

The Recovery of Europe in Post-Colonial Fiction

John McLaren

When, on the eve of the renaissance, Chaucer wrote of how the coming of each new spring sent forth crowds of pilgrims to seek "straunge strondes", he knew that, however mixed the motives that drove them out, the primary purpose of their journey was to find a grace denied to them at home. But already we can see ~~in his~~ ^{in his line} ~~lines~~ the germs of nationalism as he narrows his scope from the whole of Christendom to the especial realm of England, and then to the national shrine of the English people. Chaucer's use of the vernacular is a part of the process ^{which} led to the disintegration of the mediaeval order and its replacement by the competition of national states for world-wide empires. This process was accelerated during Chaucer's lifetime by the arrival in Europe of the Black Death, itself an element in the biological integration of the globe. During the following century, the consolidation of Islam in the east, ~~and~~ the unification of Spain in the west and the voyages of the Portuguese to the south provided the framework of the new European polity. By the end of ~~the~~ century, the destinations of Europe's pilgrims had shifted from the east to the west, from ^{Spain - all wealth of} the Holy city of Jerusalem to the wealth which God had opened for them in the New World. Instead of travelling to seek the word of God, they journeyed to take it to those who had never even heard of His name, ~~and~~ ^{therefore} whose manifest destiny it ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~therefore~~ to be subjected to the sway of the peoples of the Word. The conquistadores ~~went~~ with the ambition of the pilgrims but the lust of the ~~crusaders~~, as Europe simultaneously shifted its gaze from heaven to earth and changed the message of its religion from

an assurance of human unworthiness to a guarantee of its own superiority. For the next four centuries and more, Europeans would travel from home not in humility but in arrogance, and the rest of the world would bring its fortunes to them as offerings to ensure peace, power and knowledge.

Yet the process was not one-way. Europeans found that life in the New World changed them, and Europe itself was changed by its new relationships. These changes occurred not only in the heartland of Europe itself, but in the marches where Europeans and European culture were in direct conflict with new environments and old cultures. Drake attacked Riohacha and Ursula Iguarán's great-great-grandmother fled with her Aragonese husband to a peaceful village of Indians in the foothills. "Several centuries later the great-great-grandson of the native-born planter married the great-great-grandson of the Aragonese." So, in Garcia Marquez's "magical realism", commenced the modern history of Colombia. (1) At about the same time, and somewhat further south, occurred the marriage between a Spanish-Argentinian gentleman and an English lady, which was to ^{number among} ~~include in~~ its issue the poet who wrote the elegies to the last of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons of his grandmother's native land. Thus the history of the old world reached its culmination in the new.

This process has however been obscured not only by the long monopoly of the metropolitan countries over the production of art and knowledge, but also by the need of the peoples of the new worlds for the tradition which now belonged to the world but which remained in the custody of its European guardians. So the peoples of the colonial world became the new pilgrims, travelling back to Europe to discover the sources of their being. This led to the devaluation and neglect of the other source of this being

in the native traditions.

The immediate nationalist response to this dilemma has been to reject the European elements entirely in favour of the local. Linguistically, this has taken such forms as the synthesis from native languages of the new language of Bahasa Indonesian, the attempt to adopt Hindi as the sole language of independent India, or the cultivation of regional languages and literatures in South India. In English-speaking cultures, the spirit of nationalism found more purely literary expressions. It produced the regional populists in the United States and the bush writings of the nineties in Australia. More recently, it has appeared in Papua New Guinea not only in the controversy of Pidgin, but also in a spate of translations of traditional songs into English and the search for local forms of drama and fiction, both of which are attempts to reshape the international language to express the local tradition and experience..

Yet, while these national literatures are a necessary response to imperialism, they remain limited in scope, if not in achievement, until they incorporate also the European part of the new world tradition. This is true even of literatures in a country like India, which possesses a culture that is itself the source of much of what we regard as European, but which as a national state is a product of Europe. The Indian literatures in the local languages are invaluable for recovering the continuity which was overlaid and hidden by imperial rule, but Indian writing in English presents the dilemmas arising from the interaction of the two cultures precisely because it uses the language of the conqueror to express the consciousness of those still seeking to escape its control. The act of making the

language their own / in itself breaks out of this control.

