

JOURNEY AS GENRE: THE SEARCH FOR HOME AND HISTORY IN ARNOLD ZABLE'S *JEWELS AND ASHES*

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IN a recent essay Arnold Zable refers to a powerful form of storytelling in Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*. Chatwin discusses the 'legendary totemic beings in Aboriginal Creation myths' who 'had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path . . . and so singing the world into existence'. This kind of storytelling resembles that of Zable's own Jewish ancestry. In another article he chronicles his own entry, as a child in Melbourne, into the world of Yiddish books ' . . . from Buenos Aires, Jerusalem, Warsaw, Moscow, Mexico City, New York, Paris, cities to which . . . [our] kith and kin had scattered and clung to their all but shattered dreams.' (*Australian Jewish News* 12) Two different cultures within Australia search for their ancestral maps, bringing into existence a new world through language. One, Zable's Yiddish fathers, repeatedly displaced through time, recreating their 'vanishing past' through the stories which have journeyed across time and space. The other, Aboriginal songlines created through spatial journeys, mapping a new reality. For both, language transcends temporal distinctions of past, present, and future, naming each new place as story.

In 1986 Zable made a journey to the city of Bialystok in Poland. His parents had left Bialystok in the 1930s to come to Australia, thus escaping the fate of their community during the Holocaust. In *Jewels and Ashes*, dedicated to his mother and father, he describes his journey, hoping to find a way beyond the 'grim inheritance' (102) of his parents' life stories and, behind them, the silences in which entire families were lost.

Jewels and Ashes is therefore a quest, a mapping of a history of family and community. The story of Zable's personal journey is combined with fragments—archival documentation, memories told to him by his ageing parents prior to his journey, tales recounted by people he meets on the journey, and his own imaginative reconstruction. The impulse to tell the story is powerful. Yet its quest is not for individual identity, as in traditional forms of narrative in the novel—the picaresque or *bildungsroman*, nor is it the 'universal' search of an everyman for knowledge or faith. Rather, it is a specific temporal search for the fate of a whole community.

The quest also applies to the written narrative: a story in search of a form. This form echoes the idea of the 'songlines'—traditional storytelling as a mapping of a vanished place, 'bringing it into existence'. For Zable, books too are a form of diaspora, forming songlines of text across time and space. In *Jewels and Ashes* he isolates one text of these ancestral wanderings, a book hastily published by survivors in the wake of the Annihilation, consisting of 'photos, fragments, snatches of history, glimpses of what had been . . . (13), sent to every corner of the world where "Bialystoker" had fled and recreated their lives'. Still bearing their traces of mystery, the photographs are signs which lure Zable into his search. The traces belie the romantic visions of the Bialystok he had formed as a child from his father's stories. In this case the traces are the forces of antisemitism, signified literally in the photograph of 'Boy Laysler' upon whose face are burned, by the

'anti-Semite Dr Granowski,' 'the words "ganev", "dieb" and "wor" – all meaning thief' (14). Here the naming of the other is made literal, a reminder of the fixed, dogmatic language which inscribes oppression and brutality. Zable's concern is with a different kind of language. For the storyteller, in addition to documentary evidence, vivid imagination is necessary if he or she is to liberate jewels from dark and fractured stories.

Language is significant in Zable's ancestral tradition. His grandfather Bishke Zabłudowski, disseminator of verbal information, had sold newspapers and journals beneath the clock-tower in Byalistok for forty years. His son, Meier Zabłudowski, father of Arnold Zable, is a poet and storyteller – 'When father tells a story he enters into it and becomes the object he describes' (3). He is a philosopher who loves words; he deals in fragments, collecting and annotating articles, letters, old documents. His memories are vivid: 'Father draws maps of a city for me. Streets flow into a central square, and he recalls their names as if he still lived in them' (4). As he sorts his clippings and documents, fearing he might lose something of importance, Meier Zabłudowski sifts his memories, ordering them, creating form, refusing to indulge in the sentimentality which threatens to overwhelm him with 'grief and shame' (148). He uses his love of words and romantic gesture to soften the past, a strategy represented in his recipe for potato pancakes (latkes), a parable of both survival and creativity:

The recipe had come from his mother, Sheine. She would beat together grated potatoes and eggs, shredded onions and flour. Father follows the same formula, to which he adds raisins, perhaps almonds, something of his own imagining. The latkes thereby become a 'living dream', a live reflection of the past. As such they transcend mere nostalgia, he is at pains to stress. (153)

The son repeats a tradition in words, constructing a new story in the present, including the past and 'something of his own imagining'. He is present in the story, the narrative of his journey to Poland interwoven with his own memories and those of others:

Their stories were like the Siberian night sky as it appears now above the train, streaking starlight between spaces of darkness; and this is where their tales petered out, into an infinite darkness they called the Annihilation. (23)

Like storytelling, memory has great potential for imaginative reconstruction. The quality of imagination is a part of his parents' legacy; he is drawn towards the ways in which his mother and father remember (and forget). Thus between her long silences, his mother conjures vivid, random images of her young life, reliving them with each repeated telling:

'I can see it now, as if it were in front of my eyes', mother tells me. She conjures images of childhood on a distant continent. . . . She describes scenes at random. An epic unfolds in fragments: tales of flight through snow-laden fields at night; a wagon piled high with cucumbers drawn by a pair of horses plodding towards a village market in the pre-dawn darkness; an isolated town caught in the crossfire between rival kingdoms . . . (4)

The fragmentary material with which the writer works tends to blur distinctions between memory, fantasy, and actual experience, the recording of these fragmented stories creating its own difficulties. Meier Zabłudowski's need to transcend 'mere nostalgia' echoes some of the problems encountered in writing *Jewels and Ashes*. For example, how to strike a balance between facts of history and the 'romantic sweep'? How

to write about destruction? How much to heed Theodore Adorno's maxim that after the Holocaust there can be no poetry?

The language of poetry and imagination is integral to storytelling, and, to varying degrees, is integral to constructions of history. Moreover, if reconstruction has the potential to distort history, especially in discourses of history which make claims to unitary truth, it also has the potential to reinscribe a history which is threatened with erasure. Together with the tradition of storytelling, both written and oral, imagination revives a history which is transient, in danger of disappearing, and largely undocumented, its remaining carriers having been forced into a series of displacements. Zable describes his ancestors:

They lived on the edge of time and space, . . . always on the verge of moving on, continually faced with the decision: do we stay, persist, take root within this kingdom, or do we take to the road again? Perhaps it is safer, greener, beyond the next river, over the next mountain-range, across yet another border? (11)

Such conditions have resulted in a rich storytelling tradition, and a love of words and books which are easily transported. The tradition requires the tenacity to survive the vagaries of historical change. Thus the changing names of Bishke Zabludowski's newspapers track the changing history of Bialystok between 1905 and 1945—first within Czarist Russia, then caught up in the Bolshevik Revolution, later under German occupation, and, by 1920, part of the Polish Republic until it was invaded by Germany in 1939.

But the sweeping movements of empires through Europe is not the material of this history. In *Jewels and Ashes* imperial history is decentred, the story revolving within and around a marginalised community, now vanished, in Polish villages and in Warsaw and Krakow. Travelling through the Soviet Union Zable notes that all clocks along the Trans-Siberian line are set to Moscow time—'the empire beats according to the dictates of the centre' (26). For the Jews of Poland empires have never been a source of certainty. The mutability built into Zable's ancestral history creates the forms of its expression—a tradition of storytellers, *spielers*, troubadours, always on the move. Travelling into the family's past Zable encounters a history which refuses to be restored. When his father keeps losing what he believes to be the last letter he received in Melbourne from Bialystok in 1939, it seems

. . . as if the past refuses to allow itself to be put in order, and is always intruding into the present with disturbing hints of a world of irredeemable chaos, forever spinning out of control. (107)

In Poland, which is now 'Judenrein' (free of Jews), Zable visits the shtetl of Orla, a village near Bialystok where members of his family had lived. He is overwhelmed by a sense of rupture in the derelict cemetery and synagogue—'. . . all seems in disarray, as if the primal elements are hell-bent on tearing to pieces the last decaying remains of the past' (98).

The reader is constantly reminded of the total emptying of Jewish life in Polish towns and cities, and the difficulty of telling these stories against the enormity of fact. In the empty street Kievskia, where his mother had lived in Bialystok, Zable is aware of his own imposition of story onto the past:

On days like this, I imagine, the Probutski children, the six sisters and three brothers, would spill into the streets to play in vacant lots strewn with weeds and

rubbish. Or perhaps it wasn't like that at all, and I am merely imposing such a scene on empty sites scattered throughout the neighbourhood like gaps in rows of rotting teeth. (50)

The writer treads a path between event and fantasy, unable to create an *exactitude*, aware of the constant refrain he meets on his travels – 'You were not there. You cannot imagine what it was like!' (55):

Romance and terror, light and shadow, replicas and originals, hover side by side, seeking reconciliation, while within me there is a sense of awe and a silent refrain: I am here, at last I am here; and it is far more beautiful than I had imagined. And far more devastating. (45)

Entering this rupture between past and present, he encounters the specific place of his mother's childhood home, and understands that the object of his journey, its story, must bear traces which will always resist reconstruction. Its history is not homogenous, nor is it possible to sustain the romance of the stories of Bialystok heard in his childhood. The story *holds* its quality of rupture, for the history of Bialystok is brutal as well as vibrant, the origins of its destruction impossible to locate finally. Because of this openness – a rupture, or gash – the writer is forced into a position of avoiding the possibility of authoritatively inscribing history in a way which obscures its traces of resistance. The history remains open to further readings of its gaps and silences.

Jewels and Ashes is both historical documentation and fiction. By transcending the boundaries of both genres the text disallows the dominance of its own authority. While it re-inscribes 'a' valuable history, it makes allowance for a plurality of histories. When Zable encounters the synagogue at Tykocin which has been turned into a museum (122), he resists such a fixing of the 'vanished tribe' by young, well-meaning Poles. In his text the impulse to tell the stories generated by silence is more vital and complex than bald historical fact.

