It appeared in a newspaper headline about four weeks ago.

Other headlines on the same page, incidentally, included 'Migrants blocked from US cities risk death in desert', 'Russian PM looks West as EU seeks IMF review', 'Allies in bitter split over Kosovo refugee crisis', 'Clinton's isolation worsens as party begins to desert', 'Kabila arrives for talks on ending war', and 'Anwar says brother arrested'.

Such headlines sketch the public contours of the world in which we live and work out our values. The private contours of some people's worlds were evoked in a high-profile piece of

advice on the same page. It quoted from a feature article which appeared elsewhere in the paper: 'Always keep your mirror and lipstick under your pillow. Be sure to wake up before your husband. Never, ever, let him see you without your lipstick.'

In the context of these headlines about values in public and private worlds it is interesting, and highly relevant for today's conference, to read a further headline: 'The world would be a better place if everyone had read Marcel Proust'. The reference is to a comic-book version of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. The person responsible for the comic-book, a Monsieur Stéphane Heuet, has been bitterly attacked. But he maintains that his purpose is to make Proust's work more widely known and thus to improve morality. 'The world would be a better place if everyone had read him,' he says. 'There would be more kindness.'

Now *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is not an instructional tract or cautionary tale about kindness and gentleness. Nor, since music by definition cannot be a tract or tale about anything, is Beethoven's *Apassionata* sonata. Yet the claim is made that works such as these, and by extension all works of art, can make us morally better people. There are two possible ways to respond to this claim. On the one hand, we could ask whether it is in fact the case that good art leads to good ethics. On the other, we could accept – at least provisionally – that Lenin and Monsieur Heuet are basically right, and ask about the mechanics, as it were: we could discuss not *whether* but *how*. How does art make people more kind, more gentle, more generous? How does it make the world a better place? It is the second approach which I shall adopt in this lecture.

In the handling of these questions, I wish to offer seven main points or propositions for consideration. This conference is going to contribute to the current national debate on Creative and Cultural Education. My seven points or propositions are intended to be a resource for the conference as it considers its involvement in that debate.

Point one: *art celebrates creativity in spite of knowing reasons for indifference or despair*. All art is created in or near Ayemenem House – all art knows, but is not daunted into listless silence by, that 'old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life'. Transience is one amongst many of the experiences which threaten to engulf us, and to rob us of 'whole-hearted commitment to life'. Even worse is wickedness - the wickedness of which human beings in general are capable, and the capacity each one of us has to be shitty, petty, bitter, self-pitying, hateful. Artists do not idealise us. But they do give us a sense of compassion, towards ourselves as well as towards others: *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*. Art, writes Iris Murdoch:

illuminates accident and contingency and the general muddle of life, the limitations of time and the discursive intellect, so as to enable us to survey complex or horrible things which would otherwise appal us ... It is an image of virtue. Its condensed, clarified, presentation enables us to look without sin upon a sinful world. It renders innocent and transforms into truthful vision our baser energies connected with power, curiosity, envy and sex.

Frequently the artist celebrates celebration itself – as in the Adoration of the Magi, for example, or in the fourth movement of Beethoven’s choral symphony. More frequently, at first sight, what is celebrated is something out there in the world – Cezanne’s apple, or right behaviour in a sinful and wicked world. A paradigm example of right behaviour taken from a bestselling novel of recent years would be the awesome embrace between enemies at the end of Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong*. But essentially what is celebrated in art is not only or primarily the world out there outside us but our own capacity as human beings to delight in it and to create patterns which adore it. The embrace in *Birdsong* is Faulks’s artistic triumph, essentially, not the moral triumph of his characters. For, to recall Magritte, *ceci n’est pas une pipe* – what we have before us is not a pipe but a two-dimensional composition of shapes and colours which depicts a pipe, and in literature we have not behaviour but artful accounts of behaviour. ‘This can be confirmed in the domain of literature’, writes André Brink, whose novels have powerfully challenged apartheid in South Africa over the years,

by any reader who takes up a book to make the simple and basic, but immensely significant, discovery that there are no people or houses or trees or dogs between the pages, but only words, words, words.