The problems of the writer in English are obvious in a country like India where English is a minority language used mainly by the rulers. Yet they are as acute in English speaking countries where the native tongue is at the same time an alien tongue. The writer who uses it only to express local experience maintains the colonial status of the literature. Thus Joseph Furphy's comic absurdity remains inaccessible to most English readers. But the writer who tries to become a part of the metropolis is in danger of being absorbed and cut off from his own roots. T.S.Eliot becomes one of his own hollow men, more English than the English. Jack Lindsay is expatriated from both cultures, making a remarkable contribution to contemporary thought but achieving literary unity only when he returns to his youth in the first two volumes of his autobiography.

An escape from this dilemma has been discovered by those writers who have reversed the process of colonialism and have brought back the plunder of Europe to use in the continuing reconstruction of their native cultures. In Latin America the writers ~~I have~~ already mentioned have been among those who have created a new unity out of the bloody and contradictory history of their continent. But their achievement is paralleled by the work of writers from English speaking countries in the new world. This work takes over European conceptions and remakes them as a renewal of world literature rather than the establishment of new literatures.

II

Australian writers such as Henry Handel Richardson and Martin Boyd have written about the oscillation between the opposite poles of the old world and the new, so that in their novels each

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becomes the test of the quality of the other, forcing the characters to choose between them. But their novels speak essentially to the Australian experience. The first Australian author to make the voyage to Europe as conquistador rather than pilgrim was Christina Stead, who both in her life and her writings sailed to plunder and returned with the booty. Her first novel, Seven Poor Men of Sydney, was written in Australia but published in London. Before its publication, however, she wrote The Salzburg Tales, which were actually published before the novel (2). These tales are supposedly told at the Salzburg Festival and stake out Europe as her domain. The inclusion among the tales of ^{secular} ~~four~~ set in Australia confirms the fact of annexation.

The title of the work recalls, presumably deliberately, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Like them it is a collection of tales told by various tellers who have been brought together only by their common venture on a pilgrimage. But while Chaucer's pilgrims are seeking the shrine of the martyred St Thomas a'Beckett in order to shed their sins at his grave, Stead's have already arrived at the Austrian city of Salzburg to enjoy its August festival and the presentation of the mediaeval play of Everyman. Their homage is both to a mediaeval past and to the secular music of Mozart.

In Chaucer's poem, the themes of salvation and judgement unite the human variety of the tales within the framework of God's purpose for humankind. His characters may choose to flout God's laws, but they are always aware of them. Stead also places her characters against a background of pilgrimage in which God's purpose is symbolised by the cathedral and the mediaeval morality

play. Her characters however mostly ignore this background. The major conflict which divides them is the secular one between the worlds of money and of art, which are both shown as games people play in their attempts to cheat the eternal realities of love and death. Money is the factor which has enabled the tale-tellers to assemble in Salzburg. Art is symbolised by the memories of the city's most famous son, Mozart. The modern pilgrims see both the house where he was born, and the hut in which he wrote 'The Magic Flute'. This hut now stands inside the gates to the Capuchin convent in the woods where the festival visitors walk and tell their tales. The allusion to Mozart's last opera is significant, for this work is in essence a modern Everyman in which the hero and heroine leave behind the worlds of magic and faith and find salvation in reason. The opera thus contrasts with the Salzburg background of an older world of faith, still evident in the lives of the Capuchin monks and in the cathedral which stands in the midst of the city and provides the centre of the festival. The tension between these opposed values places the tales, for all their apparently antique style, firmly in the modern world of the tellers.

There is a further tension in the work, however, between the attempt of art to provide a framework and meaning for existence and the sheer exuberance of the life which it tries so to confine. This tension occurs throughout Stead's writing, giving it its characteristic combination of scientific detachment and intense fascination with the people whose lives she describes. Writing in 1968, she recalled an Indian treasury entitled Ocean of Story, which, she said, "is the way I think of the short story and what is part of it, the sketch, anecdote, jokes cunning, philosophical, and biting, legends and fragments.

Where do they come from? Who invents them? Everyone perhaps."

(3) The essay argues that we all have at least one story to tell, "steeped in our view and emotion". Although during her lifetime she published only one collection of stories, all her works are extended illustrations of her belief in the story, for each seems to be an extended series of tales which unwind from the experiences of the central characters, finding their own shape as they intermingle and complicate each other, reaching further levels of meaning as they reflect on each other.

