



Conferences Now and Then

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 **UCLPRESS**

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John Sutherland

I gave the opening address at the day-conference 'Coming of Age: Childhood and Adolescence in Literature and Film' in March 2005. The event was sponsored by the UCL Graduate Society and the Institute of English Studies, a member of the University of London School of Advanced Studies.

My remarks were organised around (1) an observation, (2) a survey of literary evidence, and (3) a hypothesis.

The initial observation was about the popularity of a science fiction novel at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), an institution where I have been teaching for a quarter of a century. Over the last few years, surveys show that the student body's favourite novel has been Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*. In that novel a six-year-old prodigy, with prodigious mental abilities, is trained as the super-warrior who will save planet Earth from an alien horde, the 'buggers' (in the computer sense, not the sodomising). It is easy to correlate the popularity of this text with an elite student population which has to score in the top fifth percentile of the nationwide math SATs to even qualify to apply to Caltech. Being a precocious nerd helps.

Maturity, one concludes, is a very elastic thing. In Shakespeare's seven ages of man the fourth age (somewhat younger than Bruce Willis) is already 'senex' (Latin for scapheap). The variant ages of consent throughout history, and currently, indicate the indeterminacy of what constitutes 'adulthood' and the privileges of personal decision which accompany it. So too do the variant qualifying ages for voting privileges, consumption of alcohol, and active military service. The age-thresholds alter disconcertingly across historical time and space. And in the same time-place dimensions (among the US soldiers dying in Iraq are many under 21 who cannot legally buy alcohol in their home state of California). Is Michael Jackson's accuser, who has recently been giving evidence in the Jackson trial in Santa Maria, a child, an adolescent, or a man? And when did he cross those categorical lines? Very fuzzy.

Shifting the viewpoint to the field I know best, nineteenth-century fiction, I focused on a recurrent aspect in that genre: namely the fact that the critical period of what we would see as adolescence (in the cases of, for example, Catherine Morland, Jane Eyre, Louisa and Tom Gradgrind, Maggie Tulliver, and Jude Fawley) is simply glossed over. These years are overleapt.

When the Victorians avoided something in fiction it typically meant one of two things. Either they regarded it as unimportant, or it was embarrassing and 'unmentionable' (like those other 'unmentionables', underwear). For Jane Austen it was, I suspect,

the former. The incomplete human being did not interest her. For Charlotte Brontë, it was, I suspect, the second.

Whichever: the Victorian attention to this phase of human existence contrasts strikingly with novels of the late twentieth century – of which *Catcher in the Rye* is the prime example – in which these transitional years, ignored by the Victorian novel, are, essentially, the whole matter of the narrative.

This observation led on to my main contention: that adolescence is a socio-historically variable construct. It was, effectively, invented at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States and given its theoretical formulation by G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924). Hall inspired Freud's sole visit to the US, but arguably Hall's influence was, over the successive century, the greater of the two. Hall pioneered the 'new university movement', as it was called. The vast intake of young Americans into colleges, where recruits would be subjected to intensive intellectual training, required above all else (above high intelligence, even) 'plasticity'. Adolescence, that is: a period of latency in which the mature (neo-adult) mind can be moulded as a child's. Adolescence in the US and UK nowadays is seen as extending from roughly between thirteen to twenty-four years of age, entrance into secondary education and graduation from tertiary education, in pedagogical terms. And it is primarily as a pedagogical-socialising agent that adolescence has its utilitarian value.

Literature, particularly the novel, is both a register of the emergence of adolescence and one of the principal means by which it is anatomised and promulgated (see, for example, the 'teen fiction' shelves in any bookstore).

Mine was one among a variety of talks, papers, and workshop contributions on the conference's proposed topic. It was an informative day and one which inspired a number of rather nostalgic and self-indulgent reflections for me. It was, as it happened, the first conference I had attended since retiring from UCL.

The first lit-crit conference I ever attended in my career was at Edinburgh, in the late 1960s, forty years earlier. At that period, conference culture (as much an artificial construct as adolescence) had not fully evolved and was something very new. New enough for David Lodge to introduce it as something amusingly barbaric in his novel *Small World: An Academic Romance*.

By general consent the most influential conference in the English-speaking, academic small world of the 1960s was that at Baltimore which introduced 'theory' into the university bloodstream. Thereafter conferences developed in a variety of alternative and cooperative directions. As with the Johns Hopkins event, they served to disseminate new thinking in a more dynamic and immediate way than the traditional 'learned journal', whose circulation was glacier slow (it could take five years from composition, through acceptance, to publication and another five years for response – what dialogue is possible at that pace?).

Such conferences, the high-level diffusive kind, tended towards a hierocratic elitism. Typically they would happen, expensively, off-campus in some four-star hotel in a pleasant resort location (why else would pointy-headed professors spend a weekend in Las Vegas or Hawaii?). They would have one thing in common. No undergraduates, and in many cases no postgraduates, would be present. This exclusivity was, one presumed, a principal (if never stated) design feature. These conferences represented a kind of Reaganite trickle-down model, *avant la lettre*. Dissemination at the campus level would follow dissemination at the conference level (itself a dissemination of what was going on in Olympian Paris or at Yale).

Meanwhile, the academic community at large was undergoing a radical democratisation and dismantling of hierarchy. Before 1965, the annual Modern Language Association (MLA) convention would have a dozen or so honorific speakers and a huge, deferential, audience. After the big bang of 1967, the circus animals took over. Nowadays at the MLA there are, literally, hundreds of lectures, papers, addresses, talks. The speakers are the audience.

Conference culture has evolved in the last half century to fulfil a number of necessary academic functions. There are still the top-down, trickle-down from Olympus variety, although fewer of them and less influential. The central, and most approved, model nowadays is that which rests on a relatively modest economic base (no four-star hostelry). The conference serves to bring into the public domain new thinking, but also to firm up work in progress. Typically, a conference will concentrate scholarly energy on a single *topos* ('adolescence') which may well result in a monograph, or some other scholarly residue, such as this issue of *Moveable Type*. The conference is, ideally, democratic and serves to create a supra-departmental, supra-institutional, and, in some cases, supra-national community (this, incidentally, is particularly important in science). The conference gives in-career academics an opportunity to show their paces and pre-career academics an opportunity to hone and develop skills.

Above all, conferences (meetings and, sometimes, clashes of mind) serve as an antidote to the intellectual constipation which – ever since Burton anatomised the condition in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* – has been seen as the occupational hazard of the scholar's life. I'm very glad my career coincided with the florescence of conference culture. I wish I had another forty years.

John Sutherland was Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London and a visiting professor at the California Institute of Technology. He is the author of many works of literary criticism, biography, and publishing history and is one of Britain's best known literary reviewers with a regular column in the Guardian.