

# CHRISTINA STEAD AND THE 'NATURAL UNCANNY'

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This paper is concerned with the nationalist dimension of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Christina Stead's first novel. I want to argue that this novel tries to project into 'the-space-that-is-Australia' a variant of European Romantic nationalism: a 'natural' or 'organic' nationalism that rests upon the idea of attachment to a particular soil or territory.

## I

As I read *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, its theme is the viability of European settler culture in Australia. This at all events is the burden of the remarkable address given by Kol Blount towards the end of the novel. Commemorating his friend Michael Baguenault's life and suicidal death, Blount contextualises the latter's career in the grandest possible way. After traversing continental Australia's geomorphic evolution, and portraying the emergence of its Aboriginal Civilization, he finally treats of the European settlement of Australia: "Then a new world began" (308). A 'new world', however, that would seem to have aborted:

And after all this notable pioneer tale of starvation, sorrow, escapades, mutiny, death, labour in common, broad wheatlands, fat sheep, broad cattle-barons, raw male youth and his wedding to the land, in the over-populated metropolis the sad-eyed youth sits glumly in a hare-brained band, and speculates upon the suicide of youth, the despair of the heirs of yellow heavy-headed acres. What a history is that; what an enigma is that? (308)

After the massive caesura that colonisation has represented, white European civilisation in Australia has failed to develop, and is characterised by a certain 'puerility': "He [Blount] had begun quietly, and when the first measures took the audience by surprise, a wild strong high note broke into his voice, as in a young man's where the boy's voice and a man's are blended" (308). Indeed, without a continuous history, and comparatively speaking without 'nature'—'the gift of nature' on which national genius has traditionally rested in Europe—it has come in its modern phase to approximate collective madness. No surprise therefore that Blount should deliver his 'In Memoriam' in the grounds of a Sydney mental asylum, and that his final question as to the meaning of Australian history should be answered by an inmate, a certified likeness of the dead Michael himself: "The madman at this moment approached solemnly, with quiet dignity, and cried: "My blood is running back to the sea. Out of the sea I rose, you have clipped my wings, I cannot rise again. I must drink the salt of the sea!" (308).

Kol Blount's bardic, aria-like address represents Michael Baguenault's public meaning, one might say his meaning as failed cultural nationalist. But *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* also offers a 'private history of Michael' (263). And in this Michael himself confesses to his half-sister Catherine that, because of his illegitimacy (he is 'nobody's son' (8)), he has turned from the human to the natural realm for relationship:

For a long time I endeavoured to be human. What is the solitude of a man? Not that

be is a unit, but that he is a fraction. In my solitude I migrated people to the sky, peopled the dark spaces with bodies. I talked to the stones and the sea, the stones in the house, the stones in the house answered me. I spoke familiarly to the furniture in my room and everywhere in nature. I saw a movement, a breathing, upwrenching, freeings and unhappy motion: I felt the trees had the souls of men prisoned, nature was full of gaggled voices. (265-66)

Moreover he has done this—attempted to project himself into the-space-that-is-Australia—on the basis of a corresponding, but seemingly equal and opposite need to return 'Home'. In his initial alienation from his European settler culture, he has attempted to accommodate himself to 'nature'. Yet in this same moment of naturalisation, he would alienate himself even further, this time from his alien 'naturalised' self. He would migrate himself nostalgically from the-space-that-is-Australia back to a 'Gothic' Euro-centre: 'His mind was lost in antique Celtic fogs; he drew designs in his odd hours, and had a very sweet imagination, mittel-Europaischer, mittel-alter' (263).

All the more compulsive, then, Michael's anthropomorphism, his attempt to find a home in nature, to pursue a kind of *via naturaliter negativa*. And the worse, consequently, his basic cultural predicament. For it is as if his effort *not* to know his alienation in Australia is subverted by his nostalgia, and as if his subsequent effort to overcome his further alienation results in so compulsive an attribution of his own energy to his environment as to make this seem fraught with uncanny life. As Geoffrey Hartman has said of the dialectic of consciousness and nature in Wordsworth's early poetry: 'the imagination *sub specie naturae* may fail to recognise itself and rise up as nature against itself' (88):

I went at night in the Inner Domain where it overlooks Garden Island. The tramps were there rolled in their caves, their fires were extinguished, and they looked like dead leaves, or bad fruit fallen out of the trees. No, they were shadowy emanations from the ground, abortions. They were not alive, but the trees were alive. Awfully they began to move and bend over me; they crowded together in their congregations and unholy intercourse began....When the wind comes off the bay, as it often does at nightfall, when a scurrying and rushing of feet, a series of flurries and cats-paws comes off the hills, then they burst their cataleptic dream, with what horrible memories and unspeakable ideas drunk up out of the earth with the dead encysted in their flesh, I do not know, but I was always afraid at that hour. (266)

In Wordsworth, 'huge and mighty forms' 'that do not live/Like living men' (*The Prelude*), and in Stead's novel, a cycle of alienation giving rise to 'emanations and abortions and encysted dead', what might be called a natural uncanny.