The stories in The Salzburg Tales seem at first merely part of that ocean of story which flows through all of us. The characters are assembled at random to enjoy the festival, and they all tell in their turn tales of things which have happened to them or which they have encountered in books or have heard of from others. The book thus appears the least coherent of Stead's works, a mere loose structure framing quite separate tales. Yet this framework merely gives a clearer structure to her characteristic method. The particular characters and tales may be brought together by circumstance, but this chance environment provides the opportunity for exploring the issues which preoccupied her. The tellers themselves come from England, America, China, Australia and several countries of Europe, and so provide a microcosm of the League of Nations for which one of them works as a stenographer. As one story suggests another, and each teller makes his choice of what to tell, the tales impose on their separate experiences the pattern of art which reveals the choices by which the characters create their own individuality.

The tales begin almost by accident, when the town

councillor leads the company into the woods and then starts to tell his tale of a marionettist. His friend the poet responds, and prompts a further tale from the broker. This establishes a pattern which the rest of the company resolve to follow, and they therefore appoint the Viennese Conductor as Master of Tongues ceremonies to direct the tellers. The chance gathering is thus translated into a purposive assembly with a functional organisation, "a democracy headed by an autocrat". This action provides a metonym for the process by which human choice constantly creates order from the random facts of experience. The art of the storyteller is both the supreme expression of this process and the quality which everyone of us exercises in every moment of our lives as we turn event into narrative. Christina Stead's work captures these individual narratives, and thus weaves her tellers from their diverse origins into a single global fabric.

The work however is itself also a deliberate narrative, and not merely a collection of other people's tales. This is signalled not only by the careful description of setting, with its symbolic cathedral, woods and mountains, but also by the particular assemblage of "personages" who tell the tales. These are all people who could afford to be in Salzburg for the festival, and are therefore necessarily members of the leisured classes. But within this grouping imposed on her by the circumstance in which she has chosen to set the tales, the author has made a further selection. Of the 31 story tellers, 13 are associated with the professions, six are in business and another five are artists. The other seven are either idle and elderly gentry or students, while, apart from the poet, the artists are performers rather than creators. The young are looking for

ideas, the old are consumers of ideas. No member of the group produces goods, nor is there anyone who exercises real power. We thus have a microcosm not of society but of the people who regard themselves as society. The members of the group exchange their ideas and experiences, not their products or meanings. This is in keeping with the holiday occasion, an interval outside the main business of life. This interval of travel and exchange is also, however, the condition of freedom in a world where power and production have been decisively separated by both geography and social structures. This separation was itself to provide the theme of Stead's later novel, House of All Nations (4).

[The holiday mood extends to the tales themselves. Although most deal with happenings in the lives of the tellers, they seem to exist outside time. Their style is that of the traditional tale rather than of modern fiction, and thus they seem to exist not only outside time but even outside any particular consciousness. Character, setting and plot, as we have become used to them in modern fiction, are virtually absent. The people in the tales act or experience, but we do not ~~see them making choices, nor do we share~~ their consciousness. Where setting is given, as in the tale of the triskellion, it is to give atmospheric effect rather than the sense of a particular place. The story in each tale/ seems to be an almost haphazard series of events rather than an ordered sequence of cause and effect. The emphasis falls on chance and mystery rather than on the logical structure of either external causation or inner psychology.


This deliberate structure is evident from the first tale, the town councillor's story of the marionettist. Although

this tale tells the life of a man who first leaves his parents to become a sculptor, establishes his own family and becomes a marionettist to support them, disappears for fifteen years and is disregarded by his family when he attempts to rejoin them, and eventually returns to his parents to live out the remainder of his days carving small things for tourists, we are shown this whole story as if it were a marionette show itself, the characters merely being objects displayed by a story-teller. The poet's story that follows is a bizarre episode of the absurdity of wealth, the tale of Don Juan gives the atmosphere of the arena on his last day, but emphasises the spectacle he sees rather than his involvement in it, the tale of the gold bride is a symbolic account of the sterility of love that makes its object an idol. Finally, the Centenarist rounds off with anecdotes of saintly but poor rabbis and the gold coin in a pile of dung.

Because the emphasis of the tales falls on the events rather than on either their causes or the characters involved, the reader's interest is concentrated on the pattern revealed in the events. This in turn reflects not the character of the teller but the kind of pattern he or she imposes on the world around him. Thus the councillor sees an apparently random flux of people coming and going, the poet revels in instances of human absurdity, the broker celebrates vainglorious courage in the face of fate, and the English gentleman sees a wsaary and decadent world in which the most precious values become sterile. The tellers on subsequent days place further varieties of pattern on experience. Thus the doctress, with her tale of the triskellion, shows patterns of repression and violence revolving around the ominous symbol, the banker imposes a pattern of speculation, the Danish bookbinder sees death as an old woman and the schoolboy

sees it as a terrible but random event, the architect sees a world in which disorder is kept in check only by rigid frames and the foreign correspondent observes frightening play of power and vanity.

