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Abstract

The Australian poet Les Murray has talked about 'the dreadful tyranny where only certain privileged places are regarded as the centre and the rest are provincial and nothing good can be expected to come out of them. I figure the centre is everyv/here. It goes with the discovery that the planet is round, not flat. Every point on a sphere is the centre. It seems to be a corollary of the discovery of the roundness of the world that people haven't taken seriously yet'.

Finding the Centre: 'English' Poetry After Empire

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The chief problem for anyone attempting to determine where the 'mainstream' of current English language writing is flowing today is the impossibility of finding, after the disintegration of so many linguistic, literary and cultural 'centres', a ground from which canonical judgements can be made? The question now is not where does one find a vantage point sufficiently empyrean to show where the 'mainstream' of poetry in the twentieth century is flowing, but rather what need is there to seek out such a vantage? In whose interests are such judgements maintained?

In the 1960s and '70s the problem looked simpler because of the shift in cultural power from the old originating centre of England to the new one of the United States. It was a period when post-war (and largely postmodern) American poetry was exported globally: its formal openness, its easy rhythms, its irresistible vernacular energies turned up in Sydney, Auckland and Vancouver and a succession of anthologies of 'new' Australian, New Zealand or Canadian poetry appeared, all significantly influenced by Donald Allen's 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*. All this was liberating and positive so long as the American influence meant an openness to a new range of poetic possibilities. It was not liberating where an obsession with American postmodern poetics fostered the view that there was only one narrow and rigid channel through which the historically significant poetry of this century has flowed, from Pound and Williams by way of Olson and Creeley down to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. As Creeley himself observed in a review of a somewhat messianic New Zealand postmodernist poet, Alan Loney, 'There is certainly no use in importing, wholesale, chunks of

“American” temper and preoccupations into the charming isles of New Zealand.’²

Creeley recognizes here that the mere substitution of an American-centred poetry ‘mainstream’ for an English one would be constricting. A new formal orientation in poetry does not manifest itself throughout the English-speaking world at a single moment in time as the obvious and only way of writing poetry now. The English-speaking world is not (and arguably never was) an hierarchically organized, unified whole through which the great movements in poetic style and formal orientation proceed uniformly. In *Make It New* Pound observed: ‘it is quite obvious that we do not all of us inhabit the same time’, and Robert Creeley picked up on this when he observed: ‘We literally do not, all of us, inhabit the same time. There are speeds in it, deeper roots’.³

Yet that American influence arrived in the ‘provinces’ not as a break with Tradition as such but as a different tradition, and invariably what bore a twenty or a thirty year date stamp was presented by the *avant gardes* in those places as the new. Here is George Bowering, the Canadian West Coast poet:

By now it is apparent that the mainstream of today’s Canadian poetry (in English) flows in the same river system as the chief American one – that one (to change figures of speech in midstream) nurtured firsthand or secondhand by followers of W.C. Williams and Ezra Pound. The *Contact* people in Toronto of the fifties, and the *Tish* people in Vancouver of the sixties are in the middle of what has been happening in Canadian poetry, mid wars.⁴

One can readily find New Zealand or Australian equivalents to this statement, referring the poetry scene in the distant place to that ‘river system’. The trouble with this kind of internationalism is that tends to distort the local scenes into which it is carried by making them conform to borrowed terms and definitions without allowing for their peculiar currency in those places. The claim to be able to judge accurately where the ‘mainstream’ of literary history flows, necessarily appeals to the notion of some authoritative Tradition.

What is at stake here is the breadth and historical accuracy of our sense of the word ‘Tradition’, and whether, in acknowledging the limitations of T.S. Eliot’s high-modernist understanding of the term, we merely exchange an intelligibly conservative concept of tradition for a narrowly *avant-garde* one such as Bowering’s. Here we may detect the need for a new understanding of literary change and development in this country, one in which a truly international sense of literature leads to an acceptance that there are no longer any secure vantage points – Bloomsbury or Rapallo –

from which to look back and form a 'Tradition' sufficiently authoritative and sufficiently encompassing to account for and include the truly adventurous writing (what Eliot himself called 'the really new') of both the present and the past.⁵

