

DEMYTHOLOGISING, DECONSTRUCTION, SCIENTIA AND LOGOS

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The relationship between science and religion is a highly complex and controversial one. Some argue that it is best characterised as warfare; that the two fields are fundamentally incompatible,¹ whereas others have attempted to study the 'fruitful interactions'² or similarities of intention between them.³ Some argue that the two fields are different ways of arriving at the same end, or the same reality.⁴ Others argue that science and religion should be kept apart; that neither can have any substantial effect on the other.⁵ There are other approaches: some argue that terms such as 'warfare' or compatibility are inappropriate⁶ or too constraining.⁷

This paper will explore three areas: first, the division between science and religion, or between *scientia* and *logos*, needs to be examined; second, the relationship between them will be discussed in the context of deconstruction; thirdly, the impact of the relationship upon modern Australian literature has been largely, and surprisingly, neglected - certainly the available literature on the fiction of White, Malouf and Carey suggests that there is much work to be done in this and related areas.

The distinctions between science and religion have not always been affirmed. The ancient Greeks used the term *logos* to signify a principle of order or of rational structure in the cosmos.⁸ This principle was not always synonymous with God or the Greek gods. In Stoic literature, the *logos* is Reason, an impersonal but universal source of the rhythms of life and death.⁹ In Heraclitean texts, the *logos* is a foundational law which regulates the dynamics of opposition and harmony in all natural processes.¹⁰ It signifies ratio, measure and immortal being.¹¹ (Indeed, Heidegger reads this *logos* as the Being of beings - a lightning flash that disappeared because no one held on to 'the streak of light'.)¹² In Neoplatonic writings the *logos* is Mind or Intellectual Principle, which is to say, the principle of unity and being.¹³ In other words, it is a higher intelligence which is also -crucially- intelligible in the world of perceivable things. The Neoplatonic mind thought of it as the archetype of the human mind and as the force which emanates throughout nature and makes all natural things copies of divine forms and ideas.¹⁴ Of course, in the gospel of John the *logos* becomes the word of God which is incarnate in the son in the form of wisdom and

redemptive capability, whereas in the work of Philo, *nous* (mind) and *logos* (cause) are unified.¹⁵ The word comes to signify the Scriptures themselves just as it comes to signify the sacred nature of language (*legein*, the verb form, means literally 'say' or 'tell'). The *logos spermatikos*¹⁶ signifies a creative, intelligent and intelligible source, a type of 'seminal reason'; a higher *intellect*¹⁷ of which *scientia* (knowledge) can be gained.

Yet it is by no means rare to find *scientia* (now largely associated with the sciences) and *logos* (now largely associated with Christianity and God) mentioned as opposites. The relationship is characterised at times in terms of conflict or unending tension. Theologians have had to defend religion against science (one might think of the cases of Galileo or Darwin); scientists have been persecuted by religious institutions; scientific theories have not been taken up readily because of resistance from churches. Such sources of conflict have magnified what seems to be a fundamental division. Certainly it is difficult to see how science and religion can be reconciled, in one sense, especially since there are fundamentally different contexts, methods, aims and agendas at work in each discipline. There are also very different ideas and presuppositions about the nature of the world, its origins and its ends (for example, empirically-based theories of the 'Big Bang' and 'Big Crunch' and theological beliefs concerning apocalyptic ends - in which a divine scheme is completed. Or one might think of the emphasis on arbitrariness, contingency and chance on the one hand and the insistence upon design, the workings of Grace or predestination on the other.)

Yet debates about the opposition or the tensions between science and religion have been transformed by recent debates about deconstruction. Broadly speaking, three points should be made in this context about the impact of deconstruction. First, deconstructive readings have provided critiques of the structure of conceptual and other oppositions.¹⁸ These critiques have important implications in terms of the view that science and religion are irrevocably opposed. These critiques have also questioned the view that one of these opposites ought to be privileged above the other in terms of access to truth or certainty. Deconstruction is, in one sense, an attempt to destabilise this opposition from within; to overturn the attempt to assert that one part of the opposition has a higher or superior value than the other in these terms.¹⁹

The aim is to show that the structure of such oppositions is intrinsically unstable. One might say that deconstruction reveals the internal fault-lines so to speak which are at the bases of such systems of opposition as well as at the bases of dialectical structures of interpretation.

