

AN UN-BECOMING PARADISE: *THE YANDILLI TRILOGY*

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In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as ambivalent and being in a state of "becoming" since its form is determined by its cultural context. In their critical assessment of Bakhtin's theory, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White suggest that these characteristics are figured through the processes of demonisation, which marginalises (31); inversion, which questions cultural values by "remodelling social relations" (57) and; hybridisation, which interrogates and erases the structural relationships of a culture, and produces new combinations (58). These strategies which are interleaved in their operation, appear to be exemplified in the individual texts of Rodney Hall's trilogy *A Dream More Luminous Than Love*. By narrating the texts through three grotesque figures, people who have been rendered abject by corporeal discourses, Hall exploits the aspect of ambivalence to articulate a critique of Australian colonial history in which the antipodean grotesque becomes a site of regeneration.

The representation of the antipodes as a grotesque space is quite familiar. Long before James Cook located the east coast of Australia, the continent had been constructed as a paradise, but one inhabited by a people located at the bottom of the chain of being, who were the discursive descendants of the mythological theriomorphic figures portrayed in the classical murals from which the grotesque developed. William Dampier's description of the Aborigines as "the miserablest People in the world" (1: 453) was echoed by later writers such as Joseph Banks, who saw them as "but one degree removed from Brutes" (116), and Peter Cunningham, who suggested that their lifestyle represented the "link between man and the monkey tribe" (202). While this perception indicates the observers' failure to recognise the ethnocentric specificity of their own notions of civilisation, nonetheless the Aborigines were represented as primitive, immoral, brutish, and degenerate. In short the Aboriginal body was demonised by the European discourse of the grotesque other.

The view of the indigenous inhabitants as savage and undeveloped was used by the British to justify the invasion and colonisation of Australia. In the eighteenth-century the rising crime rate in England was attributed to the "ever-increasing depravity of the people" (Hay 20), and ideas about human degeneracy and licentious practices informed the discursive construction of the so-called "criminal class". These people were said to be biologically disposed towards depraved and illegal activities, and worse, their vicious character was supposed to be genetically transmissible. As Stephen Garton observes, however, "The majority of these opinions were produced by middle-class officials, magistrates, and clergy fearful of a rising tide of immorality and crime in Britain" (74). Nevertheless, this essentialist thinking portrayed colonial Australia as a grotesque space inhabited by Aborigines and a depraved society of convicts and people who were influenced by their immorality. It is these imperial inscriptions on the colonial body that Hall questions by exploiting the poetics of the grotesque.

In his novel *The Second Bridegroom*, Hall demonstrates the cultural relativity of this construction of Australia by relating the tale through the (inverted) perspective of a grotesque convict who figuratively escapes the discursive and corporeal discipline of the centre. The narrator, Felim John, has been found guilty of forgery and transported to New South Wales where he is purchased by Mr Athol, the Master, to work his holding in a remote and unsettled region of the country. During the following voyage, the narrator murders another of the convicts, and when the party eventually lands on the distant shore, he flees into the bush to escape punishment, only to be taken captive by the Aborigines. Initially John views their culture as chaotic, but after travelling with them on their nomadic cycle, his perspective is reversed, and it is the white settlement that appears to be irrational.

The course of the narrator's movement through the text may be described in terms of Bakhtin's theory of degradation which lowers, or debases, the body and brings it into contact with the earth (21). In the logic of the grotesque, the earth functions ambivalently as both the grave and the womb, and so it figures as a symbol of regeneration. By situating the body in the "reproductive lower stratum", which relates it to the "acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (21), the process of degradation strips the body of "ideological pretensions" and foregrounds its material existence. As a trope of ambivalence, degradation illustrates the becoming nature of the material bodily principle, and challenges authority by "regenerating" the body and re-modelling social relations.

Penal ideology produced Felim John as a criminal, and transportation changes him physically into the abject body, the negative pole of Bakhtin's grotesque, as he is brutalised by conditions on the voyage to Australia, chained between decks with other "human livestock", without adequate food or water: "shut away from the light", he writes, and "shitting where we sat" (16). When the ship arrives John escapes into the bush, which he describes as a "dense tangle of dead and living plants ... a single messy tapestry ... without foreground or perspective" (29). It may be argued that John cannot read the Australian landscape because it is a text that is undifferentiated by European epistemological categories, and so it appears to be chaotic. Similarly when the indigenous inhabitants emerge from this mass of vegetation, they appear to the myopic narrator to be a combination of confused elements. In John's words,

... they did not have proper faces or torsos; theirs were face-shaped clumps of feathers, and torsos of leaves. Nor were their arms ordinary arms, because the white bone appeared to grow outside the flesh. Where a man would have cock and balls some grew a thing like a melon. Where a man stands on legs they stood on a single prop (32).

