

26/08/96

BASA Conference, Stirling: 1996**Westminster Abroad: fictions of power and authority in contemporary democracies**

The problem of state authority is how to reconcile power with justice. Justice includes the rights of individuals against the state, the rights of individuals to the protection of the state, and the rights of different ethnic, linguistic or religious groups within the state. Our views of the proper assignment and exercise of power will depend on the differing emphases we give to these different rights. While the law attempts to develop systems that regulate power by proclamation, statute or precedent, these systems inevitably reflect the existing distribution of power. Both revolutionaries and novelists have always appreciated that the clearer the constitutional arrangements the more they conceal this reality. Yet revolution, like war, demands the complete subordination of the individual to its imperatives. The ideology needed to sustain it is total, allowing neither individual judgment to its supporters, rights to its enemies nor even passivity to the indifferent. In pursuit of justice it imposes tyranny, yet, as the Sri Lankan essayist Sasanka Perera argues in relation to state and partisan terror in Sri Lanka and Chile, the demand for justice is ineradicable. ¹Where the system allows it no expression, it goes inward, hiding behind acquiescence or rationalization, only to break out in public demonstration or religious possession. This is the territory of novelists, who, dealing with the lives and motivations of individuals, show the effects on them of the conflict between individual desire and public expectation. Although novelists rarely take account of constitutional niceties, or bother to distinguish between parochial, state and federal politicians, all of whom they tend to perceive as corrupt and self-seeking, their work nevertheless reveals the gap between the personal and the institutional, even as institutional demands are themselves internalized as ideology and personal desire projected as public benefit. In the novel, the individual becomes the ^{focus} ~~site~~ of the struggles for power that fill the public arenas. ✓

British constitutional theory derives from the commentaries of Hobbes and Locke. While these writers reached opposite conclusions on the means, they

agreed on both the problem and the purpose of the state. The issue was how to reconcile order with liberty, and their ideal was a just commonwealth. The Westminster system originated as a compromise between the autocratic and the popular models of sovereignty they enunciated, but in the UK has more recently evolved as a form of Hobbsian central power. Australia adopted the Westminster parliamentary system, but, following the United States, modified it by providing the checks of a written federal constitution with divided sovereignty. Yet neither the unitary nor the federal model can provide a true commonwealth, because both follow Hobbes and Locke in ignoring the individual's holistic experience of the personal and the collective.

Constitutional theory and fiction would seem to be at opposite ends of the continuum of discourse. The one is concerned with the precision and definition of an order placed on society's unruly turmoil, the other with the ambiguities and ambivalences we experience within this turmoil. Yet if, as Hobbes understood, society needs order if it is to survive and provide scope for individuals to achieve their desires, those who impose the order need to understand the impulses and perceptions of those whose struggles produce the disorder the legislators seek to curb. Political fiction helps us towards this understanding by providing a means by which we can grasp the individual's experience of the political system. This experience is not governed by the neat distinctions of the law, but is a holistic struggle to establish individuality through the institutions provided by society.

The law and the novel are similar insofar as the reality of each is constituted by words that are governed only by their own conventions. The law is what is proclaimed by judges, yet judges are required to act within the constraints of logic, evidence and precedent. Their words have direct practical effect on human affairs, yet they themselves are subject to endless interpretation. By contrast, fiction makes the external world internal, or breaks the barrier between the two, bringing circumstance under the control of subjectivity. Although novelists have greater freedom than judges, to the extent that their words are of less practical effect, they nevertheless are constrained by the inherent rules of the matter they choose as their subjects. The law itself holds them accountable if their words cause demonstrable harm to the community, whether by bringing particular people or

groups of people into disrepute or by eroding what courts and governments may from time to time consider to be the acceptable moral standards. Beyond this, fiction has long-term practical consequences in producing what Raymond Williams has called structures of feeling. These determine our ideology, what we see as natural about the world and the way we relate to it, and therefore have practical effects on our private and public behaviour.