Point two: *the essence of creativity is seeing from new perspectives, and therefore seeing new connections and new patterns*. In addition to transience and wickedness we are beset by unconnectedness, by one damn thing after another not adding up. The making of connections in the face of unconnectedness, and out of the raw material of unconnectedness, is the very essence of creativity, the very essence of the transfiguration of the commonplace. Our three archetypal experiences of creativity and transfiguration are (a) science, where creativity lies in paradigms shifting, pennies dropping and eureka splashing (b) art, where creativity similarly lies in viewing from new perspectives and seeing new connections and (c) jokes. Yes, jokes too are archetypal examples of new perspectives and new connections. Let us approach them by touching base first with a conundrum which philosophers, psychologists, biologists and neurologists, amongst others, have addressed from time to time over the years: why can’t you make yourself laugh by tickling yourself? Before recalling a plausible answer to this conundrum, let us take in a handful of jokes. I hope an august body such as the Values Education Council will not find the next few minutes *too* frivolous and time-wasting.

‘Oh, eavesdropping again,’ said Adam, as for the umpteenth time his wife fell out of the tree. An ambulance rushes past for an emergency, lights flashing and siren wailing. ‘He won’t,’ observes an onlooker to a friend, ‘he won’t sell many ice-creams going at that speed.’ The Queen says she wishes in future to be more like Princess Diana. ‘Well,’ says someone, ‘the randy old devil, who’d have thought it?’ ‘Oh, look over there, there’s Mr Yoused-Ukashun and his daughter Val - Val Yoused-Ukashun.’ ‘Hello, hello, hello, what’s going on here?’ - ‘Are you a policeman?’ - ‘No, I’m a constable.’ - ‘What’s the difference?’ - ‘They’re spelt differently.’ An Englishman, Irishman, a Pakistani and Jew went into a pub. ‘What’s this?’ exclaimed the barman, ‘some sort of a joke?’ There was once a spat on the market of fake Picassos. An art dealer acquired what he knew to be a genuine Picasso and took it the artist in order to obtain a certificate of authentication. Picasso looked at the

painting and said he couldn't provide a certificate, for the painting was a fake. 'But señor, I saw you paint this picture with my own eyes.' — 'So what,' said Picasso. 'I often paint fakes.'

Back to tickling. The body experiences tickling as a physical attack, and therefore releases adrenalin for fight or flight. But the mind of the ticklee knows that the hands of the tickler are those of an affectionate and playful (if exasperating) friend, and that both fight and flight would be, as a term in moral discourse currently is, courtesy of Bill Clinton speaking in a slightly but not wholly different context, 'inappropriate behaviour'. The mind of the ticklee sees from a perspective which is different from that of the body of the ticklee. The adrenalin produced by the body is released by the body in the energy of laughter.

Laughter is pleasurable (the causal relationship is two-way: we are happy because we are laughing as well as laughing because we are happy), as is (potentially, anyway) physical contact with the tickler. But you cannot fool your body by tickling yourself — your body knows full well, from the very first instant, that it is not under attack from your own hands. So there is no adrenalin to release.

In all laughter, and in all smiles (*sous-rires*), adrenalin is being released, adrenalin summoned in the first instance for fight or flight. For all humour starts with a shock. That is to say, there is something which does not make sense, there is a juxtaposition of two things which do not normally go together. The anxiety provoked by a troubling juxtaposition is all the greater if the context itself provokes anxiety — if, for example, it refers to sex, status differences, authority figures, ambiguity, crime, religion, violence, illness, accidents, madness, transience, and the mysterious creativity of great artists. (All these were evoked in the ragbag of jokes I offered above.) But then suddenly the penny drops, the paradigm shifts. That which did not make sense a split second ago is suddenly seen in a new perspective, and connections are made. Frightening fragmentation has been transformed into consoling coherence. The commonplace has been transfigured. Eureka is what we say whenever we laugh. We say it also whenever we create. In the beginning was the wordplay.

**Point three:** *art provides images not only of coherence and connections but also of complexity and ambiguity.* In *The God of Small Things* there is a remarkable description of incoherence and disconnection:

As though meaning had slunk out of things and left them fragmented. Disconnected. The glint of Ammu's needle. The colour of a ribbon. The weave of the cross-stitch counterpane. A door slowly breaking. Isolated things that didn't mean anything. As though the intelligence that decodes life's hidden patterns — that connects reflections to images, glints to light, weaves to fabrics, needles to thread, walls to rooms, love to fear to anger to remorse — was suddenly lost.