In a 1942 essay, 'The Classic and the Man of Letters', Eliot puts very clearly the choice facing English literature with the steady break-up of the European 'Tradition' derived from Greece and Rome, a tradition dependent on the continued prestige and knowledge of the classics among an educated elite:

For many generations the classics provided the basis of the education of the people from whom the majority of our men of letters have sprung: which is far from saying that the majority of our men of letters have been recruited from any limited social class. This common basis of education has, I believe, had a great part in giving English letters of the past that unity which gives us the right to say that we have not only produced a succession of great writers, but a literature, and a literature which is a distinguished part of a recognizable entity called European Literature. We are then justified in inquiring what is likely to happen to our language and our literature, when the connection between the classics and our own literature is broken, when the classical scholar is as completely specialized as the Egyptologist, and when the poet or the critic whose mind and taste have been exercised on Latin and Greek literature will be more exceptional than the dramatist who has prepared himself for this task in the theatre by a close study of optical, electrical and acoustical physics? You have the option of welcoming the change as the dawn of emancipation or of deploring it as the twilight of literature; but at least you must agree that we might expect it to mark some great difference between the literature of the past and that of the future – perhaps so great as to be the transition from an old language to a new one.⁶

Whether the change Eliot describes signals the dawn of emancipation or the twilight of literature is one of those problems that looks different depending on where you stand and on how you read history. In the nineteenth century a few European nations acquired empires and slowly began to discover the relativity of the modes of thought they had considered universally valid. It was (and still is) a painful process. Imperialism, like nationalism, promulgates a unity only by submerging difference. As the old presumptions of the superiority of Anglo-imperial culture broke up with the lapse of empire, a world of difference began to assert itself. In places as disparate as North America, Australasia and Africa, writing began to exert a local provenance.

In *Widening Horizons in English Verse*, John Holloway recounts the response in English verse to the discoveries of the literatures of other cultures. He considers Celtic, Saxon, Norse, Islamic, Indian, Eastern and Egyptian literatures and their effects on English poetry, and concludes:

We in Western Europe and America have opened up to our literary consciousness, one after another of the major literatures and major cultures of the planet ... We have reached in our literary culture the point reached by the geographical explorer some time ago ... The process of exploration which began in the Renaissance with our own native past and western classics, and then opened its horizons wider and wider is certainly near the limit of its range.⁷

As Holloway points out, the last person to bring home the prize of a central corpus of work from an exotic culture was Pound in his translations of the *No drama* or later from the Chinese Classic Anthology. These are masterpieces of the histories of Japanese and Chinese literatures. 'Nowadays', Holloway continues, 'the most popular kind of contact is rather with a mere contemporary *avant garde* – in the West Indies, Australia, Africa, wherever it might be. I do not condemn this in any way. It is clearly an image of our time and our preoccupation everywhere with the topical. But it is another kind of thing; and by definition it cannot have the same magnitude'.

Holloway draws our attention to an historical epoch which has ended or is ending. Since his book was published in 1965 there has been nothing to disprove his contentions. A New Zealand critic has recently pointed out that in 1916 in Lawrence's *Women in Love* the whole world which separates the West African from the West Pacific was able easily to be passed over. By now, however, that blank slate has been 'filled in', even for white, First World intellectuals.⁸ The heartlands of English literature are in the process of being charged with the discovery of difference.

If the English-speaking world has suffered a diaspora, then we at the far reaches of that dispersal must begin not only to look out to what Allen Curnow called 'the neglected middle distance', that is, to the other former colonies, but also to the grounds of a cultural encounter with the richness, the complexity and the otherness that lie immediately to hand.⁹ Of course, we will continue to look back to all that we inherit from Europe in general and Britain in particular. Nevertheless, we must question that longstanding and entrenched assumption within English studies that the Renaissance, with its rooting in the classics, remains the torso of English studies while all the subsequent periods constitute the outer limbs.

