

Katharine's memorial speech for David

I don't want to talk about David as potter, painter, poet, philosopher, nor of David as family man, doting dad - though these do tend to be found in this family - nor of him as teacher, friend and compleat guru (though he was all those things). That aspect of him which is the subject of what I have to say is to be found in very few men, and even then to a much lesser degree; and I suppose it tends to suggest that he lived a very intense inner life where the all-powerful IDEA completely nullified the surrounding circumstances of everyday life, sometimes resulting in extraordinary consequences.

There were various ways in which this affected me personally, but I will describe only one, in which he actually served as a great source of inspiration to me in my life outside the home, that is as teacher of that much hated and maligned subject French - matiere execrable. Any such teacher eventually reaches the conclusion that the one section of the French syllabus which is "execre" above all others is that known as Aural Comprehension, where sense has to be made of mere sound. The little pink ears are assaulted by the fireworks of Gallic phonetics, the eyes glaze over, the breathing deepens, the limbs relax. Que faire, mon Dieu!?

Now, (particularly in a girl's school), the teacher soon finds that anything to do with the private life of the staff soon arouses a lively interest. So it was that the dreary chapter in Book 4 entitled 'Le Mari Distrait' relating the absurd habits of the absent-minded Monsieur Legros in donning his wife's hat to go shopping was transformed into the achingly amusing adventures of one Monsieur Ballantyne, artiste, potier, poete, philosophe, pere de famille etcetera.

The stories were strictly rationed; so popular were they that more were clamoured for; one was tempted to devise new ones, but curiously life remained more effective than fiction. They loved the one about the adolescent Liverpudlian cycling down -----Road, eyes intent on the young vision gradually approaching on the opposite pavement,(en descendant la rue), so intent indeed that the stationary camion de deménagement with back gate opened and lowered, soon swallowed bicycle and rider, Patatras! How else could they learn what a removal van is in French?

Another popular one was the story of the jeune étudiant des Beaux Arts who, home for lunch, having spent the morning with his head in the clouds (and his hands in tubes of paint) was greeted in the dining room by his mother with the words, "David, go down to the kitchen and bring the cheese up, and wash your hands dear!" The small square of window in the basement kitchen displayed the very same cloud problem which had been that morning's study. Still absorbed, notre héros, having, history records, removed the paint with the block of fromage, then deposited the block of savon on the cheese dish and remounted to the dining room. Uncle Willie's estimation of Art as opposed to Science students was not increased.

I confess I had had my doubts about these old family fables, but there was one story I could vouch for to my classes. They found it incroyable! One evening after supper, le patron de mon mari, Monsieur le Directeur, alias Mr. Courtney, called round for coffee, to discuss the latest kiln firing and plans for expansion. Après son départ, I rose to remove the trolley, but was stopped. "No no, let me do that, but give me ten minutes while I mull over our conversation first", said mon mari, not stirring from the small Victorian armchair by the fireside. Sitting in a corner, chatting to the student who was living with us at the time - David Lane - who can't be here today but reminds us of this occasion in his letter, I left my husband to his thoughts. But some time later the sound of wheels moving over the wooden floor caused us to glance up. It took us a moment to comprehend the situation. Notre héros had risen from the little Victorian chair, and it was the sound of its castors that we heard, as it was pushed through the doorway into the kitchen, for the washing up. French for castors? La roulette.

We were always teasing David, when he was distracted, about being on "the edge of the infinite", and now, I am sure, he is no stranger to the Infinite itself.