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Land as the source of opposition

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In this paper I am exploring a number of assumptions about the factors of literary production, and in particular examine the way in which the physical environment, the land, acts in new world writing to resist the assumptions of the invading culture.

For this purpose, I reject the dialectical model implicit in most structuralist analyses of literature. Dialecticians propose a conflict in some form between thesis and antithesis. This conflict produces a synthesis which becomes the new thesis, thus instituting a progressive process leading eventually to truth, sanity, meaning or utopia . In its Hegelian form, the dialectic is one of ideas. In its Freudian and Lacanian forms, it is an internal dialectic producing the superego from the conflict between the id, or unconscious desire, and the repressions of rational though, language or society. In Nietzschian terms, it is the conflict between Apollo and Dionysus which produces art and can be resolved only by the ubermenschen. In its Marxist form, the underlying dialectic is between forces of production, labour and capital, which provide the material basis of society. Literature, and the culture of which it is part, are seen merely as ideological superstructure. Even those forms of structuralism which insist on the material reality of literature and culture still see it as a response to or product of social structures. Linguistic models remove language from direct contact with

reality and explain it instead as one of the symbolic systems of society produced by the interaction between arbitrary lexical paradigms and the fixed syntagmatic structures of syntax.

Rather than the duality of these models, I propose a three-part productive structure which is constantly seeking balance or equilibrium between its parts.

In this structure, the three factors of production are land, individuals and culture. These correspond to the productive factors of classical economics: land, labor and capital. By land I mean the whole environment, which later economics reduces to merely a part of capital. Capital is, ~~however~~, by definition the product of labor. Although the land can be changed by labor it remains as both a necessary condition of labor and a fundamental limit on the possibilities of human production, and therefore cannot be reduced itself to an artefact or product. By individuals I mean people driven by desire to the labor and love which produce and reproduce their being, and in so doing change the land and produce a culture. By culture I mean the whole of the language, laws, arts, skills, institutions and physical artefacts which pattern, direct and sustain our lives. These can be grouped under the two aspects of technology and symbolic systems.

This model challenges the progressive implications of the dialectic. Rather, it accepts the proposition that, like languages, there are no simple cultures or unformed individuals. There is no point of origin, societies form us a individuals, and the languages that form us and that we use to produce our further being carry traces from an unmeasurable past which constantly direct us to an unattainable future. Living is a process which constantly produces change, unsettling all the factors of

production and therefore requiring us to produce a new balance. Each work of culture, including works of art, artefacts and social systems, represents a moment of such balance, but at the same time its production changes the situation, upsetting the balance and requiring continuing work of production and interpretation to find a new equilibrium.

This theory of language and production acknowledges an external reality in which we are involved and which produces our selves and our meanings. Language is both a part of this reality and the means by which we enter it and change it. This proposition can be defended by Occam's Razor, which forbids the unnecessary multiplication of categories. Language proposes reality. We are required neither to propose a reality beyond language nor to propose that language is the whole of reality, rather than itself that part of a greater whole by which we reach out and come to know our external environment. Any other model of language leads to total subjectivity or solipsism, and cannot account for the changes forced on language, and on us, by factors outside both, such as a tyrannical society which destroys individuals and their language, or a system of production which destroys the land on which it depends.

As western culture has at the end of the twentieth century been forced to confront its own destructive bases, writers and others have sought to escape from its imperatives by returning to what they conceive as simpler forms of living in harmony with nature, or the land. This has led on the one hand to what we may call wilderness writing, the direct confrontation of humans and the land, and on the other to an interest in cultures of hunting and gathering that are thought to have evolved a harmonious

rather than an exploitative relationship with their natural environment.