In our reading of contemporary English-language poets we discover new ways of understanding the relations among the various far-flung parts of the English-speaking world, connected in the first place by the legacy of colonialism. We gain a new sense of the language itself in the face of that long process of the collapse of the imperial 'centres', European or American, and of what the Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid calls 'linguistic imperialism'. '– All dreams of "imperialism",', he writes in *In Memoriam James*

Joyce, 'must be exorcized, / Including linguistic imperialism, which sums up all the rest'.¹⁰ By shifting the focus of English studies away from the *centrality* of the European inheritance we begin to inhabit a host of other traditions.

A literature content to sit on its laurels or even to remain in ignorance of the borders or shores which delimit it, has had it. Equally, a literature or culture fragmented or dissolved by colonial occupation can only reassert itself through a vast act of reconstitution and recuperation. In either case, turning abroad, engaging in world literature, is an act of healthy curiosity as well as being politically necessary. Identity most fully resides in the struggle in which it is engaged, and that struggle is inevitably a political one. For identity is a function of position and position is a function of power.

Such a way of understanding allows us to see the 'new literatures' in English not as the etiolated remains of a dying 'Tradition', but as what Wilson Harris calls 'complex wholeness[es]': that is, as fictive totalities composed of the various inheritances, traditions, cultural memories (including those which 'may once have masqueraded themselves as monolithic absolutes') which make up the post-colonized world.¹¹ It also allows us to envisage a greater complexity in the cultural scenes of the old 'centres'.

The view that the 'mainstream' of English poetry in this century proceeds from Hardy by way of Auden to Larkin shows the dangers of abandoning Eliot's European 'Tradition' for a merely national one. To do so is to allow that 'English' literature has simply shrivelled to its parochial confines and thereby become of interest only to the people who live within those confines, and to few of them at that. If we see 'English' literature in an international context, however, we can arrive at a more complex and a more accurate picture of a literature that includes not only the Movement and the Martians but also popular culture, Scots and Anglo-Irish writings, the writing of Caribbean and other immigrants (not to mention Gaelic, and other non-English language cultural minorities), and where two or more of those competing traditions are coming together in a particular writer – Wilson Harris, for instance – 'really new' writing is being produced.

Modernism was nothing if not international, but it was a Eurocentric movement, not a global one. One of the most pervasive changes in poetry since around 1945 (when global vulnerability became materially demonstrable) has been precisely this apprehension of being, in the words of a young New Zealand poet, Leigh Davis, 'under the technology of arms'.¹² Simultaneously, there has been a growing recognition of the discrete, the various, the multiplicity of difference and the vicarious problems of identity. This is what underwrites Ian Wedde's special pleading in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*: 'The history of a literature with

colonial origins is involuntarily written *by* the language, not just in it: the development of poetry in English in New Zealand is coeval with the developing growth of the language into its location, to the point where English as an international language can be felt to be original *where it is*.¹³ The converse is just as true: that English as an international language cuts itself off from wherever it is used. As the language of domination and exploitation it is the most pervasive symbol of the colonial process. It is everywhere a foreigner. These opposed views of the English language as 'original where it is' or as a 'perpetual foreigner' are the extremes between which all specific uses of that language occur.

Certainly, the decentering of English literature that has characterized the post-war scene presents itself as a source of possibility, a gainful 'lowering of the sights', as Charles Olson put it. Eliot's sense of Tradition with its hierarchy, its blindnesses and its exclusiveness has surely been consigned often enough to the museum of literary history.¹⁴ But once allow that there are no longer any authoritative centres from which to determine what is peripheral, and the classical 'Tradition' defended by Eliot becomes one among many traditions currently available to the writer. As such, it ceases to be 'Tradition' as Eliot understood the term: the memory of the culture of the European peoples informing and holding together the best work of the present. Yet it remains a part of the *bricolage* of the contemporary cultural scene.

