

**"OTHERWISE THAN BEING"  
DECOLONISING THE MIND: WOMAN,  
THE OTHER AND DRUSILLA  
MODJESKA'S *THE ORCHARD***

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Come, then, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you.

Lord, if you are not present here, where, since you are absent shall I look for you? On the other hand, if you are everywhere why then, since you are present, do I not see you?

(St Anselm)

Most Australians only know two myths, that of Ned Kelly and that of Phar Lap. The first was a horse thief, the second a horse.

(Paul Keating)

My two epigraphs take up, one negatively, the other positively, the theme running through this conference, a crisis of belief which is also a crisis of culture. But I want to take a stand which is positive, theological if you like. Assuming the crisis I also want to assume, as Anselm does, that however hidden God may be, God is still alive, the One who comes, coming towards us in the midst of our experience, "post-modern" as it may be. It may be true that the image of God most of us, unbelievers as well as believers, have been used to is dead. But that poses a new set of questions. As Ricoeur reminds us, we then need

... to know, first of all, which God is dead, then, who has killed him (if it is true that this death is a murder); and finally, what sort of authority belongs to the announcement of this death?<sup>1</sup>

These are the questions I want to pursue. Like it or not, we are all more or less "post modernist" these days. The God who is dead is the one who was in effect the "generalised theory", of an older world, its "spiritualistic point d'honneur", as Marx described him.<sup>2</sup> Properly speaking in Judaeo-Christian terms he — and he was most definitely a "he" — was not really God, totally Other, but, as Marx also pointed out an idol, a projection of emotional social and possibly economic need — he certainly blessed wars of conquest. In this sense, given the end of the old empires and the threatened end of European dominance — we are all also post-colonial these days — his death may have been a suicide.

The crucial point then becomes the authority which belongs to the announcement of this death. I want to say here, with deep indebtedness to Elaine Lindsay, that it is the authority of that which is other/Other, the counter-authority which in our culture largely belongs to women, and I will base myself on Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard*.

Talk about the Other is very difficult within a culture of the same, the post-modern culture of consumption Baudrillard defines as "the exaltation of signs based on the denial of the reality of things",<sup>3</sup> — hence, I suspect, incidentally, the difficulty some critics have with my use of the term "Other".<sup>4</sup> We need therefore a different frame to stand on, a different ontological and epistemological ground. This is Elaine Lindsay's point also: Most discussions of an "Australian spirituality" she argues, have been based on the premises of what is essentially a patriarchal and — for all that we are still to an extent colonials — imperial culture. But women's experience and women's reflection will lead us out of the impasse, open up "new conversations about [the] God [who is] active in our lives", point us to "God's presence within us and enfolding us".<sup>5</sup>

*The Orchard* is part of this conversation. But how is it theological? It is, I suggest, theology of a different kind, based on the concrete reality of experience rather than abstract philosophical principles and its focus is on the self, not so much on its constitution, as in Descartes and the whole tradition which rests on him, but on its unmaking, its opening out of the other/Other. Significantly, this way of self-reflectivity is the way in which Baudrillard suggests that the metaphysical dimension may reappear in our post-modern times.<sup>6</sup> I will pursue that point further later on.

To begin at the beginning, *The Orchard* is a book about women, as other or better, as othered, excluded from the patriarchal order, seen as a negative reflection of the man and rendered strange by his imperial gaze, "orientalised",<sup>7</sup> and colonised — Modjeska herself draws the parallel, "being English [her character reflects, [is] ... a bit like being a man. That awesome certainty that your view of the world is *the* view of the world."<sup>8</sup>

But how does this bear on the question of God? First and most obviously, God is by definition Other than we are, interrogates our certainties, breaks in upon us calling us to go further. In the second place, as Scripture reminds us, God's preference is for the outsider and the outcast, those without power. Human power is not synonymous with the power of the living God but tends to contest it — isn't that the main point of the *Genesis* story? It is also the source of idolatry, the power of the human heart and mind to manufacture idols, images of itself — that God is figured as male may be part of this.

