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Reading Wroe: on the biopoetics of Alderson’s functionalism

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Abstract. Wroe Alderson (1898–1965) is generally considered to be one of the giants of post-war marketing scholarship, a titanic thinker who did much to legitimize the study of marketing theory and thought. He is also widely regarded as someone who was incapable of communicating his ideas cogently. As Holbrook (2001: 37) unequivocally observes, ‘here was a writer who could not express himself clearly to save his soul’. The present article seeks to challenge this regrettable scholarly stereotype by showing that Alderson was a gifted literary stylist whose reputation as a prodigious academician is partly attributable to his allegedly ‘unreadable’ writing. It utilizes the tools and techniques of biopoetics, an emerging school of literary criticism, to provide a reflexive reading of Wroe’s published works. That is to say, it adopts a functionalist approach to functionalism by applying Alderson’s concepts to himself.

Key Words • functionalism • literary theory • marketing thought • Wroe Alderson

... use the dramatic flair of the artist as well as tested principles of scientific technique...
Alderson (1957a: 442).

Opening observations

According to The Entertainment Economy, a recent management best seller, ‘hedonomics’ is the field of the future (Wolf, 1999: 30–48). Hedonomics aims to understand the needs and wants of tomorrow’s fun-focused consumer, mainly aging baby boomers whose major life purchases are paid for and who now desire to get back to their frat-party past. More than forty years ago, however, when most baby boomers were still babies, or as yet unborn, Wroe Alderson (1957a: 286) wrote
Management of capacity for pleasure in order to fill one's time with satisfactions might be called "hedonomics". What's more, he went on to offer a typology of hedonistic consumers, noted the practical difficulties in operationalising the concept, and adroitly anticipated The Entertainment Economy with a prescient conclusion, "The suggested field of study may seem somewhat remote from the pressing marketing problems of today... The time is not far distant, however, when marketing must achieve a deeper insight into consumption choice" (Alderson, 1957a: 289).

Unfortunate though it is, Wolf's ignorance of Alderson's hedonomic agenda is not entirely surprising. Although Wroe is rightly regarded as a giant of early post-war marketing scholarship (Blair and Uhl, 1977; Chonko and Dunne, 1982), his stature has diminished markedly in recent years (Fisk, 1999; Green, 2001; Tamila, 2001). As numerous commentators make clear, his works are increasingly unread, his intellectual influence goes unacknowledged, and his 'functionalist' school of thought has very few fully paid-up students (Barksdale, 1980; Hodgson, 2000; Savitt, 2000; Sheth et al., 1988). There is, admittedly, an intermittent stream of Wroe-related research (e.g. Priem, 1992; Priem et al., 1997; Smalley and Fraedrich, 1995), but these attempts to make his publications palatable to a new generation merely reinforce the feeling that Alderson is obsolescent.

Many reasons can no doubt be posited for the waning of Wroe Alderson – the steady advance of a field that has left his ideas far behind (Hunt et al., 1981); the sheer number of marketing scholars now working and their inclination to cite only the most recent publications (Baker, 1999); the gradual attrition of marketing's older generation, those who actually knew and worked with the great man (Fisk, 1999); and, most importantly perhaps, the notorious impenetrability of his prose. Almost every commentator on the Aldersonian corpus alleges that his articles and books are confusing at best or incomprehensible at worst (Barksdale, 1980; Blair and Uhl, 1976; Holbrook, 2001; Hunt et al., 1981; Rethans, 1979; Sheth et al., 1988; Tamila, 2001; Walle, 1984). So much so, indeed, 'that even recognized scholars of marketing groan at the mere mention of Alderson and intimate that they never really understood him' (Hostiuck and Kurtz, 1973: 141). Nowadays, it seems that people can't be bothered with books and articles that were unreadable when they were written and that haven't become any easier with the passage of time.

While it is undeniable that Alderson's oeuvre is difficult, bordering on baffling, the article to follow refuses to accept the received wisdom on this allegedly recondite writer. To the contrary, it argues that, far from being a poor communicator, Alderson was a gifted literary stylist. It intimates that the intricacies of his prose perform an important rhetorical function. It contends that clarity is not coterminus with literary accomplishment (as the writings of James Joyce, Henry James, Marcel Proust and analogous colossi of 20th-century letters attest). It suggests that, rather than regard stylistic infelicity as Alderson's achilles heel, it is time to examine his publications from a literary perspective. It posits that, rather than consider him a great thinker who couldn't put his thoughts on paper, it is time to interrogate his purportedly incomprehensible prose. It maintains that,
rather than allow Wroe’s writings to gather dust in university libraries, it is time to reinterpret Alderson for a 21st-century readership.

The purpose of the present article, it must be stressed, is not to itemize the major themes and theorems in Alderson’s compendious corpus. Such exercises have already been undertaken by a long line of explicants, some more successfully than others. The objective, on this occasion, is to offer a literary analysis of the peerless thinker’s principal publications. Not only is this in keeping with the interpretive turn in marketing research, which considers everything a ‘text’ and therefore amenable to literary criticism (Stern 1989, 1998), but it also aims to show how Alderson’s supposedly greatest failing – an alleged lack of literary finesse – is in fact his most meaningful legacy, the very reason we should continue to engage with this superlative scholar. The article commences with a brief introduction to Wroe Alderson and his thought; continues with a summary of biopoetics, an ecological school of literary theory that is particularly applicable to this self-styled marketing ecologist; culminates in a biopoetic reading of Wroe’s corpus, whereby the three principal precepts of functionalism are reflexively applied to the preceptor of functionalism; and concludes with the admittedly contentious suggestion that Alderson was a proto-postmodernist. In tune with its subject matter and theoretical stance, the article is written in a literary ‘style’ that is not a pastiche of Wroe’s own, but nevertheless attempts to capture some of the spirit of the original. It is written, in other words, in an appropriately unconventional manner.

**Abridging Alderson**

In June 1955, a party of six American Quakers paid a goodwill visit to the USSR. The purpose of their trip was to forge friendly relations with Soviet Societies of Friends, the few who were permitted to follow their faith in that singularly secular society, and to report back on the experience to fellow American Friends. Amongst the Puritan party’s number was one Wroe Alderson, ‘a marketing economist’, who was charged with making sense of the communist socio-economic system, such as it was. A co-authored account of the month-long visit, *Meeting the Russians*, was written on the Quakers’ safe return and much publicized by means of radio, television and, naturally, the Kingdom Hall network. Alderson contributed a chapter, wryly entitled ‘Main Street USSR’, (Disneyland had opened a few months before the trip), which contains the following evocative description of Penza, a small town 400 miles south-east of Moscow:

> Despite its size, in atmosphere it reminded us of a typical American country town of the early 1920’s with a tenth of Penza’s population. The stores held much the same goods as those of the showy sort in Moscow, and at the same fixed prices. The leading department store was always crowded; and as we walked through its aisles and looked at the arrangement of its goods, several of us were carried back in memory to the general country stores of our childhood. The unpainted log houses that marked the older part of town were reminiscent, too, of an earlier American era . . .
The main street of Penza, called Moscow Street, was a never-ending source of interest to us. The shady side of the street was crowded with leisurely throngs of pedestrians all day long (Penza summers are hot), and both sides were crowded throughout the evening. Motor traffic was light and, apart from the very good system of trolley-buses, consisted chiefly of trucks. Horse-drawn wagons were practically as numerous as passenger cars and reminded us of Penza’s role in the agricultural life of the province. Three funerals on three successive days marched down Moscow Street past our hotel windows, with flowers and banners preceding an open casket and a dignified brass band bringing up the rear. A milk store across the street served a line of women each morning, turning away at least once the last few customers, their half-gallon pails empty, and closing its doors long before noon. (Alderson et al., 1956: 42–3)

As the extract indicates, Wroe Alderson was a very stylish writer. Yet his literary abilities rarely feature in his manifold academic articles. True, several of his posthumously published pieces exhibit the rambunctious qualities that are apparent in his stirring Russian reportage, but the bulk of Wroe’s work is devoid of poetic flourishes, evocative descriptions or amusing anecdotes. It is, rather, almost Puritanical in its eschewal of stylistic excess, resistance to rhetorical temptation and avoidance of literary elan.

