

APROPOS THE LAST "POST-": CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE, THEORY AND INTERPRETATION.

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In one sense, it seems that we live in an age of widely proliferating and seemingly omnipresent "post-s". The literature on poststructuralism, postmodernity¹ and postcolonialism and their variants is already vast and it is expanding constantly at a rate that is quite overwhelming, not to say bewildering. And yet one can still argue that it is a somewhat neglected fact that thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault, who are sometimes called "poststructuralists", have/had a significant, direct and localised interest in a number of questions and answers which might with some justification be labelled "religious".²

Though the strategies of reading differ considerably, and though the texts which are analysed are quite diverse, Judaism, Christianity, mythology and the figure or the name of the deity remain(ed) important topics in their writings. Other thinkers such as Edward Said and Toni Morrison, who are particularly interested in the discourses of colonisation, in ways of exposing their tropes and structures, and liberating the suppressed subject from the institutions of the imperialist, offer alternative approaches and critiques which are of great interest. Furthermore, the work of such thinkers, it will be argued, whatever one thinks of the "post-s", can be quite instructive with regard to contemporary Australian literature. Indeed, works by Patrick White, David Malouf and Peter Carey involve elements which provide analogues and parallels in relation to the discourses of poststructuralism and/or postcolonialism.

Though "poststructuralist" is a useful term in some respects, it remains somewhat problematic. Certainly, it signifies a critique of attempts to establish a new "science" of signs or stable binary units of interpretation which will allow a systematic analysis of the domain of empirical and mythological phenomena. Certainly, it

can be used to indicate a departure from the strategies and discourses of thinkers such as de Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Greimas. But like many such terms it might suggest to some readers that the similarities are more important than the differences between these thinkers. Or it might suggest that these thinkers are essentially the same sort of thinkers. A careful reading will suggest that it is the differences between Derrida and Foucault that are most striking. These differences might be clarified through a consideration of their views on elements of religion and myth.

Foucault, as is well known, was concerned with relationships of power and subjection and with the dynamics of their formation and proliferation. He was, for example, greatly interested in the relationship between the "care of the self" and the effects of emergent Christianity, though this aspect of his thought has not attracted very much attention.³ He understood Christianity as a religion in which the "care of the self" is primarily connected with renunciation. Renunciation, in this sense, refers to the self, certainly, but also to "all worldly attachments",⁴ and to all that "could be love of self". Christianity, according to Foucault, introduced salvation as something which is otherworldly, something which is not a part of this life, and in the process, unbalanced or "upset" the notion of the "care of the self". In contrast to Christianity, Foucault believed that Greek and Roman views of the self privileged human life. They he believed did not give human life a lower value in the scheme of things... The "care for the self" in this non-Christian context, then, according to Foucault, involves emphasising one's actions and the place one occupies for example as a citizen or as a member of a community.

If one believes Foucault, the desire for salvation after death is not a privileged notion among the Greeks and Romans. Christianity marked, for Foucault, a gradual shift in morality from "Antiquity's" concern with the affirmation of nature, the individual's liberty, or in other words, from an ethic in which one could see one's life as a "personal work of art"⁵ that one could develop without reference to the notion of an otherworldly existence. In Christianity, he asserted, "the religion of the text" and the idea of the will of God are paramount. Consequently, morality "took on increasingly the form of a code of rules" and obedience to the system followed. Foucault could not and did not

wish to reconcile the search for "a personal ethics" with the codified principles of Christianity.

Foucault was also very interested, though this might surprise many of his readers, in spirituality. His tentative definition of the term is as follows: "That which precisely refers to a subject acceding to a certain mode of being and to the transformations which the subject must make of himself in order to accede to this mode of being" (Ethic, p.14) This definition is characteristic though it raises numerous problems. He seemed to be thinking of cases for example, where one might accede to a "mode of being" such as certainty (in the Cartesian sense) or lack of doubt. Yet he did not explain just why there should be only *one* mode of being; nor did he explain just why the singular should *suffice* in such discussions. He also asserted, somewhat cryptically and oddly, that ancient spirituality was identical or almost identical with philosophy (Ethic, p. 14). (This identity or near identity seems odd because the origins of western philosophy, that is to say the natural philosophies of the Milesians, are generally explained in terms of a break, or attempted break, with religious and mythological explanations of the most fundamental problems of cosmology and cosmogony.)