Works like Ken Kesey's novel Sometimes a Great Notion, set in Oregon, and Keri Hulme's The Bone People, set in New Zealand, both deal with sub-cultures of violence on the fringes of wider societies. The main characters in both works try to escape from violence by establishing sanctuaries where they can go about their own business in harmony with the land and apart from the society that denies their individuality. Both attempts fail because even the most independent characters find that they are ultimately dependent on the society they seek to escape, and are thus implicated in its violence. Although each novel finishes with its main character still uttering defiance, in ~~both~~ each cases the works on which they have pinned their hopes are destroyed. Thus, although both novels celebrate in their different ways the individual ideal that is at the heart of modern western culture, they simultaneously demonstrate that the culture itself is incompatible with this ideal. Nor can the land alone sustain it, because the individuality we seek to nurture on the land is itself the product of a culture that remains deeply hostile to nature.

Hank, the central character in Kesey's novel, attempts to keep alive in a modern community the way of life of the pioneers who first carved their individual kingdoms from the wilderness. He is essentially a hunter, shooting animals for food and as a test of manhood, and cutting trees for profit and sustenance. But Kesey goes beyond the idea of man as a hunter to show him as part of a network which includes the past which has produced his culture and the environment with this culture has tangled to

produce the present. Nature is neither merely a primitive source of strength nor a resource to be exploited, but an element to be both controlled and respected. Nature creates the possibility of love, but it also provides the means of power. These books deal with the struggle between power and love to create a community which will satisfy the needs and desires of all those who work and live in it.

Kesey builds his novel around a town on the Oregon coast, a family of lumbermen, and the work which unites and divides their community. Kesey shows us this community and its history through his puzzled narrator's voice and through the eyes of equally confused businessmen, unionists, lumbermen, drunkards, lovers and whores. Leland, or Lee, younger son and son of a young wife, is caught in the midst of these. As a child he leaves home with his mother to get a respectable education. After his mother's suicide he aborts his education at Yale and returns home to help the family through a crisis and seek vengeance on Hank, the older brother who has shamed him. To his amazement and annoyance, however, he finds that his work with the lumbermen unites him in a community that embraces the whole family in a single world of nature and of the culture that grows from it and the men who work with it, rather than from books:

> "Oh! Hey by golly." Joe Ben laughed, pounding Hank on the knee. "You know what's happening? You see what's coming over this boy? He's getting the call. He's hearin' the gospel of the woods. He's forsakin' all that college stuff and he's finding a spiritual discovery of Mother Nature." (p.221)

Hank disagrees, claiming that it's just the work getting Lee into condition, "making a man out of him", but Joe Ben persists, and Lee is forced reluctantly to agree.

And, shifting himself to a more comfortable position, Joe Ben folded his hands behind his head, gazed happily at the clouds overhead, and launched into an exuberant theory involving the physical body, the spiritual soul, choker chains, astrological signs, the Book of Ecclesiastes, and all the members of the Giants baseball team, who, it seemed, had all been blessed by Brother Walker and the whole congregation at Joe's request the very day before their current winning streak!

Lee smiled as Joe talked, but gave the sermon only a part of his attention. He rubbed his thumb over the knobs of callus building in his palm and wondered vaguely at the strange flush of warmth he was feeling. What was happening to him? He closed his eyes and watched the last rays of the sun dance across his eyelids. He lifted his chin towards the color . . . . What was this feeling?

A pair of pintails flushed from the rushes, started up by Joe Ben's joyous arguments, and Lee felt the drumming of those wings beat at his chest in delirious cadence. He took a deep breath, shuddering . . .

The river moves. The dog pants in the cold moonlight. Lee searches his bed until he finds the book of matches. He relights his minuscule cigarette and writes again, with it burning between his lips:

> And . . . as you shall hear, more than memory is affected by this country: My very reason was for a time debauched--I was beginning to <u>like</u> it, god help me. . . . (pp.221-22)

Lee's thoughts about his experience conclude the description of a day in which everything seems to have come together. It has begun during the journey to the logging site, when a deer offers itself ostensibly as a gift of nature to Joe Ben's rifle. It continues through a morning when men, logs and machinery--people, nature and culture--for once work in harmony. The lunchtime break comes as an earned period of rest. The loggers relax, their bodies worked and fed and their thoughts free to wander through the morning's events, linking them in patterns of meaning. Joe Ben offers his words as a tribute to the moment and to his realization that Lee has made himself a part of it by his work. Hank's response reduces the wider implications to the single image of natural manliness which is at the centre of his woodsman's culture, but Joe Ben builds this out again into a network linking body, mind and spirit: another variation of people, culture and nature. This linkage is not the intellectual taxonomy of the academic, but a bricollage starting from the immediate and building out with whatever comes to hand or mind. Without fully listening, Lee surrenders to the same mode of consciousness, allowing the immediate to soak his tired body and seep into his senses until, bringing his thoughts later that night into the quite different order of writing, he wonders at

the changes in him, and thereby resists them, breaking the mood.

