Revising the past/Revisioning the future: A postcolonial reading of Eleanor Dark's 'The Timeless Land' trilogy

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Abstract

It is the purpose of this paper to propose that the preoccupation with the mythopoeic nature of Australia's historical narratives in Eleanor Dark's trilogy, The Timeless Land, situates it within the rubric of post-colonial writing.

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There has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism (Walter Benjamin).2

In an essay entitled ‘Recuperative Strategies in the Post-Colonial Novel’, Helen Tiffin puts forth a number of important distinctions between colonial discourse and post-colonial counter-discursive practices.3 Central to her argument is the assertion that a ‘rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record characterizes the post-colonial enterprise’.4 She notes moreover that:

[The post-European or post-colonial rewriting of the European narratives of quest, discovery, settlement, imperial enterprise and colonial ‘development’ inevitably involves a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemologies and an impulse to create or re-create an independent local identity’.5

Taking as a basis the theoretical framework which Tiffin enunciates, it is the purpose of this paper to propose that the preoccupation with the mythopoetic nature of Australia’s historical narratives in Eleanor Dark’s trilogy, *The Timeless Land*, situates it within the rubric of post-colonial writing. I will argue that the trilogy derives a unique significance from the *focus* it places on a re-writing of Australian history which clearly interferates the most basic foundations of Australia’s European origins. Given the Australian literary climate in the 1930s and 1940s, notably its fervent concern with the notion of Australian nationalism, the relevance of Dark’s narrative is emphasised by its place ‘at a crucial site in the construction of Australian identity’.6 For, as Edward Said has suggested, ‘Triumphant, achieved nationalism … justifies retrospectively as well as prospectively, a history selectively strung together in a narrative form’.7 Dark offers in the trilogy a narrative of nationhood which attempts to counteract the threateningly hegemonic nationalism Said refers to.

In *The Timeless Land* trilogy Eleanor Dark deals with the early period of Australia’s colonisation, and in particular with some of the notions crucial to our modern sense of nationhood. More importantly, through a questioning of traditional historical accounts of Australia’s colonisation, the trilogy opens up new and diverse perspectives for understanding the construction of Australian identity.
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colonial past, the novels weave a parallel yet alternative interpretation of the roles of significant persons and major events in our national cosmology. Thus although essentially a fictionalised account of our past, Dark's work reveals an obvious concern with a re-ordering of the various threads which constitute the fundamental fabric of our national imagination. It is precisely 'this juxtaposition of the fictional with the historical', in Tiffin's terms, which then 'forces a reconsideration of each mode in light of the other'. By craft a weaver of tales, the novelist is a priori able to enter much more freely a domain where the treatment of factual data may not always stand up to close scrutiny. Indeed, at the outset, and in a prologue to the first novel in the trilogy, Dark claims for herself a political stance which attempts to validate the use and manipulation of historical facts in order to articulate the thematic concerns of her work. She is thus able to reveal the sense of dissent which historians more generally are not permitted to express in their own narratives. As Tiffin notes, '[b]y re-imagining how “Australia” ... came into being', postcolonial fiction 'reopen[s] those closures of textual containment' implicated in the claim to 'objectivity' intrinsic to historical discourses. One might argue therefore that literature often constitutes, or may function potentially as a 'history of history'. As he sets out to re-order historical facts and perceptions, Dark implicitly arrogates for her trilogy the status of a more valid account of Australia's early colonial period. Indeed, as the trilogy suggests, history is always written by the victors. Dark's work focuses on the numerous gaps and absences which white colonial discourse strove to enshrine, if only by dint of its hegemonic nature. Those who wrote the historical narratives of quest, discovery and 'pacification' manifested an understandable reluctance to address the reality of the peoples and lands they visited. As The Timeless Land illustrates, they in fact created the fiction which legitimated their presence in an hostile environment. Referring to historical and fictional European discourses Peter Worsley remarks in his work, The Third World:

Even Nature was seen through European eyes at times: the Australian eucalypt bush was drawn with the sort of foliage and outline of European woodland ... Europe's spiritual search infused the vision of even the scientific recorders. Bedraped Greeks disported themselves beneath the palm-trees in the 'grottoes' and amphitheatres of the South Pacific.