## 2

I want now briefly to elaborate this discussion of Michael Baguenault's cultural problem in political terms. At one point in his confession to his sister, Michael speaks of having 'called up the brutish spirit of solitude' (272). He is in fact an 'alastor' figure, a 'spirit of solitude' after the hero of Shelley's poem of this name.<sup>2</sup> And insofar as he rehearses Shelley's pre-text, he incorporates, I think, the first generation Romantic model of relationship to the external world to which it subscribes, at least in the first place. ('The magnificence and beauty of the external world sinks profoundly into the frame of his conceptions, and affords to their modifications a variety not to be exhausted'.) More specifically, his career rehearses a Wordsworthian 'dying into nature' and/or 'marriage' of mind and nature. As Michael's father says, 'You can be absorbed in Nature, as—as in the sea, as if you melted into the sea and were diffused through the oceans of the earth. There is peace when her mysteries are an open book to you; in her inmost recesses she has perfect peace, even for the most fevered' (32).

In doing this, moreover, in migrating Romantic naturalism to the-space-that-is-Australia, Michael Baguenault also transposes the basis of a nationalism resting on soil, blood, and language.<sup>3</sup> For as Anne Janowitz has argued, the Romantic doctrine of the continuity of mind and nature is *politically* tendentious. Conceived during the emergence of the modern nation

state, and indeed of competing European nationalisms, it postulates in its public dimension the assimilation of a particular people to a 'native' soil—a kind of 'organic' or 'natural' nationalism according to which 'the representative character of the local site is the synecdochic piece of a nation perceived as country side' (119):

I travelled among unknown men,  
In lands beyond the sea;  
Nor, England! did I know till then  
What love I bore to thee.

'Tis past, that melancholy dream!  
Nor will I quit thy shore  
A second time; for still I seem  
To love thee more and more.

Among thy mountains did I feel  
The joy of my desire;  
And she I cherished turned her wheel  
Beside an English fire.

Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed,  
The bowers where Lucy played;  
And thine too is the last green field  
That Lucy's eyes surveyed.

For all its seemingly apolitical character, then, Michael's career can be said to shadow forth a necessary, if not a sufficient, basis for a European Australian 'nationness'. Not of course that this model of organic or natural nationalism incorporated by him does not impact on the space-that-is-Australia in the same way as other 'regurgitated ideas from the old country' (309). In *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* the very anthropomorphism that might seem to promise a viable nationness in the event mimes the colonising project it is meant to supersede, the result being, as we have seen, the cultural problem I've called the natural uncanny. (Michael's sister Catherine makes a kind of political complement to him; where Michael migrates people to the natural realm, the socialist Catherine projects a people into the 'abys' that is Australia.)

To put this problem in the novel's own, implicitly Shelleyan terms, 'But the period arrives when these [natural] objects cease to suffice'. Or as Michael himself confesses to Catherine, 'His desires flourish as their denial is pressed down; what they lack in satisfaction, they put forth in the fruit of understanding and sensibility' (272). They put forth, indeed, the fruit of perversity. For, still after his Shelleyan pre-text, Stead's alastor hero turns in the face of a natural uncanny towards 'an intelligence similar to itself', an 'epipsyche' who 'unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful'. His alastor's craving for a home in nature, or for 'wedding to his land', gives rise finally to a sibling incest wish: 'Whereas, as I was born unnatural, I have come to love my sister as myself' (274). It is to a fantasy of endogamy—to recoil upon selfsameness rather than accommodation to the other---that his *via naturaliter negativa*, his career in transgressive asceticism, eventually tends.

## 3

I've been reading Michael Baguenault's story in its own cultural nationalist terms. But I'd like in conclusion to think about Stead's natural uncanny in terms of a postcolonial perspective. And of particular interest here, I think, is the fable Catherine Baguenault tells, just before Kol Blount delivers his 'In Memoriam' (Ch. 11), of a 'far country' at the heart of which lies 'a black imperishable stone' inscribed with five indecipherable words, 'Io an qanat, reed pariah'

(300)—an ironic narrative of progress, surely, or an allegory of an aborted Australian nationness.

'To an qanat, reed pariah'. Mightn't this be an equivalent in Stead's fiction of, say, *Heart of Darkness's* enigmatic 'The horror, the horror!' or the 'boum, ouboun' of Forster's *Marabar Caves*? Indeed an instance of 'cultural difference and colonial non-sense', as Homi Bhabha puts it in his recent book, *The Location of Culture*, of 'the enunciatory disorder' that can arise in those texts that are concerned with the point at which colonising/settler cultures fade and lose their authority? If so—and if I follow Bhabha correctly—Catherine's oracular enigma would seem to signify, not so much cultural difference or diversity, rather, a cultural dedoublement, a structure—if that can be the word—of confusion. Thus, on the one hand, Catherine's ironic national allegory voices 'a strange discursive figure of undecideability', 'a certain uncertain writing in the anomalous discourse of the present of colonial governmentality' (Bhabha 129-30). On the other hand, meanwhile, it voices a 'more ominous silence...that turns imperial triumphalism into the testimony of colonial confusion' (Bhabha 123).