Lee's resistance to the to the integrating warmth of his family leads back to the disintegrating and destructive aspects of the work and love which generates it. The work of the family unites them in bitter hostility to the union and the loggers who are not members of the family. This hostility erupts at the meeting where the unionists demands just a "fair share" of the product of their labor, and the contractors scream at them their demands for the right to run their businesses as they choose. The contractors' attitude is that of old Henry, who built house, mill and business by brute force and intends to keep them by the same means. As he shouts at the union official who ferrets out the family secrets, "I never yet rose to see the GODDAM day I weren't up to RUNNING my own SONVABITCHING affairs and if any BASTARD thinks." (p.94) There is no need to finish the sentence, but in fact neither unionists nor owners run their own affairs. They and their product are ultimately controlled by the big mills like the Wakonda Pacific Lumber, to which Hank sells his logs to break the strike. The unity which work can bring locally between men and nature is broken by the wider culture of money which dominates both. Yet men continue to resist this domination with the bawdy and violent integrity that marks the Stamper family. While they fail to make the world their own, they succeed in making their own world.

This world however remains vulnerable both to the divided culture of work and to the disrupting force of passion, of Eros. This force is by its nature duplicitous, generating both the nurture which binds people together and the violence which destroys them. Old Henry embodies this force in his fierce individualism, which

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~~that~~ drives him to dominate or destroy the forest, the townsfolk, and his women. Hank inherits this force, and Leland tries to escape it, but both are implicated. Both are heirs to the constant movement west which first brought the Stampers to Oregon. Hank is the first to complete this journey, by way of the war in Korea and the return across the plains, where he meets and marries Vivian. Leland's mother tries to remove him to safety in the east, but after her suicide he responds to his brother's invitation, making his return journey in a drug-crazed trip by bus. Once back together at home, there is no further place for either brother to go. Just as there are no new lands to find, only old forests to continue logging and old conflicts to resolve. Their grandfather had fled back east, their father had stayed to build the business, but the brothers must resolve ~~its~~ the future. At first, Hank is able to use his strength to hold everything together in the old ways despite the challenge of new men and new ideas. The family keeps the business going in defiance of the union, Hank sustains the house for his father, wife, cousin, cousin's wife and cousin's children. Lee's return seems ~~to him~~ at first to complete this community, but in fact proves that its solidity rests on an illusion.

First, it is revealed that Hank's apparent lonely defiance rests in fact on the contract he has entered into with Wakonda Pacific to break the union. This contract weakens the unity of the family as its members are torn by competing loyalty to the neighbours who constitute the community in which they live and which the completion of the contract will destroy. The ties of kin are finally broken when Hank rejects the union's offer to buy them out, to trade ~~money for~~ hi independence for money. Caught between big

union and big business, Hank's appeal to family solidarity is anachronistic. It is destroyed by the same aspirations to wealth which created it. In surrendering to these aspirations the family side with the fragmented individualism of the townsfolk rather than with Hank's vision of the family creating its own community through the labour that gives it prosperity.

The family is however destroyed from within as well as from without. Its emotional centre is not the bedroom but the kitchen where men women and children come together for the festivals of warmth sustained by the labour of the men and supplied by the labour of the women. But this domestic harmony depends on the family maintaining its oblivion to Hank's seduction by Leland's mother. This act, so far in the past, destroyed the image Old Henry had built of himself as the sure cocksman, able to do what he likes to man, woman and nature. Instead, he is cuckolded by his own son, a judgement on his insensitivity to the needs even of those who share his bed. But while the cuckoldry destroys Henry's authority, it also destroys Leland's security. His return home cannot complete the family, because the family is the source of his division from himself. Instead, his return brings back to the family the Oedipal rivalry which has rotted its centre.