Human beings are creative — they transfigure the commonplace — when they use 'the intelligence that decodes life's hidden patterns' and in this way find or weave meaning, find

or weave consoling coherence over and against fearsome fragments. Incidentally, whether life's hidden patterns are decoded and discovered or whether they are woven by human beings is a theological question which need not delay us, for the gods themselves are artists, and we are co-creators with them, drawing forth order and beauty ('lo, it is good') from the chaos of disconnection.

Merely pretty patterns, it is important to stress, are not consoling. Patterns – the images of pattern which we create – need to be complex and ambiguous if they are to be truly consoling, and if they are to generate and sustain in us the qualities we need for the moral life: tenderness and generosity, gentleness and affection and love, and gritty determination to fight, to combat, to rebel for a better political world. Beautiful patterns and images, as distinct from those which are merely pretty and tinkling, contain fear and anger and remorse as well as love. A map without utopia on it, said someone, is not worth looking at. Yes, and a map without fear and anger and remorse on it is not worth looking at either, for it cannot contain even love let alone utopia.

The importance of complexity and ambiguity can be illustrated with reference to jokes. A good joke, a satisfying joke, resolves one shock but provides another - it leaves you wondering. That story about Picasso, for example: it contained two shocks. One, he told a lie - he denied being responsible for a painting he had in fact executed. Two, he said something nonsensical – 'I often paint fakes'. But then we realise that there is a deep truth underlying both the lie and the nonsense – all great artists are dissatisfied with their own work. The laugh is on the art dealer who doesn't understand, but also on ourselves as we are confronted with our own simplistic notions. The story provides an image of layer on layer of mystery and ambiguity. In an analogous way, a great work of art provides coherence which is multi-layered and provokes endless questions about the nature of art itself, and the differences between art and artifice, action and acting, performance and reality: 'you can only tell the truth by telling lies'.

Images are most purely provided by the visual and plastic arts. But drama and cinema are successions of visual images as well, it is relevant to remember, and a single theatrical production or film is a composite image. So is an opera, and a novel, and a poem. In a poem, incidentally, each image is a metaphor, which is to say each is a kind of joke, each is a juxtaposition of two disparate worlds – each is a miniature work of art, providing the solace of connectedness. Such images, miniature works of art, are often also the building blocks of novels: 'Ayemenem House was aloof-looking, as though it had little to do with the people that lived in it. Like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life.'

And in the same book there is that beautiful capturing, with a metaphor, of our experience of disconnection: 'meaning had slunk out of things and left them fragmented'.

What about music? We may think that instrumental music does not provide 'images'. But Lenin would not agree. Nor would Michael Tippett:

My true function ... is to continue an age-old tradition, fundamental to our

civilisation, which goes back into pre-history and will go forward into the unknown future. This tradition is to create images from the depths of the imagination and give them form ... For it is only through images that the inner world communicates at all. Images of the past, shapes of the future. Images of vigour for a decadent period, images of calm for one too violent. Images of reconciliation for worlds torn by division. And in an age of mediocrity and shattered dreams, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty.

Yes, surely Tippett is right. All artists are in the business of 'creating images from the depths of the imagination', images of reconciliation and connectedness, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty. Beauty, not prettiness. The shock of the new, not muzak.

**Point four:** *art draws the community together.* This is most obviously, most palpably, true in the concert hall, the theatre, the cinema. But you have a similar experience of unity and community in an art gallery. And when in private reading a novel or a poem. The imagery is shared – between you and the artist, and between you and all other people in the audience or in the readership. *Alle Menschen werden Brüder und Schwester* – Schiller and Beethoven are addressing exuberant creativity – *wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt*. Or as a poet sang centuries before the Common Era, likewise hymning creativity:

Fire and hail, snow and fog, tempestuous wind ... Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and cedars. Wild beasts and all cattle, creeping things and  
winged birds. Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of  
the world. Young men and maidens, old and young together. Let them  
*praise ...!*

This bringing of the community together may be linked, as by the ancient psalmist, to reverence for the natural environment – biophilia.