While all writing is political in effect, if not in intention, certain novels place politics at their centre. The novels I discuss here are all political in this sense, and probably also in the sense that they are intended to produce a directly political effect on the reader. Beyond this, however, their politics are very different. Sam Watson places his immediate conflicts in the context of a mythological struggle against evil forces that individuals must overcome within themselves before they can combat them in society. This struggle takes us back from contemporary Brisbane to the dawn of time and the creation of Australia, a perspective that makes our present constitutional arguments seem trivial, irrelevant to the human issues involved in achieving a just society. Amanda Lohrey takes the reader inside an industrial dispute, showing the inability of either law or abstract principle to comprehend the complexity of the ambitions that drive the individuals in their causes and conflicts. Although the author's sympathies are clear, the novel seeks understanding rather than action on the part of the reader. Similarly, David Dabydeen's novels offer insight into the situation of the black in Britain, yet the recognition they demand of the black as a citizen and a member of civil society is intensely political. It would be possible to accept the authenticity of Lohrey's novel and still believe that the unions are misguided. It is not possible to accept either Watson's or Dabydeen's novels and continue to ignore the exclusions of Aborigines and blacks from their societies.

The literary form that made the most overt political demands on its readers was social realism, from Dickens onwards, and its explicitly ideological successor, socialist realism. The latter form claims to demonstrate the essential truths of history through the interplay between personal desire and social circumstance in the lives of characters who can be regarded as characteristic of their times. It makes the further claim that by exploring this conflict it can demonstrate the way to

resolving it through revolutionary political action. Thus Frank Hardy commences his political novel, Power Without Glory, in a Melbourne paralysed by poverty and depression, shows the corruption engendered by individual and parliamentary attempts to escape these circumstances, and concludes with a vision of a revolutionary future free of both oppression and corruption.² The demonstration gains its power from the fact that it is firmly based on Australian history from 1890 to the 1940s. This history provides not only the framework of depression and war, sporting and business intrigues and the fluctuations of political fortune, but the details of character and event that comprise the substance of the narrative. The characters are thinly-disguised analogues of people recognizable from the parts they have played in public events and popular mythology. But this scurrilous account of the lives of the great and powerful diverts attention from the kind of truth the novel offers. By grounding his account in public events, Hardy as narrator asks the reader to trust his account of them. The reality Hardy seeks to establish is the experience of the opportunities, frustrations and deformations offered by capitalist society. In the end, we judge the book by its purported revelations of particular conspiracies and scandals, rather than by its success in revealing the cost paid by West and by society for his escape from poverty to power. Reading the novel against its intent, its implication is that the attractions of power deform both individual desire and collective effort, and that even a revolution is unlikely to establish a commonwealth. This is the lesson Hardy pursues in his most important political novel, But the Dead Are Many.³

In this work, Hardy deals with the implications for Australia of Stalin's betrayal of the ideals in which Communists throughout had invested their faith. The vehicle for his investigation is John Morel, an analogue of Paul Mortier, ideologue and inspirational intellectual leader among Australian communists in the postwar years, who eventually took his own life when his external world fell apart. By using an actual character, Hardy sets himself the same task he had had in Power Without Glory, to bring together the inner significance of events while remaining true to recorded fact, but with Morel, unlike West, he has a character modelled on a colleague whose history and attitudes he has shared. The novel is thus an attempt to discover the meaning of ^{His a} ~~his own~~ life as it has been shaped by history, and of the

meaning of the history that has shaped it. Morel shares with the protagonists of classics like Arthur Koestler's Darkness at Noon and Victor Serge's The Case of Comrade Tulayev the sense of betrayal by the revolution that he continues to support, but as an Australian he remains an outsider to power, and therefore does not have the same sense of responsibility for this betrayal.⁴ Hardy extends his character's role as participant observer by taking him beyond the career of his historical counterpart to take him to Moscow during the show trials of the thirties.

Koestler's novel is one of a trilogy he wrote to explain appeal and the destructive effects of the international Communism. It was written after his escape to England following his experience of the miseries of life in Russia under Stalin and in a Falangist prison in Spain, in a life he described for the benefit of uncomprehending English readers as "typical of a Central European member of the intelligentsia in the totalitarian age. He explains:

It was entirely normal for a writer, an artist, politician or teacher with a minimum of integrity to have several narrow escapes from Hitler and/or Stalin; to be chased and exiled, and to get acquainted with prisons and concentration camps.⁵

Yet he considers he was fortunate, despite his experiences of displacement, poverty, abuse, and the fear of imminent death. Most of those he wrote about from this time later "vanished in the dense fogs of the East" (p.118). His knowledge of their fate, and of the complacency of western intellectuals in the face of it, gives his writing its moral urgency as he tries to come to terms with the forms of totalitarianism that have destroyed them, often after, like his liberal German employers, they have given their acquiescence, or, like those who joined him in service to the God who failed, their enthusiastic support.

