Nick Berry

know fear, know courage™

Essays

Reflections on film

I went to university late in life. I was already ancient. I was 26, going on 27. They called us mature students. Sweet of them. I didn't feel mature back then. I don't feel mature now. I hoped to learn back then. I hope to learn now. What does maturity imply? That you've grown up, learned everything, found all the answers, and can now hand them down from on high to lines of supplicants, crawling towards your glory? That is how some professors understood their roles. They could and did teach nothing but contempt. Others pointed the way to wisdom, my Shakespeare mentor among them. No one can take you there, but he can set up signs. I call Tony Gash my mentor because that is what he was. His name calls me to mark it. He was a wise and, in his willingness to share that wisdom, loving man. He opened my mind and, in that manner, myw soul, to Shakespeare. Here is how he did it.

Tony Gash was the main Shakespeare guy at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich, which is in Norfolk, the northern folk, which can be found due north of Suffolk, the southern folk; English can be literal. Norfolk forms the top of the bump in England's eastern profile, north of London and south of Newcastle. Norwich rode to prominence on the back of sheep and of the city's proximity to Holland. Via the navigable river Yare, and thence into the southernmost reaches of the North Sea, the merchants of mediaeval Norwich could get their goods to the markets of Europe faster than they could to London. At the mouth of the Yare sits the town of Yarmouth (English can be literal). For the purposes of cultural credibility, Yarmouth clings to its association with Charles Dickens, who set chunks of *David Copperfield* there, the closest he got to an autobiographical novel. Otherwise, in its modern iteration, Yarmouth lives as

far from anything Dickens may have recognised as culture as it is possible to get.

Norwich. A fine City. That was how it announced itself to me, and to everyone else entering by road along the A11. A fine City is how I experienced it, and I hope for its sake that it still is. UEA, in my experience, was a fine university, and I hope for its sake that it still is. At the time, literature at UEA was famous for Malcolm Bradbury and his creative writing MA. It should have been famous for Tony Gash. Founded in the early 1960s, along with a slew of what were referred to as 'the new universities', because they were new universities, UEA was the butt of jokes in its early years. It was tagged the University of Easy Access or, as was the case, the University of Excessive Acronyms, which they were not, technically, but were cut some comedic slack to make the gag work. But I treasured my time in EUR and, later, EAS, before taking my BA and going on to take my MPhil at what turned out to be an inferior university in intellectual terms, at least in my experience: OU, to stretch the acronym gag, or Oxford University. Yes, that Oxford University. If you abbreviate it like that, it becomes the Open University, which is where Rita's need led her, and Rita led my need to Oxford, for good or ill. I went there because I could, and to revenge myself on my father, who went there too and never graduated but tortured me through my teens with the certainty that I would never go there because I was too lazy, ungrateful and thick.

Well, I did go there, and I graduated, and it was worth it, but not for the reasons that took me there. I encouraged it to make part of me the biggest arse I have ever been, and allowed it to make part of me awed, but not because of its reputation. Another part of me wore the hood of alcoholic at that time, a part I inherited from my father but never fully grew into. I did my best, for long years, culminating in an ability to split three bottles of wine over one pizza, in the company of a dear old soak employed within the university bureaucracy, as I was by then. I refer to him as a 'dear old soak' not out of malice, but because I think he would like the moniker. It is honest, and so was Keith. He was already past retirement age but had manoeuvred himself into a modest sinecure as a

means to top up his modest pension, and to get him out of the house. I was beyond retirement age too, and always have been. Unemployable. The three bottles were Amy, the manager's, special deal for us. We got three for the price of two if we promised to drink them all. Seemed like a fair deal to us, so we did drink them all, three times a week, generally, and we walked away afterwards in a straight line. The first bottle would go while we studied the menu, which we could have recited from heart. The second two went.

When we got back to the office, Keith would settle to his newspaper and I would settle to exploring the nascent world of online nudie pix. You couldn't call it porn back then. The bandwidth wasn't up to it. Seen objectively, my use of that forerunner of the magnificent resource into which online porn has grown involved staring drunkenly at poor-quality images of poor-quality bodies. Or trying to. The glacial speed of the connection fed to us by those early modems meant that discovery mid-download was a constant threat. I did not have the protection offered by Keith's corner desk. I did what I could with pot plants, but I knew that if someone lobbed a grenade into the office, I'd take the first of the shrapnel.