*The Orchard* questions this kind of power and the definition of reality on which it rests. This definition, closed in on itself, preoccupied with identity and unity, the rational and emotional certainties of the Cartesian self, gives rise to the culture of appearances and display and "the illusion of a seen and safely loved self" (121) which finds its identity "in that reflection of another ... and encourages us to see ourselves as others see us" (63), to live in effect under the sign of Narcissus.

"Narcissus, absorbed in himself, had never been able to recognise love when it was offered" (63). Just so this closure excludes the Other, the living God, just as it excludes the other person as other.

To become an object in the regard of others means that others become objects to us; and so too do we to ourselves ... No wonder submission is so delightful: we are reminded of ourselves by the control we allow another to exercise over us (63).

The "era of transgression", of exploration, is over. This is a world of certainty without finality, without tragedy, without God,<sup>9</sup> subject only to the power of human desire.

In this world woman has been subsumed into what Cixous calls the "realm of the proper" the libidinal economy she called

masculine which is preoccupied with property, propriety and appropriation,<sup>10</sup> — Augustine's "homo incurvatus in se". But Modjeska's point is that women's actual experience — as distinct from the ideological conditioning she also reflects on here — opens her out to the Other and it is this opening which is our concern.

If faith is defined as commitment to realities at present unseen (*Hebrews*, 11), then religious experience has to do with a kind of radical doubt, a sense that what is essential happens elsewhere. This kind of doubt is disappearing from the post-modern world, governed by the notion that what is evident to the senses and rationally calculable is all that is and that our task is to operate<sup>11</sup> and play with it. But *The Orchard* turns on an experience of this radical doubt, an interruption not only of the surface appearances but also of the self when its central character and narrator is suddenly threatened with blindness.

Sight, "seeing, ... being seen, wanting to be seen; and ... not being seen" (135), dominate our lives, especially perhaps the lives of women. But the "confirming gaze" of others taken away she is plunged into solitude. Normally "doubt gets swallowed up in the rush" (124), "the clatter of distraction" (121), but here it invades her, interrogating the sense of self "that had been fixed for years" (233).

In the book her reflections are not explicitly theological. But the implications are profoundly so. Negatively, there is a recognition of finitude, a dispossession, shattering the hall of mirrors. In her solitude she realises that the other is in no way another herself and that she can never possess another. As Levinas remarks; "if one could possess, grasp and know the other, it would not be the other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power."<sup>12</sup> But here she is brought up before a sense of her own finitude and vulnerability, alone before what Levinas calls the "there is", the something "impersonal, anonymous yet inextinguishable", at work in the darkness "murmuring in the depths of nothingness itself."<sup>13</sup>

As Ricoeur remarks, there is no such thing as a religious symbol that is merely a sign or statement about social structure. However, religious symbols "mean", they never simply prescribe or transcribe social events. Rather they transmute them.<sup>14</sup> Metaphorically this transmutation becomes a kind of death — in earlier times, as the narrator observes, being blinded was an alternative penalty to death. What we are dealing with here is

the classical mystic notion of dying into life. But where this is usually explored by means of tropes of the desert and heroic defeat Modjeska figures it much more immediately and intimately, perhaps reflecting woman's tendency to reconciliation and continuity.

The Other she encounters here is indeed "in the midst of our lives", not only on the periphery, or some heroic frontier. The argument that could be directed against current notions of Australian spirituality, that experience of the Other alienates us from ourself, falls away. The encounter here is with what is more intimate than the most intimate self. One of the characters reads from Thomas Merton, for instance, putting a gloss on this experience:

Too many people ... are ready to draw back at any price from what they conceive to be the edge of the abyss. True, it is an abyss: but they do not realise that he who is called to solitude is called to walk across the air of the abyss without danger, because, after all, the abyss is only himself (128).