Until Leland's return, the tolerance of the women and the space of the frontier have largely allowed this destructive force to dissipate itself harmlessly. Henry's illusions have been left intact, Hank's strength has been unchallenged. But as the frontier shrinks and closes, male strength and female love prove no longer adequate. While old Henry's ferocious desire built the business and the family it supports, he brought it no love of his own to complement his work. One wife escaped him through death,

and the other by flying back to the east. Hank and his wife Vivian for a time maintain a stable core by supplying the want of love left by Henry. Hank however allows work to introduce division by accepting the strikebreaking contract with Wakonda Pacific. Leland drives this fissure open when he rejects the nurture of the family and follows instead his own desire for vengeance. Where Hank has played the cuckold with Leland's mother, Leland will perform the same service with Hank's wife.

Hank represents the older America, based on individual achievement and the power of the will driving the body. Yet he himself knows that willpower and strength are not enough. His life is a search for the completeness of love which he knew as a child when he found the three bobcat kittens in the woods and nurtured them by the river. But the river, image of the destructive as well as the nurturing powers of nature, takes them away from him, drowning them in its flood. This is the first, decisive step towards making Hank the man he becomes. He lives every moment of their drowning with them;

> he forces himself to imagine exactly what it must have been like--the crumbling, the cage rocking, then falling with the slice of earth into the water, the three cats thrown from their warm bed and submerged in struggling icy death, caged and unable to swim to the surface . . . (p.108)

The almost unbearable pain of the incident, the boy's memory of the love which has betrayed its objects to their death, and his ability to contain his grief help to build the solitary strength which sets him apart from his fellows. The episode also

foreshadows Joe Ben's later death in the same river, betrayed by ~~his~~ the zest ~~zeal~~ for life which makes him an enthusiastic accomplice of Hank's plans. But more than these, it symbolizes the strength and vanity of human desire which is at the heart of the novel. Just as the river destroys the cage with its bobcats, so it will eventually--although not within the time of the novel-- take away the house which old Henry has built defiantly on its banks. Within the novel, the river of time will invade the loving community that Hank has nurtured within this house, leaving only the two brothers, the river, and the logs with which they trust and defy it.

Leland represents a newer America, literate and educated, compassionate but manipulative, scornful of the older crudities and naivities, but finally standing for nothing. At first, the action of the novel seems to endorse his stance. Leland wins Vivian, Hank loses cousin, father and contract, and is left isolated in the house that had been the centre and source of both his commercial and his domestic energies. Lee conquers through the weakness that wins Vivian and exposes his brother as a bully and blusterer.

This resolution however fails to accommodate either the cowardice or self-contempt with which Leland has rejected the opportunity to work with brother and cousin as one of a community, or the generosity of spirit with which Hank treats everyone who deals with him. In recognizing the limits of his strength, Hank has in fact become stronger than Lee, who knows only that there is no magical SHAZAM to turn him into his brother, ~~but~~ and that he has still to learn to be himself. He has destroyed one community by exposing its illusions, but he has not found the

basis for another.

The novel however remains open-ended. The brothers join in a last defiance of nature as they raft their logs down a raging river, but, while this action brings together their mental and physical being, the family and the love within it have been destroyed. Joe Ben is dead, Vivian is leaving, and the house, symbol of domestic independence, is empty. The strength of the individual has not been able to achieve harmony either with nature or with society. Rather, it has destroyed the possibility of either.