Elan, nevertheless, is a particularly appropriate word when applied to Wroe Alderson. Although he came late to academic life, having previously worked for the US Department of Commerce and the renowned research department of Curtis Publishing Company, this self-made, horny-handed farm-boy from St. Louis, Missouri, was a veritable intellectual dynamo (Smith, 1966). More than almost anyone in the early post-war period, he recharged the battery of marketing thought and restored power to a discipline drained by the austerities of the times – times when ‘all goods were scarce and consumers asked few questions’ (Alderson and Green, 1964: 5). In a comparatively short publishing career, he produced a string of ground-breaking articles in a host of learned journals, from *Philosophy of Science* to the *Annals of Business History*. What’s more, he co-edited several pioneering volumes on marketing thought (Cox and Alderson, 1950; Cox et al., 1964); organized a long-running series of annual, by-invitation-only theory seminars (Wales and Dawson, 1979); and issued a regular, theoretically-informed newsletter from his highly successful consultancy firm, Alderson and Sessions (Lusch, 1980). Alderson also held high office in many professional societies, including the AMA presidency in 1948, and was instrumental in the establishment of the Marketing Science Institute during his time at Wharton School of Finance and Commerce (Green, 2001; Smith, 1966).

Most significantly perhaps, Alderson published two solo-authored books, *Marketing Behavior and Executive Action* (1957a) and *Dynamic Marketing Behavior* (1965a), which are widely regarded as landmarks in the history of marketing thought. The first of these has been hailed by Bartels (1988: 238) as ‘unquestionably the most fully developed theoretical exposition of marketing up to that time’ and, for Green (2001: 105) at least, it contains concepts that are ‘as fresh today as when they first appeared’. *Dynamic Marketing Behavior*, by contrast, is much less original that its predecessor, if rather more readable, and it is chiefly remembered for the famous final chapter of 150 ‘falsifiable propositions’. Be that as it may, the two
books effectively bracketed Alderson’s formal academic career – which lasted from 1959, when he joined the University of Pennsylvania faculty, to his sudden death from heart failure in 1965 – and contain the most complete explanation of the maestro’s much-vaunted ‘functionalist framework’.

Functionalism, in essence, involves a total systems approach to marketing (Rethans, 1979). Unlike the so-called ‘functional’ school of thought, which concentrates on the specific activities or functions that form part of everyday marketing practice (breaking bulk, monetary exchange, transfer of title, etc.), Aldersonian functionalism focuses on the entire marketing system or process, from initial production to ultimate consumption (Sheth et al., 1988). More specifically, functionalism embraces the relationship between the marketing system – and its constituent subsystems – and the surrounding environment, from which it draws inputs and delivers outputs of energy, information, materials and suchlike (Barksdale, 1980). Functionalism, in short, treats the marketing system as an organic whole, an organism almost, that can only be fully understood and effectively managed as a totality (Monieson and Shapiro, 1980). It is, as one of Alderson’s early explicants explained, ‘an all-encompassing, integrating perspective of marketing entities and their interrelations’ (Nicosia, 1962: 404, emphasis in original).

Wroe Alderson, of course, wasn’t the first academician to adopt an ecological approach to marketing matters (Duddy and Revzan, 1947), nor has he been the last (e.g. Fisk, 1974; Lambkin and Day, 1989; Prendergast and Berthon, 2000). However, in addition to his biologically-based ‘systematics’, Alderson’s functionalist paradigm contains a number of well-known subordinate concepts, most notably transvection, organized behavior system, and heterogeneity, which require only the briefest introduction.

Considered by Sheth et al. (1988) to be the richest of all Alderson’s notions, transvection is a group name for a series of individual exchanges or transactions. In many ways, the marketing equivalent of a ‘herd’ of buffaloes or ‘pride’ of lions (the biological analogy is not accidental, since Alderson considered them semi-sentient entities), transvections are the basic unit of marketing activity. The term refers to the process by which, say, a pair of shoes makes its way into the hands of the consumer, from initial manufacture to ultimate acquisition. It includes not only the transfer of goods and title, but all the inter-firm negotiations, personal communications, physical transformations and geographical relocations along the way. If, in other words, the transaction is the part, a convergence of buyers and sellers in immediate contact, the transvection is the whole, a conceptual encapsulation of the complete marketing process.

Transvections, of course, don’t exist in splendid isolation. On the contrary, they involve various organized behavior systems, principally the firm and the household. Defined as ‘entities which operate in the marketing environment’ (Alderson, 1965a: 26), organized behaviour systems comprise coherent groups of individuals conjoined by the expectation that they have more to gain by grouping together than operating independently. Granted, the boundaries of the group may be somewhat amorphous, as Shapiro (1964) showed, but such entities are character-
ized by interaction with the surrounding environment; they compete with and
differentiate themselves from propinquitous behaviour systems; they have rules
and rituals for determining membership, duties and status; they have controls
for evaluating the inputs and outputs appertaining to the system; and, given occa-
sional reinforcement, they tend to persist over time, since members appreciate
that their group-based gains can only be preserved if the organization itself
survives.

Clearly, the persistence of highly differentiated, survival-oriented organized
behaviour systems has significant implications for the traditional economic notion
of perfectly homogeneous markets. To this end, Alderson posited the opposite
notion of perfectly heterogeneous markets (Atwater, 1979). As each firm’s offer-
ings are different and each family’s demands diverge, it follows that markets are
discrepant to the point of radical heterogeneity. In such circumstances, the role
of marketing is to successfully match heterogeneous demand and heterogeneous
supply. In practice, however, the matching process is somewhat patchy and prone
to failure, largely on account of imperfect information exchange. The inevitable
upshot is that some goods remain unsold and certain consumers’ wants are unsatisfied,
albeit these discrepancies represent opportunities for marketing innovation (new products) and improved communication (promotional campaigns).

Market clearance, in Alderson’s cosmology, is a theoretical possibility that
never occurs in practice, on account of environmental turbulence, technological
development and congenital discrepancy. Nevertheless marketing’s major func-
tion is to make meaning out of meaninglessness by bringing together diverse
demand and miscellaneous supply. Marketing involves a constant struggle for
sustenance, status, stability and survival in an ever-changing marketplace. Above
all, marketing combines the ‘dramatic flair’ of the artist with the ‘tested principles’
of scientific technique (Alderson, 1957a: 442).

Beginning biopoetics

Art and science, to be sure, are often regarded as antithetical. Ever since the
celebrated ‘Two Cultures’ debate, when the practising physicist and sometime
novelist C.P. Snow (1993 [1959]) identified the warring factions, it has been
widely accepted that never the twain shall meet. Certainly, this belief is firmly
entrenched in marketing scholarship, where the ‘art or science?’ controversy of the
early post-war period was convincingly won by marketing scientists (Brown,
1996a). Recent years, admittedly, have witnessed something of an artistic revival
– thanks largely to the rise of interpretive research perspectives, which draw
inspiration from the humanities and liberal arts (Holbrook 1995) – but few would
deny that furthering the science of marketing remains our discipline’s driving
force and ultimate ambition.

While it is generally accepted that science and art differ significantly in terms
of their ultimate aims (discovery of truth versus creation of meaning), modes of
representation (poetic expression versus literal language) and appraisal criteria
(persuasiveness versus validity), the distinctions are not as clear-cut as is commonly supposed (Bragg, 1998; Carey, 1995). Numerous physical scientists, for example, admit to the essentially aesthetic character of scientific research and discovery, as exemplified by Nils Bohr’s famous assertion that ‘scientists should think like poets’ (Tolstoy, 1990). Concomitantly, the history of the arts reveals that cultural endeavour is deeply affected by the scientific wonders of the day, be it Darwinian biology, Einsteinian astrophysics or the discovery of DNA (Conrad, 1998). Indeed, the decidedly blurred boundary between art and science is especially evident at the present time, when best-selling, blockbuster books are being written by physical scientists (Stephen Hawking, Stephen Pinker, Steven Weinberg, et al.), plays are being staged and movies made about singular scientific accomplishments (Proof, A Perfect Mind, etc.), and cutting-edge creative artists are engaging with the aesthetics of emergence – fractals, chaos theory and the self-organizing system that is the Internet (Ede, 2000; Johnson, 2001). As Mark Quinn, a prominent sculptor in human DNA, recently observed, ‘in a way art and science are the same thing. Science is about creating the alphabet and with art you’re writing the words’ (Aidin, 2002: 27).

