

Nearly six years ago, when I had written the last of my poems for the collection *Green Shadows and Other Poems*, I felt sure that I could write nothing more for publication. I went on writing, of course, but only for my archives.

In mid-2020, during a so-called lockdown in the state of Victoria, I wrote the first few of the pieces in this book – but only for myself and for future readers of my archives. Not until I had mentioned my project to Ivor Indyk of Giramondo, did I think of my pieces as the first of a published collection. Thus encouraged, I went on writing long after the lockdown had ended, pleased to be able yet again to explain myself.

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TAMARISK ROW

A few weeks ago, on one of the first days of spring in my eighty-second year, I began a project that seemed likely to provide a neat rounding-off to my career as a published writer. I began to read *Tamarisk Row* (1974), my first book of fiction. I intended to read the book at my leisure and afterwards, in order of their publication, every book of mine, ending with *Green Shadows and Other Poems* (2019). I intended also to write a brief report of my experience as a re-reader of each book. A copy of each report would be lodged in each of my Chronological Archive, which I think of as a documentation of my life as a whole, and my Literary Archive, which is concerned with everything that I've written for publication.

The whole project, before I began it, seemed likely to be reassuring and far from demanding. I looked forward especially to learning about the earlier writer things that he may not have known at the time or things that had since been forgotten. I feel nowadays as though I know immensely more about the writing of fiction than I knew in earlier decades. How would the man I am now judge the earlier man? These and other matters brought on a pleasant sense of anticipation in the days before I began my project.

I had previously read none of my books in its published form. I had looked into each book many times, often for the purpose of finding and then reading – sometimes aloud – one or another passage that I was proud of. I had read aloud more than a few of my favourite passages in public – the last words I had uttered in public comprised the sonorous last paragraph of *A History of Books*. But I had never sat down and tried to confront any book of mine as though for the first time. The word *tried* is the operative word in the previous sentence. I surely knew, when I opened *Tamarisk Row* the other day, that to *try* was as much as I could do.

I discovered early in life that the act of reading is much more complicated than most people seem to acknowledge. My project, as I called it, was never going to be any sort of simple confrontation. And so, while I scanned in their printed form a hundred thousand of the million and more words that I had scrawled in ballpoint pen half a century ago, I did what I've always preferred to do in the presence of a certain sort of text: I followed the workings of my mind.

If I chose to use a common expression, I could report that my mind wandered often from the time when I re-read the first page of *Tamarisk Row*. The word *mind* denotes for me, however, other than it seems to denote for most people, and while I can readily report that some or another conscious part of me was wandering, I would reserve the word *mind* to denote the place where the wandering occurred. I can be much more specific. I can report that for as long as I attended to the text of *Tamarisk Row*, I was distracted by, and sometimes even lost in, the true subject-matter, as I would call it, of that text.

Certain matters mentioned or hinted at in the previous paragraph will be raised again in later sections of this book. I report here only that I had in mind while I read the first, brief section of *Tamarisk Row* far more than the words of that section could have been intended to denote. This should not have surprised me. I had said several times in public that I was for ever prevented from reading any of my published books because I saw their published texts always as surrounded, so to speak, by so much else that had gone into the making of those texts. From among the teeming, infinite-seeming profusion of what I saw, I might mention an image of part of the city of Bendigo as it appeared on a hot afternoon in 1946 to a small boy climbing with his classmates the flights of wooden stairs at the rear of the Capitol Theatre at the upper end of View Street. I might mention a host of persons and places that I recall from the four years that I spent in Bendigo or a host of events that I took part in, although none of those persons or places or events had any bearing on what I wrote about in *Tamarisk Row*. Or I might mention some of the thirty or forty thousand words that I removed from the original text of the work to reduce it to a publishable length, and some of what I saw in mind or felt while I first wrote those words. But the author of a text is not alone in seeing far beyond the simplest denotations and connotations of that text. Surely any self-aware reader knows what a multitude of imagery appears during the reading of a text, often distracting but sometimes enhancing.

In short, I will always have to struggle indeed to decide how any book of mine might affect a reader. But no such struggle need hinder me from assessing the soundness of the

sentences that make up the text or the skill and consistency of the narrative. I've learned a great deal about sentences and about narration since I began to write what turned at last into *Tamarisk Row*, and although I could never think of disowning the man who spent his late twenties and early thirties writing his first work of fiction, I expected my re-reading to tell me that my first book was flawed. I knew the sentences would not disappoint me – I've been concerned since boyhood with the structure of sentences – but I expected to find faults in the narration. I had never forgotten the stinging comment by an Irish reviewer that I had grafted an adult's perceptions onto the sensibility of a child.

Needless to say, I found passages that I could wish today to have written differently, but I was more often pleasantly surprised. The author of fifty years ago had thought far less about theories of narration than I have today, but some sort of feeling for the rightness of the narrative was already with him. Throughout my reading, I had in mind the accusation by the Irish reviewer. Had the boy Clement Killeaton been credited with insights beyond his grasp? I had the accusation especially in mind while I read such sections as those reporting Clement's peering of an afternoon into the orange-gold glass panel of the west-facing front door at 42 Leslie Street, Bassett, and I felt wholly exonerated from the Irishman's charge. Twenty and more years before I succeeded in defining for my own satisfaction what I now call 'true fiction' or 'considered narration', I had written page after unerring page of the stuff.