As a wised-up corporate veteran and exploiting the status afforded him by age and bearing, Keith had nabbed a corner desk. From there, his line of sight meant he could spot danger coming and knew that he could not be observed from behind or from the side. After our lunches, he would entertain us all by performing a trick that may be unique. I'd never seen it before and haven't since. Keith could sleep while holding up a copy of the broadsheet *Daily Telegraph*. Combined with the strategic location of his desk, this expanse of paper made him, for practical purposes, invisible. At the same time, as part of our meagre duties involved staying up to date with current events, it was perfect camouflage. When he was feeling ostentatious, he would sleep behind the *Financial Times*, but that risked his being unexpectedly asked questions about stock movements, which is too great a burden on the recently woken.

Keith had trained his sleeping ears to respond to my warning hiss and could awaken, fold the paper, and resume playing solitaire on his computer in seconds, including login. As this pursuit involved the movement of a mouse, of which he made great show, no visiting executive or senior academic ever had cause to doubt his diligence. Keith was right-handed and his desk placed him to the left of anyone entering our office, while his screen was hidden from general view. They should have known. The less work he was doing, the greater the mouse activity. After I had been there a while, he took to positioning his computer screen at a rakish angle. Keith was rakish, but I was the reason for this. I pointed out to him that, while the screen maintained its traditional orientation, the green baize and playing cards of the pixeled representation of a solitaire table were vividly reflected in his spectacles.

All this happened after my MPhil (Oxon) and I had graduated. That piece of paper doesn't get to call itself what it represents until it has been through that ceremony either. Until it has a name on it, it is like an unsung piece of music, although it never reaches those heights. As soon as my interview was over and I had received the good news, I went round to my former college to see my former choral director and current friend, to tell him of my ascent to the ranks of the university bureaucracy, into which I was to be inducted at academic-related Grade 2, the second lowliest among those being asked to do the same job. I'd only managed to scrape into that remuneration band by a few hundred quid or so, before deductions. It didn't even qualify me for honorary MA status (Grade 3 and higher), but that didn't matter as I had achieved non-honorary MPhil status and had a longer and more ornate gown to show for it, so there. Regardless of rank, those who had 'come up' under their own steam always held one over those who had not. Such is the nature of the game. But I was outgunned by everyone in that world anyway, as Oxford was not my *alma mater*. UEA was. Still, I did my best to fake Oxonian authenticity and could outdrink almost everyone. I was the one who half-carried, half-dragged the Rector of Bonn University back to his lodgings after one epic ceremonial piss-up, not the other way around.

“Fuck, David; I’ve got a job. What do we do now?” We went and got drunk, which is mostly what we did.

I went to Oxford on the pretence of wishing to enter the trade but was always out of my depth and knew it. I could do other things, but not professional academia. I did other things, and some of them were good and some of them were bad. I don’t recall doing anything indifferent. I met the Rita who led me to Oxford in a cinema. She led me to Tony Gash, my first and last mentor, who came from Oxford. He led me to Oxford to study with the same don who had taught him. He in turn turned out to be the closest I have ever come to another Tony Gash, but was not him. Not close.

Fresh out of Oxford, Tony was among the first to be hired by that new university, UEA, as it scrambled to seduce people of ability with the promise of instant tenure; that quirk of academic employment that means you can’t be fired. Well, you can, but you need to get creative. To quote from that, for me, life-changing movie, *Educating Rita*:

> *Rita:* Will they sack you?
>
> *Frank:* Good God, no. That would involve making a decision. Pissed is all right. To get the sack, it would have to be rape on a grand scale. And not just with students. That would only amount to a slight misdemeanour. No. For dismissal, it would have to be nothing less than buggering the Bursar.

Thank you, Willy Russell.

Tony Gash was the best Shakespeare teacher at UEA, and everyone knew it, even if they couldn’t say why, or what being the best teacher meant. Shakespeare had always been a problem for me at school. The problem was, it was love at first sight, and that was going nowhere. Like a street urchin falling for a duchess. The role in which I had cast myself at school, academically at least, was Grand Arsehole, First Class. My self-appointed task was to do everything in my power – which was considerable – to disrupt and destroy

and harass and torment and prevent anyone from learning; myself in particular. I told myself I did this because I hated school. That is not true. I did it because I feared learning. Perhaps because I sensed the danger of learning something that would free me from Fear, and she had me on a short leash. Fear is a jealous mistress. She doesn't like to catch you flirting with Courage. One day, out of nowhere, I chose not to flirt with Courage, but to walk up to her and kiss her full on the mouth, if only to see how she reacted. I expected her to slap my face. I didn't expect her to put her hand down my pants.

