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SUMNER LOCKE ELLIOTT:
WRITING LIFE

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of
the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the life and writing of Sumner Locke Elliott (1917-1991). It is a biographical study which argues that through the canon of his work, Elliott both defined and attempted to come to terms with his sense of otherness, difference. A principle focus in this context is his perception of his family and childhood as central to his difference: through his writing he continually renegotiated and reassessed his family and himself in an effort to understand and to psychologically exorcise his own 'outsider' status. It is argued that ancestral memory is at the core of Elliott's art and life. His inherited name is emblematic of his sense of being more than the sum of his own parts; a collective or cumulative centre which encompasses the entire matriarchal generation preceeding him. This is reflected in the dialogical form of his books (a narrative structure through which the writer is thinking/speaking/writing through many voices, consciousnesses and points of view). This dissertation similarly depicts Elliott's life as one of a developing dialogic imagination. To this end, the many voices and conflicting view points that informed him are heard throughout this narrative. Only against the background of family was Elliott able to distinguish and decipher his own self-delineation.

Elliott's writings - his juvenilia; his early stage and radio plays; his more mature stage works; his television scripts for America; his only Broadway play; and his ten major novels are critically evaluated and discussed in terms of the intersection between art and life.

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"I think autobiography happens automatically for me. Memory is the strongest power I have, it's my lifeline to the truth."

Sumner Locke Elliott

FOREWORD

He sat framed in the glass front of The Brighton Grill, a fashionable restaurant on Manhattan's East side, peering out at the bleak New York street. "Just ask the maitre d' for Mr. Elliott," he advised me during our phone call to arrange this lunch. "I've grown very old and you mightn't recognise me from my photographs." But there he sat looking exactly like his photographs, particularly his baby ones; maybe for men a receding hairline unites the two poles of life: the bald baby had become the balding man.

In Australia, Sumner Locke Elliott won the Miles Franklin Award for his first novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You* (1963) and, after the publication of his sixth novel *Water Under the Bridge* (1977), he won the Patrick White Award for his contribution to Australian Literature. His work was greatly admired by the Nobel Prize-winning White who once commented that Sumner was the finest living Australian novelist apart from himself.[1]

In America, several of Sumner's books were selected for publication by the Readers' Digest Book Club, and, among other honours, he was declared a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library in 1983 alongside names like Arthur Miller, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Susan Sontag and Herman Wouk. All over the world, his

1 Patrick White said this to Bruce Beresford who included White's comment in his SLE Obituary Notice, *The Independent* (London), 29 June 1991.

novels had received critical and popular acclaim and had been translated into many different languages. But, as I discovered while researching his collected papers, he had been a writer in Australia and America long before he ever thought of becoming a novelist.

At sixteen, Sumner was apprenticed as a playwright and actor by Doris Fitton, director of the Independent Theatre in Sydney, and he also began acting and writing for the Sydney radio mogul, George Edwards. While he was still in his teens his radio serials and plays were broadcast across Australia and New Zealand. He was drafted into army service during World War II and he drew on his experience in an ordnance depot in the Northern Territory outback to write his most celebrated stage play, *Rusty Bugles*. The play's raw army barracks language was condemned by the New South Wales Vice Squad and the Chief Secretary, and even raised questions in Federal Parliament. Banned at first, *Rusty Bugles* eventually enjoyed a two-year nationwide run and forced a revision of Australian censorship laws.

Before *Rusty Bugles* opened, Sumner had left for a new life in America where he spent the next 14 years writing for television during the early days of the industry. His screenplays were broadcast coast to coast and he became one of the 20 best television

writers in a country generally acknowledged to be the television mecca of the world, before he turned to novels, of which he wrote ten. Armed with the knowledge of all this experience I wrote to him in January 1990, requesting access to his papers which were in collection at Boston University. To my delight, he answered this letter from an unknown researcher giving approval and suggesting that - on our way back from Boston - my husband and I join him for lunch in New York. We met him there in April, 1990.

He wore a tailored jacket and tie and looked stylish, his bright eyes belying his age. When we met it was as though we'd always known each other. He talked for over three hours and introduced the staff: Annie, the waitress; David, the Maitre d'; and Stephanie, the owner, who was the daughter of film star Joan Bennet. And we were Australians, "*real* Australians", he indicated with some pride. He ate sparsely and then insisted on picking up the check. During the conversation, which I would always remember as 'the Entertainment', there were only two brief pauses in his breathless rush of stories, enquiries and reminiscences. On both these occasions I went instantly blank: overloaded with questions, I asked nothing.

He spoke about his work, passing me a copy of his newly released novel, *Fairyland*. "I've been gay all my life," he confided,

placing his hand upon mine, "and this is about that experience." Realising that I wasn't surprised, he continued: "But I haven't had sex for five years, since I suffered a stroke. Still I can't complain, I had a good run." This last remark - accompanied by a slightly wicked smile - reminded me of both the actor and playwright he had once been before becoming a novelist. Then as though he had said nothing revealing, he discussed the morning's flurry of snow ("so unusual for April in New York, that I hoped you had seen it"); the recent elections in Australia; his early life and family; our trip to America; and his companion, friend and fellow writer, Whitfield Cook, who was then out of town.