I've spent countless hours during the past sixty years trying to write fiction, but I've also spent a great many hours

trying to explain for my own satisfaction *what I'm actually doing* when I'm writing fiction and why I find certain sorts of fiction more satisfying than other sorts. I had been busy at both of those tasks for nearly twenty years before I found the words that I had sought for so long. In fact, I found two neatly complementary sets of words. One set I devised myself. In 1979, I was writing part of the script for a documentary film about myself and my books and my interest in horse-racing. The words I was writing were to come from my own mouth while I was standing alone before the camera. I had come to dislike and distrust cameras by then, and I was perhaps provoked to declare to the darkness behind the lens what I had previously been unable to write on a blank page. Or, perhaps I supposed my situation was that of the narrator of the last passage of *The Plains*, and the camera in front of me was aimed only at the darkness behind my eyes. Whatever, as they say, in the film *Words and Silk* I declare at length what I can state simply here: true fiction is an account of certain of the contents of the mind of the narrator.

The second of the two sets of words I found in the introduction to a paperback collection of the short works of Herman Melville. Given the importance of those words to me and the number of times I've quoted or paraphrased them, it might be expected that I could name the author of the words, but I can't. His name would be somewhere among my lecture notes in my Chronological Archive, but the notes amount to several hundred pages, and the book where I first read the words is in storage in Melbourne, four hundred kilometres away. So, the author, who was a male and a lesser-known academic, if dead by now never knew

or if still alive will never know that a few of his words had a life-changing impact on one of his fellows. Those words are to the effect that a story well told informs us not only that certain things may have happened but *what it is to know that such things may have happened*.

It would not be inapt for me to mention here my having described myself sometimes as a technical writer: one whose fiction is no more and no less than an accurate report of some of the contents of his mind. For this sort of writer – my sort of writer – a passage of fiction is not an account of something that might once have happened in the visible world; it is not even an account of something that could conceivably have happened in that world. For this sort of writer, such issues are irrelevant; a passage of fiction reports his or her *contemplation* of what did happen or what did not happen or what might have happened or what can never happen.

While I read recently many a passage from *Tamarisk Row*, I enjoyed many a seeming-memory, as I would call it, of myself in my early thirties in what my wife and I called the book-room (before it became our eldest son's bedroom) during the several hundreds of evenings and weekends when I wrote the last drafts of what is called, on the rear cover of the 2008 edition, my masterpiece. I enjoyed, for example, the seeming-memory of myself writing not what I myself saw when I looked sometimes of an afternoon through the translucent yellowish glass in the front door of a weather-board cottage at 244 Neale Street, Bendigo, thirty and more years before, and not what some readily visible character saw in some readily visible film-in-the-mind, but what came to light, to use that impressive figure of speech, when, in a

certain north-facing room in a certain north-eastern suburb of Melbourne, I wrote that a certain fictional personage stood before a pane of sunlit glass and when I got ready to report the patterns of imagery already rising to sight in the endless, inexhaustible place-of-places that I demean when I call it my mind.

While I was writing the previous sentence, I was reassured yet again of the truth of the claim by the narrator of my 'First Love' (first published in the collection *Velvet Waters*, 1990), that no such thing as 'Time' exists; that we experience only place after place; that remembering, as we call it, is no sort of rediscovery or recollection but an act performed for the very first time somewhere in the endless place known as the present.

By way of illustrating my preferred form of narration, I could cite the section of *Tamarisk Row* titled 'The field lines up for the Gold Cup race'. That section is one of a number of passages in the book that can surely not be taken to represent the thoughts or the imaginings of any character. Nor am I willing to agree that the passage is any sort of commentary or intervention by a narrator such as Thomas Hardy or Anthony Trollope employed. I prefer to leave unnamed the source of the passage and not to connect it closely to any one character. Of course I wrote the passage, and of course, by a crude process of elimination, it must be attributed to the narrator, but during the complex process of the reading of true fiction, such exactitude is not called for. If, during that mysterious process, a reader can mistake a character for himself or herself, then the same reader can likewise err with the narrator or the narrator err with either of the other two.

I seem to recall several critics pointing out that my first published work contained many, if not most, of the themes or strands to be found in my later works. I found plenty of evidence for this during my re-reading. I should have been annoyed, perhaps, by my wastefulness – using in an overly long first work what should have been husbanded for the future. Or, I should have been a bit ashamed of my nervousness as an unpublished writer – putting on display far more than was needed to impress a likely publisher. Instead, I learned that I myself, in the person of the narrator of my first work of fiction, had foreseen the inevitable. To quote the course broadcaster towards the end of his call of the Gold Cup race: ‘ . . . he knows at last that he will never leave Tamarisk Row . . . ’