Alphabetic assemblages aside, the interpenetration of art and science is not confined to the aesthetic practices of physicists like Bohr and Feynman, or the physics envy of aesthetes like Picasso and Schoenberg (Conrad, 1998). It is no less evident in the scholarly sphere (see Locke, 1992), where the rhetorical power of published findings is an integral part of their acceptance by the scientific community at large (the 40-year delay in recognizing Mendel’s genius has been attributed to his stylistic infelicities). The liberal arts, likewise, have long aspired to the truth-seeking, law-establishing, reliably rigorous methods of their scientific brethren (e.g. cliometrics in history, the quantitative revolutions in anthropology and archaeology, Noam Chomsky’s linguistics, Northrop Frye’s literary criticism). True, the humanities have been held to ransom of late by the anti-scientific ethos of deconstruction and post-structuralism, which spurn established scientific notions of ultimate truth, researcher objectivity and the discovery of law-like generalizations (Storey, 1996). However, the notorious ‘Sokal Hoax’, where a preposterous parody of postmodern pontification, containing all sorts of elementary scientific errors, was submitted to and published by a prominent cultural studies journal, did much to undermine the post-structuralist paradigm, as did the hoaxer’s follow up volume on the scientific naivety of such latter-day ‘intellectual impostures’ (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998).

Obviously, it would be precipitate to predict post-structuralism’s passing. Nevertheless, the dénouement of deconstruction has given rise to renewed interest in, and a burst of theorizing around, the art/science interface. A number of makeshift monikers have been mooted for this still emerging school of literary-cultural criticism—ecopoetics, bioaesthetics, evolutionary aesthetics, etc.—but the inaugural anthology was called ‘biopoetics’ and the term is starting to stick (Cooke and Turner, 1999). As the editors observe, the greatest obstacle to evolutionary analysis of art is the lack of an agreed name, since scholars in different fields are working in isolation, unaware of neighbouring developments and con-
ceptual commonalities. The biopoeticists, however, are making up for lost time and all sorts of variations on the putative paradigm – defined as ‘the science of at least one art’ (Cooke, 1999: 6) – are already discernible. These include Rabkin’s (1999) Darwinesque reflections on the ‘descent of fantasy’; Kroeber’s (1994) pioneering critique of 19th-century nature poets’ ‘protoecological’ inclinations; and Slethaug’s (2000) metatheoretical attempt to show how chaos theory can be applied to American novelists like John Barth, Michael Crichton and Don DeLillo, who incorporate aspects of chaotics into their own works of fiction.4

However, by far the most ambitious attempt by a literary theorist to meld the physical sciences and liberal arts is found in the works of Frederick Turner. In a series of powerful volumes, he maintains that aesthetic appreciation – our love of beauty – is not only hard-wired into the mammalian cerebellum, but it is reinforced by reflexivity, a cultural feedback loop that leads to increasingly successful actions, choices and decisions, all of which help humankind to become better adapted to its environment (Turner, 1986, 1991, 1995). Aesthetic appreciation, in other words, is a superior form of cognition that enables its possessors to appraise a situation with greater efficiency. Better yet, it is in tune with ‘the deepest theme or tendency’ in the cosmos itself, where ‘the smaller parts of the universe often resemble in shape and structure the larger parts of which they are components, and those larger parts in turn resemble the still larger systems that contain them’ (Turner, 1999: 127). Just as the three-line stanza of Dante’s Divine Comedy parallels the tripartite structure of the poem as a whole, so too snowflakes, ferns and the fractal geometry of coral reefs echo the natural world’s most elemental theme. And this, Turner concludes, is reflexivity, the self-reflecting feedback loop of organized behaviour systems, be they animal, vegetable or mineral.

**Reading reflexively**

If, as Turner contends, reflexivity is the essence of biopoetics – the secret of the universe, no less – then it follows that a biopoetic approach to Alderson’s literary oeuvre should adopt a reflexive perspective. That is to say, it should take a functionalist approach to Alderson’s functionalism. It should ask, in keeping with the founder’s own injunction, how his system of scholarly action works. It should show, by close reading of Wroe’s prose, what purpose his idiosyncratic literary style serves. It should enquire, approximately 40 years after the marketing master’s untimely death, how the functioning of his legacy can be improved. It should apply, as the burgeoning literature on reflexive social science suggests (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Steier, 1991; Woolgar, 1988), Alderson’s principal principles to himself.

Some *MT* readers, admittedly, may consider such a project insufferably self-indulgent and dismiss it as the kind of thing that doubtless has its place in the liberal arts but not in a hard facts-oriented science like marketing. Others might regard it as an insult to a great man’s memory, someone whose substantial scholarly achievements can only be diminished when examined through a literary
lens. Certainly, there is a danger that close reading of Alderson’s corpus will alter our understanding of the intellectual icon – that is the ultimate aim of literary criticism, after all (Stern, 1989) – but it is equally arguable that the real insult to Wroe’s memory is to consider him, as many apparently do, as a great theorist who ‘couldn’t express himself clearly’ (Holbrook, 2001: 37). Not only is this a gross misreading of a gifted writer, but it ignores the fact that Alderson himself frequently adopted a self-referential stance. As indicated by his copious allusions to ‘learning how to learn’, ‘how new is new’, ‘the going out of business business’, ‘subsets in subsets’, ‘plan for planning’, ‘the science of managing science’ and ‘competing for the opportunity to compete at this opportunity level’, Wroe was reflexive before reflexivity was recommended, let alone routine.

It is arguable, then, that an ecological reading of the textual ecology of an ecology-espousing marketing theorist is entirely appropriate, especially in an academic environment where environmental issues are high on the agenda (e.g. Fisk, 1997, 1999; Kilbourne et al., 1997). Granted, there is no guarantee that order will emerge from the complexities of Alderson’s oeuvre, but the biopoetics of Theoretical Transvection, Disorganized Belief System, and Heterogeneous Hypotheses may introduce a modicum of textual variation into marketing’s intellectual gene pool. Or, to put it in Aldersonian terms, it may increase the potency of his conceptual assortment.

Theoretical transvection

The transvection, Wroe Alderson’s proprietary neologism for the series of marketing transactions that transpire between producer and consumer, is generally regarded as his theoretical crowning glory. He personally considered it something special and in Dynamic Marketing Behavior (1965a: 86) goes to great lengths to establish its provenance and etymology:

The problems of competitive adjustment and of channel coordination call for a more powerful concept than the transaction. This is the concept of the transvection, a term invented by the author in 1958 for lack of an established English word with the same meaning. The word comes from the Latin roots trans and vehere. From its etymology the word is meant to convey the idea of flowing through, with special reference to something which flows through a marketing system . . . The choice of a word which would sound something like the word transaction was deliberate since the two ideas were obviously closely related.

Not everyone, it has to be said, was so enamoured with Wroe’s show-stopping construct – Alderson’s colleague, Reavis Cox (1964), dismissed it as a fancy word for channels of distribution – but most commentators concur with Sheth et al. (1988: 93), who conclude that ‘the concept of the transvection is the richest of those brought forth by Alderson’.

Richness aside, the creator’s contention that transvections provide a central organizing concept for marketing is entirely appropriate, since he himself was something of a theoretical transvectioneer. He was a theoretical transvectioneer in so far as his primary function in the organized behavior system of early post-war marketing scholarship, was as a ‘manufacturer’ and ‘distributor’ of theory. With
regard to the former, for example, one of the most striking things about the Aldersonian corpus is the sheer wealth of conceptual coinages it contains. In addition to the three core constructs previously itemized, Alderson's intellectual biomass includes a sizeable fringe of theoretical forms including core and fringe, monostasy and systasy, proximate and ultimate environments, subrationality and pseudorationality, vicarious search, random pairing, differential advantage, extinction mode, conditional value, waiting power, promotional pricing, behavioural drift, routinization, habituation, sorting, seriality, postponement, parallelism, componency, concurrence, contravalance, conformability, consumer sweep rates, radius of power, principle of precession, triangulation, constellation, allocation, prenegotiation, footing, blaze, potency, discrepancy, assembly and many more besides. In biopoetic terms, a kind of conceptual hypertrophy clearly prevails in the Aldersonian ecosystem and, while the resultant theoretical thicket is somewhat impenetrable, the academic abundance of Wroe's rain forest cannot be denied.

