

Counter-imperialism in Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age*

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Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age* (1985) is the most comprehensively counter imperial text in Australian theatre. The play's main strategy is to target a central dichotomy in imperialist discourse, between the civilised imperial centre and the barbarous or primitive colonial margins. The chief concern of this paper is how the play's deconstruction of imperialist discourse produces a movement in audience awareness away from the dichotomies which privilege imperialism and towards a sense of conflation that renders the traditional associations untenable. Provocatively, imperialist values are represented by the denizens of Hobart, a city at an extremity of the former British Empire, and barbarity is depicted through the Tasmanian wilderness and its inhabitants.

The play concerns the descendants of a group of former convicts who had gone into the South West wilderness of Tasmania to find gold. By 1939, when the action of *The Golden Age* begins, the descendants are few and pathetic, racked with congenital disorders and seeming to speak an archaic and degenerate English. They are discovered by Peter Archer, the son of a Hobart psychiatrist, and Francis Morris, who grew up in a working class suburb of Melbourne. Peter's family regularly gives charity performances of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and it is with one of these that *The Golden Age* begins.

After the death of one of the group, the wilderness clan goes to the Archers' home in Hobart with Peter and Francis. At the instigation of Ross, a visiting Federal Cabinet Minister, the clan is placed in an asylum because its condition could suggest to the public that Nazi fears of social entropy might be valid, thus diminishing support for Australia's war effort. William Archer, the psychiatrist, reluctantly agrees and assumes the role of the group's protector. He also uses the position to experiment on the group.

Despite communication difficulties, Francis and one of the group, Betsheb, have fallen in love. Visiting the asylum, Francis admits to Betsheb his love for her, but

immediately goes off to war. Several deaths occur in the wilderness group from a variety of causes, including suicide. Alone, Betsheb sinks into acute depression. William Archer, too, declines and suicides out of guilt for what he has done to the group. Meanwhile, towards the end of the war, Francis is in Berlin. He and a companion are pursuing a German soldier who finally asks, in English, to be killed. Francis complies but is imprisoned for the shooting, seemingly as a result of diplomatic manoeuvring. Out of prison, Francis returns to Tasmania to find Betsheb. Together, they escape to the wilderness.

In presenting its story, *The Golden Age* first evokes in the audience common prejudices and associations which privilege the imperial centre over the colonial margins. But, as the play progresses, standard associations are loosened and dismembered. The divisions and precisions of imperialist discourse dissolve in the course of the play. In witnessing the action, the audience is led from a sense of familiarity to ambivalence and then, hopefully, to new understanding. The manoeuvre is supported by a pervasive climate of scepticism in the work. Along the way, associations between characters and events and Australian history and culture advance the play's counter-imperial case.

The excerpt from *Iphigenia in Tauris* that opens *The Golden Age* suggests the theme and the dramaturgy employed in the rest of the play. It does so by evoking a familiar dichotomy between civilisation and barbarity and then challenging the clear divisions it implies. In Euripides' play, the supposedly civilised Argoans have blood on their hands and desecrate a temple. The piety of the putatively barbarous Taurians makes it possible for the Argoans to escape Tauris.

Eventually, there is a similar conflation of civilisation and barbarity in the settings of *The Golden Age*. In particular, the play destabilises the common association of Europe with civilisation. This is most strikingly apparent when Francis is in the ruins of Berlin amid which 'are the remains of a huge statue: the head of Frederick the Great, its face riddled with bullet holes' (63). The career of Frederick the Great exemplifies a coalescence, rather than the perceived opposition, of rationality or civilisation with darker qualities such as pretence, duplicity, oppression and cruelty. A correspondent of Voltaire's, French was the Prussian king's preferred language and his interest in French literature led him to neglect his native German. (In this he mirrors a variety of Nowra's characters, including Elizabeth Archer, the Hobart matron in *The Golden Age*, whose admiration for Europe leads her to undervalue her Australian context.) While he may have aspired to be a philosopher king, Frederick invaded Silesia in 1740 on the basis of slight dynastic claims, proving himself a pragmatist and a talented soldier. The decapitation of the sculpture recalls the beheadings of the French Revolution, cruelties which form a seemingly anomalous part of the Age of Reason. Thus, Frederick exemplifies the potential for savagery in the ostensibly enlightened and cautions against facile separations in practice between civilisation and characteristics associated with barbarity.