John's short sightedness serves as a metaphor for ideologically-induced blindness. The perception of the grotesque is a matter of perspective and his apprehension is informed by European discourses about the Antipodes which demonise the inhabitants. John expects to see misshapen, monstrous people, half-human and half-animal, with "raw evil" in their eyes, but instead he discovers the

“flicker of terror” (34).

While living with the Aborigines, John acquires some knowledge of their cultural practices; he learns to recognise their pathways through the bush, for example, and which species of plants are edible. When the group returns to the location where they found the narrator, they discover that Athol has begun re-forming the landscape to accord with the European agricultural models. The narrator who “has become a forest creature” sees with “forest eyes” (43) that Athol had in fact “taken a place, complete in itself, full of food [and] smashed it to fragments, then slaved at the work of carving out something in its stead” (43). John’s former view of the Aboriginal culture as “the hub of chaos” was informed by European epistemologies but his perspective has been transformed by living in the “close and always changing places of a plant world” (79). From his inverted viewpoint he sees the white settlement as a barbaric desecration of an ordered space.

John’s physical transformation underscores the becoming nature of the human body, that Bakhtin defines as the essence of the grotesque. The grotesque body, he suggests, “reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, growth and becoming” (24). He goes on to argue that it “swallows the world and is swallowed by the world” (317), and from the time that John escapes, he begins ingesting the foreign environment, drinking the slimy brackish water, and eating the “lengths of snake, roots and stalks, berries, [and] bleeding hanks of meat” (42) that the Aborigines offer him. At the same time, he is also figuratively ingested by his environment since his captors do not allow him to bathe, and he becomes covered with a crust of festering sores (84) as he is transformed into a different kind of being. “Picture me”, he says, “scabby insect skin, stick limbs, and leaf veins down the inner side of thighs and forearms, rags of faded blue shirt buttoned round my neck, the whole caked in a chrysalis of clay. I was what the men had wished me to become” (113). John’s body is like a palimpsest from which the engraving of the British ideological pretext is erased and on which Aboriginal cultural values are inscribed, illustrating the relationship between the body and the environmental context. His physical transformation demonstrates the material dimension of discursive practices and challenges the notion of the body as a fixed entity, by suggesting that any body may become grotesque since it is a question of positionality rather than a function of essentialist biology. The process of degradation removes the narrator’s convict body from the imprisonment of British penology and weaves it into the tapestry of the Australian environment where he becomes a cultural hybrid. The old social relations which constituted him as a criminal are partially erased and he forms new links with the environment which interrogate the imperial demonisation of the Aborigines as uncivilised, and suggests that the colonialists too will be changed through their engagement with the new land.

This relativity of perception is emphasised in the second novel of the trilogy, *The Grisly Wife* where a group of free settlers, female “missionaries” led by a male prophet, Muley Moloch, migrate to Australia to build a New Jerusalem in the bush. In the early nineteenth century, British colonial discourses represented Australia as

depraved and debased because most of the population were said to be related in some way to the convicts. However, as Richard White for one has observed, the critics who put forward these opinions, were “middle-class observers bringing their own values to a scrutiny of working-class life in Australia”, and the characteristics which they condemned “were seen as being distinctively Australian when in fact they were equally a part of the English social order” (23): As Hall shows in both *The Second Bridegroom* and *The Grisly Wife*, the English social structure which was being replicated in the colony was the source of the “corruption” since its values, customs and institutions were being transfused to the antipodean body. Just as the earlier colonists brought their codes of perception and ideologies with them, so Moloch and his disciples bring their own peculiar religious beliefs and practices with the intention of converting the country into a clean space for the second coming.