Once these faultlines are revealed the conceptual structure is shown to be questionable or self-defeating.²⁰ As an example one might think of recent attempts to show that myth is not in fact peculiar to a religious understanding of the world but that it also figures in explanations which are privileged as 'scientific'.²¹ The aim here is clear in one sense: to show that a conceptual opposition - one discipline is contaminated by myth; one is supposedly not contaminated by myth - is untenable. The question of just what gives rise to these oppositions and whether this dialectical structure (thesis/antithesis or binary antinomies) is justifiable becomes crucial.

Secondly, deconstruction leads to a radical revision of the relationship between science and religion. Some critics have argued that a dismantling of the rhetorical structures by which the sciences are exalted is required. It is required because technologies of devastation have been produced; because environmental catastrophes have occurred, ostensibly as a result of the view that nature is something to be tamed and mastered; and because, it is argued, science has led people further and further away from the 'ground of Being'.²² The aim is to reaffirm the central and foundational ontological importance of this 'ground'. According to this view, the great conceptual oppositions of western metaphysics - not just the opposition between science and religion - need to be *de-structured* or dismantled from within. The aim is to clear away the conceptual obstacles which litter the path to the 'house of Being'. (There are problems - a point that is not new - with this sort of approach but a discussion of these is outside the scope of this paper.)

Accordingly, the third point that should be made about deconstructive strategies is that they seem to affirm something mysterious at work in the world which *de-structures* conceptual polarities.²³ This something unravels the structured oppositions which supposedly characterise metaphysics, theology and religion.²⁴ These oppositions, it is claimed, have their sources in humanism as well as in dualistic traditions such as Neoplatonism, Gnosticism and Hegelian idealism, with its emphasis on the generation of oppositions and the resolution of these.²⁵ (Two questions arise here: the question of epistemological reductionism and of essentialism, particularly in terms of the rather simplified understanding, for example, of metaphysics and humanism, which are after all extremely complex and multi-layered discourses.)

Numerous aspects of the relationship between religion and science are apparent in the novels of White, Malouf and Carey. For example, Carey's Tristan Smith inhabits a world (Voorstand) where the mythological and sacred dimensions of religious experience have been supplanted by

technologies which produce Simulacra, that is, machines. Consequently, the religious dimension has been lost and Tristan sees the mechanical images take the places of the mythological beings. In this way, the narrator suggests that the world has become demythologised or desacralised: science and technology have superseded religion and myth; surfaces without depth have superseded, in true postmodernist fashion, the resonances and profundities of mythological signs and figures.

The satire in the novel is sharpened considerably: it suggests that this world is more concerned with surfaces and appearances. There is little attempt to look behind the facades; indeed, the novel suggests that the facades conceal a hollowness or an emptiness. Holograms, which are in a sense pure surfaces, proliferate. It is no wonder that Tristan, whose physical appearance is regarded as monstrous, should be treated with such suspicion and distaste. It is thought-provoking to say the least that Tristan wears a mask which makes him appear to be a demythologised figure, a type of simulacrum himself (a mouse). In this context and in this world, adverse judgments are based on the perception of appearances and an inability or unwillingness to distinguish between appearance and reality. Sadly, the appearance defines the reality.

In one sense, Patrick White was interested, surprisingly, in some of the parallels and analogies. This is surprising because he was, like the deconstructionists, otherwise suspicious of the claim that language could be used without ambiguity, mystery or slippage;²⁶ or in other words, that language in the sciences could be produced in forms which are uncontaminated by mythological traces or metaphorical structures.