What Worsley identifies here, despite the quote's primary allusion to a level of visual representation, and what Eleanor Dark delineates in greater detail in her work, is that the coloniser comes to write his or her
claim to the land through words, and more specifically through their inscription on the page. As critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gauri Viswanathan have demonstrated, the written word has long constituted the backbone of colonialism, both as ideology and as praxis. The ability to (re)present the stories of the Other on the page has effectively allowed an erasing of his/her subjectivity and subsequently, a denial of their culture as readable texts. As a character notes in Storm of Time: ‘We are strangers here, with no stories behind us ... we are ourselves the first stories’. The issue is perhaps best illustrated in the attempt made by the young Aboriginal girl, Dilboong, at writing. Through the inscription of the word ‘BELIEVE’ on the slated floor, she endeavours to (re)claim an identity, the sense of subjectivity which the European invasion denied her. As Dark seems to suggest, although Aboriginal culture may retain its stories and legends, such as that of Dine wan, the Emu, these are already in the process of being obliterated by the white man’s more durable printed word.

A point frequently stressed in the novels is precisely the fact that Aboriginal Australians did in fact have cultures and languages. If I may misquote Michael Wood, ‘their silence was not just unspoken [English] and it was not consent’. To this extent Dark highlights the conflicting nature of the relationship between orality and the written text and traditional and modern societies. Through her efforts to learn how to put words on the slate, Dilboong endeavours to gain the power to (re)write the narrative, or, in the words of Eva-Marie Kröler, attempts ‘to convert an apparently irrevocably interpreted past [into a] redefinable present’. Here Dilboong claims for herself a space and a place in the text of Australia’s national identity—‘small marks on the slate’. Denied the use of pen and paper—she is actually forbidden by Stephen Mannion from watching or listening to the lessons his sons receive from their private tutor—Dilboong uses the wet rag with which she wipes the floors to spell out her, and, in fact, the correct version of the word ‘believe’ which the younger Mannion continually misspells. As the printed signifier evaporates, so too does her presence in the room. It is perhaps useful to read in this poignant, if somewhat melodramatic scene, a very pointed allusion to the sort of claim Aboriginal Australians have held on the land. Having owned and occupied the land for thousands of years, their presence remains recorded only in the numerous, yet mostly hidden, etchings in caverns or cliff walls. From the perspective of European history-making this inconspicuousness then makes it perfectly morally and physically justifiable to usurp and colonise a land so ‘obviously’ devoid of visible signs of life. On the other hand, it is possible to understand the ostensible lack of continuity as commentary on the inscriptions of the other...

Through the perspective of the text, the past as it is inscribed by the adventures of the main character, is a major anchor of the novel. It is within the framework of myth or traditional elements in a land that is united and divided. In other words, the so-called national identity to encourage...
with their indigenous peoples, according to Habha and other writers, is hierarchical and constitutively repressive. The self-evidently effective denial of Aboriginal constitutively and effectively denials of Time: the inscription of the European culture onto the Australian landscape. The act of dispossession—of the land, of a culture, of an identity—Dark's narrative both subverts and reverts historical perspectives, consequently undoing the mythology of conquest and civilisation at the heart of traditional Australian historical narratives. By reinscribing Aboriginal Australians in the narrative, Dark imposes an alter/native to a more conventionally endorsed notion of a European-anchored model of Australianness. The internecine conflicts portrayed in the novels—between English and Aboriginals, but more specifically within the ruling classes—articulate therefore (an)other version of the myth of Australian nationhood. Indeed, one of the more significant elements in the trilogy is precisely this accent on a barely cohesive society, united solely by the perceived threat of the peoples it strives to dominate. In other words, the trilogy undermines that 'triumphant, achieved nationalism' about which Said writes. As Leonie Rowan notes:

"to constantly and ceaselessly introduce difference into repetition is to weaken the master's control over his house and his tools and to allow life. One might argue indeed that the Terra Nullius decree was itself only possible, and certainly facilitated by the fact that Aboriginal peoples so ostensibly 'failed' to record their presence on the land. The narrator comments at one point, of the behaviour of the new arrivals:

There was the problem of meeting the effect of the land upon the minds, the emotions, the avaricious impulses of men who were not content to inhabit, but longed to possess ... There was an intoxication in space; hope lifted in a new country, ambition enlarged, and hands stretched out to grab."