We learned why he was so pleased that Labor (led by Hawke) had been re-elected in Australia. "Ours was a Labor house," he explained. "My Uncle George was a Labor politician and I was brought up to vote Labor and did so, *always*," he added with a New Yorker's typical last word emphasis. Learning that my husband was a John Steinbeck fan and that we had just toured the Steinbeck locations of the West Coast, he told us how he'd met the great American novelist - "just the one time" - not long after arriving in New York, and he spoke about his quite separate and special friendship with Steinbeck's widow, Elaine. A stage version of *The Grapes of Wrath* was on Broadway then and when he described the final scene - "...it's how the novel ends but was cut from the film

version: when the white woman, whose baby has died, cradles the starving Negro man and breastfeeds him" - his eyes filled with tears. "So poignant and touchingly simple," he said. He was vital, even when he spoke about his recent brush with cancer. "In remission," he reassured us. Not until he rose from the table to leave the restaurant and needed assistance with his overcoat and hat did I realise he was a fragile 72-year-old.

He directed the cab driver with clarity and authority, but as he walked towards his apartment, his step was not so firm. Yet with his back still to us, he waved goodbye with a circular flourish of his hand, dramatic to the last. I never saw him again.

During the next 15 months we corresponded regularly and spoke on the phone occasionally between New York and Australia. He insisted on paying for these calls. "No arguments!" he said in his customary decisive tone. "I'll be glad of the tax deduction."

He gave formal approval for this biography just before his death in June 1991. Through his network of close friends, news of his passing appeared in Australian newspapers first, scooping even the New York press. He would have enjoyed that.

For me, his death seemed more like a rumour, a headline

without any real substance. It was just that his letters and phone calls had stopped. In my memory and imagination he lived on - I heard his voice in each of his books and saw his animated face and bright beguiling eyes behind every story.

His memorial service was attended by fellow writers, entertainers, actors, the Australian Consul, old friends and new. "But it wasn't a New York formal affair at all, just a gathering of special friends," Elaine Steinbeck explained. His favourite poetry was recited by its author, American poet Josephine Jacobsen; his favourite music - a Sondheim piece - was played; his favourite people were there. An extract from his novel, *Waiting For Childhood*, was read aloud by actor Gordon Chater, a fellow New Yorker and an old friend from Sydney theatre days. "The passage was marked out by Sumner in his copy of the book," Gordon Chater later told me, "and I was extremely nervous about reading it; sick in fact, because it was something he had been especially pleased with, depicting the relationship shared between a father and his child."

Elaine Steinbeck then told the gathering about Sumner's last days and her pride in her old friend's bravery.

> He was very sick and very thin and he hadn't been dressing but insisted on putting on a brightly striped shirt for my visit...and, after we had greeted with hugs

> and kisses, he became very dramatic and told me that there was a time for everything and that this was a time for remembering and recollecting. And he stretched himself up, very straight, and he spoke about a woman from his past. He began describing every detail of her life and his relationship with her. He was so emotional. And then he spoke about how remembering that woman led into the memory of someone else and then someone else. And his voice was so tremulous. And he said that this was what he did every day now: remembered and recollected. And when I started to cry, he encouraged me. He said not to be sorry or ashamed; and he marvelled at what a wonder it was to have a friend with whom he had shared such pleasure, laughter and gladness and with whom he could now also share the tears. And he was so strong that it wasn't morbid or tragic. He was performing a part of his life as a great show. And it was a magical time. Very often when one thinks of a friend, one thinks of a high point in that person's life, a time of youth or some extraordinary experience. But I think, that as a friend of Sumner Locke Elliott, I am the luckiest woman: I can think of the last time I saw him and I can remember *that* with pleasure. There was no fear and no pain. And through him the sorrow was transcended.[2]

From the many people I spoke to both in Australia and America, it is clear that Sumner Locke Elliott was a person who left a strong impression. Even his acquaintances retain memories of times they shared with him. His ability to achieve an instant rapport with people was best expressed by Broadway producer, Hal Prince, who recalled: "Sumner was the sort of person who radiated such warmth and enthusiasm that you came to believe he was an

2 Elaine Steinbeck recalled her address at SLE's memorial service to me, New York City 1991.

old friend."[3] His 'summer' neighbours in New Hampshire, his 'high-rise' friends from New York and the Australian companions of his youth all maintain their own clear recollections of the man, the writer, their friend. He made each one feel they had a special place in his life for the 'run-of-the-play'. He, in turn, inspired lasting friendships, some of them maintained almost entirely by letters. He was respected by his peers, loved by his friends and remembered by everyone with whom he made contact. He left behind a body of writing, including ten published novels, which will long be treasured by his readers around the world. It seems fitting that all future royalties from his books were bequeathed to The New Dramatists Society of New York where a plaque above the entrance reads: "These doors remain open through the generosity of Sumner Locke Elliott". Sumner was a novelist who never forgot his beginnings as the boy playwright.

When I returned to New York after his death to interview his friends in America, I once again passed by The Brighton Grill in Manhattan. I half expected to see him there, still energetically telling stories and reminiscing but the table in the restaurant's glass front was empty. I'm sure The Brighton Grill has never been quite the same since Mr. Elliott stopped coming.

---

3 Hal Prince to me, 1994.