Yet — and this is another difference from current imagery — the abyss is not an absence pure and simple, not the absence of pure nothingness but, to use Levinas' distinction, "a horizon of the future".<sup>15</sup> We are moving beyond dualism, beyond the either/or of gain and loss, life and death, even of male and female in which the Other becomes a mirror image. The mirror is broken here, the self-sufficient cognito, enclosed, finite, self-sufficient, shattered, flows into infinity.<sup>16</sup>

Concern with power and domination give way here to the "reserve of the stranger or sojourner on earth" (Levinas), the classical sense that "we have not here a lasting city". What is required is no longer "performance — that endless dance of display — but the simple task of being" (181).

It is the journey of the soul that marks us, Ettie says. Or not. And for that journey the past has as much meaning as the present and legend, is as potent as the truest of stories (4).

Values are reversed here, but very peacefully, without any kind of Faustian struggle and without condemnation — we are beyond moralising: activity, accumulation of people and things no longer

matters, nor do pain and loss represent failure. What she comes to realise rather is the wisdom of attentiveness:

... there are times in every person's life when what they need is nothing. I don't mean poverty, I don't mean that, that's a terrible cruelty and it's time we did something about it ... ; what I mean is a spiritual nothing, a time of darkness and nothing, of being alone with the emptiness and the fear and the tears and the loss; that's the way to the only riches it's worth trying for (70).

Nothingness, like madness and illness has been a "chained Titan in the dungeons of a once cocksure modernity".<sup>17</sup> But here there is nothing to be afraid of. We move inwards, under the guidance of women painters and writers of the past, friends in the present and, significantly, of women mystics like Hildegarde of Bingen, moving away from the world of patriarchal domination.

This is nothing like that self-abnegation, the diffuseness and unconscious passivity which writers like Judith Plaskow, Catherine Keller and Anne Carr have criticised.<sup>18</sup> Rather it represents a discovery of women's true self, her divine possibilities. So she quotes Hildegarde of Bingen: "I am no man of learning ... but deep in my soul I am learned" (144).

This learning leads to unity, of self and Other, pain and joy, darkness and light. The God who appears is the one of the mystics who dwells in inaccessible light" and the fullness rises out of a

... dark and punishing solitude ... the fullness of a feminine space ... connected ... to a golden thread running through time, and to the silent quality which is unconscious and belongs to all things created (137),

drawing into a wholeness all that is.

This vision is not Modjeska's alone, it runs through the writing of many other women writers today — Helen Garner, Beverley Farmer, Sarah Dowse, Marion Campbell, Nicolette Stasko, to name only a few. But it transforms the traditional notion of the journey, usually seen in terms of self as a solitary monad journeying through an empty landscape, into a vision of unity, polyphonic and polymorphous, taking us out of linear time delivering us into the

archaic world of myth. But it also represents a transvaluation of value Hélène Cixous calls the

... 'propriety of woman' ... paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly, body without end ... . Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide ... She also dares and wishes to know from within, where she, the outcast, has never ceased to hear the resonance of fore-language.<sup>19</sup>

Ecstatic as this may sound, it is a spirituality for post-modern times. The self is not monolithic here but polyphonic, moving beyond the merely rational, beyond being, into a dimension in which "the anchor of the proper noun becomes ridiculous to the point of being superfluous".<sup>20</sup> This is the dimension Derrida calls "spacing", in which it becomes impossible for identity to be closed in on itself and it flows through and with the movements of existence, keeping a trace of all the voices which traverse her, all that happens and, just as importantly, does not happen.