I was ~~living~~ existing in London at the time, directionless, soulless, working in a bike shop, earning a pittance, more than all of which went on booze and cigarettes and eating meals that were beyond my budget. As all poor people know, it is part of the job description to indulge the fantasy of being rich sometimes, and the trade-off you make against a month of tinned beans can be worth it. It didn't matter, structurally, that I was in London, working in a bike shop. I may as well have been overspending anywhere, doing anything, earning anything. The directionless, soulless and poor are geographically immune.

The bike shop was smack in the middle of the city, under Charing Cross railway station, as such shops could be back then. The cellars of the great buildings that people that part of London, and the arches that span the Embankment to support the railway bridge that crosses the Thames, heading south, were cheap space for marginal businesses. The cross itself marked the last stop on Eleanor of Castile's journey to her tomb in Westminster Abbey, which she made in the winter of 1290.

Being employed below Eleanor's cross meant that the working day ended with me emerging from my troglodyte labours into the lights of central London, with its landmarks and tourist traps staring at me, grubby and smelling of bike lubricant and stale cigarette smoke. That evening, having as usual nothing special to do, I crossed the Strand and drifted past the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, where I used to sing every Christmas as a boy chorister. We had a regular gig there to do the pre-Christmas carol concert, and it was joyous.

That was in the earliest 1970s, when a trip anywhere beyond the end of the road was an adventure. From St Martin's, I crossed the face of the National Gallery and turned right, up Haymarket. I felt like going to an expensive restaurant, which would mean any restaurant, to get expensively fed and expensively drunk. Caviar tastes with a fish-n-chip budget, and I was already at the point where cheques were rubber-balling back to me. I went to a movie instead, which turned out to be *Educating Rita*, starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters, both of whom I liked, and access to 110 minutes of their company was within the bits of cash I had on me. I wept for the first of many times with Rita, as Denny, her husband, found out she was still taking the pill, tore up her books, and threw them on the bonfire. He had been knocking through their two ground floor rooms to improve the house. Like me in my poverty of wallet and soul, Rita knew it wasn't the house that needed improving. Long before the final credits rolled, I knew I needed to go to university.

Fast forward a year or so. May have been less, or more. Life moves at strange speeds when you are changing it. Having blagged my way into UEA on the basis of my working (literally) knowledge of Norwegian – don't ask – I had followed up on my original plan to get into my non-acronym of choice: EAS, or the School of English and American Studies. I had started off in EUR, which is where Norwegian lived, and got distracted by my Norwegian teacher and by finding out I could do this thing with the books. But EAS was where Shakespeare was and that is where I knew I needed to be. EAS was the élite school in UEA's humanities operation because of, or perhaps in spite of, the presence of Malcolm Bradbury. No disrespect to the man, but he was not among the school's intellectual big hitters, and they were many, as a proportion of the full roster. Anyway, I could never have got into EAS through the front door. By that time, because of and not in spite of the presence of Malcolm Bradbury, the University of Easy Access had become a destination of choice among seekers of literary knowledge and seekers of literary reputation. My meagre qualifications, which barely covered the minimum entry requirement, would not have opened the door to the EAS broom cupboard.

But I had made a good fist of my first year and had scraped together enough credibility to beg my way in, helped by Holger Klein, who also deserves a name check. Recalling how Courage had reacted to my virgin assault, the first course I signed up for was Tony Gash's 'Shakespeare: The Theatre of Shadow and Substance'. What? Whatever. It was Tony Gash, and Tony Gash was The Man. Which plays were included on the reading list, alongside some titles of Plato that I was unsure how to pronounce? Hamlet, King Lear and Richard II, which I assumed to be a typo that should have read Richard III. Such was the knowledge I brought with me to the first seminar. Hamlet and Lear were the plays I had been set for my English A-Level. My first love of Shakespeare and my first fear. You couldn't make it up.

It may have been after the second seminar. That is when I tell myself it was, but it doesn't matter. I found myself hovering around outside the seminar room as Tony chatted to some of the students he knew from a recent production he had staged. He was a gifted director. I wished that he knew me. As the unknown but wanting to be known know, you can kid yourself that osmosis will do the job. But it was enough to be in the presence, or at least within audible academic chuckling distance of the presence.