Although Alderson's concept cultivating capacity is incontestable, he is chiefly remembered as an intellectual intermediary, someone who scoured the scholarly universe for tradable theories and exchangeable ideas (Barksdale, 1980; Rethans, 1979). He was a marketing middleman, in effect, a kind of educational entrepot or conceptual clearing-house. The former farm boy's greatest gift, in many ways, was his remarkable ability to harvest a host of academic specialisms (economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, mathematics, cybernetics, political science, military history, operations research, and so on), and handle the resultant scholarly crop. In so doing, he occupied an important position as marketing's principal principles provider and this, in turn, helped him dominate and direct the market in marketing theory and thought.

That said, Wroe's success as a theorem trucker is attributable, in no small measure, to the fact that he commanded a fleet of concept delivery vehicles. These comprised the annual seminars in marketing theory, which commenced in 1951 (and attendance at which was by Aldersonian fiat); his pioneering co-edited texts on marketing theory (in the second of these, Reavis Cox (1964:13) identifies Wroe as 'the dominant force keeping us to the task of working out an effective body of theory'); and, most importantly of all, the bi-monthly quasi-theoretical newsletter, *Cost and Profit Outlook* (which was published under the auspices of Alderson's consulting firm and, according to Lusch (1980), was not only widely circulated amongst the academic community but also regularly discussed in lectures and seminars). More than almost anything else, then, Wroe Alderson was a conceptual channel captain, who conveyed the conjectures of conglomerate academic disciplines, controlled the output of marketing’s theoretical utilities, and did everything in his power to expand the market for marketing theory. Alderson was a scholarly sales representative whose principal product was marketing principles, who sold the idea of ideas on selling, and who flogged the functionalist framework for all he was worth:
Perhaps some may regard functionalism as only one of many strands of scientific thought in man’s effort to understand his universe. What makes it so important for marketing, as well as for a general science of human behavior, is that it is the one common factor to be found in all the social and biological sciences. (Alderson, 1957a: 18)

Functionalism has held a prominent place in sociology, psychology and anthropology. Several leading economists can broadly be classified as members of the functionalist school . . . From his reading in the behavioral sciences this author has long been aware that functionalism is the only school of thought which provides a common thread in all these various fields. (Alderson, 1965a: 5, 24)

Above and beyond marketing marketing, Alderson was a middleman in two other important ways. First, the body of middle-range theory he formulated functions as a kind of temporal transvection. That is to say, in the history of marketing thought, Alderson represents an intellectual bridge between past and present. As both Tamila (2001) and Blair and Uhl (1977) point out, functionalism is situated somewhere between the outside-looking-in approach of the 'institutional', 'commodity' and 'functional' schools of thought, which predate Wroe's early post-war endeavours, and the inside-looking-out ethos of the 'managerial' school that came to prominence in the post-Alderson epoch and dominated the field thereafter (Bartels, 1988; Sheth et al., 1988). A successful marketing practitioner and consultant, Alderson contended that the purpose of most theory is to improve marketing practice and even his most theoretically informed books were written with the marketing executive in mind. Although he never fully embraced the micro, intra-firm outlook of the managerial school,5 preferring to focus on the marketing system as a whole and family groups rather than individual consumers, he often observed that there's nothing so practical as a good theory (e.g. Alderson 1965a: 2) and, perhaps more than anyone before or since, laboured diligently to that end:

Events in recent years have forced students of marketing to put a heavy emphasis upon problems of private management and public policy. One result has been to reveal the inadequacy of the earlier years of study in the field, which proceeded by almost haphazard accumulation of facts. It has become evident that if the difficulties raised by events in the areas of public and private policy as applied to marketing are to be solved, they must be put into a framework that provides a much better perspective than is now given by the literature. (Alderson and Cox 1948: 139)

Second, he was a middleman in a stylistic sense. As previously noted, Alderson was a talented writer. Unlike many marketing academicians, and contra those who consider him unreadable, Wroe had a wonderful way with words, as the following 'ecological' extract from a private letter indicates:

We have just had a week of golden October days beside the Chesapeake, with Heaven waiting in every sunset.

The hoarse cry of the wild goose is like a brute reaction to beauty too bright to be borne. A world in flames, over land and water, re-enacts the ancient and tragic mystery of Death-in-Life and Life-in-Death.
The dogwood leaves are dying in a burst of battle red. Oak and maple strew the lane with the vivid hues of passion and the soft shades of memory. And soaring there on a high stark limb is the scarlet banner of ivy.

On the water, where life first found its home, life is still harvesting life; a fisherman out in the chilly dawn; the sails of the oyster-men at noon; a belated woman crabber poling her skiff through the ripples along the shore. Underneath the surface the living still feeds on the living – or faces death in the stab of the heron or the swoop of the osprey. (Alderson, October 9, 1960)

Yet, for all his literary abilities, Alderson’s textual transvection – the actual words on the page that convey his ideas to a concept-consuming clientele – is decidedly flat, deliberately downbeat and largely devoid of ostentatious literary devices. Just as marketing is concerned with getting goods quickly and efficiently to market, so too Wroe’s professional writing is business-like, no-nonsense and solely concerned with getting the message across. Adjectives are rare; exclamation points even rarer; alliteration is expressly eschewed, even when it is the obvious stylistic option; and, not least, his prose has a curiously telegraphic character, a strangely detached, strikingly impersonal air that comes from an addiction to asyndeton (that is, the excision of definite and indefinite articles). On many occasions, it is like reading a memorandum, an agenda, a bullet-pointed bulletin board with the bullet-points removed (‘Number of firms engaged in wholesaling increased 50 per cent between 1939 and 1948 according to new official estimates’). True, Wroe’s theoretical telegrams sometimes find room for literary flourishes, especially in his later works, but by and large Alderson’s textual transvection is an uncluttered communications medium that gets his concepts to market with the minimum of fuss (‘It is surprising how many words we can do without when writing a telegram’). Any stylistic curlicues, arabesques or flights of fancy that the first draft may have contained were largely expunged by the time the conceptual merchandise left Wroe’s writing factory. It seems that the goods were graded and ground down before they entered the cerebral distribution channel:

He is acquiring the right to exploit the footing a firm occupies. He has his own reasons for wishing to acquire the opportunity than another is giving up. He may believe that he can operate a concern more successfully than his predecessor. He may be willing to accept a smaller return on his investment. He may be acquiring the business at a much lower figure than the original cost. (Alderson, 1950: 79)

Routinize if the cost of rule negotiation plus the cost of negotiating the routinized transactions while the rule holds is less than the total cost of negotiating the individual transactions without the rule. (Alderson and Martin, 1965: 122)

Disorganized belief system

According to Alderson, there are two main organized behaviour systems, the family and the firm. The former faces the dilemma of decision-taking in an epoch of abundance, which stands in marked contrast to economists’ traditional concern with the allocation of scarce resources. The latter is driven by a desire to maximize its revenue stream, which again stands in marked contrast with the profit-maximizing assumptions of economics. Analogously, the organized behav-
our system of Aldersonian thought is nothing if not abundant, the conceptual equivalent of a torrential income stream. The prose may be placid – flat calm for the most part, if deceptively deep and dangerous – but the cascade of concepts is almost overpowering. So much so, that his corpus is closer to a disorganized belief system than an organized behaviour system. His ideas, to put it bluntly, are all over the place. Or so it appears. Closer examination, however, reveals that this seeming disorganization serves an important scholarly function. There is method in the master marketer’s madness.