Patrick White's novels are explicitly concerned with religion and science at many levels. He claimed that much of his work entailed an attempt to find symbols which are worthy of worship. Indeed, his work is full of such symbols: one need only think of the chariot and the four riders, the mandala, the chapel, the wilderness in which all that is inessential is cast off, and the vivisector. It is interesting to note too, though the issue has not been studied in any detail, that White made use of the figure of the scientist in a number of novels. Yet his approach is not deconstructive. Characters such as Palfreyman in *Voss*, who combine scientific training and a religious outlook, are relatively ignored or overlooked.²⁷ A brief discussion of the figure of the vivisector should suffice to make the point that White was interested in the relation.

Vivisection clearly connotes a scientific procedure. In the novel of that name, White uses the figure of the vivisector and the image of vivisection

in at least four ways. The vivisector, in one sense, is one who adopts the reductionist method: that is, he believes that in order to understand a complex living whole, it is sufficient to isolate and study each of its parts. The sum total of the knowledge of these parts will yield a comprehensive understanding of the entire form of life. Knowledge of the interior life of an entity then is gained through an invasive and analytical procedure which explores the relationship between the constituent elements. Yet White's novel suggests that there is an element of insensitivity, even of cruelty, in this type of procedure.

Certainly, vivisection emerges as something shocking and repellent in the novel:

There was a little brown stuffed dog clamped to a kind of operating table. The dog's exposed teeth were gnashing in a permanent and most realistic agony. It's guts, exposed too, and varnished pink to grey-green, were more realistic still (135)

In passages such as these the reader feels the horror which the artist glimpses in the window. The image in the window evokes fear and anxiety in the onlooker in the novel. It is also associated with agony and death. Significantly, there is no mention of the knowledge that is produced by such procedures nor is there any mention of the beneficial uses to which this knowledge may be put. It would seem then that the narrator equates such procedures with cruelty and destructiveness.²⁸

But White makes matters more complicated than this. The novel audaciously suggests that there is a parallel between the dog in the window and the subjects whom the artist studies, draws and paints. The artist and the vivisector, the novel suggests, have a number of things in common: both employ the strategy of dismantling; both take apart, in a sense, destroy in order to discover or to reveal; both torture, at least from the narrator's point of view. What is implied here is that the scientist and the artist are not opposite or dissimilar figures in every sense - quite the contrary. This is a bold suggestion, especially given the fact that much of the literature on science and religion stresses not the similarities but the differences or the conflicts between the two.

Furthermore, the image of the vivisector is not confined to the artist and the scientist but also to God in the novel. God is named as a vivisector by the artist who inscribes this on a wall. The connection is forged between artist, God and scientist. Each, the novel suggests, takes apart in order to create or to reconstruct; each destroys in order to create or each creates in order to destroy. The artist is understood in the novel as one who has a

complex personality with numerous, seemingly discordant facets. These facets include a troubling duality: the artist, according to White is a destroyer as well as a creator. Or in other words, according to this novel, the artist cannot be one without also being the other. This is why White's novel and many others like it are ambivalent towards the figure of the artist and towards the act of creation itself. There is a highly ambiguous attitude towards figures such as Hurtle and it is thought provoking to say the least that White saw himself in a number of senses in Hurtle Duffield.²⁹ The strategy is not so much 'anti-humanist';³⁰ it demythologises.

So White's novel seems to affirm the figure of the artist even as it raises troubling ethical questions about the treatment that is meted out to the artist's subjects - one might add, by implication, about the treatment that White the writer meted out to some of his friends and associates. In this sense, the figure of the artist and the motif of the creative imagination are demythologised. It is too simplistic to claim as some critics have claimed that White's intention was to celebrate the artistic imagination or to exalt the figure of the artist. There are too many deeply disquieting aspects of White's meditations on the artist in such novels. There are many ambiguities and the artist often emerges as a morally compromised figure in such works. If this is accurate, then it would seem that White was interested in an ironic treatment of such figures not in an uncritical celebration of them; not in a 'refusal to demythologise',³¹ but in a dismantling. The religious intention in White's novels mentioned earlier would seem to be at odds with the articulated images and metaphors which convey cruelty as well as creativity.