The significance of this desired wholeness is indicated in the epigraph, or prologue, which the author speaks in his own voice for the last chapter. This tells an apparently unrelated story of the man he met in a mental home, a "nuthouse". This man, Siggs, a self-taught loner from eastern Oregon, had tried to live in complete solitude, but after a month and a half committed himself and took on the position of ward public relations officer. He explains that only by succeeding in this can he make solitude a real option, an act of choice rather than of flight. Once he has made this choice, he is able to go back to his solitude, where he is perfectly happy with himself and able to get on with the main task, to deal with the "main party . . . Nature or God. Or . . . Time. Or Death. Or just the stars and the sage blossoms." (pp.574-75). The novel ends with a certain balance achieved between culture and nature, and its three main characters, freed of emotional tangles, now able to get on with this "main task". It resolves none of the fundamental problems of sustainable balance, but it does point the way to a balance based on love and work by people at harmony with themselves and

therefore not seeking domination over nature or others.

By contrast, Keri Hulme, in The ~~Stone~~ Bone People, starts with a society that has already disintegrated and an individual who has withdrawn to recreate an ancestral harmony of peoples and cultures. This individual, Kerewin, has built herself a stone tower within which she tries to create a harmony of both her Maori and her European ancestral traditions. She ventures out into the local society of town and pub, but her tower gives her the security that enables her to remain aloof. Within it, she works as an artist, the individual producing the integration of time and place that the culture lacks. Her work, however, is interrupted by the arrival of the boy, Simon, whose refusal to speak is the ultimate rejection of culture and the shared communication on which it depends. Ironically, by challenging her ability to communicate, Simon's silence leads Kerewin out of the artful but solipsistic communication of her tower and involves her in the violence of the world she has tried to reject. By accepting responsibility for another she finds herself drawn her back into a world she can inhabit only by discovering a relationship with a culture which the land has made completely its own. From this basis she is able to find a way to a wider integration of different peoples and cultures within a single land. [Keri Hulme's ~~The Bone People~~ The novel opens with ~~a~~ three-part lyrical prologue, which can be read as either prose or poetry, of a mind overwhelmed by human voices and the action of winds and waves.

The narrative proper then begins with a description of Kerewin waking in the tower where she works through art and science to interpret and integrate the culture and nature she has collected in books, artefacts and found objects. She sustains her life by fishing.

It thus appears that she has made a completely self-contained world that allows its solitary human dweller to produce her life in harmony with culture and nature and, through her art, to provide a future for others. But this self-sufficiency proves to be an illusion. Simon's arrival proves that neither ~~he,~~ Kerewin, he, nor Joe, ~~Simon's~~ his adopted father, can live alone. For Joe, Simon represents the future he has denied himself, but instead the violence he has chosen precipitates Simon into Kerewin's world, bringing with him the struggle for power and dominance from which she has withdrawn. Simon forces her to accept responsibility for it the violence from which she has withdrawn. In a last desperate effort to avoid responsibility, she destroys her tower and retreats into the wasteland. Only here, in the wilderness, can she finally accept that she is not alone. The bone-people, the bones of her ancestors which remain in the land, restore her to the community without which her culture has been barren. Only through her acceptance of the history that contains her people, and her acceptance of Simon and Joe as her present, is she able to find a way of recovering the links between culture and environment, between land and people.

The opening pages of The Bone People introduce the reader to a world where place and people have both been disjoined from the words, the culture, that alone can make sense of them. The first passage, entitled 'The End at the Beginning' is set out in the form of free verse, the first three stanzas beginning 'He walks down the street . . . ', 'He walks down the street . . .', and 'She walks down the street . . . '. The fourth stanza proclaims the theme of the book, but attains its full meaning only when we have read the rest of the novel.

> They were nothing more than people, by themselves. Even paired, any pairing, they would have been nothing more than people by themselves. But all together, they have become the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great.
>
> Together, all together, they are the instruments of change (p.2)

The rest of the book shows how they come together and change, but it also shows how the change is outside both their intent and their control.

The next two sections further add to our confusion. Both start with the Biblical words, 'IN THE BEGINNING'. The first goes on, 'it was darkness, and more fear, and a howling wind across the sea.' We later learn that this is a shipwreck interpreted through the inchoate mind of a child, but even after reading the whole book it remains impossible for me at least, to identify precisely the actions to which his words refer. The Biblical connotations are clearer, conflating 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth' with 'In the beginning was the word'. This novel makes literal the perception that the word is god, that the world of our knowledge begins with the fact of our perception through language. It also however casts ironic doubt on this perception by placing it in the mind of a boy who refuses to use language. Simon's ~~His~~ refusal to speak forces Joe and Kerewin to listen, and so leads them out into the language that restores them to a place in the culture of the community from which, in different ways, they have cut themselves off. Before they can find this place, however, they have to plumb the depths of despair and violence within themselves. Only then are they ready

to give themselves to the healing power of the land.