In Murray's own poetry, in spite of his celebrated quarrel with modernism and in spite of his announced determination to write 'against the grain of Literature',¹⁵ the whole continuity of the English literary tradition is as present as it is in a selfconsciously 'Attic' Australian poet like Peter Porter. (Murray, after all, read all of Milton in a single long weekend as a schoolboy.) Yet it never crowds out his lithe grasp of the vernacular energies of that rich idiom, Australian-English, not to mention his debts to Celtic and indeed Aboriginal sources. This does not mean simply that in practice Murray's poetry has been enriched by the language of popular usage as was Eliot's high-cultural Tradition. It means that the European inheritance has been obliged to cohabit in a given body of poetry with an utterly alien sense of tradition. Behind Murray's poetry we sense the presence of English literature as a whole thing, not just the past as the inheritance of canonized texts. In other words, the writing is vitalized, charged with a sense that the energy of the language proceeds from the differences with which it is riddled. In his own words, he is trying 'to make not so much "high" as rich and flexible art out of traditional and vernacular materials'.¹⁶

The problem of nationality emerge clearly when we compare current writing in Britain with that in the Caribbean. Let's look at Derek Walcott's poem 'The Schooner *Flight*'. The poem's speaker, Shabine, explains his name as 'the patois for / any red nigger' and claims:

I had a sound colonial education
I have Dutch, nigger and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.¹⁷

A rich complexity of reference is worked into the poetry of those who choose to start out from that sense of displacement, of unhousing, which is part of the general condition which terms like postmodern or post-colonial attempt inadequately to account for. The sustenance of ideas like 'home' and 'heartland' has always been fostered by migratory myths of an original Eden and an ultimate resurrection. These myths need not be dismissed as mere colonial nostalgia. When they are co-opted into a poetry which confronts and reinterprets history, which questions the motives behind linear chronology and which offers meaning as multifaceted, they figure as vital and necessary fictions.

Now that peasantry is in vogue,
Poetry bubbles from peat bogs,
People strain for the old folk's fatal bogs.
Coughed up in grates North or North East
'Tween bouts o' living dialect,
It should be time to hymn your own wreck,
Your home the source of ancient song.¹⁸

So begins Guyanese poet, David Dabydeen's 'Coolie Odyssey', leading from the dry fireside where coconut shells are cackling, by way of Seamus Heaney's evocation of reclaimed ancestors in Irish peat bogs, to a winter of England's scorn where memories are huddled and hoarded from the opulence of masters. Dabydeen commemorates his narrative in a parodic reflection and rejection of the classic colonial narrative. Instead of adopting the expansive viewpoint of the colonizer setting out from Europe, Dabydeen moves out from the position of the exploited and oppressed:

We mark your memory in songs
Fleshed in the emptiness of folk,
Poems that scrape bowl and bone
In English basements far from home,
Or confess the lust of beasts
In rare conceits
To congregations of the educated
Sipping wine, attentive between courses –

See the applause fluttering from their white hands
Like so many messy table napkins.

These images reveal that much noted duality that runs through Caribbean literature. But one finds a similar note in unexpected places where the only cultural link is that of a common experience of having been colonized and deprived of language. In many Scottish writers, for instance, we find this two-fold understanding of identity as something that is, whether one likes it or not, constituted by a multiplicity of differences, racial and linguistic. In the post-colonized subject, Caribbean, Scottish or Canadian, we find characteristically the internalized conjunctions of different histories, whose continued presence necessitates a continual reinterpretation, demands varieties of reading stance and calls forth contradictory modes of expression. But at the same time, there is the sense that these apparently centripetal tendencies at least potentially exist in a creative relationship with one another, that a peculiar species of coherence is granted them because the pressures of history acting within the individual are forcing them into new, curious and shapely ways of seeing.

In the writing of Wilson Harris we find exemplary confrontations with mythic material. In a sense Harris's Guyana is a metaphor for the English language itself in the world after empire (*malgré* Grenada and the Malvinas). Harris doesn't merely consign the older notions of tradition to some capacious museum of cultural history: he dismantles, reconstitutes and resituates those traditions, makes them part of the current scene, if not privileged, still useful and present. Harris's writing shows an extraordinary openness to the variety of traditions meeting in a post-colonized country. Such a way of understanding allows us to see the 'new literatures' in English as what Wilson Harris calls 'complex wholeness[es]': that is, as fictive totalities composed of the various inheritances, traditions, cultural memories (including those which 'may once have masqueraded themselves as monolithic absolutes') which make up the post-colonized world.¹⁹

