

*Multum In Parvo*: intertexts and Yin Yang  
Symbolism in Nicholas Jose's  
*The Rose Crossing*

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In more ways than Wordsworth could have anticipated, we lay waste our powers and require loud effects of art if we are to attend. Joy Kogawa, Nicholas Jose and Kazuo Ishiguro spring to mind as, in Alison Broinowski's apposite term, 'bridging' novelists who have appropriated the subtler ethos of Oriental art to explore problematic relationships between East and West (13). In an essay in his recent *Chinese Whispers* (1995) Jose describes 'fiction as a kind of licensed lie,' which 'pretending less, may reveal more' (167). In *The Rose Crossing* (1994) he has woven Western and Chinese imperial history, romance and symbolism into an intricately textured pattern of oriental symmetry and elegance to create a politically and environmentally suggestive parable for our contemporary world. Formally a hybrid narrative resonant with intertextual echoes from *The Tempest*, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Robinson Crusoe*, 'The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner,' William Morris and the literature of colonial exploration, the novel focuses on a romantic encounter between Rosamund, the stow-away daughter of an English botanist, Edward Popple, and Taizao the young exiled Ming pretender with his guardian eunuch Lou Lu on a paradisaical island in the Indian Ocean. Their fruitful union, which is delicately paralleled by the crossing of the red English musk rose and the yellow Chinese eglantine, is used as an emblem for a more creative and harmonious relationship between China and the West. Whereas the abortive conclusion to this fictive contact recorded in the epilogue, like the Tien An Men Square incident, signals that in 1652 the time for such a rapprochement was not yet ripe.

Postmodernism has accustomed us to novels with alternate endings: *The Rose Crossing* is a utopian romance with two beginnings, setting in train a narrative sequence organized in part to reflect the principles of *yin* and *yang*. Since ancient

times, change in this system has been explained in terms of the interaction of complementary forces, male and female, light and dark, creative and destructive as reflected in the diurnal and seasonal cycles, the movement of the heavenly spheres, the life cycle of plants, animals, and humans, and in the rise and fall of dynasties, and is often thought of as occurring in five phases linked to the five elemental forces. All human activity, from harvesting to wearing ceremonial robes of the appropriate colour, has been thought of as in harmony with these forces, and the aim of the Confucian moralists has been to produce a society which eschewed discordant outbreaks.

From the outset Jose creates as it were a double semiotic register, drawing concurrently in his use of leitmotifs on colour symbolism, Western archetypes, and allusions to this system. When Poppo returns after an interview with the scientific Society of Fellows (where the mahogany panelling is carved with roses) to the estate of his patron Lord Brougham in the North of England – a terrain also associated with the Wars of the Roses – he at once seeks out his daughter Rosamund beyond the formal gardens in the ‘wilder’ (22) park where she is riding and seizing her bridle mounts behind her (24). This discreet invocation of a Renaissance commonplace is historically apposite, and there is also perhaps an echo of the scene in *Mansfield Park* where Crawford tempts Maria round the locked iron gate, across the ha-ha to the knoll beyond (Loewe 105, 108). But Poppo’s devotion to his daughter Rose, matched by his wife Delia’s preference for their son Henry – the first of many such contrastive parallels – has *yin yang* as well as Freudian and patriarchal overtones. Thinking of her as ‘his creation’ as he watches her sleep and ‘burning like a red-hot poker’ he tries to persuade himself (like Dante) that ‘at the highest levels of truth’ his desire for her is permissible and that he should ‘let himself devour her.’ She, waking up and disturbed by his presence, obliges him to withdraw and (in a Hogarthian image) to plunge his head through the ‘black mirror’ of ice on the rose garden pond to regain his equilibrium (26-7; see Austen 82-8 and Panofsky 189-91, fig. 143). To escape his incestuous impulses, Poppo sets sail on a quest for the black rose, an image of which is carved on a flaw in a talisman he owns of Oriental jade – a stone also associated with Pao Yin, the hero of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The principal analogy here is with the element of sublimation in the Protestant ethic which fuelled the entire colonial enterprise, but as later events are to confirm there is also a reference to both Western and (more obliquely) Oriental fears of miscegenation.<sup>1</sup> Poppo’s puritan ambivalence is balanced by his wife’s more cavalier attitude to sex, reflected in her willingness to submit to Sir Astley Neville’s nibbling her tits into a ‘ring-a rosy of bruises’ (29) to get her husband appointed by the Society of Fellows as ship’s doctor.