It is very difficult to convey the intricacies of Derrida's writing in a summary. The aim, as always, is to articulate a form of writing which simultaneously suggests multiple readings and points of view, which multiplies resonances, ambiguities and positions — he attempts to multiply the semantic density of a text. Indeed, Derrida it seems, wishes to problematise the notion that God can be sought and found "around" a trope, a figure of speech, a grammatical structure or an ellipsis, or in short, in forms of language.

Also, whereas Foucault was interested in Christianity in the context of historiographic and genealogical surveys of the "care of the self" and of the practices of liberty, Derrida is interested in ways of speaking of/to the deity,⁶ in mythical narratives and figures which reveal a fundamental resistance to systematic or univocal interpretations. One of his most striking and brilliant though flawed meditations is on the tower of Babel. Babel, he argues, is a myth which highlights the inadequacy of one tongue among others. The myth also, according to Derrida, informs us of a "need" for the adoption of figures and tropes, for myth itself, for "twists and turns" in language, and also for translations (the myth

is of course available to us in English or French, not generally in Hebrew). Yet translation is precisely the problem, as far as Derrida is concerned. He will argue that such translations are inadequate and therefore cannot "compensate"⁷ for all that is lost in the very process of attempting to translate one text into another.

The "tower of Babel", then, suggests an "irreducible multiplicity", that is, a complexity which is difficult to overcome or control. Attempts to provide a single authoritative interpretation are defeated. The very notion of systematic analysis becomes somewhat problematic because of the ambiguities and semantic density of the text. So, according to Derrida, such myths highlight the *failure* to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the narrative.

Babel is not just a proper name. It is also a common noun which not only means "confusion" of tongues and of architects whose plans are interrupted. "Babel" also means the name of God as the name of a "father". The people of Babel hear the name of God who has marked with "his patronym" the place where understanding (in the sense of systemic comprehension) has become impossible (p.246). They are confused and their understanding is fragmented.

In the deconstruction of Babel, then, one finds that ambiguities and enigmas emerge. Attempts to resolve these by appealing to rational or universal frameworks of meaning fail. So, according to Derrida, God gives the inhabitants of Babel the name of confusion as a form of punishment. The name of God, in this sense, is in Derrida's words, "the mark" and "the seal" which proclaims "confusion" (p. 248). Why are they punished? If one accepts Derrida's analysis, they are punished because they wished to "make a name for themselves, to give themselves the name, to construct for and by themselves their own name". They are defiant and proud. And they are punished because they had wanted to gain, by themselves, to be sure of, *by themselves*, "a unique and universal genealogy". God's name in this myth is violently imposed upon those who seek their own name and seek it in their own terms — terms which then are rendered indecipherable or incomprehensible. The violent imposition of the proper name (pun intended) of confusion inaugurates the deconstruction of the tower, of the language, of the structures (both architectural and grammatical) here. In breaking the lineage, translation is imposed and yet forbidden: one must translate and yet one cannot surmount the problems that accompany translation. The interruption of the

construction (of the tower and of monolithic interpretation) produces a *dissemination*: a failure to impose or effect a universal language; a submission to a plurality of tongues which is henceforth inescapable.⁸ Such a failure constitutes the sort of thing that Derrida calls "the Babelian performance" (p. 253).