Barbara Hepworth consciously saw her work as expressive of biophilia as also, simultaneously, of the building and sustaining of human communities. In so far as a single statement can capture the relevance of aesthetic values for moral and political purposes, this is as comprehensive a summary as can be found anywhere:

The West Riding of Yorkshire is a producer country – a land of grim and wonderful contrasts where men and women seemed to me, as a child, very tender and exceedingly strong in their belief in life. It is a country of quite extraordinary natural beauty and grandeur: and the contrast of this natural order with the unnatural disorder of the towns, the slag heaps, the dirt and ugliness, made my respect and love for men and women all the greater. For the dignity and kindness of colliers, mill hands, steel workers – all the people who made up that great industrial area gave me a lasting belief in the unity of man with nature, the nature of hills and dales beyond the towns. It is upon this unity that our

continued existence depends.

The term 'commonplace' nowadays has connotations of trite and banal. Earlier, as an adjective, it simply meant ordinary and everyday. Before that it was a noun, a translation into English of *locus communis*, the place which human beings have in common – public space. Art transfigures the commonplace in all three senses - what is trite, what is ordinary, and the space which human beings share when they meet. Art, to repeat, draws the community together. It has the capacity to bring the VEC together, incidentally, and the VEC with other bodies which it may meet.

**Point five:** I am going to leave point five until later, as also points six and seven.

First, let us consider some possible objections to what I have been saying.

### **Part two, antithesis: objections to the thesis**

Very briefly, I should like to consider three objections to the thesis presented so far, the thesis that art makes us moral, or that aesthetic values are of a piece with, and feed into and nurture, moral and ethical values. I shall consider also a fourth possible objection. It follows from each of the others, but also from a position broadly in agreement with what I have been saying. It is that I am in the process of wasting the Values Education Council's valuable time.

The first objection is that the implied view of the moral life in this lecture is, simply, absurd. Morality is to do with following rules, according to the outlook underlying this objection; and moral education, it follows, is to do with inculcating knowledge of the rules and the will-power and self-discipline required to observe them. It would be an unfair caricature of this outlook to say that it seems to focus primarily on rules about what *not* to do. There is arguably enough truth in this caricature, however, for it to be visited and evoked here today. 'We had three sex education lessons at our school,' runs a famous account. 'In the first a priest came, and he told us not to do it. In the second a doctor came, and she told us *how* not to do it. Third, the headteacher came, and told us *where* not to do it.'

According to a recent news report (which appeared to be serious, but may have been malicious) there is nowadays a technical term in the United States for this form of values education - 'abstinence education'. Every state is being given an abstinence education grant of 50 million dollars, a requirement being that the money cannot be used for any programme which mentions condoms, safe sex or family planning. In Britain, New Labour will no doubt shortly set up the Abstinence Education Committee, acronym AEC, pronounced (perhaps) ache. Everything I have been saying in this lecture, seen from the values position of abstinence education, is at best irrelevant and at worst deeply pernicious nonsense. I will reply to this objection, in due course, with point five.

A second possible objection is that the thesis of this lecture is, or may be, all very well, but that the lecturer seems oblivious to the reality that it is *how* we teach, not *what* we teach,



that determines whether art makes people good, or better. I entirely agree with this objection, and will in fact assert it as point six. I shall recall the argument that teaching is an art, particularly a performing art. It is only when teachers act as artists, particularly performing artists, that they are likely to have a beneficial moral effect.

A third possible objection is that I appear to have been referring throughout to so-called 'high' art –Tippett, Beethoven, Proust, Iris Murdoch, Hepworth, Cezanne, and so on – and have not acknowledged that high art is famously, or infamously, a possession of the *élite* class in our society, a class which is absolutely no more moral than any other. 'We really must stop people sleeping on the streets,' a senior politician was quoted as saying a few years ago. 'It's such a nuisance having to step over them when one comes out of the opera.' I also agree with the thrust of this objection (though would point out that there is no reason to suppose the Good Samaritan was a Philistine!), and will address it with point seven.

