

FREEDOM AND NECESSITY IN THE CULTURE OF INTERPRETATION

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I would like to offer a few reflections about the current situation of Literature and Theology in Australia, as an academic discipline. And it seems important to begin by noting that the very idea of an Australian university was built upon the premise that religion was a divisive influence which should be excluded from those institutions that would hopefully contribute to an Enlightened Australian Culture. This was a prevailing sentiment that dominated the constitution of every Australian state university, for generations the *only* providers of tertiary education in Australia.

The attempt to relegate the Australian Churches (and therefore Theology) to the fringe of an Enlightened society says a great deal about how the power elite of a 19th century colony tried to aggressively realise its particular brand of liberal humanism. And of course the imposition of this liberal culture was pursued in distinctly illiberal ways. It is possible that those who intended this censorship, and the apartheid it represents, were inspired by the 18th century idealisation of the individual, during that age of the so called "Enlightenment", dominated as it was by four great intellectual solipsisms: a commitment to reason, a stress on "nature", the idea of progress, and the rejection of the authority of tradition.¹ To this list we could well add a fifth; the rejection of any ritual or theology that did not conform to an "Enlightened" way of thinking.

Why is this offered up as important background to a reflection upon literary interpretation? Because institutions tend to maintain and reflect the ethos of their foundation. And because we need to understand that interpretation ultimately reflects the character of a given culture at any point in its history. Indeed interpretation is determined by the kind of humanistic or anti-humanistic colouring which particular institutions have and this is necessarily bound up with their departmental politics. Several of my undergraduate and postgraduate years were spent as an external part-time candidate studying through a rather provincial English Department that was oblivious to literary theory. Also the Department, it seemed to me, implicitly censured a theological reading

of texts, unless those readings conformed to a rather narrow understanding of what theology is. It may well be that behind this Enlightened censorship lies the inability of academics, at that particular institution at least, to acknowledge that there might be a living and organic relationship between literature and theology. I would venture to guess that this is a blindness built upon the premise that theology is not a living tradition, but rather is little more than a series of discredited historical doctrines which hinder a liberal and humanist (and reasonable and Enlightened) interpretation of texts.

My own experience of theology, as an Anglican student at a Roman Catholic seminary, was quite the reverse. For in fact it was not until I finished my first literature degree and studied theology, complete with a Grand Tour of the history of ideas from the pre-Socratics to Derrida, that I was made aware, not only of literary theory, but more importantly, of its place in a wider and inter-disciplinary tradition. Actually, I was given more of a liberal and humanist education at a Christian seminary than I had previously received at a secular university. For me this remains an irony difficult to explain to those who presume that the opposite *must* be true. This is not to suggest that my personal experience is representative. It is merely to illustrate the point that interpretation should involve a degree of awareness of culture and the history of its world of ideas, as well as a degree of awareness of how power and politics are played out in institutions. Including those institutions with a tradition of excluding theology on the grounds of its narrow-mindedness.

Actually, the appeal for a theological reading of texts is not an appeal to a narrow doctrinal sense, but an appeal which acknowledges that Western theology is not a dead discipline, but a living speculation which began with the ancient Hebrews and the pre-Socratics, and thrives on lively open-ended debate. It is an appeal which allows that, quite possibly, those who engage in theological readings are, quite often, no more narrow-minded or less broad-minded than those who imagine themselves to have transcended the belief of the other.