Only the centenarist, standing back from the others, shows how the tales people tell give value and meaning to their lives. At the end of each day's ~~the~~ tale-telling he talks of rabbis and saints, hell, devils and exorcism, possession and atheism, until on the last day he tells two farcical ghost-stories which reduce the whole of metaphysical speculation to absurdity. Yet the absurdity is itself, like the game of chess which concludes the book, an expression of the human vitality the tales serve to contain.



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III

Raja Rao On academic research:

Research is always like a man lost in the desert. You can only see stars wheresoever you look. You will always find a star somewhere, and following it through dust and jungle you certainly will come to a kingdom, where you are sure to find a prince, and he has many daughters to marry. If you do the right thing in the right way - that is, if you show your originality by talking of your astronomy starting from your particular star, which is always unique, in position, coloration and behaviour - you can show an altogether different pattern for the whole round sky. It all depends on where you start. And there is always a princess to wed you eventually.

The Serpent and the Rose, 1960; Orient Paperbacks, Delhi, 1968, p.344.

The Indian writer in English faces the opposite problem to his Australian contemporary. While the Australian writer must shape her mother tongue to incorporate new experience in an old tradition, and thus renew the tradition, the Indian writer brings an older tradition to a language of imperialism which he shares only with foreigners and with the rulers of his own country. Yet, because the English language is the legacy of imperialism to his country it is shaping its new institutions, so to free himself from it he must make it his own as certainly as the writer in the newer country. In The Serpent and the Rope (5), Raja Rao confronts this problem through the first person narrative of a Brahmin married to a Frenchwoman and engaged in a scholarly search for the Indian origins of the Cathar heresies. His family calls him constantly back to India, his studies to France, and a spritual Indian love to England. In the course of the novel, he becomes convinced of the essential truth of Catholicism, as distinct from Christianity, and his wife of Buddhism.

Within the orthodox form of the novel, Raja Rao has integrated a tale of Hindu epic, a complex pattern of love affairs, a bildungsroman of coming to maturity between cultures, and a continuing philosophic dialogue on the nature of being. The last is the central issue of the work, for the passions which drives the narrator, Ramaswamy, through his love affairs, family business and studies is his need to resolve the question of the Truth which in turn will answer the riddle of his own being. This question is in turn intimately involved with the kind of love he feels for his French wife of the flesh and Indian wife of the spirit and with the demands of his family. These conflicts of essence are shown against the reality of contemporary politics. The countries of India, France and England are symbolized through their physical landscapes which embody their separate traditions, but also through their present political realities. England is shown casting off its imperial traditions in order to renew a more ancient continuity through the coronation of a Queen. Modern France is symbolized by the trams of Marseille and the lawyers of Rouen and Paris. The new India is represented by Nehru, the Hamlet who knows "his madness is intelligent, while others only see ghosts" (p.340), the politicians who want it to be either China or England, but never itself, and the former Raja Raghubir Singh whose function has been taken away with his tiny kingdom and who now can live only in the past. Reflecting in Paris on the fate of his country, Rama realizes that it "would in fact be nobody's India, till someone sat and remembered what India was." (p.375) The novel is, at one level, an attempt to remember this in the context, not of India alone, but of the whole of humankind's spiritual history.

Yet, while the novel is an attempt to recall history,

and Rama describes himself as merely an historian, it also repudiates history. History is the process of becoming, and involves the individual in conflict with the world. It is the principle of the west, which has constantly tried to make the world in accordance with its own desires. India, Rama claims, is outside history, "contiguous with time and space, but - - - anywhere, everywhere." (p.331). This is the chief great opposition on which the novel is built, at once an opposition of east and west and of time and being. The opposition is expressed in the novel in the contrast of the French and Indian lovers, Madeleine and Savithri, and of the earth, domain of the feminine, and the spirit, domain of the masculine. These oppositions are brought together in the figure of the rope and the serpent, the animate and the inanimate. Yet this central figure also transcends all oppositions in the unity which Rama seeks as the ultimate meaning of life, for the serpent and the rope are not different, but the same thing seen from different perspectives (p.333).