This interpretation of the narrative is crucial not just because it raises a number of problems about translation but also because it suggests much about Derrida's interest in myth. A full evaluation cannot be given here for obvious reasons. But it must be said that Derrida's interpretation is often quite lucid, and it shows, if the explication has been clear enough, just how incisive, at times, deconstructive readings can be. However, it must also be said that Derrida, it seems unwittingly, creates considerable problems for himself: if one accepts his own claims about incompleteness, division and multiplication (no pun intended) and the failure of the desire to control or close, it then becomes difficult to see how his own attempt to characterise "the Babelian performance", even through analogies, can in any sense be acceptable or adequate or rigorous. Or in other words, Babel, if it is, as he believes, a mark of multiplying meanings, would exceed and evade the very terms that Derrida wishes to employ in his text in relation to the attempt to describe what "the Babelian performance" might be like. The excluded, the uncontrollable, the proliferating levels of meaning, if one accepts these as valid notions, would then emerge or multiply in advance of the reading(s) that Derrida is already in the process of attempting to provide. And though multiplication and dissemination would not necessarily be sufficient to produce a refutation of his readings, they would render much if not all of what he attempts to say about "the Babelian performance" highly problematic.

Indeed, it is this sort of dilemma, one assumes, which might have led thinkers such as Toni Morrison and Edward Said, to distance themselves from poststructuralism. These are thinkers who are concerned not so much with the proliferating structures of language or with the labyrinthine readings of texts and tropes. They are interested in how discourses are used to establish, transmit and perpetuate forms of domination for example through the institutions of imperialism.

Said for example, has been concerned for many years with the demystification of imperialism and its strategies. In the 1960s he rejected Derrida's work as "nihilistic"⁹ though to be fair Derrida

has consistently rejected this description. Subsequently, Said wished to emphasise the ways in which European culture had been imposed and reinforced by the colonisers' insistence that things oriental are barbarous, evil, and in need of enlightenment. "Orientalism" is Said's term for the West's strategies of domination, restructuring and exercising authority over the Orient. Unlike Derrida, however, Said stresses not textuality and intertextuality but "worldliness" (which is to say, the domains of actual political problems and possible solutions). If one believes Said, poststructuralism's concern with textuality results in a "critical non-interference" which coincides with increases in militarism, imperialism and oppression. Said seems to believe that the concern with textuality in itself leads the critic in the direction of the enigmatic, the mysterious, the numinous or spiritual. Said advocates a type of "secular criticism" which address, directly, "the political, social and human values" (p. 127). Secular criticism involves an awareness, certainly, of the resistance to theory, but ensures that criticism is open "toward historical reality", society, "human needs and interests"— it highlights "concrete instances" drawn from the everyday.

So, Said chooses to concentrate on issues such as Zionist propaganda, atheism (which he advocates), and ways of transmitting, forming and institutionalising ideas for the purposes of establishing cultural hegemony. He privileges notions of community that are based on concrete "interdependent experiences" such as the encounter with militaristic thinking and its effects. His commitment to Palestinian activism is one of the reasons why he argues that Foucault's thought, whose influence he has acknowledged, leads to a more rather than a less cynical position (p.134) with regard to direct political involvement. He has continued to resist the dogmatic element and the determinism that he finds in poststructuralism and especially in Foucault.¹⁰ And crucially he rejects the Judaic and Christian myths and mythologies which Derrida and Foucault are/were clearly interested in.

Toni Morrison interprets the Tower of Babel, unlike Derrida, as a narrative that suggests that "one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached".¹¹ But language as Morrison understands it, "arcs toward the place where meaning may lie" (p. 6); its force lies in its ability to "reach toward the ineffable" (p.7); it "surges toward knowledge,

not its destruction" or its problematisation. Morrison's analyses of American literature are intended to reveal a language which can "powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs" of racism, cultural domination, and a "dismissive 'othering' of people and idioms which are by no means marginal".¹² These idioms, furthermore, are examples of language use where meaning is not endlessly deferred or elusive. She discusses canons which suggest that a country's literature, the USA's, is free of the presence of Africans and African-Americans. In other words, she questions a canon which excludes the presence of an entire culture. Yet she argues that this other element is inextricable, though ignored, notwithstanding the intricate strategies which are undertaken to "erase its presence from view" (p.9). Her aims are to identify the moments when American literature became complicit in the very processes of racism; to determine how and when literature undermined racism; to reflect on "how African personae, narrative and idiom ... enriched the text in self-conscious ways" (p. 16).