This irony continues into the third sequence of the Prologue, the perception of the boys' foster-parents that opens with the words 'IN THE BEGINNING, it was a tension . . .' This tension precedes the death of the wife and their son, but inaugurates the father's possession of the lost boy, Simon P.Gillayley--or rather, the

boy's adoption and possession of his father. In reading this, we need to remember that Polynesian adoption customs operate both ways, with parents as much adoptees as children. We are in no danger of forgetting that western culture imposes on this tradition the concept of parental ownership of the child. This concept, violating natural relationships far more than adoption does, produces the subsequent violence with which the characters deny their own deepest reality.

Before we encounter this denial, however, the author leads us through a more conventional narrative that apparently introduces us to the real people who are to be the novel's protagonists. We first meet Kerewin in the tower she has built to keep the world at bay. We see how in turn she meets Simon, who penetrates her mental as well as her physical barriers and opens the way for his father, Joe, to invade her life. This delayed opening encourages our expectations of a conventional plot where the child brings both man and woman to realize that they need each other to complete themselves. The remainder of the book however disappoints such expectations by showing that the two destroy each other and the child. As the opening has warned us, the two together are only people. It is only 'Together, all together [tha they are all instruments of change.' The element that brings them together, overcoming the opposition of individual and culture, is the place--in this case, not the land alone, but the littoral, the undefineable boundary of solid land and ever-changing ocean from which comes Simon P. Gillayley, the boy who refuses to speak.

The opening of Hulme's novel contrasts with the opening of Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion. Kesey also presents a stream

of consciousness as his union organiser drives into a storm that merges the mountains and streams and plains of Oregon in a mist from which only the river and an ancient two-story wood-frame house emerge with any clarity. However, as he comes opposite the house he sees in front of it a flagpole from which a severed human arms defiantly performs twisting pirouettes. In this opening scene history emerges from nature just as the car slides along the highway to penetrate the land. We are already in caught up in a culture of defiance and dominance. The remainder of the novel traces the history of this culture, explaining how the people it has produced have become caught in their present impasse. Ultimately, the people are able to find their escape only by recognizing their place in this history and entrusting themselves to nature: to the land they have plundered ruthlessly, and to the river that ultimately sweeps away their achievements and even their lives.

Each of these books offers the promise of overcoming social problems, represented in both cases by domestic and public

violence and by family disintegration, by means of a return to the elemental relationships between humans and the land. This return can however also be seen as the attempt of the individual to reassert the dominance of a culturally determined individuality, in the one case over nature, in the other over culture itself. Kesey reveals this attempt as itself the source of violence. Hulme shows violence rather as emanating from a culture that has lost its contact with the land. In both cases, however, individuals are unable to find a source of strength in the land until they are able to find a way of healing the wounds their culture has inflicted on itself by its exploitation of the land. In one sense, Hulme goes further than Kesey, because she recognizes that the wounds can be healed not by rejecting culture, nor by trying to live with it alone, but by going back to the point where we can understand it as both product and medium of the human encounter with nature.

Both novels can be read also as the response of their authors to the violence of contemporary society by attempting to impose a narrative unity on the disjuncture of nature and culture. In each case, however, this disjuncture interrupts the narrative flow, destroying the traditional unities of character and motivation, and preventing either resolution of the conflicts or closure of the action. Rather than presenting a clear narrative sequence, they portray a network of people, places and events that interact through a matrix of time. The pattern that emerges from this matrix is neither that imposed by individual will nor that left by cultural tradition, but the shape of the land itself--the coastal forests and rivers of Oregon, the stones, the beaches and the ocean of New Zealand.