The narrator, Catherine Byrne, is betrothed to Muley Moloch in exchange for a pair of kid leather shoes. Moloch, a bootmaker, inhabits the dark world of “dwarfs and cripples” (406) of the tannery where animal carcasses are disembowelled, and the hides processed into leather. As Catherine observes when Moloch inducts her into his morbid domain, the bodies being transformed are mostly female, and in her words, “their spongy glands and heaving lungs — had been boiled into gas until the residue of it smeared every surface of this male world” including the machinery itself (284). Furthermore, the invisible odour of the conversion process invades her body, and causes her to vomit, eliminating her interior bodily matter, and seals and coats her somatic orifices (281), as in the treatment of the animal skins. The reducing technologies of this industry metaphorically exemplify the eviscerating gender discourses of the patriarchal social structure where women are only esteemed for their appearance. As Catherine complains, she was never praised for her “lively mind”, but rather, valued for her obedience (252), or in other words, her pliability. The exchange of her body equates the kid skin of the cured animal hide, with her own “kid” skin (257), and figuratively exemplifies the exploitation of women and children in industrial England.

Catherine had hoped to escape the corruption and oppression of England, but ironically, the group brings their oppression with them in the form of Moloch’s patriarchal religion. On the isolated mission (411) he presides over a discursive system of confessions and penances which attributes every misfortune that the group encounters to a personal transgression. As Catherine explains,

we had to be vigilant about our thoughts because otherwise things went wrong — a back-door key mislaid — hens failing to produce eggs — the prophet himself suffering a bout of flatulence — such problems multiplied and had to be investigated (268).

This religious discourse constructs the women as guilty, in the same way that penal ideology produced the convict body as infested with corruption. The confession forces them to divulge their innermost thoughts, to excoriate their interior just as the tannery disembowelled the animal bodies to produce a pliable

commodity.

The penances often take the form of physical punishment (367) which is administered by the women themselves and as a result they turn against each other. But when Moloch travels to Melbourne this divisive routine is suspended and the women's personal isolation breaks down as they are relieved from the fear of being exposed by each other (294). This image of unification is extended when Moloch evicts Catherine from his bed and locks her in another hut with the rest of the female followers. All of the women are physically corrupt in the sense of lacking some part of their anatomy — a breast, a nose, a toe, a womb, and so forth — but together they become one whole body.

You could picture us as fragments of Mr Moloch's single creation crowding the tiny dormitory so that the room became nothing but a box crammed with parts such as one lady's dimpled elbow joined to another lady's rounded shoulder and hands of several sizes making nearby gestures ... you should imagine us sharing all eighteen legs and ten torsos and you should imagine us sprouting old creaky flaps of skin among young breasts (343-4).

They are combined grotesquely into one female "beast" (to use Catherine's term), young and old, sick and healthy, pregnant and dying: truly a figure of ambivalence which, in its unity, disrupts category borders and the structures which support them. In this earthy scene the relations between the women are regenerated as uniting instead of dividing, and when this composite beast erupts in laughter and Moloch arrives to investigate the cause of the disruption, the women adopt their normal demeanour, excluding him from their camaraderie.

Paradoxically, their bonding is strengthened by the consumption which invades their bodies. This disease, commonly referred to as "the white plague", may be read as the physical and social corruption of the body by the colonisation of patriarchal religious and gender discourses. That is to say, the women are infected with their leader's beliefs in the same way that the British authorities claimed that colonial children were corrupted by their parents' immorality. The coughing spasms which dislodge the phlegm (277) interrupt Moloch's religious rituals and mark the women's resistance to his authority as they are unwilling to acknowledge their infection for fear of being punished (278-9). Since their bodies are the carriers of Moloch's power their physical decomposition parallels the fragmentation of his discursive control: they keep their insides secret.

The women's resistance is also figured as regenerative through Catherine's pregnancy. While she was comatose with fever Moloch raped her, and ironically, the conception of the child gave Catherine the strength to live, and indeed the strength to resist the confessional, because she feared the inevitable physical punishment would endanger the child (367-8). The birth of Immanuel completes the movement of grotesque degradation, since the body which was brought to the brink of death, produces the new life. But Immanuel, who is gestated in a spirit of resistance, is not indoctrinated with his community's values and beliefs, which illustrates the 19th-century discourse of environmental influence that opposed the

discourse of the "criminal class" by insisting on the importance of environment to development (R. White 27). Beyond the slums of the English social context children would not become criminals. In the free space of the Australian bush, Immanuel escapes the structure of religious oppression (421-3) and eventually he returns to England to take up a respectable position in society. As a native colonial, the child of a grotesque body created in England, Immanuel's success contradicts the British discourses about colonial children inheriting their parents' depravity (Robinson 5).