Rama offers the symbol of the serpent and the rope to Madeleine as the conclusion of their last philosophic struggle, the battle which ends their marriage. It represents the only two possible attitudes to life: either the world is, and therefore I am real in terms of the world, or I exist, and so the world exists as me. The first is the vedantic or Indian proposition, the second the marxist, and they are irreconcilable (p.333). The unreal world is the serpent, who sees the rope as rope but dreams a world of visions. The real world, the rope, sees the serpent as death. But beyond these two positions, the "rope just is - and therefore there is no world." (p.336) The novel is about the

separate struggles of Rama, Madeleine and Savithri to attain this ultimate purity of existence.

Yet, although the image of the serpent and the rope, or the serpent that is at the same time the rope, concludes the struggle between Rama and Madeleine, it does not resolve the dramatic problems of the novel. Rama follows his philosophic resolution with an anecdote of the good man who tried to cover the whole world with leather instead of just making himself a pair of slippers. This story illustrates the simple reality of living which evades the philosophers, but which still presents the problems Rama must overcome before reaching a philosophic resolution. He must divorce Madeleine. He must find a cure for his illness. He must find somewhere to live. His spiritual wife must accept her actual husband. Even if India is a country of the mind, its people must also live in their bodies.

Rama's philosophic quest is a modern counterpart of the epic tale of the hero Rama, incarnation of Vishnu and Krishna, whose joint names Ramaswamy apparently shares. The ancient tale starts with Rama's birth and follows his adventures through marriage, exile, the abduction and recovery of his wife, his eventual ascent of the throne and her final banishment. The physical adventures have a spiritual significance. The action of the modern novel, by contrast, is concentrated in a period of three years, from 1951 to 1954, during which time Rama has to make critical choices. His concern is for the spiritual, but this has to be worked out in the actual choices he makes. The epic Rama wanders in the legendary forests by the Chitrakuta Hill, his modern counterpart wanders through the deserts of modern thought and the actual worlds of India and Europe. At the end of the epic, the hero is safe in his kingdom and then is

carried into eternity. At the end of the novel, Ramaswami is in exile in Paris and planning to go to Travancore in search of his true home.

Yet this difference in form masks a common perspective. Both works are about the difference between truth and illusion. The epic Rama established the unity of man and nature in the woods and overcame the demons to recover his bride, only to loose her through pride or worldly necessity, according to your reading of the story. The truth he discovers through his adventures is that these worldly matters are illusion, and that ultimate reality is accessible only through the paths of duty and negation. Even the denial of Sita is a step towards final union, which occurs only after the gods reveal to Rama the truth of his own being. The Rama of the novel similarly moves from a romantic and worldly love to spiritual union and eventually, albeit precariously, to self-sufficiency. Unlike his epic namesake, he is not vouchsafed any divine revelation.

The translation of Rama's search from a legendary India to the actual modern world, however, multiplies the polarities and oppositions which the narrator seeks to overcome or resolve. The novel opens with the author's pilgrimage to Benares, where he commits the ashes of his father to the sacred waters. During his visit and subsequent travels about India, to the upper reaches of the Ganges and then south to his home, his memories of his wife Madeleine and France counterpoint his absorption in India and its holy places. But this simple opposition of eastern and western religions, vedantic Hinduism and Catholic Christianity, is complicated by the subsequent action. As Madeleine's involvement in Rama's philosophy leads her to adopt

buddhism, Rama's studies of the Cathars lead him to identify with Catholicism in distinction from the historical religions of Christianity and Buddhism. He equates the historical desire for the absolute with a rejection of the world and, ultimately, the self-destructive brutality of nazism. In contrast, both vedanta and catholicism, the successor of pantheistic religions of nature, accept the world and continuity but deny history. Through that denial he accepts the world but loses both Madeleine and Savithri, the one to the spirit and the other to necessity. At the close, his ambition to go to Travancore, to the Cape Cormoran where three oceans meet and India ends, is a desire for a higher unity than that offered by either the Ganges or the Rhone. Throughout the book, he has presented his relationships through the images of bridges which enable the individual to cross from one world to another. At the end, he seeks the ocean which stretches beyond all bridges.

The actual story of the novel is less important than its philosophic dialogue, but the philosophic problems are always experienced in particular places as the narrator travels between India and Europe. The contrasts between the Ganges and the Himalayas, north and south India, Benares and Bombay, embody the contrasts of Vedanta, just as the contrast between Cambridge and London, Paris and the south of France, Languedoc and Provence, represent contrasting ways of living. But we see all these places through Rama's eyes, as extensions of his Brahmin consciousness. The novel thus extends India to the world at the same time as it creates an Indian past which can offer it salvation from its present.