As the ensuing voyager narrative unfolds, with Poppo sailing East via the Portuguese Azores and the Dutch establishment of Cape Town, while Taizao and Lou Lu travel West toward their ‘Hesperian’ (51) meeting-point, sea changes are played on this principle of semiotic cross-fertilization. And beneath the elegant idiom of romance, the references to the vicissitudes of ‘fortune’ (7) in that ‘turbulent age’ (37) and the factiousness of rival colonizing powers cumulatively bring home the analogy with our own times. Poppo’s battered ship, the *Cedar*, is a microcosm, a

'veritable world' (34); Macqueen, her captain, is a 'king's man' (44); and his Cornish mate and 'leveller' (45) crew mutiny against his 'hard hierarchy' (45) as they round the Cape – 'Zone of the monster of ocean whose throat was the tunnel of wind and water down which ships vanished' (48). Then as if by divine retribution the ship is stricken by plague, decimating the mariners, and later the hull begins to rot. Counterpointed against all this are images of renewal, culminating in the arrival on the island. The stow-away Rose is discovered 'Lying like a foetus' (39) in the cabin-trunk, and she emerges newly shorn among the crew, Orlando-like, as Pople's young assistant Ross; Macqueen's black slaves, one of them called Jonah, worship her as a 'lucky charm' (53) against the plague; and in a splendidly discordant *yin yang* variant, she and Pople are described as sleeping 'head to toe, toe to head, back to back' (42).

The novel's second section, beginning in the East, is contrapunctually related to the first, entering into dialogue with it and deepening the symbolic resonances. The execution of King Charles, which Pople witnessed, is paralleled by references to the suicide of the Ming Emperor and the murder or dispersal of his heirs, while the divisions within England are echoed in China's invasion by the Northern Manchus (favoured by the Jesuits), and the survival in the South of some self-interested mercantile support for the Ming cause (endorsed by the Macaoan Dominicans). Pople's botanical quest (flying Rose's green pennant, embroidered with the black rose) functions in part as synecdoche for the idealistic side of colonialist expansionism. And it is complemented by Lou Lu's piloting his imperial charge aboard a dragon-prowed and phoenix-crested junk past cosmopolitan Malacca in quest of help from Rome, suggesting a move by China away from its isolationist traditions. There is also a *yin yang* complementarity both to the lovers-to-be, each travelling incognito, and to their guardians, which manages to convey something of the ethos of their respective cultures without lapsing into caricature. As her name and attachment to her mare Nelly intimate, earthy energetic Rosamund embodies Nature's elemental forces. The impotent Taizao, Son of Heaven, by contrast, whose languidness is that of 'mushrooming numbers of imperial princes ... forbidden by Ming code to work' (Anderson 259) and of static tendencies in Chinese culture then and now, is more closely linked with Art. He is seen writing poems, playing the flute and striving for the 'essence of the rose' (71) in painting, and he shares with Pao Yu a liking for theatricals (Cin 170). The puppet opera he stages, about a maiden in a flower garden who wakes to find her dream lover has flown, anticipates the sad end of both romances. The cosmic implications of Taizao's effete and solitary status are emphasized by Lou Lu: 'The boy could not be emperor until he proved his potency ... A prince must set an example, link heaven and earth, balance opposing elements' (75). The care with which Taizao tends the flowers on board also has a certain poignancy in the more recent context of the 'puppet' emperor Pu Yi's last days.