In *The Golden Age*, as a whole, the dichotomy is represented through two starkly contrasting settings, Hobart and the Tasmanian wilderness, and the characters associated with each. The differences established between the Tasmanian capital and

the wilderness some distance from it provoke in the audience the traditional association between wilderness and darkness, the underworld, the chaotic subconscious and its contrast with the world of order, control and rationality represented by Hobart and its denizens. In Nowra's Europhile Hobart, there is a clearly delineated past and present, a definite hierarchy of relationships between people, clear speech and agreed meanings. In the entropic wilderness, origins are obscure, speech is largely incomprehensible to the audience and there are physical deformities and autism. Like the ingenuous travellers between these worlds, Peter and Francis, the audience will more easily recognise and probably be comfortable with the 'civilised' setting and its inhabitants than with the wilderness and its people. In the Archers' Hobart house and garden, there is a Eurocentric gentility that contrasts with the group-centred uncouthness of the feral group. The gulf is represented in the difference between the unruly bodies of the wilderness group and the almost disembodied or very formally embodied qualities of the Hobart people. At first, therefore, the wilderness is an 'Other' which is more repulsive than alluring.

But similarities between the two groups and settings begin to emerge as the play progresses. For instance, the audience may observe that the physical deformities of the wilderness people are matched in the ostensibly civilised people of Hobart by psychological malfunctions such as hypocrisy, megalomania, oppressiveness and pretension. An important equation between the two groups is established through their respective matriarchs, Ayre, from the wilderness, and Elizabeth Archer, the self-appointed transmitter of European culture in Hobart. Both women are unable to create what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have termed in relation to the post-colonial condition, 'an effective identifying relationship between self and place' (9). The lives of both women are blighted by allegiance to a distant model of perfection, some golden age. Ayre's inability to be 'at home' is due to a melancholic longing for a return to an idealised past, while its cause in Elizabeth Archer is a niggling dissatisfaction produced by her unfavourable comparison of her antipodean surroundings with a European ideal.

Along the same lines, two sets of parallel incidents, two plays and two meals, initially seem to conform to standard imperial depictions of the civilised centre and the barbarous margins but eventually contradict them. The extracts from *Iphigenia in Tauris* are clear and conform to the audience's expectations of theatrical high culture. The actors know and seem to understand their parts well. They communicate clearly and with dignity. In contrast, the wilderness group's dramatic efforts seem to be performed in a language which is as ragged as the costuming, gibberish which fails to communicate anything but a poverty of meaning. The performers in the wilderness know their speeches by heart but, according to the stage directions, the words they are speaking 'sometimes seem out of keeping with their emotions, as if they ... don't understand what they are saying' (15). Though the language is largely incomprehensible to the audience, the tone, the putting out of eyes, an implication of sex and mention of 'outcastin' may suggest *Oedipus Rex* or *King Lear*, canonical texts whose sophistication makes the primitive wilderness play seem even more pathetic.

In a pattern common to the rest of *The Golden Age*, the plays performed in Hobart and the wilderness are first apprehended as polar opposites only to be later equated. The audience may understand that the enactment in the wilds of Tasmania lacks meaning for the actors because it is beyond their experience, a relic of another time and place which they cannot understand and are therefore unable to communicate with any force. Under these circumstances, what should be tragedy becomes farce. Such an understanding necessarily threatens the status of the presentation of an ancient Greek play in Hobart in the twentieth century. These seemingly contrasting performances both suggest that the enactment of borrowed cultural artefacts thousands of kilometres and many years from where and when they were originally performed may well be absurd. This is the foundation of a disparagement of borrowed culture which becomes more evident when William Archer later observes, 'We Australians have assumed a hand-me-down culture but at our heart is a desert' (53). The reason for the desiccation is apparent in the contrast between the sham plays and the wilderness matriarch's telling of the group's history which has a dignity due to its having more meaning for both the teller and her audience. The contrast between the plays and the matriarch's story destabilises traditional notions of dignity and authority, qualities normally associated with the imperial centre but which are reallocated in *The Golden Age*.

The second pair of parallel incidents, a dinner in the wilderness and another in Hobart, has a similar result. In its initial encounter, the audience is likely to view the wilderness group as uncouth, even degenerately animalistic. Such a possibility would seem to increase when the two groups dine together in Hobart, where the wilderness group's behaviour might seem especially grotesque beside the elegance of their companions. But the earlier parodies of bourgeois manners by the wilderness group may well lead the audience to see such manners as mere pretence, even as inhuman, an encoding of exclusivism to legitimate a power without moral authority. Against this, the behaviour of the wilderness group may be perceived to have dignity because, at the very least, it is honest.

Through these means, *The Golden Age* may relocate its audience in relation to the discourses of imperialism. Dislocation and relocation are central to any examination of the heritage of imperialism and in *The Golden Age* dislocation is both a theme and an important dramaturgical element. In a Brechtian way, the non-linear narrative structure and other dislocations at the beginning of the play violate the audience's expectations and thereby deprogram it, forcing it to be more open and creative in its attempts to make meaning rather than allow convention to shape its responses. The dramaturgy provides the audience with direct experience of the difficulties that may arise when habitual modes of thinking are no longer adequate to explain new conditions. The theme is pursued through visual symbolism later in the play, when Peter and Francis cast a feeble light onto a map in an attempt to learn their location in the wilderness. There seems to be an equation between the inability of the light to illuminate their position and the potency of the map to reveal their location. All the map defines, ultimately, is the place's remoteness: it is next to useless in meaningfully representing their situation. A counter-imperial implication is that

discourses created in the imperial centre may not be useful in making sense of the colonial margins.