A fourth objection, to the effect that I am wasting the Values Education Council's time, follows from any one of the first three objections. It may also be made in some such terms as these: 'You have acknowledged that there is a *soi-disant* moral majority in our society which believes that values education should take the form, quintessentially, of abstinence education. This majority, known popularly sometimes as Middle England, sustains the current government and is rooted in a deep-seated moral panic about young people, and about the poor and excluded, the so-called underclass. Here at today's conference we should be talking about how to analyse and to confront that moral panic, in its two main forms, and how to carry arguments with Middle England. It is strategy and tactics we should be discussing, not fine ideals. The text of your lecture so far might yield one or two contributions to the Pseuds Corner column in *Private Eye* but is useless to us in the task we actually have before us here today, which is that of drafting a hard-nosed submission to the government's project on Creative and Cultural Education.' To this objection I will reply in a concluding note.

### **Part three, synthesis: continuation of the thesis**

This third part of the lecture takes the form of a continuation of the arguments being developed in the first part. It contains three points. These correspond to three of the four objections sketched in the lecture's second part.

**Point five:** *the arts see 'being' and 'becoming', not behaviour, as essential elements of the moral life.* The difficult moral and political decisions, the arts tell us, are not between right and wrong, but between right and right, and between wrong and wrong. We are faced with these decisions within the particularities of a social location and a social role. The distinction I am wishing to stress here is sometimes said to be between the respective moral philosophies of Kant and Aristotle. For Kant, the prime moral question was 'What rules should human beings follow, always and everywhere?' For Aristotle, 'What sort of person should I become, given the particularity of my gender, age, ethnicity and social location in an overall social system which is systemically unjust?'

There is a place in values education, certainly, for the concept of rules of behaviour. The

arts, however, do not give their primary attention to rules. This is no doubt a matter of regret for Kantians present at today's conference but is not, I submit, the fault of your lecturer! In so far as values education is essentially to do with inculcating obedience to rules, the arts have little to offer. In so far, however, as values education is concerned with forming sensitivity to unique, socially situated dilemmas, the arts contribute with their images of, to recall phrases already used in this lecture, 'the transfiguration of the commonplace' and 'whole hearted commitment to life'.

**Point six:** *creative and cultural education requires teachers to be artists not instructors.* Teachers have many roles. To use metaphors from the performing arts, they are stage-managers, ushers, fundraisers and front-of-house managers as well as scriptwriters, composers, conductors and performers. This is by way of saying that yes certainly there is a place for instruction, control and administration. But teachers at their most quintessential, so to speak, are artists, particularly performing artists. 'I have come to believe,' wrote John Steinbeck, 'that:

a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.

To stress the teacher-as-artist role is to stress at least four separate points. First, the classroom – or the lecture hall for that matter! – is a place of theatre. 'We had a large class of about forty girls,' recalls Muriel Spark:

A full classroom of that size, with a sole performer on stage before an audience sitting in rows looking and listening, is essentially theatre.

Second, the classroom is a place of uncertainty, ambiguity and – therefore – risk. Muriel Spark's famous (infamous?) teacher Jean Brodie contrasts herself with her headteacher, Miss Mackay, whose motto both in life and educational administration, she says, is Safety First. But, Jean Brodie announces to her students, 'Safety does not come first. Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first. Follow me.' Creative teachers are risk-takers.

*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is well worth close consideration in the context of this lecture. Neither the novel nor the play gives precise rules on what to do and not to do. But both provide, in their respective ways, an image of the complexities of adolescent sexuality and (therefore) of education, rooted in the particularities of 1930s Edinburgh. And both do so with 'whole-hearted commitment to life'. It is of course no coincidence that Miss Brodie's protégée Sandy, who is also the student who 'betrays' her, writes a book in later life of, it is said, great moral significance.

The title of Sandy's book is *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

This could equally be the title of Muriel Spark's novel itself, or of any work of art.

Third, teachers-as-artists have to be risk-takers because they do not know, and cannot

know, what exactly is going to happen. 'I do not know what I think till I see what I say': these are species-typical words of every artist in every art. Analogously, teachers are called to say: 'I do not know what they'll learn till I see what I teach', and also: 'I do not know what I'll teach till I see what they learn'. Teaching requires artistry because creative outcomes (the kinds of outcome we are interested in here today) cannot be pre-determined. One of the most practical handbooks about teaching yet written, to judge by its title and provenance, may well be *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* by Muriel Spark's Sandy Stranger.

Fourth, the teacher-as-artist is concerned with fostering creativity amongst pupils and students: pennies dropping, paradigms shifting, eureka splashing. This is important across the whole curriculum, not in 'cultural and creative education' only. This point follows directly into point seven below.

