APPARATUS OF SCHOLARSHIP

Thanks to the many friends and colleagues who have emailed me or commented on my piece about Jennifer Wallace's new book Digging the Dirt – and particularly Jennifer for responding so thoughfully. [Link]

The book is well-written and a good read. But Jennifer, I complained, doesn't indicate her sources and complementary discussion of her topic – the archaeological imagination.

Paul (Cartledge) in Cambridge says that this is just not the sort of book that has a scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliography. And also that it is a personal treatment – liking it or not is a matter of taste. Jennifer, in her comment, takes this line too, celebrating subjectivity and her personal response to matters archaeological. She decided to omit references and bibliography because she thinks a lot of the work in archaeology is difficult and technical and to introduce it would obstruct her author's relationship with her audience.

Some questions come to mind.

Is the apparatus of scholarship (footnotes, citation etc) the same as scholarly work? Not necessarily. My point is that I am concerned, with many of my colleagues, that the link between the apparatus and the aspiration of scholarship to respect the work of others and build collective knowledge is often loose. Paul tells me that I am getting too much sun here in California! Maybe I am witnessing too much of the US academic rat race where establishing a personal profile is pursued at the expense of community and collegiality. This is what I put first – not the technology of academic writing, but the ideal of thoughtful work that takes the reader through the building of a case that is worth hearing. And this often involves others who should be included because it affects them, however firmly installed in an ivory tower they may be.

Should popular writing be absolved from standards of scholarship? Attention to audience and respect for their interests is important. Many readers will shy away from a book that requires them to have a PhD in the subject. But Jennifer's book is not at the opposite extreme of a mass market pulp fiction paperback. There are many

ways of writing that come between. It is not simply a question of either give all the background, or miss it out.

Is a personal treatment incompatible with the ideals of scholarship? For many who identify scholarship with its apparatus, it is. Certainly I have been many times criticized for using the first person in my academic writing.

Are there any examples that I like of personal treatments of topics that normally find their home within technical academic discussion? I am very impressed by much popular science writing. I think immediately of Stephen Jay Gould. In “Wonderful Life” he took the reader into some of the most esoteric of palaeontology, made a fascinating case for his neo-Darwinian stand, and all along told of the researchers on whose work he was basing the case. No dumbing down, no avoidance of the often difficult and technical world of the scholar. In fact a celebration of the fascination of thinking differently! Daniel Dennett is another favorite writer of mine – his “Freedom Evolves” again celebrates the collective and technical work of all sorts of philosophers, cognitive scientists, evolutionary psychologists in a very personal take on determinism and the question of human agency. Bruno Latour’s books all also discuss in depth very technical matters without dumbing down, making popular. He also seems to have an aversion (he would call it Gallic) to footnotes and any scholarly apparatus at all.

I don’t think there need to be a contradiction between a personal treatment and what I see as the principles of good scholarship.