Clearly to their disadvantage, Aboriginal Australians were 'content' simply 'to inhabit', and revealed no desire 'to possess' the land. As Hegel has written of that European breed of man with which he was more familiar:

"Man realises himself through practical activity, since he has the impulse to express himself, and so again to recognise himself as externally existent. He attains this by altering external things and impressing on them the stamp of his own inner nature, so that he rediscovers his own character in them. Man does this in order that he may profit by his freedom to break down the stubborn indifference of the external world to himself, and enjoy in the countenance of nature only an outward embodiment of himself."

Through an emphasis on the act of dispossession—of the land, of a culture, of an identity—Dark's narrative both subverts and reverts historical perspectives, consequently undoing the mythology of conquest and civilisation at the heart of traditional Australian historical narratives. By reinscribing Aboriginal Australians in the narrative, Dark imposes an alter/native to a more conventionally endorsed notion of a European-anchored model of Australianness. The internecine conflicts portrayed in the novels—between English and Aboriginals, but more specifically within the ruling classes—articulate therefore (an)other version of the myth of Australian nationhood. Indeed, one of the more significant elements in the trilogy is precisely this accent on a barely cohesive society, united solely by the perceived threat of the peoples it strives to dominate. In other words, the trilogy undermines that 'triumphant, achieved nationalism' about which Said writes. As Leonie Rowan notes:
for a new understanding of what the house is, how it was built and who it shelters.  

By juxtaposing the horrors lived by the settlers to those imposed by the latter on the Aboriginal peoples, Dark’s narrative disavows the very myth of colonialism as a signifier for civilisation. To the extent that the texts conflate the ‘constant and arduous struggle with the land and the Natives’, which traditional historical narratives describe as the colonists’ plight, with a parallel account of the brutal and systematic processes which led to both dispossession and elimination of the latter, they deny the English the aura of martyrdom intrinsic to colonial discourse. The point is compounded by the suggestion that in the new colony land was ‘not inherited, not even ... bought but acquired by a scratch of the governor’s pen’, thus irrevocably exploding the myth of an heroic conquest. Although the texts depict a rapport between whites and blacks ruled by mutual fear and distrust, Dark leaves us in no doubt as to the nature of the former’s presence on the land. Europeans are not once portrayed as other than invaders, whilst Aboriginal Australians appear quite clearly as the victims of colonisation. Those violations of the English settlement for which Aboriginals are seen to be responsible are then identified in the novels as acts of legitimate defence against the convicts’ continued incursions and occupation of their land. Indeed, both Pemulwy and Bennelong, two prominent Aboriginal individuals, are depicted by Dark in the mould of freedom fighters, their acts of resistance and leadership not unlike the actions of twentieth century nationalist leaders.

At one stage Stephen Mannion attempts to justify to the Governor the brutal methods of recrimination he is known to advocate against the increasingly frequent incursions by Aboriginals into the farmers’ properties. In a fit of anger he declares at one stage, ‘If by savagery Your Excellency means measures to protect life’, to which the governor is heard to utter to himself: ‘It was not long ago that your property was theirs’. At times like this, Dark’s narrative seems to reveal a desire to engage in a dialogue with the reader, and specifically a reader perceived by the text to be sympathetic to the ‘improvements’ on Australia’s history which Dark puts forth. Asides are addressed almost directly to this implied reader, and mediated through a sense of irony which shifts constantly between gentle wit and sarcasm; thus style constitutes one of the most effective ways in which Dark attempts to endow the trilogy’s revisionist tone with the greater authority of a communal (national) project. Despite the pious tone which Dark’s prose occasionally adopts, it reflects clearly
also a preoccupation with articulating a (sub)version of events which works as an alternative to other more traditional versions of Australia’s past. The novels’ overt antipathy towards the ‘genteel’ classes symbolised by the Mannions, the MacArthurs or the Wentworths, denotes yet another way in which Dark articulates a more valid Australian subject(ivity). The latter is embodied in the characters of Andrew Prentice, and later of his son Johnny, both of whom appear to be far more at ease in their dealings with Aboriginal Australians than the upper classes. Eleanor Dark is too cynical, however, to suggest that this ‘new Australian’ mistrust of authority is itself incompatible with a similar desire to cheat Aboriginal Australians of their land and their values, and ultimately to dominate them. Commenting on works by the Australian novelist Patrick White and the Barbadian author George Lamming, Tiffin states:

In forcing a reading of history through fiction, [these] accounts of colonial origination expose both the fictive nature of European history and the ways in which fictions, specifically those dealing with alterity, appropriate, annihilate and marginalize competing perspectives to produce authoritative and apparently objective historical accounts.24

Eleanor Dark’s work has often been criticised for subscribing, in diverse ways and varying degrees, to Rousseau’s notion of the Noble Savage. Whilst it would be impossible to deny that the portraits offered of Aboriginals and their society often appear simplistic and romantically patronising, they nevertheless allow them a voice within written Australian history which represents a break from normative depictions of Aboriginals and their culture in Australian literature. A case in point is the insertion in Dark’s novels of Aboriginal cultural, religious and socio-political rituals whilst the novelist simultaneously refrains from violating the sacred aura which surrounds them. Unlike the historian or the anthropologist of pre-Geertzian days, whose craft’s cloak of scientific rigorously demands a thorough and often disrespectful dissection of the Other, the novelist’s ability to play with the notion of ‘truth’ allows for a more ethical negotiation of the treacherous space which bridges the desire to tell the Other and the Western propensity for Othering. By presenting the dispossession of the Aboriginal peoples as a process which inevitably imprisoned the white invaders themselves, the works reveal yet another dimension of their postcolonial concerns. Thus in her portrayal of White Australian society in the late 1700s and early 1800s, Dark highlights the fact that the denial of dignity which colonialism so imperiously demands
ultimately imposes upon those whose job it is to execute the system's vicious measures the potential to experience a similar—but not the same—sense of debasement and abjection.

In conclusion, I would contend that whilst it may be argued that the liberal humanist ideologies espoused by Eleanor Dark's narratives limit the trilogy's ability to put forth a truly postcolonial narrative, *The Timeless Land* nevertheless reflects a remarkable attempt to 'introduce difference into repetition', in Rowan's words, and thus 'to allow for a new understanding of what the house is, how it was built and who it shelters'. The focus on the past becomes a central concern of a postcolonial fiction which attempts to place itself as an interpellation to a truly 'postcolonial moment'. In *The Timeless Land*, Dark returns to the past in order 'to disentangle it from the myths and fears that once made it menacing', and to reclaim it from the lies that have come to validate our present identity. Within the context of a growing awareness in contemporary Australia of the need to unsettle the sedimented past in order to re-create the future which Eleanor Dark's Trilogy must be read as an early example of Australian writing reflecting the counter-discursive aims of postcolonial fiction.

**Notes**

1. Eleanor Dark's Trilogy comprises *The Timeless Land* (*TTL*) (1941), *Storm of Time* (*ST*) (1948), and *No Barrier* (*NB*) (1953). The following editions will be used for the purpose of this essay: *TTL*: London: Collins, 1947; *ST*: London and Sydney, 1948: Collins; *NB*, London and Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980.


4. Helen Tiffin, p. 28.

5. Helen Tiffin, p. 27.

6. Helen Tiffin, p. 32.


8. Helen Tiffin, p. 32.

The system's narratives limit the past, not the present. The Third World (1967) and the following works: London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967, p. 12.


Eleanor Dark, *TTL*, 1947, p. 27.


The levels of controversy which the question of ‘settlement’ versus ‘invasion’ continues to draw in 1994 is perhaps a clear indication of the commitment which Dark’s works reveal towards a re-ordering of Australian history.


Eleanor Dark, *TTL* (1947), P. 342.

Helen Tiffin, p. 33.

Leonie Rowan, p. 77, emphasis added.