In this regard, latter-day readers of Wroe’s prose cannot help but be struck by his reliance on two distinctive literary devices, excursus and anachrony, both of which convey a sense of seeming textual disorganization. Excursus is the technical term for digressions and analogous rhetorical tacks away from the main line of argument. Now, most would agree that, whatever else it is, Wroe’s writing is full of digressions (as he openly acknowledges and occasionally ‘apologizes’ for). Again and again, he introduces a topic, goes off at a tangent and returns unannounced to the original topic several lengthy paragraphs later. What’s more, the tangential material is almost always theoretical – as opposed to, say, an empirical illustration of his basic point – and by the time Wroe’s thesis gets back on track the reader has lost touch with the overall arc of the argument and, on occasion, the very will to live:

This sketch for a theory of economic interaction may appear to have ranged far beyond the boundaries of marketing. (Alderson, 1965a: 249)

In recent years market analysts have talked about the process of ‘diffusion’, which is a term borrowed from anthropology. Incidentally, some anthropologists are evolutionists and emphasize the way in which a new product or a new culture trait may originate independently in many separate areas. (Alderson and Halbert, 1968: 53–4)

From a reader’s perspective, the obvious solution to this digressive difficulty is simply to reread the offending passage, frustrating though this can prove. Backtracking, however, not only reinforces the feeling of dislocation and diffuseness, but it is further compounded by Alderson’s fondness for anachrony in both analeptic and proleptic forms (flashbacks and flashforwards, in other words). Instead of a simple linear narrative, where A is followed by B, with C in hot pursuit, Wroe repeatedly refers back to earlier sections, prior paragraphs and previously posited points (‘Let us now return’; ‘Some years ago the author asserted’; ‘As indicated in the preceding chapter’; ‘Returning to the Discourse on Method by Descartes’). Conversely, he constantly defers the current discussion to some unspecified passage or chapter still to come and which one has completely forgotten about by the time it hoves into view (‘As we shall see shortly’; ‘The above factors will be discussed more fully later’; ‘Aspects of that study . . . are discussed below.’). Such is his proleptic propensity that key concepts can remain undefined for hundreds of pages (in Market Behavior and Executive Action, for example, the notion of monostasy and systasy is introduced on page 136, but it is not explained until page 325). Indeed, on one quintessential occasion the conceptual colossus employs analepsis and prolepsis in the same sentence (‘We are still at the begin-
ning of informational revolution referred to earlier – the most remarkable developments still lie ahead'). In these discombobulating circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that library copies of Wroe's texts are often heavily annotated by past readers, valiantly trying to impose a modicum of order on the author's conceptual congeries.7

On top of the complexities of the Aldersonian chronotope – the temporal and spatial deployment of his rhetorical artillery – the basic organization of his textual material is anything but straightforward. The books in particular lack a clear-cut structure, the sense of one chapter leading logically on to the next and the next. They flit, rather, from topic to topic and, even within the chapters, the headings are either misplaced (often a paragraph 'too late' or 'too early') or are worded slightly differently from the information that follows. Sub-headings, furthermore, are conspicuous by their absence, as are figures, tables, scholarly citations8 and, of all things, punctuation marks, commas especially.

Ordinarily there are limits observed by either side and principles by which their bargaining activities are guided which may result in a long-run outcome with respect to process which is not too different from the long-run outcome under the supposition of pure competition. In a mass production economy the central consideration in negotiation may generally be expected to be the endeavor to balance access to markets through diversified channels against the need for enough volume to reach the breaking point in production costs. (Alderson and Cox, 1948: 145)

Of the total number of establishments in the wholesale trades about half were accounted for by service and limited wholesale functions alone while goods handling intermediaries number approximately 160,000 or two-thirds of all firms engaged in wholesale trade. For all wholesale trade the average volume of business in 1948 was about 780 thousand dollars as compared with approximately 275 thousand in 1939. For all goods handling intermediaries the average figure for 1948 was approximately 500 thousand as compared with 200 thousand in 1939. (Alderson, 1949: 147)

Yet, for all the discursive disarray, it is important to appreciate that this textual disorganization is purposeful. Akin to the tantalizing jumble of olde-tyme antique dealers or the here-be-bargains disarray of department stores at sales time, Alderson's apparently unsystematic prose performs an important rhetorical function. It is 'difficult' because readers expect, and to some extent require, it to be. Important ideas and concepts are often presented in an inaccessible manner, as any reader of Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger or Judith Butler will agree. Lucidity can be an impediment to acceptance when serious theoretical matters are being disseminated. Like it or not, convoluted prose carries connotations of profundity, of sagacity, of scholarly perspicacity. As Alderson admits in his very last publication, unsophisticated readers are often overawed by displays of apparent erudition (Alderson and Halbert, 1968). They blame themselves for failing to get the point and mistake the author's incomprehensibility for insightfulness. Thus, far from being examples of 'bad writing', Alderson's impenetrable articles are models of intellectual intimidation, of calculated obfuscation, of meaningless is more. They represent organized disorganization. They flit to flummox. They digress to impress.
In the decades since Alderson’s death, many commentators have condemned his unsystematic style and failure to operationalize his concepts (Barksdale, 1980; Hunt, 1991; Sheth et al., 1988). It is equally arguable that it is this very unsystematicity that continues to attract readers – albeit fewer with every passing year – and that operationalizing his ideas would be the death of them. Alderson is the Everest of marketing scholarship, something difficult, dangerous and demanding, something that draws people because it’s there. He was on a mission to mystify and most would agree that he succeeded triumphantly.

Heterogeneous hypotheses

Just as Wroe Alderson can reasonably claim to be marketing’s most challenging thinker, so too he is one of the most heterogeneous. Indeed, if Alderson’s entire corpus had to be summarized in a single word, that word would probably be heterogeneous. It is heterogeneous, furthermore, on both sides of the scholarly market. His inputs are heterogeneous, his outputs are heterogeneous, his content is heterogeneous, his style is heterogeneous, he supplied heterogeneous ideas to meet the heterogeneous demands of heterogeneous audiences of executives, academics, and postgraduate students.

Be that as it may, by far the most striking thing about Alderson’s body of work is the wealth, diversity and sheer catholicism of his source material. With the possible exception of Russell Belk, another cite-heavy scholar who browbeats readers with his seeming erudition, no one in the history of marketing thought can claim to be so widely read. Whether it be mathematics or military history, whether it be game theory or gestalt psychology, whether it be particle physics or pragmatist philosophy, whether it be systems theory or Shakespearean tragedy, whether it be institutional economics or information technology, whether it be cultural anthropology or Parsonian sociology, Wroe Alderson was grounded in them all. And then some.

Russell has suggested elsewhere that philosophers can be classified according to a tripartite division based on whether their chief interest is a theory of knowledge, a theory of action, or a theory of value. He places himself in the first category and points to Dewey and his fellow pragmatists as prime examples of the second. Actually in some of its versions pragmatism is a theory of knowledge promulgated by thinkers who are impressed with the importance of action. When philosophers really make action primary they are inclined to emphasize its irrational character, whether they end up by deploring it like Schopenhauer or glorifying it like Nietzsche and Bergson. A theory of rational action which would provide an adequate perspective for the executive and policy-maker has yet to be formulated. (Alderson, 1951: 16)

Although Alderson was very widely read, there is some doubt about the depth of his reading. His discussions of Marx, Freud, Nietzsche and Malinowski, to say nothing of his nineteenth-century economic antecedents (see Dixon, 1999; Reekie and Savitt, 1982; Savitt, 1990), are rather superficial, tantamount to trite (‘Karl Marx . . . built his economic theory on the concept of class struggle and the gradual movement toward a classless society’). His historical analysis of marketing’s emergence and development is whimsical at best and infantile at worst.
('Before the dawn of civilization there was a time without marketing. This was the real heyday of the “do-it-yourself” movement.'). His much-cited review papers, such as ‘Psychology for Marketing and Economics’ (Alderson, 1952), are little more than the Readers' Digest redux, academic versions of his executive abstracting service, Cost and Profit Outlook. In a similar vein, the incessant inclusion of superfluous detail about his source material – ‘The most luminous presentation . . . is found in a list of 19 numbered propositions in the closing pages of a book by Carl Rogers’ – is less a signifier of deep learning than of someone somewhat lacking in the erudition department or desperately overcompensating for imagined educational shortcomings (‘This might be called the “better mousetrap theory”, to name it after an old story erroneously attributed to Emerson.’). And nowhere is this better illustrated than in his occasional marketing malapropisms, the misuse of words like mitigate for derogate, constructive for instructive, assure for ensure, immigrated for emigrated and principal for principal.