Here we find the basis of a sense of the English language that puts the legacy of colonialism at the centre of its attention without simplifying the ways in which that legacy continues to bear upon writing in the colonizing as well as in the colonized worlds, is present for the descendants of the colonizers as well as for those of the colonized. What Harris calls for is a 'radical aesthetic' which visualizes in broken post-colonial worlds communities tolerant enough to include renovated versions of the codes of imperial power alongside those of the cultures that have been mutilated by imperium. In other words, Harris manages to allow for the conflicting

demands of tradition *and* difference. He suggests a view of the new literatures not as mere branches of the host trunk growing at various speeds into mature traditions in their own right but as complex and rich totalities made up out of conflicting elements existing in dialectical tension. This view is the enabling condition of an approach to current English writing because it discovers common features by recognizing the full complexity of culture since colonialism.

Like Harris, Wole Soyinka is aware not simply of the national and racial components of existence, but also of the historical, geographical, psychic and economic conditions which go into their formation. He is as clearly a representative of black Africa as he is of a common humanity when he stands before existence's chthonic forces. In these terms, he is a writer of major significance in the context of world literature. By the range and specificity of his knowledge, he refuses the option of sectarianism and dismisses as cowardly the craving for national exemption. As he says in the introduction to *Six Plays*:

There's no way at all that I will ever preach the cutting off of *any* source of knowledge: Oriental, European, African, Polynesian, or whatever. There's no way anyone can ever legislate that, once knowledge comes to one, that knowledge should be forever excised as if it never existed.

Soyinka's is an exemplary attack on xenophobia. If his apprehension of the world is shaped by the peculiar stresses and urgencies of Nigeria, it is liable to be explained in terms the relevance of which should not be lost in New Zealand or Canada or Scotland:

In defence of that earth, that air and sky which formed our vision beyond lines drawn by masters from a colonial past or redrawn by the instinctive rage of the violated we set out, each to a different destiny.²⁰

NOTES

1. Les Murray interviewed by Iain Sharp, *Landfall*, Vol. 42 No 2 (June 1988), p. 160.
2. Robert Creeley, rev. by Alan Loney of *Dear Mondrian*, *Islands*, Vol. 4 No. 4 (Summer 1975), p. 467.
3. Letter of Robert Creeley to Charles Olson, 23 October 1951, in *Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, Vol. 8, ed. George F. Butterick (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1987), p. 83.
4. George Bowering, *A Way With Words* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1982), p. 23.
5. T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Essays*, by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 15.
6. T.S. Eliot, 'The Classics and the Man of Letters', *T.S. Eliot: Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 215.

7. John Holloway, *Widening Horizons in English Verse* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 108-9.
8. Simon During, rev. by Subramani of *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation*, (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 1985), in *Landfall*, Vol. 41 no 3 (September 1987), p. 359.
9. Allen Curnow, 'Modern Australian Poetry', in *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings, 1935-1984*, ed. Peter Simpson (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987), p. 83.
10. *Hugh McDiarmid: Complete Poems, 1920-1976*, ed. Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken (London: Martin Brian and O'Keefe, 1978), Vol. II, p. 790.
11. Wilson Harris, *Explorations* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1981), p. 135.
12. Leigh Davis, *Willy's Gazette* (Wellington: Jack Books, 1984), n.p.
13. Ian Wedde, Introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (Auckland: Penguin, 1985), p. 23.
14. See, for example, Charles Madge's obituary for Eliot, 'In Memoriam, T.S.E.', in *New Verse*, Nos. 31-2 (Autumn 1938), p. 18.
15. Les Murray quoted in C.K. Stead, 'Standing Up to the City Slickers', rev. by Les Murray of *Selected Poems and The Daylight Moon*, *London Review of Books*, (18 February 1988), p. 11.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
17. Derek Walcott, *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (London: Johathan Cape, 1980), p.4.
18. David Dabydeen, *Coolie Odyssey* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1988). 'Coolie Odyssey' is the title poem.
19. Wilson Harris, *Explorations* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1981), p. 135.
20. Wole Soyinka, *Six Plays* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 5