Indeed, she suggests that the "breakdown in the logic and machinery of plot construction" (p.25) highlights the destabilising impact of race on narratives; the irruption of the repressed in and through tropes and figures. Things go awry, according to Morrison, in spite of the author's intentions. This is why Morrison speaks of a "haunting, a darkness" from which early American literature "seemed unable to extricate itself" (p.32). So, what she finds in much American literature is a construction of blackness and enslavement which suggests non-freedom and non-personhood. The literary imagination then is used to allay deep psychic fears of Africans and to "rationalize external exploitation" (p.38). The result is a "reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness" which is associated with "the African" in literature. What is worse, processes of enslavement were carried out in the name of "enlightenment". The presence of Africans, encoded, becomes a metaphor for "transacting" the process of Americanisation "while burying its particular racial ingredients" (p.47).

Ultimately, Morrison wishes to question the "subjective nature of ascribing value and meaning to colour": the very presence of the non-free (the African) in the very "heart of the democratic experiment" (American life) — the master narrative of master (white) and slave (black) (p.48). And she asks a question that is penetrating and troubling: "how could one speak of ... progress, suffragism, Christianity ... without having as a referent, at the

heart of the discourse, at the heart of definition, the [erased or suppressed] presence of Africans and their descendants?"

Four topics, she suggests, require investigation in the wake of the imperialists' suppressions and erasures: first, the status of the Africanist character as "enabler and surrogate" (p.51); second, how an Africanist idiom is used to mark the onset of modernity, that is, how dialogue comes to be seen as alien, used to reinforce hierarchies of race, appropriated in discourses about sexuality, "fear of madness, expulsion, self-loathing" (p.52); thirdly, the ways in which black characters are strategically deployed in order to enhance the qualities of white characters; and finally, the manipulation of stories about black people within works on morality, codes of behaviour, notions of civilisation and reason. (An evaluation of Morrison's and Said's critiques of colonialism is beyond the scope of this paper and will be pursued in a subsequent paper.)

What does all of this have to with the writing of White, Malouf and Carey? Well, White was very interested in the suppression of indigenous cultures; the employment of tropes for the purpose of perpetuating relationships of racial inequality; and the extent to which the force of the repressed irrupts through the seemingly ordered and stable surfaces of the language. He was also interested in the ethic of renunciation, and like Foucault, seemed to regard this as one of the chief characteristics of religiosity (one might think of Ellen in a *Fringe of Leaves*, Theodora Goodman, Voss and Himmelfarb who variously cast off the inessential in their search for a mode of being which brings greater simplicity, purity, unity and/or insight). He explored the abjection and the predicament of the colonised in figures such as Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot* and some of the aboriginals in *Voss*, for example. (They seem similar in many respects to those whom Fanon called "the wretched of the earth".) Carey and Malouf seem to be aware of this: certainly, both have mentioned White as a crucial influence on their works and both have cited *Voss* as a crucial text.

But what is more striking perhaps is the interest in Babylon which is apparent in the fiction of Malouf and Carey. Carey, like Derrida, is interested in the deconstruction of Babylon; Malouf is interested in highlighting the failures of the coloniser through the appropriation of the name which has multiple associations in the Bible: hegemony (over Mesopotamia), conquest, exile, false prophecies and divinations (*Jeremiah*), shame, luxury,

abominations (*Revelation*), idolatry (*Daniel*), ambition and pride (*Genesis*).

Babylon, the name, the place and the story, are investigated, especially in *Oscar and Lucinda*. The investigation suggests that Babylon is a place where social "types" are more important than individuals, where luxuriousness abounds, where ornamentation and opulence are measures of value and fulfilment, and where inequalities are perpetuated. Indeed, Carey's strategies suggest not so much a community but a menagerie. In relation to this scene, the protagonists seem out of place: Lucinda is perceived as an outsider; Oscar's benevolence seems odd and misplaced. Indeed, an inversion in the perception of status is effected by the sustained irony.