Yet, despite Alderson’s autodidactic inclinations – he was, remember, a self-made, self-taught man, largely unencumbered by the ‘impediments of education’ (Fisk, 2001) – there is no question that Wroe’s reading was exceptionally wide. According to Monieson and Shapiro (1980), his principal influence was Talcott Parsons, the prodigious system builder who dominated American sociology in the early post-war period (Holton, 1998; Layder, 1994; Robertson and Turner, 1991). It is erroneous, however, to think of Alderson as little more than a Parsonian acolyte or paraphraser. Wroe’s intellectual palette was much wider and more eclectic than that. It is a place, in point of fact, where Biblical allusions abut asides on Babylonian archaeology and Latin smatterings are counterpointed by etymological ruminations:

Like Jeremiah, each man must live with the fearful chance that he may be numbered among the false prophets. (Alderson, 1964: 105)

Trade in the Mesopotamian Valley . . . began as barter but at an early stage was transformed into sales through the development of a medium of exchange. The transformation from barter to sale has left its mark on the language in such survivals as pecunia, the Latin word for money, which originally meant cattle. (Alderson, 1965a: 101)

More pertinently perhaps, its egregious heterogeneity again plays a vital rhetorical role, in so far as it helps make the case for marketing theory-building. By drawing his readers’ attention to the wealth of theoretical material ‘out there’ in manifold academic disciplines, near and far, Wroe intimated that marketing’s atheoretical leanings – its fetish for ‘the facts’ – were out of sync with the rest of the scholarly community (Alderson, 1957b, 1958). He was suggesting, in effect, that marketing researchers had to shape up or get left behind. And many, happily, took the hint.

In addition to the heterogeneity of Alderson’s input, his output is equally polymorphic. He writes in what can only be described as heterogeneous prose. Instead of the standard subject–object–verb construction, beloved by advocates of plain English, he often includes two or more contrasting ideas in a single sentence and, as often as not, incorporates a couple of tangential sub-clauses, for good measure.
This propensity accounts for the inordinate length of many Aldersonian paragraphs and sentences, some of which are Faulknerian in their interminability, as well as the high incidence of and/or conjunctions in the great man’s syntax. When added to his penchant for approximations (‘sometimes’, ‘generally’, ‘usually’, ‘commonly’, ‘roughly’, ‘vaguely’, ‘on the average’, ‘something resembling’), it is more or less easy to understand why a certain proportion of readers now and then find Wroe’s writing somewhat dense and/or vaguely disorienting on occasion:

In order to measure some aspects of effort expended and work done, reliance can best be put upon concepts of movement or flow through some one or more varieties of space and time against the resistance of some one or more varieties of obstacle. To use these concepts effectively, clear definitions will be required of distributive space and time, location or position, and flow or movement. (Alderson and Cox, 1948: 150)

This is an area of business games in which two or more human participants are specifying marketing strategies and programs or negotiating and carrying out cooperative arrangements. (Alderson, 1963: 11)

The inevitable outcome of Alderson’s linguistic largesse is that his books and articles are a jungle of jumbled ideas and expressions. In accord with his preferred ecological conceit, they are teeming with life but difficult to penetrate. Yet, just as he was much more than an apologist for Talcott Parsons, the ecological analogist extraordinaire, so too Wroe’s rota of metaphors is much more heterogeneous than he is given credit for. Granted, the first among functionalists makes frequent reference to mutation, adaptation, parasitism, succession, survival, hypertrophy, habitability, evolution, niche and analogous ecological figures of speech. Across Alderson’s corpus as a whole, however, ecological references are vastly outnumbered by his deployment of military metaphors, corporeal conceits, sporting similes and agricultural allusions among innumerable others:

Thus competition presents an analogy to a succession of military campaigns rather than to the pressures and attrition of a single battle. A competitor may gain ground through a successful campaign based on new product features or merchandising ideas. It may lose ground or be forced to fall back on its core position because of the successful campaigns of others. (Alderson, 1958: 23)

Finding the source of the difficulty in a marketing system is something like diagnosing the factors in a case of human illness or the malfunctioning of a mechanism such as an automobile. (Alderson, 1963: 10)

Day to day decisions are something like those made from play to play by the referees in a football game. The strategic decisions emanating from the supreme decision center are more like the annual changes in the rules which are to govern the games for the following year. (Alderson, 1957a: 88)

Although there’s much more about Hannibal than habitat in Alderson, the key point about his verdant metaphors and disconcerting sentences is that they are purposeful. They perform an important discursive function. They are verisimilitudinous. In their labyrinthine way, they reflect the heterogeneity, the plurivalence, the out-and-out complexity of the phenomena he writes about. Marketing, for Alderson (1965b: 225), was not the ‘grubby country cousin of economics
which pokes around in the soil of human behavior'. On the contrary, it was an extremely elaborate, highly sophisticated, carefully coordinated, ideally smoothly integrated system, involving all manner of intricate sorts and transformations. The complexity of Alderson’s style captures the complexity of the marketing system. The syntactic doubling parallels the double search process of buyers and sellers in heterogeneous markets. The mixture of metaphors is a stylistic manifestation of the mixing and matching activities that interpose themselves between buyer and seller. Just as marketing is a ‘complex and wondrous mechanism by which goods and services move from producer to ultimate consumer’ (Alderson and Halbert, 1968: 1), so too Wroe’s prose is a complex and wonderful mechanism by which heterogeneous concepts are channelled to heterogeneous consumers of marketing heterogeneity.

Discussing directions

When the literary achievements of Wroe Alderson are weighed in the balance, two salient questions arise: why did he write the way he did and why should readers continue to wrestle with his works? Obviously, the first of these questions is impossible to answer, since the great man has long gone to the organized behaviour system in the sky, and even if Wroe were available for interview, it is not certain he could fully articulate his literary rationale. Studies of living authors, after all, frequently reveal that they find it difficult to make sense of their motivational mainsprings (Blythe, 1998). Be that as it may, biopoetic literary theory suggests that the environment might have had something to do with it, that the ecological context of Wroe’s writings is a significant explanatory factor. To be sure, present-day memories of the 1950s are grossly distorted by hindsight, nostalgia and media misrepresentations. Historians, however, agree that the epoch in which Alderson penned his words of marketing wisdom was characterized by a progressive, onward-and-upward, science-will-provide worldview (Cross, 2000; Halberstam, 1993; Hine, 1999). As Wroe himself wryly acknowledged in one of his final published articles, ‘at the time we were perhaps all a little hypnotized by faith in technological advance’ (Alderson, 1965b: 232).

In marketing terms, the late 1950s–early 1960s cusp is remembered for many things such as the creative revolution, the ‘modern’ marketing concept, the much-vaunted managerial paradigm, the fashion for motivation research and the intellectual ferment that spawned several, still-studied theoretical frameworks (e.g. 4Ps, marketing mix, channels theory, market segmentation, wheel of retailing, hierarchy of advertising effects). In retrospect, nevertheless, it seems clear that these scholarly developments are related to the broader ‘art or science?’ question. At a time when marketing was tarred by the Edsel fiasco, the Quiz Show and radio payola scandals, the highly critical Ford and Carnegie Reports, and the obloquy of prominent public intellectuals like Galbraith, Packard, Carson and Friedan, it was imperative that the discipline demonstrated its scientific aspirations, scholarly credentials and unwavering commitment to objectivity, rigour, dispassion, truth.
and, naturally, the identification of law-like generalizations. Granted, there was considerable internal debate about the field’s scientific standing (Brown, 1996a). Some claimed it was already a science, others considered it a protoscience and yet others contended that it might attain scientific status by the end of the 20th century. But no one at the time – and very few since – seriously doubted that science was the way to go (Buzzell, 1963; Newman, 1965; Schwartz, 1965).