I believe Muriel Spark made this point quite eloquently in her novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. For the grounding of interpretive freedom does not belong only to those Jean Brodies of the world who imagine themselves to be liberated from the shackles of outworn mythologies, and who teach their *creme de la creme* to imagine likewise. No, the grounding of interpretive freedom belongs equally to those Sandy Strangers of the world. For Sandy is Miss Brodie's student - the victim of Jean's false Enlightenment - who gazes into her

teacher's eyes, and onseeing there the shadow of her reflected self, recoils in horror. Sandy saw that her freedom was the freedom to become like – *and to interpret like* – the "Enlightened" Miss Brodie, who was always looking up and out rather than down or within. Through this revelation Sandy came to realise that Jean Brodie was actually quite monstrous, and that equally there was the same potential for monstrosity in her own fallen self. So Sandy's particular necessity was to orchestrate Jean's downfall, and to retreat into the mythology of her choice. Ultimately, Sandy's sense of her own awful freedom forces her to become an enclosed nun, thereafter giving spiritual direction behind a grille that she clutches with a kind of desperation, while still staring into the reflected gaze of those who come to her for guidance.

I remember once attending a postgraduate seminar on this novel, as a masters candidate back at that provincial English Department. When I tried to introduce some of Ms Spark's own published observations on the theological nature of her work, these were soundly dismissed as irrelevant by the tutor, who also happened to be the course director, and a professor as well as the head of department. It was not the first time he had so dealt with this obviously naive Christian in his class, and after the firm put-down there followed a strange hour of power and game, of censorship and anxiety, in a pattern which I have often experienced as a student, and which I am sure is repeated in many a seminar room.

It is quite possible that these two inter-woven stories of teacher and student, one from fiction and the other from life, tell us much about the political dynamics of the reading of texts in an academic culture that claims to uphold interpretive freedom. It is a culture which so often sides with Miss Brodie, and with her *creme de la creme*, to uphold the ideology that underpins their aesthetic. It is a culture which simultaneously ignores the very possibility that, from within her enclosure and from behind her grille, Sandy Stranger might be as authentic an interpreter as her teacher Jean.

My own feeling is that the largely secular Academy is still filled with Jean Brodies who cannot come to grips with the fact that there are schools of theology which mirror every trend in philosophy and literary theory. Perhaps such a prevailing attitude highlights gaps in the level of thinking encouraged by the Academy. It could well be that what is lacking is a basic understanding or overview of the situation of theology and contemporary literary theory within the history of Western thought, a tradition that continues on in spite of God's death.

It is from within this theological tradition that we can see Sandy Stranger's betrayal of Jean Brodie, and her retreat into the enclosure, not as an abandonment of freedom, but rather as an assertion that an idea of freedom based upon a reasonable and Enlightened appeal to the rights of the individual can itself become a form of tyranny. I believe that Muriel Spark's point is that, within the enclosure, Sandy is no less free than outside it. In fact she is freer, and perhaps less of a social menace, because she has acknowledged the darker side of her own nature in a way that the Enlightened Jean Brodie would not.

Here Spark's literary vision represents a distinct kind of theologising that finds its logic within a particular movement in Western thought. And I would suggest the movement is Postmetaphysical thinking, a movement in which both Modernity and Postmodernity subsist. Jurgen Habermas, in his recent book entitled *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, suggests that the contemporary dialectic of thought within Western civilisation has not changed for one hundred and fifty years, and "is not essentially different from that of the first generation of Hegel's disciples".² I would suggest that during that same period the concerns of many writers have not changed either, even though their fictions appear to us in different narrative styles. In *any* age writers go on making their interrogations about freedom and necessity, about identity and the myths and metaphors of human self-understanding, in ways that often reflect the wider cultural debate, and these include those aesthetic ideologies which keep flowing from the world of ideas throughout the ages. And it is a world of ideas that is both philosophical *and* theological, even if the secular critic presumes that the discourse of theology was rendered extinct long ago with the death of God. To my mind the enterprise of literature and theology becomes more complex, and seems more urgent, when we come to the period of God's death, a period we are still in. For this is the period of Modernity and Postmodernity, with their often heavily disguised patterns of signification, and their various Postmetaphysical discourses. And it is within these later movements in 19th and 20th century fiction that a misreading is most likely to occur, and particularly by those who can only manage to equate theology with a particularly narrow definition of Metaphysics.