IV

Patrick White's novel Riders in the Chariot and Xavier Herbert's Poor Fellow My Country are both very much about the intrusion of history into the affairs of an Australia that would prefer to be left alone. Yet White, like Raja Rao, is not concerned so much with the history itself as with the infinite which lies behind it and to which his epigraph from Blake directs the reader. This epigraph is also remarkable in its time for using the example of the North American tribes as a lesson in spirituality for Europe. Herbert is similarly concerned with spirituality, in forms offered to the white Australians from their sources in the ancient cultures of the Aborigines, of India and of Israel. In his novel, however, this spirituality is presented not as a means of redeeming or transcending history, but as its victim.

White's Riders in the Chariot (6) revolves around the image of the chariot itself. The vision of the chariot sets apart the four who share it, distinguishing them from the common run of humanity. The vision itself is not however a miracle so much as a mark of the way they are able to live in harmony with the world. The central irony of the book is that this capacity for harmony generates discord, arousing resentment in others and leading to destruction. The four riders constitute among themselves a microcosm of their times, representing both the victims of history and the creative force which ensures the continuity of good. Alf Dubbo, the Aborigine, and Mordecai Himmelfarb the Jew represent respectively those dispossessed by Europe and those dispossessed from it, Mrs Godbold embodies the practical virtue of compassion and Miss Hare has both the wisdom of the holy fool, the capacity to see things as they are, and the gift of a continuity with the past. Her preposterous home,

Xanadu, with its suggestions of Kublai Khan's sacred dome of pleasure, is a bewildering monument to the splendours of European culture, but she is also completely in tune with the chaotic natural world which has overtaken its gardens. From this centre of certainty she draws the strength that enables her to evoke from Himmelfarb the wisdom embodied in his ceremonies, which have otherwise been destroyed in the holocaust and found no place in the new land. Similarly, Mrs Godbold's unjudgmental compassion enables Alf Dubbo to draw on his ancestral powers and realize in paint the vision they have in common. Although the actual painting disappears at the end of the book, along with Xanadu itself, the fact of the vision and the visionaries remains alive in Mrs Goldbold and her family, the "arrows" she "aimed at the forms of darkness" and which survive as images of goodness.

If the four riders represent the creative possibilities of the worlds of Australia and Europe, their histories represent the destructive forces of the twentieth century. The novel is framed by the images of Xanadu, first as a crumbling reality, lastly as a memory. Between these points, the action of the novel commences when Miss Hare admits a housekeeper to the mansion, and with her the forces of envy and malice. The operation of these forces is shown at large in the fate of Alf Dubbo in Australia, where he is made an outcast, and Mordecai Himmelfarb in Europe, where his family and community are destroyed in the holocaust. The action culminates around Xanadu, where Himmelfarb is subjected to a mock crucifixion and dies, Dubbo succumbs to alcohol after completing his painting of the chariot, and Miss Hare disappears, allowing Xanadu to be razed by the bulldozer. This razing concludes the history, but it is

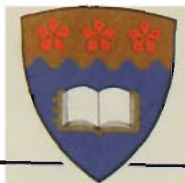
unable to destroy the strength which the four have implanted in Australia through their integration of the visions of Europe, England and the Aborigines.

The visionary conclusion of White's novel is reversed in Xavier Herbert's Poor Fellow My Country, where the main narrative ^{concerns} when Jeremy Delacy brings about the act of butchery which finally destroys his hopes of a society which will redeem Australia from the consequences of its betrayal of its own heritage (7). The details of this novel are too complex to unravel here, but ~~a~~ brief glance at the main structure and oppositions shows the same process of assimilation and recolonisation that appears in the work of White or Stead.