"And then he said…"

"Really? Oh no! Hahahaha."

Not too loud, but loud enough for others to know that you get the joke. Too discreet, and people would miss it. You can't explain later that you had shared the general merriment; they just hadn't heard it. Too loud, and you tattooed yourself 'gauche'. We each developed our individual interpretations of the academic chuckle. Mine, I attempted to imbue with a mix of Socratic wisdom and Senecan satire. When off duty and not discussing literature, we ignored the disparity between these and our natural laughs.

What did he say? No idea. No sentence made sense to me, but I was close enough to audibly join the chuckling while being far enough away not to have the gaze turned on me. Please, God; don't let him ask me anything. Then the others suddenly weren't there. They evaporated, without me noticing or their leaving a trace, as the indolent can when

there is something heavy to be carried. For a microsecond, I wondered whether I should evaporate with them, but I didn't know them yet and they were not just on first-name terms with 'Tony', as they called him, but were actual actors. They had played in a production that he had directed. A production of a Shakespeare play. And if he had directed them to perform naked, they would have. And one of them was painfully pretty and if I tried to evaporate with them, she would see in my face that I had been visualising that prospect while she had been discussing staging technique.

If you don't react in the microsecond it takes to create the illusion of that having always been your intention, you wobble. Your mind shifts your centre of gravity in the direction of those you have told it you ought to be following, while the rest of you stays put, which can cause an eerie impression of equilibrium in a fourth dimension. I managed to not wobble while wondering whether the panic I felt was as visible to him as it was to me. Now it was just Tony and I standing there, too close to each other to maintain the pretence that we were not standing together.

When the others had done their vanishing trick, they robbed me of my camouflage of curated distance. Had I been rumbled as a fraud – failing a low-octane quotation test, for example, by meeting the line with a blank stare – I could just about pretend to have been engaged in some pursuit other than worship. To facilitate this, while the ceremony of adoration was edging towards its modest climax, I had been edging to within turning-around-quickly distance of the department notice board, even if it was the one for academic staff. As an EAS neophyte, I could pass that off as an honest mistake, maybe even elicit sympathy. Now, my cover had been blown. I needed either to commit to standing with Tony, intentionally, offering the prospect of conversation, or admit that I had not really, well sort of, been sort of listening, but, yes, I had got the joke (I hadn't) and, oh, is that the time?

I drew closer to him and sod the consequences. Now I was officially within his orbit. Now, if neither of us had anything pressing to say, we would have to consciously part, which would require a parting gesture. It was too late to be

rescued by a passing (in his case) adoring student or (in my case) someone I thought I may have seen before. Neither were we yet sufficiently familiar for one of us to suggest a spontaneous coffee. I wasn't yet aware of that as an option.

"Nick, (shit, he knows my name) what do you make of the ending of *King Lear*?"

I had at least read the play by then, which put me ahead of where I had been when I last confronted the work. Good job too, as that was the play we had been discussing and I felt reasonably on top of the story, at least. But I hadn't reached the point where I could attribute lines to Goneril or Regan with any accuracy, despite my legendary (to me) memory. My problem is not forgetting things, but not not forgetting things. Which renders stranger the several years of my time in London that I barely recall. Not even where I was living and at what point. I remember odd bits of things but can't join them up or place them in sequence. Was it several years, or one? Or several months? Whatever it was, my life was in such a mess at the time that the forensic department of my memory skipped that chapter. I won't bore you with my answer to Tony's question because there wasn't one. At least, nothing that could be expressed using the Latin alphabet. Some mumbling.

"You know, I've been teaching the play for 30 years and haven't a clue. I thought maybe you might be able to give me one."

It was and remains the only time I ever heard anyone in his position say such a thing. Never before and never since. Aside from the humility of that statement, it unlocked Shakespeare, and much else, for me. It showed me that there are no answers, because if there were, surely this man would know that one. The question is the thing. Loving not knowing and loving never knowing. It showed me that learning is a process with no goal but itself, not a pitch with nets at each end, and you a team of one, endlessly kicking the same can from one goal to the other. Which is why Socrates could say, with candour and without irony, "I know nothing". In knowing is the door slammed shut. If Socrates knew nothing, what do I know? *Je ne sais rein. J'essaie.*

Tony knew nothing and, as far as I am aware, still doesn't. Last time I saw him, he was as wide open as ever. His schtick was unique in my experience of the formal business of literary academia. His reading lists had no critics among the secondary reading. Instead, they had secondary reading. He once said something like: "If you want to get closer to Shakespeare, read who he read." Those were not his words, but it was a long time ago. That was their sense. That was the start of the trail leading to Montaigne and Aquinas and Ovid and Plato and Heraclitus.