The question of whether White's audacious metaphors are more rhetorical than accurate is an important one. But it is not one that can be answered here. Certainly it is important to examine the connections that White's novel makes and to ask if the similarities between vivisector and artist are as strong and as clear as the novel suggests. The metaphor of the vivisector certainly has a rhetorical force in the novel and it certainly succeeds to a degree in its persuasive intent. But one wonders if artists and vivisectors are really so alike. One wonders too whether the differences ought to be suppressed or ignored. Perhaps a deconstructive approach to the metaphors articulated within the novel would help.

Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* is concerned with the use of pseudo-scientific jargon and with the appropriation of taxonomy, classification and observation. First, it is significant that one of the earliest 'theories' in the novel is that Gemmy had started as a white person and had become black.

According to this theory, the 'whole cast of his face' (p. 40) had changed because he had lived among the aboriginals. Facial structure and its transformations over time are explained in terms which many of the listeners seem to accept as true. They seem to accept the explanation because it seems to be based on observation and inference. In other words, Malouf suggests rather satirically that the conditions which generally provide the bases of scientific theories are parodied so successfully that the listeners actually believe that the explanation must have the force of a scientific one. Yet the use of irony and satire suggests that the narrator sees these people as ignorant and bigoted individuals. For example, another explanation suggests that Gemmy's jaw has changed physically because of the fact that he spoke five languages. This explanation is taken seriously by the listeners whereas the reader of the novel realises that such explanations are not based on any evidence whatsoever. They are based on the fear and suspicion which Gemmy is subjected to and they are self-serving in a crucial sense. The pseudo-scientist adds:

Wasn't it true (this was not Mr Frazer but another delver into deep things) that white men who stayed too long in China were inclined to develop, after a time, the slanty eyes and flat faces of your yellow man, your Chinese? (p. 41)

Malouf cleverly parodies not just the nonsensical theorising of such individuals but also their speech patterns. The effect would be very amusing were it not so troubling. What is particularly disquieting in the novel - though interestingly, commentators have not commented on it - is the exalted status that is so quickly given to theories which are based on supposition and prejudice. The problem is not so much that the evidence is lacking but rather that there is no interest in the *actual* evidence at all. So even as the theorist gains assent within the novel the reader sees the theorist as a fraud, or as a pseudo-scientist who makes use of outdated and discredited social Darwinist concepts about race, intelligence and physiognomy to reinforce deep-seated prejudices.

One irony that the reader can delight in is the suggestion that the ignorant or backward one here is certainly not Gemmy. In this way, the reader also gains a deeper understanding of the reasons why Gemmy disappears from this world; why he seeks other people and other places. His deliverance unsurprisingly takes place in solitude and in the wilds- or in other words, in the place where such theorists and their attitudes are not found. Malouf also seems to suggest that the possibilities Gemmy offers to these people - spiritual and civil possibilities - cannot be realised so long as

the pseudo-scientific rhetoric, with its racist connotations, persists and is disseminated.

Remembering Babylon, then, becomes not so much a matter of remembering a place where communion is possible but of remembering a place in which communion is denied. Or in other words, it becomes a matter of remembering a place where the prospect of reconciliation is made impossible by the gulf that separates people with many affinities - some of which are spiritual - largely through the misappropriation of the discourses of theoretical inquiry and supposedly scientific methodologies. Crucially, Gemmy seems to offer the chance to dismantle the false oppositions which are constructed by the 'theorists' discussed. In this sense, the failure that the novel marks might be called the failure or absence of deconstruction. The oppositions remain intact; these binary structures are employed in order to ground discourses of exclusion and marginalisation; they are perceived to be stable and sound structures (crucially, the novel *unravels* them even as the characters try to *erect* them); and, as a consequence, Gemmy, along with the creative, spiritual and unifying possibilities that he offers, disappears.

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