It is arguable, then, that Alderson was suppressing his natural literary instincts in order to write in a suitably ‘scientific’ manner, a manner which is characterized by flat, neutral, unadorned prose, what Agger (1989) aptly terms a styleless style. True, Wroe slipped from time to time, especially in later years when he may have felt less need to man the minimalist barricades. But the bulk of his published work gives no real hint of the marketing maestro’s rhetorical prowess. The telegraphic tone, the eschewal of adjectives, the compound sentences, the terminological tussivation, the lengthy digressions, the elevated expressions, the avoidance of asinine alliteration, the lack of soundbites, aphorisms or even boxes and arrows diagrams, all bespeak scientific rigour, scholarly propriety and absolute integrity. Casual readers of Wroe Alderson may smile wryly when they encounter his occasional exhortations to communicate clearly (‘Physician, heal thyself!’). The fact of the matter, however, is that Alderson was a brilliant communicator, who brilliantly communicated the complexity of marketing, the seriousness of scholarly purpose, the legitimacy of the subject area and the richness of its intellectual hinterland at a time when the specialism was considered an offshoot of economics at best or a lair of wily ne’er-do-wells at worst. Reading Wroe may be heavy sledding but heavy sledding has its place.

Like Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, then, Alderson was an arresting literary stylist who wrapped himself in the raiment of science. Science, however, has lost much of its lustre in the present postmodern period. As one admittedly overexcited commentator observes:

While postmodernists recognize the enormous material benefits that western science has provided – we are better fed and educated, more affluent and live longer than our ancestors, we are free to think and say what we like, and exist in the reasonable expectation that things will continue to improve, albeit fitfully – they draw attention to the dark side of science, to the fact that it brings costs as well as benefits, that it is not the ‘be all and end all’, and that the achievements of Western science have been accomplished at a very heavy social, environmental and political price. (Brown, 1996a: 250–1)

In such circumstances, it seems reasonable to ask why marketing researchers should continue to read Wroe’s oeuvre – a 50-year old, pro-science corpus that requires a lot of mental effort – and three tentative answers can be suggested. The first of these is its obvious historical importance. Alderson was a leader of the field who helped put marketing where it is today. For that reason alone, his work is worth attending to. Indeed, latter-day readers of Wroe cannot fail to appreciate the prescience of his thought. Many of the issues, themes and concerns that marketing academicians have addressed in the past half-century are anticipated in Alderson (Holbrook, 2001). Relationships, consumerism, societal marketing, not-for-profit, space and place, aesthetics, hedonics, demarketing, brand symbolism,
product constellations, dark-side concerns, services marketing, internal marketing, self-marketing, the broadening debate, introspection as a research method, and the extension of consumption to include post-purchase and disposition activities are all grist to the awesome Aldersonian mill. He even anticipates re-engineering, just-in-time production, direct product profitability, total quality management and, of all things, the advent of e-commerce.

Looking at the system as a whole, it is clear that the cost of carrying inventory should be kept to a moderate figure by starting just in time to prepare the inventory for the next season. Many considerations go into the phrase ‘just in time’, but the longer goods are in process or in storage, the higher the carrying charges will be. (Alderson and Green, 1964: 577)

The time may come when two-way television and other electronic developments will make it possible to conclude many transactions without either buyer or seller leaving his regular location. (Alderson, 1957a: 318)

Alderson may be the Nostradamus of modern marketing, but Wroe’s runes are of more than mere historical significance. They continue to perform in a functional capacity. True, the famous treasure trove of 150 falsifiable propositions may be rather less valuable than was once thought. What’s more, many of the scholarly seer’s functionalist notions are simply unacceptable today (e.g. the narrow focus on channels of distribution, the patriarchal conception of nuclear families, the Panglossian presupposition that science will provide). Nonetheless, the cryptic corpus of this 1950s futurologist has considerable contemporary significance. Wroe’s books and articles are full of intriguing asides, parenthetical postulates and throw-away remarks that remain eminently researchable. To cite but a single instance, in the penultimate chapter of Dynamic Marketing Behavior, Alderson introduces the idea of undercover systems, consisting of the underground (communist conspirators etc.) and the underworld (organized crime, in the main). For Wroe, the trade in proscribed goods and services, the payment of protection money and the dissemination of anticapitalist ideas—let alone the links between these clandestine operations and legitimate behaviour systems like households, enterprises and government bodies—are all potentially fruitful areas of marketing inquiry. They still are, as the drugs trade, Enron scandal, illegal immigrant transshipments and anticapitalist riots in Seattle et al. attest.

In addition to the historical and functional factors that help ensure the survival of Aldersonian thought, there is a third consideration in the ongoing struggle to avoid scholarly ‘extinction mode’. And that is literary. Marketing researchers, as a rule, rarely give much thought to literary style. They tend to write in a realist, no-nonsense, give-me-the-facts manner, in accordance with the norms and expectations of mainstream social science. In recent years, however, the so-called postmodern turn in marketing scholarship has been accompanied by attempts to write in non-traditional ways (poetry, drama, photo-essays, etc.). The success of these experiments is moot, admittedly, but they are being embraced by a growing number of academicians (Stern, 1998). Be that as it may, on reading Wroe’s prose today one is struck by its ‘experimental’ character. Far from being badly written, as conventional wisdom would have it, it is a remarkable example of avant-garde
academese, an exercise in disciplinary defamiliarization, a veritable stream of scholarly consciousness. To be sure, Alderson didn’t set out to write like James, or Joyce, or Faulkner, or Fitzgerald. However, the long, unpunctuated sentences are somewhat reminiscent of Kerouac’s ‘spontaneous prose’. The detached tone has more than a touch of Surrealist ‘automatic writing’. The interminable digressions are proto-Thomas Pynchon and the constant shuffling of his corpus is akin to William Burroughs’s cut-ups and collages.

Granted, some readers of MT might be tempted to dismiss such biopoetic speculations. But it is worth recalling that Wroe Alderson was a lifelong lover of art and literature (he collected sculpture on a small scale). Furthermore, he lived through the entire period of modernist and early postmodernist literary experimentation (he was 15 when Mann wrote Death in Venice, 25 when Ulysses and The Waste Land appeared, and in his prime as an author when the Beats were howling at the moon). Most importantly perhaps, he himself was a talented literary stylist, who endeavoured to write in a carefully controlled, suitably scientific manner. In so doing, he forged a ‘difficult’ scholarly style, a style that has been disparaged, dismissed and disdained for decades, a style that is generally, if erroneously, regarded as Alderson’s intellectual albatross. A style, in short, that the marketing academy has taken 50 years to catch up with, to properly appreciate, to recover, to recuperate, to recognize. Perhaps it is time to read Wroe with fresh eyes. Perhaps it is time to learn from a past master of the literary craft. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that Alderson wasn’t the last of the pre-modern marketing titans but the first and the finest of the postmodernists. Or, in light of the decline of deconstruction, the rise of biopoetics and Wroe’s imperishable principle of postponement (which saves the most significant transformation to the end), perhaps it is time to appreciate that Alderson was marketing’s premier pre-post-postmodernist.

Closing comments

Wroe Alderson is one of the giants of 20th-century marketing thought. Although his functionalist paradigm is currently out of favour, he remains a pivotal figure in the history of our field. Within the contemporary academy, Alderson is widely regarded as a prodigious thinker who couldn’t communicate his ideas coherently. The present article has attempted to challenge this scholarly stereotype by using artistic techniques to study an advocate of scientific principles, as Wroe himself advised. It has argued, in keeping with functionalist precept, that Alderson was a gifted writer whose stylistic foibles and literary infelicities performed an important academic function. They are rhetorical devices that helped ensure the acceptance of his ideas at a time of scientific fundamentalism. So gifted a writer was Wroe that, approximately 40 years after his death, many academicians still fail to appreciate that his standing in the marketing pantheon is as much due to his literary acumen as the ideas themselves.

To be sure, some scholars may be dismayed by, disagree with, or simply dis-
believe the biopoetic portrait of Wroe Alderson presented herein. Before dismissing this article out of hand, however, it is worth remembering that the elicitation of such (antagonistic?) responses is an integral part of literary criticism. The aim is to provoke, to persuade, to present a perspective that is plausible, if only for a moment. It is not a question of whether the interpretation is ‘true’ or ‘false’, or an accurate representation of Alderson’s ‘real’ intent. As such standards are unattainable in any event, and as his real intentions are unknowable, it is perhaps more productive to give pause for thought and, ideally, to overturn people’s preconceptions about the phenomenon under investigation.