The subversion of imperialist orthodoxies in *The Golden Age* is supported by a climate of sceptical anti-authoritarianism. The script's chief strategy in this regard is to suggest a general duplicity or untrustworthiness. In the course of the play, the American government betrays its soldiers by treating well certain of its former Nazi enemies; the soldiers who were saluting Mussolini one day kill him and cover his body with excrement on the next. Science's capacity to heal and restore has an equal and opposite ability to damage, dehumanise and persecute. The audience observes that there is no difference between the seemingly just and the supposedly decadent when the Australian government proves itself the equal of its fascist opponents in persecuting those who might disrupt its course. The asylum which should have been a refuge for a woman from the wilderness reduces her to a psychotic mess and, in fighting against what he must have construed as brutality, Francis is brutalised himself.

The script further promotes sceptical anti-authoritarianism by destabilising notions of 'truth'. An important device in this regard is the presentation of comparative value. For instance, there is Peter's telling Francis that what they took to be gold in the wilderness settlement is actually iron pyrites, fool's gold. At first, the presence of the fool's gold may be received by the audience as another aspect of the play's illustrating the inferiority of the wilderness people but, finally, the quality of the 'gold' in our terms is likely to be seen by the audience as not as important as the particular value given it by the wilderness group. Thus develops the idea that the attribution of meaning and value is contingent rather than fixed and universal.

The validity and authority of imperialism is perhaps most strongly impugned when the suffering of the wilderness group represents the treatment of Australian Aborigines, especially Tasmanian Aborigines. The connection first occurs in the deaths from pulmonary thrombosis, a disease to which many Aborigines fell victim. William Archer refers to Ayre, the wilderness matriarch, as 'Queenie Ayre', repeating the process whereby some Aborigines were given by their white overlords such honorifics as 'Queen' and 'King', imposing the colonisers' own conception of social control and bestowing a cruelly bogus dignity. The magnificence of Ayre and Betsheb's clothing during dinner at the Archers' recalls how those held to be the last Tasmanian Aborigines were dressed in Victorian finery for public display. Like a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman regarded as the repository of a dying culture, Fanny Cochrane Smith, Ayre makes a sound recording.¹ Perhaps most of all, the connection with Aborigines occurs through the wilderness group's relationship with the Archers, their seeming benefactors and actual imprisoners and persecutors. The tenor of such kindness received by the Aborigines is expressed by Elizabeth Archer who, while prepared to have the clan under her roof, views them as 'a poor contaminated people' (43).

On a more esoteric level, the name given to the doctor's family is that of a prominent Tasmanian grazing and wheat-growing family, these activities being the most frequent reason for the dispossession of Aboriginal land. 'Archer' also recalls the twice-referred to story of the arrow burning Saint Teresa's heart and her being

able to smell it burning. While the arrow received by the saint provoked ecstatic visions in her, the connection with the wilderness group, the image of the heart and the heart's burning suggests an emotional and spiritual cost to the clan in this brush with the Archers and the process they represent.

The wilderness group is also able to represent the general population of Australia to which it is linked; they are products of convictism, migration and a gold rush. In common with settler populations in many parts of the world, including Australia, the wilderness group preserves aspects of the mother culture at the time of separation, especially its language. William and Elizabeth Archer's comments on the group sometimes echo the disparagements of the imperious British against their distant cousins, the Anglo-Celtic Australians. William's description of the group's language, 'a word salad made up of Cockney, Scottish, Irish dialects' (36) is just as apt for Australian spoken English. According to William, the people who most influenced the group's modes of speech, an escaped convict and his sister, both had cleft palates, a malformation which would have given it nasality, a central feature of the Australian accent. Though an Australian audience is likely to view the clan's speech as uncouth, replicating a common imperial attitude to colonial accents and usage, the position is likely to soften once the link is made with their own, Australian, speech.

Imperialism is also undermined by an allusion to an Australian colonial hero executed during the Boer War when Francis is imprisoned in Berlin. In common with the popular conception of Breaker Morant and the outcome of his case, Francis's punishment seems more an outcome of colonial embarrassment than his own wrongdoing.

In explaining to Peter his decision to leave for the wilderness with Betsheb, Francis gives voice to one of the most important ideas in the play, that in refusing to squarely face their past Australians are condemning themselves to a lack of identity, an inability to be at home in their own country, a rootlessness. *The Golden Age* provokes its audiences to face Australia's colonial past, and its deconstruction of elements of imperialist discourse promotes the 'effective identifying relationship between self and place'. Betsheb's is the final statement of the play, 'Nowt more outcastin', no more exile, and it affirms the possibility of unity between people, and between people and their environment.

Note

- 1 Fanny Cochrane Smith's is in the Tasmanian Museum.

Works cited

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