

*Russell Whitehead*

## Of monks and munching

I've been knocking out this column for 10 years, I noted the other day. It adds up to a lot of words. But then that's what I do for a living, knock out words. I type every day, hunched, scrunched, puzzling and ferreting and doing my neck and shoulders in. I sponsor physiotherapy and the anti-inflammatory drugs industry like a philanthropist. Tap tap tap, and the little identical regular coded shapes peck up onto the shimmering screen in front of me, prior to their whirring and grinding delivery onto sheets of semi-quality paper that I always feel I have to read through before sending their equivalent electronically to wherever the particular text is destined. I want to touch it before I release it.

There's a noise when you write, and of course your sight (assuming you're not blind, but I believe blind writers picture their text) is engaged, and you can hold and touch text on paper, and fresh print smells (gorgeous) too. So it's just taste that's not playing a part. And I think that may be why I think about food all day – what we might have for dinner, what to go and buy, how to cook it, and so on.

Monasteries, in the Christian tradition, were extremely productive on two fronts: books and food. They churned out beautiful handwritten full colour books indoors while outdoors fish were jumping in the trout ponds and poultry were clucking and laying and barley and hops were maturing and then coming indoors to be turned into beer. Cheers.

When I make mistakes as I type, the not-miracle of word-processing means that I commit a few further keystrokes and you'd never know. When the monks of old working as scribes missed a word out in transcribing a text, the physicality of the text, of their writing, meant they needed another system of correction. Because it had to be visible, they'd make a virtue of a vice, so a monk might draw a little picture of himself ascending a ladder in the margin, hauling the missing letters on his back up to their rightful

place. The value of these literal margins as the places where the writer is revealed is echoed by Robert Macfarlane in *The Wild Places*, who mentions that a 'tenth-century copyist, working in an island monastery, paused long enough to scribble a note in Gaelic beside his Latin text. "Pleasant to me is the glittering of the sun today upon these margins."'

Mediaeval texts are beautiful as texts, as objects, as works. There's a fine collection in Cambridge in the Fitzwilliam Museum, and they can 'delight young and old'. The content is delivered through a charming combination of words, colour and illustration, some of which seem designed to motor the text along, and some of which seem incidental. There was no machinery to reproduce these tomes, so each one was unique. There weren't very many in the world and there weren't very many people who could access them or read them. Now (although my royalties would seem to indicate otherwise) the situation is very different. Books and text and all sorts of stuff to read are all over the place, mass-produced, digitalised, on-screen, on-line...

It (writing) all started as the very physical, and still can be. Every now and then you talk to someone who hadn't been a student for a while, but then has a written exam as part of some form of professional development, and they cannot believe the sheer effort of writing for three hours by hand. But are we aware of this history; do you think about our prehistoric ancestors with stone tools when you sit on an Ikea chair? Or, when you're cooking, do you think about how this is an activity which has been going on pretty much forever in human history (but probably not before), or do you think, oh my cooker design is very old-fashioned, oh what's the use-by date on that packet, oh I can sear this for about one minute each side?

I caught a bit of a TV programme about cooking and the old days recently, which I think may well have been done by Terry Jones, ex-Monty Python and ongoing Mediaevalist. They were reconstructing the King's food – cooking and then eating it. I can't really say, because I

didn't see the whole programme, and I don't know what series or context it was designed to fit into, but it did seem possibly a slight shame to have limited it to the King's table, and not to have included some indication of what everyone else was having. Anyway, they had a sort of round-up dinner, with various mediaeval and/or food experts assembled to eat and speak. Comments were made along the lines of, eating this makes you feel that you're not so different from people 600 years ago (see what I mean about the King's-table-only angle?).

Nonetheless, it is of course fascinating to think about eating things that are the same as people ate a long time ago. And to read what they read. Or wrote and cooked. Looking at works of visual art, listening to 'ancient' music, and so on, are things we're quite used to, and don't give us the same pause for thought, anymore than it strikes us as extraordinary that chatting, arguing, fighting, having sex, working when we don't feel like it, and so on, are important historic and prehistoric activities.

The mass spread of food and text are parallel in some ways, with Burger King (there's the king again) and Japanese noodle bars and traditional London pie shops fulfilling the criteria of mass availability and standardisation, perhaps at the cost of other, more actually edible, factors.

Regular readers of this column will be anticipating the triangulating of this parallel here. Yes, I think you can say that these thoughts about food and writing can also be applied to

learning, and so of course teaching. They are activities that people have closely engaged in, partly with conscious emotion, partly taking them for granted. The wariness I feel about too many books and too many food outlets is rather like my reaction to the excess of learning material. Learners used to be like diligent monks, dedicatedly crafting beautiful colourful notebooks, where now they click and scroll. Learning material is released as mobile phone downloads to be gazed at on the train while grazing on a portable meal solution.

The most direct connection I feel with the doodling monks is perhaps a hunched neck and shoulders, but it is true that language learning has always come back to pretty much the same basic ingredients. And sometimes they're notions, functions, chunks, and they can be parsed or grow on trees, but there have always been words and the bits that hold them together, and we can always call them vocabulary and grammar. Anne, of whom I know nothing these days, but who was a vicar's daughter from the Isle of Wight living in the same tatty house as me in the 1980s in Kentish Town, London, and who was a formidable cook, I remember saying you should see learning to cook in terms of grammar and vocabulary. 'Start with teaching yourself a basic range of techniques – grammar – and then you can build a repertoire of variations – vocabulary – onto them.' Word for word, I've yet to encounter an improvement on that recipe.



*Russell Whitehead has been a teacher and self-access co-ordinator and now writes books, CD-ROMs and on-line materials and tests.*

*His new website is now live at:*

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