**Point seven:** *learners in schools should work and create at their own frontiers and should be familiar with the frontiers of contemporary art.* Creative and cultural education will not otherwise have the beneficial effects I have been describing. This means that creative and cultural education must be concerned with very much more than developing the performance skills of the most talented young people, important though that is. It means also that it must be concerned with much more than 'high' culture, the canon of the European classics. Artists currently working at the frontiers of their traditions are experimenting with hybridity – mixes of high and popular, of European and other world cultures, of art forms, of genres. We deceive children and young people if we do not encourage and enable them to know this, and to experiment with hybridity themselves.

Of course, no artist creates *ex nihilo*. Craig Raine said once, in an article about T.S.Eliot:

The task of the artist at any time is uncompromisingly simple – to discover what has not yet been done, and to do it. To do it, moreover, in a way which not only breaks with, but is also a logical extension of, the past ... The late Hans Keller definitively observed that the greatest art is characterised by unpredictable inevitability.

## **Concluding note**

The political-cum-literary task facing the Values Education Council, in so far as there is agreement here with the broad outlines of what I have been saying, is extremely daunting. For the task is to say something to the Government's working party on creative and cultural education which will not be laughed out of court as off-message and unusable – and that is all but impossible, in some people's view, within the current context of the Government's pact with Middle England.

The deal, it is said, is that Middle England will give the Government a second term providing the Government for its part does nothing to inconvenience or disturb Middle England. But Middle England, to quote a columnist in one of yesterday's newspapers, is 'not just politically intolerant but culturally and aesthetically narrow-minded'.

It could be objected, I mentioned earlier, that this lecture should have been about strategy and tactics for approaching Middle England. It would then have been more useful for the literary-cum-political task facing the VEC here today. But maybe what I have been saying casts light on strategy and tactics, and could even modify our view of the, er, enemy?

And maybe some of the artists I have quoted could be quoted in the VEC's submission to the committee, either directly or else translated into submission-speak?

Words, phrases and statements from artists here this morning include 'erotic' ... 'the sensuality of the mechanisms of the universe' ... 'art enables us to look without sin on a sinless world' ... 'images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty' ... 'the unity of humankind with nature, upon which our continued existence depends' ... 'a great teacher is a great artist' ... 'a classroom is a place of theatre' ... 'the greatest art is characterised by unpredictable inevitability' ... 'transfiguration of the commonplace' ... 'whole-hearted commitment to life'.

If the VEC does contrive to include some of these ideas in its submission, how will it be received? My fear is that a playful VEC (*vecus ludens*) saying such things will find the committee to be awfully reminiscent of Ayemenem House :

It was a grand old house, the Ayemenem House, but aloof-looking. As though it had little to do with the people that lived in it. Like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life.

That, yes, is my fear. But fear is not, finally, what we learn from the arts. It is absolutely not the note on which to end this, or any, lecture. I have a *dream* too, an image of hope in my mind's eye and ear. It is an image of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty.

It comes to me, does this image, trailing clouds of unpredictable inevitability. When the VEC meets the Government committee, according to this image, there will be, in spite of everything, there will be, I use the term now for the last time, there will be, yes with unpredictable inevitability, there will be, transfiguration of the commonplace.

## **Notes**

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Toru Takemitsu, quoted in the programme for *The Spirit Garden* series of concerts, Royal Festival Hall 1998.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Chatto and Windus 1992, page 8.

André Brink, *The Novel: language and narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*, Macmillan 1998, page 5.

Jokes and tickling: *The Act of Creation* by Arthur Koestler, first published 1964 and re-

issued by Arkana, 1990. Puns: *Language Play* by David Crystal, Penguin 1998.

Michael Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius*, Paladin 1964, page 156.

'Fire and hail...': Psalm 148.

Biophilia: *The Diversity of Life* by Edward Wilson, Penguin 1992, chapter 15.

Kant and Aristotle: *Drama, Narrative and Moral Education* by Joe Winston, Falmer Press 1998, pages 18–24.

Steinbeck and Muriel Spark's classroom: programme notes for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, National Theatre 1998.

'Safety First...': *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Macmillan 1961, page 3.

Craig Raine on T S Eliot: *The Guardian*, 19 August 1986.