It is possible to underscore the desire to incorporate the silences and lacunae of history with theories of both psychoanalysis and history. In psychoanalytic dialogue, narratives of the past are re-organised in the *present*; it is the present state which determines the significance of the story and allows a progression into a future. Zable takes his difficult journey into history in order to move on from the past – 'so that I will never have to return' (102). In his narrative Zable often forgoes chronology, taking his stories backwards, circling around events, repeating fragmented events from different angles. Impelled upon his journey he is unable to escape the relentless continuity of the events that unfold.

In addition, disruption and dispersion create (and are created by) a fragmented, non-homogenous history. This view of history subverts chronology, and, although I have explained that Zable finds a ruthless necessity in continuity, when he discovers chronologies of events he circles around them. He emphasises the persistence of the past in the present, and vice versa, creating a sense of the full chaotic impact of these events.

In an extraordinary narrative move Zable enters the vast silence of the fate of his family after the Melbourne family's last contact with Bialystok, recreating events in the town from June 1941 to August 1943. In 1943 the ghetto was isolated, its inhabitants either killed there, or in the forests nearby, transported to other ghettos, or to Treblinka and Auschwitz. In 1986 he visits the apartment at Kupietzka 38, in which his father had lived before leaving Poland. It is a place encountered previously only as an address on an envelope. Yet in the present he enters it, imaginatively entering his father's perception as he looks at the view onto which Meier had looked as a young man. Having set the place

he goes on to describe how, on the afternoon of February 5, 1943, according to a witness, the residents of Kupietzka were shot in a nearby courtyard, amongst them Meier Zabłudowski's parents, Bishke and Sheine (146). Zable approaches the most difficult parts of the story obliquely, including both the time before (when his father lived there) and after the event (his own presence).

At the same time the inscribed text gives importance to place names, people's names, dates, searches through records. The specific naming of what was silent or absent, mapping its territory, brings it into existence. Therefore, in spite of the fragmentation of history, which is based on the material nature and chaos of events, its re-inscription is a gesture of healing. Zable re-asserts the identities of Meier Zabłudowski and Hoddes Probutski and their lost world. *Jewels and Ashes* therefore holds a delicate balance between a model of history as fragmented and dispersed, and a history that reclaims silenced voices through the power of memory and imaginative reconstruction.

The stories of *Jewels and Ashes* have an energy which pushes them against the boundaries of historical documentation, and dichotomies of fact/fiction. It might be said that such fictionalising of history serves to romanticise it, and in this sense it seems to me that this work is more a fiction than a text of historical documentation, despite its being shelved in my university library with books on Polish history. The element of fantasy, especially in descriptions of Hoddes Probutski's father, Reb Aron Yankev, the Chasid, emphasises the magical recreation of a reality through story.

This particularly silent branch of the family tree attracts the open-ended possibilities of fiction. In order to be told it must be constructed entirely from memory, for the family has no documentation of Reb Aron. Because of his pious withdrawal from a changing modern world, Reb Aron had never allowed himself to be photographed, nor, tragically, did he write to his three daughters in the New World. Despite this overwhelming silence, Zable describes his grandfather in terms of strength: Reb Aron's Chasidism has a spiritual energy; it transcends fear and destruction, enabling his spirit to ascend, despite the coming apocalypse. Descriptions of Aron Yankev have a fantastic and surreal quality, the language conveying the energy of shtetl life rather than historical accuracy:

In the pre-dawn darkness Reb Aron wanders the silent streets of the Chanaykes, his feet pounding the cobblestones, his head soaring above the roofs, somewhere in the higher heavens. And, as she tells the story, mother's eyes shift upwards, as if fixed upon a waning mirage called Byalistok. (115)

The converse side to rupture and fragmentation, then, is an openness to the imaginative revisioning of the past. Story also functions as a transforming mode; indeed transformation, or healing, is a motivation for the writing of *Jewels and Ashes*. As he uncovers the past the writer takes a warning and a lesson from his father:

'Do not dwell too much upon the past', father warns. He blots out disturbing dreams and prefers that which he can touch and see whole wide awake. 'A fractured past and muddled dreams are synonymous', he claims. 'Obliterate the crippled visions that emerge from the darkness,' he stresses. When father awakens, he deliberately breaks free of the night and reminds himself: The sun rises in the east, sets in the west, and life goes on. (146-47)

Meier Zabłudowski is able to continue with his future, using a strategy of 'forgetting' to deal with his pain. His 'present' is different to that of his son. The son's task is to fill the silences of his own childhood, understanding, finally, his mother's nightmares, her

inexplicable anger, her refrain between periods of silence: 'I have a story to tell! No one sees! No one understands! No one knows who I am!' (198).

Although the experience described in *Jewels and Ashes* is culturally specific, its narrative form is constructed within the experience of dispersion. In a world of migration, exile and cross-cultural displacement a need for new genres of expression does emerge. *Jewels and Ashes* challenges boundaries of history, biography and fiction. As such it is worth examining as a possible kind of emerging genre in a literature of diaspora.

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