It should be said here that Bhabha derives his notion of 'cultural difference and colonial non-sense' from Frantz Fanon, from the latter's Manichean world view,<sup>4</sup> and views it as the ground of hybridity, as he would call it, not to say as the generative location of culture itself. For Fanon, however, the Manicheanism of the colonial world was saturated with the violence of the coloniser vis-a-vis the colonised; his notion of 'the primary Manicheanism' supposes an all but undifferentiated field of violence. Fanon's example reminds us then that 'cultural difference and colonial non-sense'—in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, a natural uncanny as it comes to be articulated in the enigma of 'To an qanat, reed pariah'—cannot but implicate the Manicheanism of the settler and the counter-Manicheanism of the native that together ground it historically, even if they also contain the ground of postcolonial culture. 'Cultural difference and colonial non-sense' cannot but articulate colonialist violence; not just the twin silences of imperial discourse and of 'those dark corners of the earth' (Bhabha 123).

Given the example of Fanon, I'd like now to consider one more instance in Stead's novel, perhaps the most perplexing of all, of the natural uncanny. This is Michael Baguenault's account to Catherine of an excursion into Sydney's hinterland with a companion:

We had now left all vegetation behind and nothing was to be seen but sand: a strange desert, a desert as wide as the earth, strange, strange.... The full moon was now in its zenith: presently a chill wind rushed out of the eastern horizon, out of the darkness, and gathered darkness above it; it wandered about the desert and ever grew in sound.... A flake of air fell past my ear sighing 'Gone!' At my side was nothing but a violin planted in the sand. 'Look yonder!' said the air, and the air became full of sounds, thicker and thicker, and the air began to roar and the sand to whirl and we were again in the full blast of the sirocco. In the following storm, which was a minute's entire length, he bowed beside me, above, around, like half a dozen goblins; looked like a violin, scraped cries out of his own stomach, turned into a mandrake, withered and swelled. The cloud of dust was full of people, rushing past with songs and kickings, old muttersers singular and angularly breaking into yells, bad children, fairies, old professors, confessors, aiders and abbesses, two legged palsied palimpsests, clerks, sharks, narks, shades, suspicions, university janitor, spiral-horned rams, stock exchange rampers, rabbits, whorlic-whorlies, willy-willies, whories, hoursis, ghosts, gouttes, knouts, ghouls, walking-gourds, grimalkins, widdershins and withering wights, but in such a horrid, enlaced, perplexed, twisted and lolloping rhythm as I shuddered to look upon. (269-70)

Here the cycle of anthropomorphism/nostalgia in which Michael is caught up appears in accelerated or demonic form. Michael's migration of people to his desert environment (a *terra nullius*?), his projection of consciousness *sub specie naturae*, gives rise to 'sirocco' and to 'storm': as if a violence done by himself to his surroundings, or his standing somehow in violation of them, is repeated in a violence visited upon him. It gives rise to 'Manicheism delirium', as Fanon calls it (*Black Skin, White Masks* 183), a condition of Manichean

doubling according to which 'mittel-Europaischer' is scarcely to be differentiated from 'strange desert', nor 'strange desert' from 'mittel-Europaischer'.

Alternatively, it gives rise to 'cyclothymia'. This is a term Rene Girard draws from psychiatry, which (apparently) uses it to designate an alternating presence and absence of *thymos* (Gk. meaning soul, spirit, or anger) (154-55). For Girard, cyclothymia names an hallucinatory reciprocal mimesis as between competing doubles, and indeed the structure of tragic violence.

Fanon and armed struggle, structuralist-masculinist Rene Girard—is one alienating Stead's novel from itself? I don't believe so. That Michael Bagueenault's career really does implicate a problem of cultural violence is, I think, borne out by his eventual suicide, his dying-into-nature at Sydney's Gap. Michael all along specialises in the natural uncanny, not to say immolates himself to it—the 'giver up', as he describes himself, 'the sacrificial agent, the atoner, the ascetic of the body' (272). But because his efforts only serve to aggravate his alienation, there would seem to be no other recourse for him but to withdraw unconditionally from the scene, to turn on himself the cultural violence he has tried to resolve, and thereby symbolically relieve his society of it. Not that his sacrifice/suicide works a conclusive catharsis in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Since Michael no more than models a way of dealing with his settler culture's predicament, it is the natural uncanny that prevails in the end: 'The trees raged in the park, which is always turning back to wilderness; they lifted their arms and tossed in the darkness of the undercliff. The souls of trees are freed in storms, they struggle, arise and commingle in the lower air. Wild flutings, reedy laments, and cries of inhuman passion fill the ear' (317).

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#### Notes

- 1 On Australia as a 'young, puer culture', see David Tacey, *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious* 250.
- 2 Hazel Rowley notes that David Stead gave Christina the complete works of Shelley for her fifteenth birthday, and that she 'loved *The Cenci*' (31). And of course Stead incorporates *The Cenci* in *The Man Who Loved Children*. See Susan Sheridan, *Christina Stead* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 45-48.
- 3 For a discussion of 'organic' Romantic nationalism as against 'contractual' nationalism, see Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, 1-47.
- 4 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, esp. Ch. 1, 'Concerning Violence', 27-84.