Of course this does not mean that Literature and Theology should join an alliance of Moderns and Postmoderns, or claim any moral high ground in the world of interpretation. For no moral high ground exists, and in any event the whole Postmetaphysical enterprise has its own case to answer before a jury which is still out. But in acknowledging

this I believe there is a great deal of difference between identifying the tradition of discourse contained within a text, and the passing of our judgement upon that text, or upon the discourse, whether that judgement be positive or negative. My own feeling is that we should simply try to locate the various discourses within a given text, and see whether they illuminate the philosophical and theological discourses that exist outside the text and within the cultural ambience that contributed to the creation of the text. Judgements upon the text can follow later, if they happen to be appropriate.

Actually the truth of Habermas' proposition that the western cultural ambience has remained unchanged for a hundred and fifty years is daily reinforced in my life, in most of my basic encounters with others, and with media and with art. One particularly striking example occurred last month when I saw a filmed called *The Piano* whose discourse was a barely disguised reworking of *Jane Eyre*, now gorgeously reincarnated as a Postcolonial and Jungian cliché. It reinforced, for my anyway, the truth of the proposition that the West's intellectual dialectic has not changed since Hegel began interrogating the presumptions of the Enlightenment. And I can see this same dialectic reflected in the writings of some 19th century writers whose tropes are shared and reworked by 20th century writers as diverse as Iris Murdoch, Robertson Davies and Patrick White. For each of these writers move in the same tropological territory, along with many other writers who aspire to say something about the human condition.

My own feeling is that we cannot read Iris Murdoch as particularly English, or Robertson Davies as particularly Canadian or Patrick White as particularly Australian without losing sight of their common tropes, and the common tradition in which they all move. For each belongs to a similar Postmetaphysical realm and it would be helpful to read them *within* this expansive tradition rather than making up other traditions for our own convenience or connivance, according to departmental politics and their critical obsessions. The discipline of literature and theology may well be an excellent way of rescuing our more complex western literatures from the lesser pursuits of postcolonialism, feminism, nationalism, or the more obsessive and gnostic forms of psychological interpretation.

Actually, in looking for a comprehensive banner for the practice of Literature and Theology I would see benefit in re-evaluating and expanding upon the general idea of a Great Tradition, not to make fresh gashes at old wounds which have scarcely healed, but to explore Leavis's idea of some literature as a reworking of other literatures that

share a common horizon, a common seriousness and a common concern. Leavis reminds us that this common seriousness and concern has produced diversity rather than similarity, and I take this to mean something like Bloom's idea of literature as the reworking and overcoming of an influential predecessor. Leavis speaks of this kind of influence when he said:

The profoundest kind of influence [is] that which is not manifest in likeness. One of the supreme debts one great writer can owe to another is the realization of unlikeness (there is, of course, no significant unlikeness without the common concern – and the common seriousness of concern – with essential human issues).³

Into this greatly expanded Great Tradition, we could well include some literature than would have appalled Leavis and his disciples. We might even include some literature which, on the surface, would appear to overturn the idea of a Great Tradition, for the literature of subversion comes as much from within a tradition than outside it. And that does not make it any less great.

In conclusion can I say that I believe that the study of Literature and Theology has a place in helping us to apprehend and identify this great tradition of common concern and unlikeness which appears in a lot of contemporary fiction. For Literature and Theology, as a discipline which considers the full ontological implications of the western text, can do much to encourage a level of interpretation that does justice to the breadth of vision shown by so many writers, and especially 20th century writers, who encode and disguise a great deal of philosophy and theology in their writing.

Perhaps the time has come to give Sandy Stranger a notebook and some software. Then from within her enclosure she can add discourse analysis to her repertoire of spiritual direction. Between paragraphs she can continue to clutch desperately at her grille, and gaze apprehensively and anxiously into the eyes of those who come to her seeking illumination. And as we all know, in some philosophical, theological and literary circles, Illumination is something quite different to Enlightenment.

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