Biopoetics, of course, isn’t the only available school of literary theory. As Stern (1989) has cogently shown, all sorts of alternative approaches are available – Marxist, reader-response, new historicist, post-colonial, feminist, autobiographical etc. – any number of which can, and should, be applied to Alderson’s œuvre. Yet, irrespective of the extant alternatives, the overall aim of the present article has been to challenge the scholarly stereotype, the unfortunate fact that people tend to read Wroe in a myopic manner. They see him as a source of ‘general’ theory (albeit Alderson never claimed to possess one, as his frequent use of the word ‘toward’ in article titles attests). Others use him to alleviate marketing’s intellectual inferiority complex (Alderson thought of the value chain before Porter; where he led, industrial economics now follows et al.). And yet others either condemn his failure to operationalize his concepts (even though empirical testing would destroy their inherent mystique) or simply dismiss his writings as downright unreadable.

Myopic though they are, all such interpretations are perfectly legitimate. From a literary perspective, there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ reading, albeit some are more insightful or impactful than others. If nothing else, the present article has sought to recuperate Wroe and, in so doing, it has attempted to reflect reflexively on what constitutes ‘good’ academic writing. Lucidity, linearity and the avoidance of linguistic excess are the hallmarks of mainstream marketing scholarship. But as Alderson brilliantly demonstrated, decades before the ‘experimental moment’ in latter-day social science, obfuscation, complexity and linguistic licentiousness are equally eloquent, possibly more so. Or, to put it more simply, simplicity can be disadvantageous in the marketing theory market.

Notes

1 Alderson’s work is still widely cited, as Smalley and Fraedrich (1995) show, but articles on or about the foremost functionalist are few and far between.
2 Compared to the 40-plus (and counting) years of, say, Kotler, Levy or Green, Wroe’s 15-year writing career is really quite short. In fairness, Alderson published a number of very brief articles prior to World War II, including one in the inaugural issue of JM, but the vast bulk of his output dates from the 1950–65 period.
3 In addition to his six-year stint at Wharton, Alderson was a visiting professor at MIT during 1953 and ten years later served in a similar visiting capacity at NYU. Wroe also studied at George Washington University and the University of Pennsylvania, though he did not possess a PhD.
4 If the contemporary intellectual ecosystem is already replete with random variations on, and mutations of, the biopoetic gene, the origin of this scholarly species is firmly established. In 1975, the celebrated entomologist Edward O. Wilson contended in his controversial book, *Sociobiology*, that the social behaviour of human beings is adaptive, a biological relic of our animal origins. These adaptive behaviors include altruism, aggression, reciprocity, courtship rituals, mating displays, incest avoidance and, not least, the making and appreciation of art. For Wilson, human-kind’s artistic impulse is shaped by natural selection, it is to some degree inheritable, and it exhibits evidence of universals or near-universals (archetypes, serpent imagery, ubiquitous narratives like the Oedipal triangle). Accordingly, it is amenable to scientific study and Wilson’s subsequent publications have sought to cash out this contention (e.g. Wilson, 1998), though his stance has been very heavily criticized by opponents of Environmental Psychology (Gould, 2001; Richards, 2000; Rose and Rose, 2001).

5 In *Dynamic Marketing Behavior* Alderson describes his position as ‘microfunctionalism’. However, this does not mean micro in a marketing sense (i.e. firm/product specific). It is micro compared to the ‘macrofunctionalism’ of Malinowski or Pfaff, who examined entire societies/cultures from a functionalist perspective. Alderson’s approach to marketing was predominantly macro in orientation, notwithstanding his abiding interest in executive decision-taking.

6 Some readers might be inclined to challenge this assertion, since there is no hard evidence that Alderson ‘deliberately’ wrote in a disorientating manner. This, of course, is quite correct. However, the departure point for the present article is that Alderson was a talented literary stylist, not the inarticulate academician of legend. It follows, therefore, that he knew what he was doing. The very fact, for example, that he ‘apologizes’ for his digressions is proof positive that he was aware he was digressing. What’s more, he could quite easily have edited them out to improve the ‘readability’ of the article or book. But chose not to do so. More pertinently perhaps, the basic premise of functionalism is that everything has a purpose and, if functionalist precepts are applied to Alderson’s functionalism, then it is appropriate to assume that Wroe’s digressions, obscurities and so forth perform in a purposeful manner.

7 Anachrony, admittedly, is widespread in academic writing. Many if not most works of marketing scholarship include references to previously posited positions (‘as discussed earlier’ etc.) or defer discussion until later sections and chapters (‘see below’ and suchlike). My point, however, is that analepsis and prolepsis are particularly strongly marked in Alderson. On reading his articles, one cannot help but be struck by the frequency with which such stylistic devices are employed.

8 Alderson often fails to cite his scholarly sources and thus relies on the reader to recognize that ‘conspicuous consumption’ means Veblen, ‘countervailing power’ is Galbraith, ‘regional studies in the state of Iowa’ refers to Berry, ‘an intensive study of the central business district of Philadelphia’ is the work of Radcliffe, or that ‘to each according to his needs’ is a quote from Karl Marx (who plagiarized it from Saint-Simon). While this cite-lite tendency was common at the time (Savitt, 1990), it also serves a significant rhetorical function insofar as it again flatters the readership (you know who I’m referring to) and reinforces the author’s erudition (the source is so obvious, except to the irredeemably ignorant, that it doesn’t require referencing).

9 The pragmatism of Alderson’s poetics is perhaps best illustrated by his inveterate
numerical discourse. Although Wroe was a talented mathematician (at one point, he immodestly claims to have solved the Goldbach conjecture) and his solo-authored publications are peppered with equations and formulae (Marketing Yield Ratio, Index of Productivity, Sortability Scale, Ratio of Advantage, etc.), he can hardly be described as an out-and-out number-cruncher. Quite the opposite. If, at most, Wroe was a wannabe statistician, he was an astute exponent of mathematical rhetoric. Not only did he argue for the adoption of quantitative methods in marketing, as many academicians did in the Ford Foundation-affected 1950s and 1960s, but he was acutely aware of the semiotics of large numbers in general and the persuasiveness of threesomes in particular (Brown, 1996b). More perspicaciously still, he appreciated that big numbers are blessed with a gee-whiz, believe-it-or-not, Guinness Book of World Records quality, which is guaranteed to impress even the most innumerate reader. Thus his model of consumer behavior contains 24 stages (compared to the usual four or five); his marketing planning procedure involves fourteen steps and eighty tasks (instead of the normal ten to twelve); he is aware of 140 ways of setting prices (on electrical products alone); he claims to have identified no less than 600 customer motives (note, exactly 600, not approximately); his much-admired ‘transsections’ article includes an appendix with 72 definitions pertaining to three primitive concepts (sets, behaviour and expectations); and, most famously of all, the final chapter of Dynamic Marketing Behavior contains 150 ‘falsifiable propositions’ for future functionalist researchers.

The merest glance at the list reveals that the vast majority are neither propositions nor falsifiable (28. The transvection concept when fully developed will become one of the most powerful tools of system planning; 114. Design principles for planning facilities were stated in Planning and Problem Solving in Marketing). Some of them are indistinguishable (4. Competition by problem-solvers in heterogeneous markets is necessarily dynamic; 88. Competition among problem-solvers in heterogeneous and discrepant markets is inherently dynamic); others are incomprehensible (15. All information transmitted by means other than direct perception of the product is coded; 59. Congenial behavior is presumably the goal sought by instrumental behavior); and more than a few are inconsequential (86. Proliferation of opportunity for enterprise is based on response to consumer needs and the needs of the firm; 115. Storage and display facilities must be adapted to the nature of the product). It is clear, then, that what really matters is the number of putative propositions – precisely 150 – not their falsifiability or otherwise. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that they remain untested, as many lachrymose, Woe-is-Wroe commentators point out. However, the existence of this theoretical treasure trove is an integral part of the Aldersonian legend, alongside his volcanic temper, voracious appetite, superhuman scholarship and inscrutable literary style, what Smalley and Fraedrich (1995: 2) aptly term ‘his digressions, extensions and philosophic ramblings’.

References

Reading Wroe

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