This is reflected formally. With its doublings and redoublings the narrative flows in and out of the lives of others and across time and self as the unitary self unravels in a series of tracking shots along the lines of memory, intuition and aspiration. Meaning becomes a matter of movement, the woman's namelessness does not matter as reference falls away, replaced by the "radical pathos, the pure distance"<sup>21</sup> into which we are drawn. Socially as well as spiritually this is liberating. Woman here is "the primary term" (18), seeing herself now as "neither wife nor mistress" (p. 28) able to stand alone as herself (53) and to explore her own infinite possibilities under the patriarchy, as Irigaray writes,

We women ... lack a God to share a word to share, and become. Defined as the often dark, even occult mother-substance of the word of men we are in need of our *subject*, our *substantive*, our *word*, our *predicates*: our elementary sentences, our basic rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy.<sup>22</sup>

Modeska and other women writers have recovered this genealogy and with it God as a mode of becoming, the living God whose "being is in coming ... who goes on ways to himself even when they

lead to other places, even to that which is not God [whose] ways to himself include something like distance from himself".<sup>23</sup>

To return to the original — and basic — question, however, by what authority do they do this? — and by "authority" I do not mean ecclesial only. In a time in which fundamentalist wish-fulfilment has reached epidemic proportions it is necessary to found belief on some kind of evidence, however deficient the merely rational may be.

Here let me draw further on Paul Ricoeur. According to him this sense of the Other at the heart of selfhood works gravitationally, at three levels, according to the evidence provided by the body, by what he calls "the foreign" and by conscience — as distinct from mere consciousness. All three fields are at work in *The Orchard*. It is the claims the body makes, threatening the central character with blindness, which break open her self-sufficiency, liberating her from the Narcissistic world in which she sees herself reflected in the eyes of others not the encounter with the Other. To be human, her body teaches her, is to be vulnerable and finite. The "interiority of the mental",<sup>24</sup> the world of reflection on which she has relied, arises out of a failure to understand this, the reality that "one comes not into the world but into question".<sup>25</sup>

The realization that the Other is not an aspect of self but foreign, that ultimately each of us is alone with our own mortality moves her further and the final realization arises from this, the sense that she alone is responsible for herself, for responding, opening to what is and who she ultimately is. This is the level of conscience. The crucial moment is the one when, sitting in the stillness and facing the possibility of blindness, she learns — the word is crucial — "that I might be cast low but I had not ceased to exist; layers had been stripped from me, but I was still there, here, my breath rising and falling" (126-7).

This is the crucial moment of identity, the "it's me here" (*me voici*), and of accountability which Levinas sees as the key point, the encounter with the other. Here she discovers her essential loyalty, to what is. Its authority is absolute and what it demands is obedience — in its original sense of listening. This brings us, of course, to a point beyond the moralising so many mistake for religion. It also takes us beyond the "indifferent and inertial passions" of consumer society.<sup>26</sup> But in a sense it fulfils the

essential post-modernist ambition, Nietzsche's call to leave behind

... The 'true' world — an idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating — an idea which has become useless and superfluous — *consequently* a refuted idea: let us abolish it.<sup>27</sup>

In this sense Post-modernism is a theological destination to which woman is the guide. What she leads to is liberation, creativity, a sense of grace as gift, and the final section of *The Orchard* is full of images of this kind, beginning with the image of the Winterbourne, the mysterious stream which rises in spring "through the chalk with the grace of tears" (210) and concluding with the fable of the princess with silver hands. But my time has run out. Let me conclude by thanking Elaine Lindsay for her insight. She is right. Women's spirituality is less proscriptive, more optimistic than a desert spirituality. It "brings God into places where God has not been shown previously to dwell, places associated with women, children and men together".<sup>28</sup> There is no need for vast journeys or heroic endeavours. It is the inner journey which matters. We are being lead across a frontier, away from Prometheus, hero of toil and struggle, productivity and progress through repression to return to our own selves in their inwardness, to

... an image of joy and fulfilness; the voice which does not command but sings, the gesture which offers and receives; the deed which is peace and ends the labour of conquest; the liberation from time which unites [us] with God, [us] with [the rest of creation].<sup>29</sup>

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