The guardians too are carefully counterpointed. Pople personifies several aspects of Western culture that had their inception during the Renaissance. Politically moderate with Royalist sympathies, he is a 'black solitary' (106) individualist, associated on the island with the solitaire, and his relationship with Rose is

more personal than Lou Lu's 'abstract devotion' (71) to Taizao. As a natural philosopher at a time when science still had links with alchemy, he is also something of a hybridic (207) Faustus figure seeking power over nature, obsessed with an ambiguous vision

of a black flower, a bloom of no colour that combines all colours, for ...  
 Black is final significance. Is mysterious power. Where the black flower  
 grows, a rose it is said, one finds the endorsement of the superior being.  
 Whoever has it is undisputed emperor. They say the black rose grows  
 atop a mound that conceals one single nugget of gold ore, a mountain  
 of gold. (142)

Later Poppel is seen struggling with the problem of finding the right words for naming new creatures on the 'nameless' (170) utopian island.

Lou Lu by contrast embodies the Confucian rather than the Daoist side of Chinese culture in that he is 'no visionary but a practical, open-minded man who looked to solutions' (62). Though curious about navigation, he is essentially a social being, a courtier, interested, like the historical eunuch caste he represents, in power as it resides in the art of political manipulation rather than in knowledge (see Anderson 235-65). As befits the greater antiquity of Chinese culture, 'old tortoise' (57) Lou Lu is twice Edward Poppel's age, and the differences and similarities between their world views are sketched in terms of *yin* and *yang*: 'Poppel discovered that the old man came from the centre of the world, whereas he, Edward Poppel, came from the moving point of history .... The Chinese had heard of Jesus' but not that he 'join[ed] matter to eternity, humanity to God. The European had heard of harmony' but not that it 'subordinat[ed] the lesser to the greater' (159-60). Both exiles are idealists who have been prepared to undergo castration – metaphorically in Poppel's case (42), literally in Lou Lu's, as he recalls in graphic detail (258) – in the service of their 'losing cause' (170).<sup>2</sup> And yet both are also 'go-betweens' (165), the one in the botanical sphere, the other in the human. The wider implications are that their respective cultures too are in effect emasculated by an isolationism based on fear and ignorance, which as exemplified in *The Rose Crossing* only love, understanding, and cooperation can transcend.

The tropical island 'east of [Dutch] Mauritius' (118) where they meet, a threshold site between East and West, is based on Rodrigues as encountered by the Burgundian François Leguat and a crew of eight (including a young lad, Pierrot) in 1691, half a century after Dutch sailors were marooned there. Surrounded by reefs with only two navigable passages (256) and free of natural predators, Rodrigues survived as a sanctuary a little longer than the other Mascarene Islands, teeming with crayfish, eels and dugong, solitaires and giant tortoises, and trees with red and black wood (North-Coombes 8, 21-2). Like Marvell's 'Bermudas,' Jose's fictive version is a paradisaic refuge, a 'newly constituted world' so small as to make it 'possible to know everything' (113); but colonising it can mean either cultivation or destruction – whether viewed as a historical paradigm or in terms of contemporary technology and

science. Solomon Truro, the rebellious mate with homosexual leanings (125) who wants to be king and to 'confirm sole possession of the territory' (109), exemplifies the drive to impose sterile Eurocentric structures. He brings death to the volcanic heart of the 'great garden bowl,' the *hortus conclusus* where Pople is to plant his roses, and slay a black parrot in the 'green, sunny circle,' (another variant image of the black flaw in the green jade), which echoes to the 'whizz' of his 'crossbow' (110-11).