Babylon, here, recounts the story of confused tongues, highlights multiple idioms in a setting where differences multiply, and suggests the protagonist's necessary but impossible attempts to make sense of the languages of the "beasts". It is this Babelian inability to master the meanings of the images or signs, to maintain control over the church, over the image of the church, and the environment that is also highlighted at the end. In the context of the discussion of Derrida's emphasis on a transparency that somehow becomes an impossibility, the destruction of the glass church which Oscar had hoped to impose upon an alien environment becomes a resonant metaphor indeed. Could Carey be suggesting that transparency itself, and the violent imposition that is apparent in the fragmentation of the glass church, mark the opening of a deconstruction of the "tongues" or the idioms — alien and transplanted from another place and another *Weltanschauung* — which the figure of the glass church embodies?

Finally, Malouf's Babylon highlights concerns which are similar in a number of ways to the concerns of Said and Morrison. Certainly, racism is encoded in the idioms of many of the colonisers. The novel, *Remembering Babylon*, facilitates its irruption through the syntax. Malouf's strategy however is crucial: it is someone from London, that is, the heart of the empire, and not an aboriginal, who ultimately abandons the colonial settlement. It is this person's predicament which reveals the extent of the inequality and subjection. The continuity of an identity, crucially, is shattered by the colonisers' (with one or two exceptions) intolerance or indifference. It is not really Otherness that is the major problem but rather the conditions which make its construction possible or necessary, that is, the processes by which

the status of the subject as Other is formed, established, legitimised and perpetuated. When "their" written account of Gemmy's life is washed away in the rain, the reader is offered a resonant image of transformation after the colony. A language, a history, is erased. It is erased because it is insubstantial, perhaps, or inauthentic or false. Subsequently, the protagonist's own understanding of his life can be re-affirmed and re-figured in terms which are closer to his chosen environment, its sacred history and its ethos. The erasure of the other history and its implicit and explicit judgments seems to signify another beginning — one significantly that becomes a mystery (from the reader's point of view). The history of rendering the outsider as something alien so that (s)he is subsequently destined to occupy a lower position in a hierarchy that is clearly vicious is portrayed memorably and subtly in the novel. The starting point that is a mystery at the novel's end is not transparent for the coloniser and interestingly for the reader too; what follows is not incorporated into the "official" history nor can it be refigured in the terms of the colonisers nor, presumably, can it be contaminated by their historiographies. In a dramatic moment pregnant with suggestions of emancipation and flight — a flight out of Babylon, in a sense — Malouf renders the ostensible master narrative deeply problematic by insisting upon the events and stories it systematically excludes or overlooks or erases; by highlighting its blind spots and the extent to which it fails to provide any representation of the other which might be said to be truthful, faithful and/or accurate.

Babylon, in Malouf's work, then becomes a thing of the past. It is certainly associated with imperialist gestures (p.168), hegemony, the discourses of an "enlightenment" which the figuration and erasure in the novel often reveal as discourses of domination and enslavement. Babylon is remembered: in other words, it is a place, a name, a story, which has been surmounted but which haunts the present time as a trace. Its historiography is shown to be unsystematic and never fully representative in spite of intentions.

In Carey's novel, the collapse of an idea or a grand conception (which itself presupposes the gesture of domination or colonisation) emphasises the uncontainable expanses of a world and of a terrain. In this context, water functions as a metonymic representation: the object of fear, the repressed, irrupts through the barriers constructed to prevent its release and destroys the

mechanisms, the structures and the life of the (colonial) host. In Malouf's novel, the colonisers' universalising narratives bear within them the seed of their own dismantling — the dismantling of the dream of colonising the other is enacted in the very structure of the novel. (One should not forget here that the biblical Babylon is itself implicated irrevocably in the history of imperialism.) It is striking indeed that Malouf should suggest the possibility of renewal through a figure who returns to the wilds, away from the empire and away from his own origins; and that Malouf should suggest that a possible facilitator of unity between two races should be lost to those who claim to speak in the name of progress and enlightenment.

REFERENCES

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9. See the interview with Said in Imre Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society* (Methuen, New York, 1987), p. 124.
10. See for example "Foucault and the Imagination of Power", *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986), pp. 149-156.
11. Toni Morrison, "Nobel Lecture 1993", *World Literature Today*, Vol. 68, Number 1 (Winter, 1994), pp. 5-9.
12. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Picador, Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. xii.