Introduction: Locating Time, Consciousness and Writing and the Work of Peter Malekin

This book contains a series of responses to the work of Peter Malekin as both scholar and teacher. These responses come from former students, from colleagues and from scholars who knew him only from his publications.

The wide range of writing collected here reflects the wide range of Malekin’s interests, yet there was a coherent intellectual vision underlying all his work. We might state the core of that vision, in Malekin’s own words, as “the limitations of discursive intelligence are not the limitations of the mind”.¹ What he sought to imply with this negative formulation is the reality and the significance of levels of the mind which are empty and unconditioned, “ungrounded, non-contingent consciousness”.² The philosopher WT Stace named the conscious experience of this level of mind as pure consciousness. This level of mind is notoriously difficult to write about, as Malekin points out in the introduction to his translation of Jacob Boehme: “… polarities, even metaphorical polarities like depth versus surface, are necessary for the process of reasoning and the functioning of language, even though they are ultimately invalid. When the mind is surprised by deeper experience it is still, and does not meddle with interpretations.” (3) Nevertheless, we can say some things about this kind of “deeper” experience. Pure consciousness is devoid of empirical content. In the terminology of philosophy of mind, it is without intentional states. This means that the normal structure of experience, with a subject, object and process of perception, is suspended. More accurately pure consciousness is prior to the usual waking structure of experience—that is, the experience of being a self amidst a world of objects, whether these are objects of perception or the usual mental content of ideas, feelings and thoughts. The mind is silent and empty and not directed towards anything. This also means that pure consciousness is prior to all the activities of mind that comprise our sense of self, the sense of being a separate, isolated ego. As Plotinus describes it, it is a state in which “you are your finite self no longer”.³ Using Plotinian terminology, we might describe this as reaching into noetic levels of the mind.

¹ Malekin, “The Dying Swan’s Last Croak”, this volume.
Many academics and philosophers reject outright the possibility of this kind of experience. It is a commonplace in philosophy of mind that awareness is always awareness of something, an assumption widely shared in the humanities. Peter Malekin insisted that this was wrong. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to engage in a close argument for the reality of noetic levels of mind, but the reader should note that for Malekin the noetic was real. That assumption is shared by the editors and by some, though not all, of the contributors to this volume.

Much of Malekin’s work was engaged in bringing this experience to bear in interpreting literature, the arts, and especially later in his career, theatre. In a sense it addressed the question, if noetic levels of mind exist, so what? At stake here, for Malekin, were assumptions about the mind that form part of the common sense of most western scholarship but which he regarded as mistaken. Among these assumptions were that the brain produces consciousness; that pure, intentionless consciousness does not exist; and, in the context of the theoretical turn of the 80s and 90s, that the self is entirely constituted by language or by signs. In connection with this last point, we should also note that his work engaged closely and incisively with contemporary theoretical debates, nowhere more so than in the opening theoretical chapter to his *Consciousness Literature and Theatre: Theory and Beyond* (co-authored with his long-time friend and collaborator Ralph Yarrow).4 His response to critical theory was complex. He was stimulated and excited by the debates about language, authorship, narrative closure, the canon that raged within the humanities through the later part of his career. He felt that these debates raised necessary questions, but he also found some of the terms in which these questions were debated inadequate.

Partly in response to critical theory, towards the end of his career he appealed increasingly to an alternate, non-western tradition of linguistic theory originating in the Vedic tradition:

> Behind outer physical and inner mental speech Vedic tradition posits two stages, *pashyanti*, and before that, *para*. *Pashyanti* is pre-verbal, marked by unity of subject and object, non-discursive, immediate, devoid of any sense of spacetime, a holistic cognition. *Para* is prior even to *pashyanti*, a first stirring towards speech, a sense of “something to be said”, and arises out of unconditioned mind (non-contingent consciousness).5

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4 Part 1 of this book contains an excerpt from this work.