The *Wendepunkt* in Jose's narrative occurs in the Crusoesque first contact scene, and he dwells on its significance as a decisive moment in the flux of things in a manner which again recalls Virginia Woolf, placing the meeting at the centre of his numerologically suggestive twelve chapters. The halting cultural dialogue that ensues, conducted in Latin and entailing the exchange of such emblematically propitious gifts as an embroidered phoenix and an engraved heart from Hervey's treatise on the circulation of the blood, may be construed in terms of *yin* and *yang* in that for cultural cross-fertilization to take place, suspicion, selfishness and competition have to be overcome. And in Jose's clever deconstruction of the Fall, which has as much in common with Blake's critique of Milton's patriarchal rationalism as with Coleridge's sacramental vision, Rose's disobedience is a redemptive act. If as mentor and as 'wizard' (116) imbued with natural magic Pople with his 'staff of power' plays Prospero to Rosamund's Miranda, he also assumes the role of Milton's jealous Father, whom Blake sometimes associated with Satan. For he is representative of Western culture's tendency from Plato through Milton to the present to privilege the *yang* forces over the *yin*; and he seeks to control Rose, as he does his roses, by 'inscribing a circle round her, bonded but kept untouched by the rigour of a fundamental geometry. Thus the island contained his virgin daughter as queen and heart' (128). One is reminded of the vision of the Virgin Mary within the rose in Dante's *Paradiso*. Rosamund counters Pople's demand for purity and discipline – which induces in her 'a form of hysterical pregnancy' (168) like that suffered by Queen Mary – by accusing him of watching her like some 'jealous monster' (187). And whereas Milton's Eve brings sin and death into the world when she wanders from her consort's side, Rose's striking out alone with her pet solitaire represents an impulse towards life, and leads to her encounter with Taizao, an oriental Adam with shoulder-length black hair, practising *tai chi* with emblematically phallic sword in hand.

The details of their two sexual encounters, the first after Taizao has serenaded her on the flute, as in a pastoral or Chinese painting, the second under the nose of her inebriated father, are perhaps disconcerting to some readers, in that Taizao is first roused and later doused by her shower of golden urine. But the images are chosen to convey how the principles of *yin* and *yang* interfuse the plant, animal, human, and spiritual or mythic worlds in a continuum which Western dualism seeks to deny: 'He ... looked at the thing that had happened to him, crimson-black stalk with a rose-petal head growing from the nest of black hair ... urging him as she rose and sank in the saddle' (203-4). That Rosamund is the active rider here gives a feminist complexion to the Platonic and Renaissance horse and bridle image, as does the fact

that in defiance of normal Confucian expectations the first hybrid offspring of their crossing is a green-eyed black-haired *girl* – the colours of the jade talisman again. In the broader historical context of relations between China and the West, it also modifies the convention whereby the colonizer is thought of as male, the colonized as female, in the direction of a more balanced partnership. The cosmic or mythic side of the continuum, in which the Emperor links heaven and earth, like the Monarch in the European system, is presented in Taizao's dream, which includes two of the creatures, dragon, tiger, phoenix and tortoise-cum-serpent associated with the five seasonal phases (Loewe 115): 'She ... the phoenix bird flapped and fluttered in the cloud, her wings outstretched, her back arching, ... a shuddering gold emblem in an ecstasy of fiery light as the dragon circled' (242). When dragon dances traditionally took place, the colour of the dragons (green, red, yellow and white on black) and the age of the participants were determined by the season (Loewe 261).

That things go awry despite the elective affinity that, like Pao Yu and Tai Yu, these young courtly lovers feel for one another – 'the presence of each penetrating the other, as if passing through the window of the eyes to snare the heart and soul' (194) – is due significantly to the conflicting ideals, principles and power drives of the *older* generation. At the symposial meeting round the square cabin table to celebrate a hundred days on the 'uncharted island belonging to no emperor,' with Taizao facing south as if reinstated in Beijing, the guardians are well aware that 'to bond or remain separate was the challenge, and they enacted a ritual of exchange while concealing deeper untradeable aims' (224; Loewe 125). It is these hidden agendas that prevent their consolidating the bridge of love and trust the lovers have spontaneously created: 'Poppo had an enthusiastic vision of a great universal ecumenism in which his highest truth would be crowned, subliming and absorbing knowledge and beliefs from the four winds into a pinnacle of a single immutable beauty. Atop he would stand, eternal omnipotent wizard' (226). Lou Lu talks in terms which also have a Cold War subtext, of their meeting as: 'a unique conjunction that will lead us to be – the greatest men of our time! So posterity must judge us. We have no choice. We must act to rectify the order of ages and put the governance of the great world to rights. We must act not from personal ambition but as the agents of the magnificent enterprise of universal empire' (227). In pursuit of his sublime ideal Poppo is prepared to steal the yellow eglantine (later gifted freely) for scientific grafting, to sacrifice the happiness of his 'lost' (206) and disobedient (234) daughter, and to disown what he initially reacts to as her 'monstrous birth' (238). Lou Lu's very worldly raid on Poppo's garden, where he suspects that gold is hidden, is motivated by his Confucian loyalty to his Imperial master and the need to equip a 'force to ensure the prince's accession' (264; Struve 9-10). His decision to kidnap Rose and abandon Poppo, Crusoe-like, among the solitaires doomed to extinction, is partly 'a eunuch's revenge' (265) at not finding gold, but primarily dictated by the imperative of securing the Ming line.