Herbert's overt purpose is to assert the need for an independent Australia. He does this most evidently through the voice of Jeremy Delacy. At Lily Lagoons Delacy has used his capacities as a stockman and bushman to create a community which unites black and white, human and natural, in a model of what an independent Australia could be if it remained true to its heritage. Delacy also preaches of his ideals of miscengenation and sturdy independence to anyone who will listen. Around him he gathers a community which includes his half-caste grandson, Prindy, the daughter of the Indian hawker who becomes Prindy's mate, and a Jewish woman who endows the household with the ceremony of Judaism. Prindy himself is educated to combine the wisdom of his Aboriginal ancestors, a tolerant form of Catholicism, and the practical knowledge of Jeremy. This ideal community is, however, destroyed when Jeremy breaks his own principle of allowing people to act out their own fate. The savagery with which Herbert describes the execution of Prindy and the uncomprehending girl by Prindy's mentor, Bobwirridirridi,

destroys any hope that may remain of humans learning to live either with each other or with their environment. The final message of Herbert's novel is that the mixture of traditions destroys the common elements of creativity in each of them.

20m



6th April, 1987.

dear John,

Thanks for the note. I have picked up the types you mentioned. Perhaps I should give you a full list of the ones I found:

2.6 was ✓

8.2 several ✓

10.3 tale ✓

11.3 absurdity ✓

12.24 drives ✓

18.27-8 delete 'the world'? ✓

20.21 a brief ✓

24.25 been ✓

25.23 dislocates

25.26

cor fr's' ✓

also, I thought 17.18 should be 'contrasts ... contrasts'. (Is that OK?)

Did I mention it before? No need to write back if you approve. ✓

That's the lot. It will be in print in July as one of what now appears to be a baker's dozen.

best wishes,

Bill.

P.S. We are now set up to enrol people in SPACHANS. Any potential new members at Footscray to whom we could offer invitations?

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V

Keri Hulme's novel The Bone People differs from all the works so far discussed. Not only is the book set wholly in New Zealand, it is defiantly about the indigenous people and their way of life. The central character, the boy Simon, far from adapting language to his purposes, refuses to use spoken words at all. Yet the novel is, in effect, about words, about shaping experience into consciousness until it explains what has happened and gives a direction to where we may go. Simon, like the first English invaders, comes from the sea, and like them he is white. But unlike them, his past is a blank, and he receives languages and identity from the Maoris who adopt him. In return, he reverses the pattern of colonialism, keeping alive the mother who dies, bringing together the couple who care for him.

The language of the book hovers between prose and verse, moving now into the one, now into the other, gaining the expressiveness of poetry without the formality, the freedom of prose without the definition. The reader thus is involved in the process of consciousness coming into being rather than in the deliberate shaping of narrative. The language does not discover the patterns of experience, but allows them to evolve. Thus the opening pages of the novel convey the experience of a child without words, and we understand their significance, their part in a wider context, only near the very end of the novel. Their importance is not, however, in explaining the event, but in expressing it as it is experienced with no explanatory context.

Even this narrative chapter seems to float into being as the disembodied creation of the narrator's voice. The first words of the novel are not, properly speaking, a part of the

narrative at all, but a kind of hymn to its significance. First he, then she, walks down an asphalt street, and they smile and sing. Then, as they take hands with others in a dance, the words comment on what is happening:

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, they are the instruments of change. (p.2)

The novel both shows us the becoming of this perilous something, and leaves it as it is about to grow even more great and strange.

The opening words of the chapter that follows this invocation are a variant of the Biblical: "In the beginning, it was darkness, and more fear, and a howling wind across the sea." (p.4) The reference could be to Creation, or to the coming of the first people, or of the first colonists. It is in fact the beginning of the story of the boy, whose first names, Simon Clare, link him to the rock of foundation and the clarity of light. The name of his adopting clan, Gillalea, seems to bring the wildness of the Celt into the world of the Maori. But, just as the world begins afresh with every life, so Simon by his existence forces into new patterns the world into which he comes. Like the process of colonisation itself, these patterns are shaped only by violence, but out of the violence comes a new life which remains true both to the bone people, the ancestors, and to the European heritage which has come to this new world. The woman through whose words we hear the story, Kerewin Holmes, unites in herself these two pasts. Her round tower, her books, her knowledge of chess and music, come from Europe, but her

skills, her basic lore and learning, and her identity are Maori. But it is only the advent of Simon, and her involvement in his fate, which forces her from her chosen isolation and brings her together as a part of the instrument of change which welds these disparate elements into a new unity.

The new unity comes only from the forcing apart and destruction of the old. This is conveyed by the language itself, which moves not only from prose to verse, but also from dialogue and direct description or narrative to interior monologue to fragmentary stream of consciousness. Even the narrator changes, so that while most of the time we encounter events through Kerewin's words, at times we hear the man and at other times see the world through the uncomprehending yet wise eyes of the boy. Because he sees events discretely, without pattern, he bewilders the adults. In turn, his attempts to make sense of what he sees, to find patterns which will please the adults who control his world, have their roots in a past he cannot share with them, and so cause only further bewilderment and frustration. This frustration produces the violence which is at the heart of the novel.