Shakespeare probably read some of them, but it doesn't matter. I just followed the 'Who read what?' line. If Socrates existed, and you can go where you want with that, it is said that he read Heraclitus. Whom did Heraclitus read? Was the Buddha writing then? Confucius was, as was Lao Tse, and they were all contemporaries. Four of the greatest thinkers every to breathe, all breathing at the same moment in 300,000 years of human history. Two of them – Siddhartha Gautama and Heraclitus (of Ephesus) – were princes, and both gave up their wealth to follow a path of contemplation. The same path on which I found Tony, as was my experience, from childhood. Tony contemplated Shakespeare and guided us to do the same. And whether he had read them or not, Shakespeare contemplated the same things as Heraclitus and Siddhartha Gautama and Confucius and Lao Tse.

Tony's relationship with Shakespeare was about Truth, capital 'T': the low sound that reverbs no hollowness. Not the truth of Shakespeare, but the truth Shakespeare contemplated, in all its costumes. This approach ran contrary to the common weal of literary academia at the time, which was richly entrenched in the post-modernist vision and its offspring. It was a game of -isms for us students to play back then, and had not yet matured into the totalitarian doctrine it seems now to have become. You can't play with it now; at least, not if you want the piece of paper for which you paid so dearly. Some academics I experienced in action back then seemed to see the text as a line on which to hang theories, which is fine, if that is your business. I came across some

brilliant critics, for what my judgement is worth, which is very little. But they were not the ones who wrote the stuff they were criticising, and that is the stuff that interests me. Avoiding the critics was a short cut to that. Read what the writer wrote, read the stuff that influenced the thinking and then read the critics, and see where all that takes you.

Critics outnumber the writers they critique by orders of magnitude, and you can't read everything. A professor I encountered at Oxford had stopped reading critics in his field altogether. He explained that there were not enough hours left in his life to keep up with the constant output. So he, as Tony did, withdrew to the texts and the voices he judged most helpful in elucidating them.

Time is a fine editor. The longer something survives, the more reason there is for its survival. Elizabethan and Jacobean London was the Hollywood of its day, where vast fortunes were made in the theatres. There would have been hundreds of hacks crowding the contemporary Tin Pan Alley. How many of the thousands of movie directors and actors and script writers, in the history of cinema, can the average non-movie-buff name today? So it is with Shakespearean and Jacobean theatre, or the baroque in music, or the renaissance in painting. That is not to say that there are not still some undiscovered masters and mistresses who… But if the sum total of your exposure to art, from womb to tomb, consisted in contemplating one minor work of Michelangelo, you would have lived a rich life.

Heraclitus was credited with the first coherent philosophical treatise to be committed to paper, of which only fragments survive. We know of the work through the frequency with which he is cited by those who followed him, at a time when you could still order a copy of his book. But the fragments survive, and they do so for the reason that people considered them worthy of survival. Which is more than you can say of Shakespeare, who never compiled, edited or published any of his own works. It was left to his admirers and co-conspirators to gather the screeds of cue scripts into the earliest versions of the complete works. To be, or not to be, indeed.

As I stumble into my seventh decade of draining the global supply of oxygen, I have less time, literally and metaphorically, for weeding. In the heat of my freshly deflowered fervour, during those intense years with Tony and one or two others, I was certain that I would commit the entire works to memory, as well as imposing my mind on much of the ancient literature. It hasn't happened, and it will not. Today, I can happily spend a few hours on a few words and know that it has been time well invested. I never realised my plan to read the complete works, let alone commit them to memory. I know three of Shakespeare's plays unreasonably well, and a few others quite well and most barely or not at all. I have not read all the sonnets. I have not read The Tempest, although I have seen it performed. I intend to read it, and may today, but I'm nervous of it. Nervous of getting tangled up in thoughts that I do not have the years left to process. I'm still working on the implications of "to thine own self be true." Who is thine own self and what is truth?

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