The black rose itself, which recalls the black tulip of Dumas, is an open-ended leitmotif – though not quite as elusive as the real object – and both its propitious *yang* and nihilistic *yin* potentialities symbolically, are borne out as it recurs in different

contexts. The negative implications, hinted at in the fact that Popples's guiding talisman is flawed, emerge in the quite powerful scene in which Rose upbraids her father for his intolerance and jealousy and he gradually begins to yield. Whether conceived in terms of Christian guilt or scientific hybris, Popples's denial of the powers of *yin* and his quest for a flawless Rose, constitute a flaw with potentially nihilistic consequences. 'Attempting to be more than Man We become less', as Blake put it (Erdman 403). It is therefore significant that in this scene too Rosamund takes the lead, and at the wedding feast (of solitaires and tortoises – their extinction is already under way) he consents to her release. Later, alone in his rose garden he experiences a spiritual catharsis, casting into the stream the grains of poison fungus intended for the Chinese, which he has kept stored with the talisman in a pouch next to his groin, and thus recovering his full humanity, '[h]e was transformed' (254-5).

But the black rose also has redemptive implications which reflect the positive side to Popples's quest. Beyond the Cape it flies embroidered on the green flag as an emblem of their liberty. Both as a hybrid and as a traditional symbol of love, it corresponds in the world of plants to the love-child of Rosamund and Taizao. The fact that it is the poison Popples released into the water that is responsible for its unusual colour does not make it a cousin of Blake's 'The Sick Rose,' because the principles of *yin* and *yang* are also operative in Chinese herbal medicine. In terms of the alchemical allusions too, it is the sublimed essence of the rose, as gold is of base metals. And since Edward Popples's vision does indeed prove true and the black rose is found growing above gold, it would seem they stand in a perfect *yin yang* relationship to one another at the heart of this paradisaical island encircled by a reef.

The novel's ending therefore is replete with ironies, pointing to the historical relations between Orient and West. There is the tragic irony that Popples's change of heart has come too late and cooperation turned to plunder. There is comic circumstantial irony in that the Chinese have left without discovering the gold. There is a Schlegelian romantic irony about the way both parties acted according to their lights. And cosmic irony, finally, might be said to be involved in the way mankind's desire to bring back the age of gold and coexist in harmony with nature's rhythms seems doomed in every way by greed, power drives and one-sided ideologies. The destructive implications are made clear in the novel's closing pages, with Popples facing extinction like the solitaires, Lou Lu dying of old age and exhaustion, Taizao falling victim to assassination and Rosamund and her daughter isolated to the point of losing their language and their Western culture; though the cycle we are told begins again with the rise of Popples's young son Henry (Struve 178).

It is difficult to do full justice in short compass to the Schubertian subtlety with which Jose plays variations on his leitmotifs in *The Rose Crossing*, a novel Loris and Meung or Sir Philip Sidney might have envied. A glance at the genealogical table in Joseph H. Pemberton's history of rose cultivation, one of Jose's acknowledged sources, with its species, sub-species and hybrids, reveals how apposite the analogy with racial and cultural hybridity in humans is – a difficult topic to write about artistically in the mimetic mode (19). One of the advantages of *The Rose Crossing* over some other recent Australian East-West bridging novels is that, though like a William

Morris interior perhaps in places too heavily embellished, it succeeds in inducing a mood both active and contemplative.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hogarth's seduction diptych 'Before' and 'After' includes images of a phallic rocket or fire cracker and a broken mirror to comment on the action (see Paulson II. pls. 37-8).
- <sup>2</sup> For an account of how the operation of castration was performed, see Anderson 207-11.

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