The critical episode of the work is when Joe, the man, belabours the boy into insensitivity. The boy escapes with his life only because he at last fights back, wounding and nearly killing Joe with a sliver of glass. The episode occurs only because each of the three has been driven to breaking point by their frustrated love for the others. but this neat pattern emerges only retrospectively. The incident itself is narrated only indirectly, as the boy feels it happening.

The world is full of dazzlement, jewel beams, fires of

crystal splendour.

I am on fire.

He is aching, he is breaking apart with pain.

The agony is everywhere, hands, body, legs, head.

He is shaking so badly he cannot stand.

The hard wood keeps grinding past him.

Joe's voice is thin and distant.

"When did you get this?"

"When did Bill Drew give you this?"

"How long have you kept this?"

He is pulled up and held into the door frame.

The wood gnaws his body.

- - -

Sliding the sliver out of the wrapping, his hand trembling uselessly. He fists forward. It seems a foolish feeble blow.

But I need to stop the wood coming through.

Joe screams. (p.320)

The alternation between first and third person echoes the confusion of the fight, but the broken sentences convey both the bewilderment and the frustration of the participants. Only much later does the reader learn exactly what has happened.

This act of violence finally dislocates the lives of the three central characters and drives them apart. Both Joe and Kerewin have themselves suffered in childhood and consequently have a record of violence to others in their later life, and both have sought to escape into solitude. The needs of the abandoned boy force them out of their solitude, but they remain incapable of yielding to the responsibility. Only after this collapse into brutality, which drives them back into themselves, are they able

to acknowledge their own inner needs and accept each other. The novel closes with Kerewhin rebuilding, in a new form, the tower she has destroyed. the old tower was a symbol of her isolation, the new home is designed as a place to be together.

The violence is itself a symbol of the imperialism to which the characters are subject. Unlike White or Herbert, Hulme locates the source of the violence not in evil or misguided characters, but in the most sensitive and caring people and in the community which has preserved its identity despite imperialism. Both Joe and Kerewhin find support from the warmth of the Maori community, but this warmth easily turns into possessiveness and drunken sentiment, with its corollary, quarreling and violence. The clannishness of the community is a reaction to the violence which has taken away the basis of their society. Only as they work through the violence can they create structures which will nurture a new society. They work this out both in terms of their own lives and within a wild landscape which they must learn before they can possess it from their ancestors. Joe obtains this possession by deed of gift, Kerewhin by building. The house she builds and to which Joe returns symbolizes a new society which has recovered what has been taken and at the same time takes into itself the legacy of the conquerors.

The novelists I have discussed are, of course, not the only ones who have taken back Europe and turned it to their own purposes. David Malouf, for example, in An Imaginary Life virtually makes the plains of the Danube an extension of Australia. It is impossible to imagine anyone creating the desolate world of the Roman frontiers without having known

expansive loneliness like that of inland Australia. But the novelists I have mentioned represent a distinct progression in the expansion of the European consciousness. Rather than taking back to Europe accounts of life on the frontiers as tribute to the imperial centres, they have made the frontiers themselves the living edge of our consciousness. Christina Stead did this by bringing an antipodean eye to bear on the rituals of Europe. White and Herbert judged Europe by its impact on the antipodes. Hulme has gone further, and fused the European with an equally old Pacific culture and a wilder landscape.

Notes:

- (1) Gabriel Garcia Marquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude, translated by Gregory Rabassa, 1970; edition quoted, Pan Books, London, 1978.
- (2) R.G.Geering, Christina Stead, revised edition, Angus and Robertson Publishers, Sydney, 1979, p.28; Christina Stead, Salzburg Tales, London, 1934; edition quoted, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1966.
- (3) Ocean of Story, Viking: Penguin Australia, Ringwood, 1985, p.3.
- (4) House of All Nations, New York and London, 1938.
- (5) Raja Rao, The Serpent and the Rope, 1960; edition quoted, Orient paperbacks, Delhi, 1968.
- (6) Patrick White, Riders in the Chariot, Viking Press, New York, 1961.
- (7) Xavier Herbert, Poor Fellow My Country, Collins, Sydney, 1975.
- (8) Keri Hulme, The Bone People, Spiral, Wellington, 1983.