The notion of a prophylactic solitude such as Moloch attempted to establish can become a moribund isolation as Hall demonstrates in the final part of the trilogy, *Captivity Captive*, where he problematises the notion of an insular state, and argues for cultural hybridity. The Malone family, Ma and Pa who look like they could be brother and sister, and their ten children who also bear a very strong family resemblance, live on a remote property called "Paradise", the smallholding established by the narrator's grandfather when he left Tasmania (489). They may be seen as representing the bush pioneer family which was romanticised in nineteenth century nationalist discourses. But as Hall shows, the idea of creating a type which is severed from the rest of the world bespeaks a form of racism. On "Paradise" Pa creates a world isolated from the rest of Australia because he wants to keep his family "hard" while the nation is "going soft" (582). This motive recalls the British fear that the white "race" might degenerate in Australia by failing to adapt to the new land (R. White 67). The fear of becoming savage either through intercourse with the indigenous body or immersion in the unstructured "natural" environment haunted the European colonial psyche (H. White 20-21). Ironically, however, the family's degeneration comes from a failure to integrate with their surroundings. The colonial body of the pioneer family which is "severed from the world" becomes incestuous when civilising strategies fail to contain the "beast within".

While the environment produces physically healthy children, the isolation and fear of degeneration produces an impoverished mentality. Pa exerts his own law, and maintains the "boundaries of his power" (522) by brutalising his children and reducing them to "a collection of beasts" (541), which suggests the decay of civilising practices. Their house has no walls, the mists drift in, and their own living odours spill out into the bush. During the dry weather, the dwelling sinks into the earth, but floats over the floods when they come. This image of their home as being imbricated with the environment figuratively naturalises the family's mode of living. But unlike Felim John who became part of the environment, a cultural hybrid, Daniel Malone forces the bush back and devours it like a cancer (595). In contrast to Bakhtin's grotesque body which transgresses its limits (26) and revels in heterogeneity and hybridisation, which Stallybrass and White describe as producing "new combinations and strange instabilities" (58), this pioneer body struggles against the indigenous "trees, men, women [and] kangaroos", to make room for itself (515) by resisting new connections and eliminating difference. The pioneer body is like the "white plague" of colonialism which transforms the Other into the Same (Stallybrass and White 41).

The Malones' isolation represents the negative pole of the grotesque where,

according to Bakhtin, degeneration does not lead to renewal because it is “torn away from the whole in which it had been linked to the ... chain of growth and development” (53). When Patrick, Michael, Norah, and Ellen venture beyond the boundaries of Paradise, Patrick observes a world of infinite possibility in the bush, the fertile and sensuous “estranged world ... we call grotesque” (641). The paradise that Pa has created and vigorously maintains is an ideological construction wrought from the unstructured and abundant world of nature. Whereas the nationalist discourses represented the bush life as free and unfettered as opposed to the corruption of the city (Gibson 178), the Malone family, in fact, is held captive on the property, prisoners of their parents’ “inherited prejudices” (492), in the same way that Moloch held the women captive by infecting them with his religious practices.

Because they are restricted to their remote world, the family turns on itself and the children commit incest, a practice which may be interpreted as a form of cannibalism since it threatens the categories of self and family with dissolution. This trope of incest interrogates the notions of racial purity that informed the discourses of national identity in the nineteenth century (R. White 64-66), because as Hall demonstrates, it is isolation, whether of self or type, which leads to degeneracy rather than commerce with the aboriginal people. Furthermore, as cannibalism was used to characterise and condemn indigenous people, by locating the cannibal within the colonial body Hall reverses the imperial perspective and portrays the white body as demonic and uncivilised, again suggesting that it was English values which created the savage.

The three texts which comprise *A Dream More Luminous Than Love*, chart the historical movement of degradation in which the British body was removed from its social structure and transplanted in the antipodes where it eventually regenerated and formed a new culture. The inverted perspectives which the grotesque narrators provide suggest that the colonists’ struggle was as much against the superstitions and ideologies that were inscribed on their own bodies as against the inhospitable landscape. By demonstrating the cultural relativity of perceptions of the grotesque — its ambivalence — Hall interrogates the “official” history of Australia and generates a new image of the colonial body. In order to survive it was necessary for the colonials to cleanse themselves of the European values and beliefs; to rise above their moribund position and form new connections with the environment: to rejoin the chain of growth and development and become the regenerated grotesque hybrid.

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