Koestler found a refuge from these consequences of zealotry in England, "a country . . . suspicious of all causes, contemptuous of systems, bored by ideologies, sceptical about Utopias, suspicious of all systems, bored by ideologies, rejecting all blueprints" (p.218) and offering a "human climate . . . particularly congenial and soothing . . . for internally bruised veterans of the totalitarian age" (p.220). Although he became dissatisfied with life in Britain under its postwar

Labour government, and remained contemptuous of England's ruling class, particularly the judges who for two hundred years defended a barbaric system of punishment, after 1952 he made London his home, a permanent outsider in a country which filled him alternately with contentment and exasperation. The contentment arose from its general tolerance, its freedom from the fanaticisms he had known in Europe, while the exasperation was induced by legal system based on the rights of property and fear of the lower orders who might threaten it. As he explains in his 'Reflections on Hanging', the English belief in the liberty of the individual led them to prefer harsh punishment to effective policing, with the consequence that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they adopted the most penal code in Europe. This code, which freed the mob from the obligations of labour for eight 'Hanging Days' a year - more than the number of religious holidays - was strenuously supported by generations of judges who opposed any attempts at mitigation while not once objecting to repeated extensions of its capital provisions or admitting to the possibilities of injustice in its processes (p.548-9). As in the United States, the criminal code is the dark side of a society based on the rights of the individual. It recognizes the responsibilities of individuals for their own actions, but breaches the ideal of commonwealth by denying any rights to those who, voluntarily or involuntarily, deviate from its norms.

In contrast to Britain, ^{Koestler} continental European political and legal systems ^{had} been extensively codified to provide a place for everything and everyone. This offers fertile breeding ground for comprehensive ideological systems that provide abstract criteria for judging every policy and action. In his reflections on these systems, Koestler explains how idealistic individuals with a psychological predisposition to rebellion, reacted against the miseries of capitalism by responding to the public representations of the ^Soviet Union as an ideal society. During the nineteen-thirties these factors brought converts to communism from around the world - not as "a fashion or a craze" but as a "sincere and spontaneous expression of an optimism born out of despair"(p.67). Yet such optimism led to entrapment in the utilitarian ethics of revolution (p.143). Even the realities of daily life in the Soviet Union could not dispel the illusions that justified this ethic, for the foreign comrades merely assured themselves that when their turn came they would do it

better (p.112). The core of these ethics was a denial of human subjectivity and the avoidance of responsibility for the actions of the party or of the individual self as its agent. All action was judged by its outcome, but as this outcome could be known only in the future the only immediate test of correctness was the Party line, the policy laid down by Party authorities. The underlying syllogism confined members in the inescapable logic of a closed system:

It was easy . . . to prove scientifically that everybody who disagreed with the Party line was an agent of Fascism because (a) by disagreeing with the line he endangered the unity of the Party; (b) by endangering the unity of the Party he improved the chances of a Fascist victory; hence (c) objectively he acted as an agent of Fascism even if subjectively he had his kidneys smashed in a Fascist concentration camp. (p.90)

Koestler shows how the logic of the closed system defies correction by either logic or evidence, obliterating inconvenient distinctions and translating factual objections into the domain of the personal. "In short, the closed system [Marxist, Freudian, Catholic] excludes the possibility of objective argument by two related proceedings: (a) facts are deprived of their value by scholastic processing; (b) objections are invalidated by shifting the argument to the personal motive behind the objection" (p.84).

This closed system, which immunized Koestler against both his intellectual origins, and even against any fascination from the past when he travelled to the remotest and most ancient cultures on the margins of the Soviet Union, suppressed even the doubts expressed in an unguarded moment by a devoted communist who, reflecting on the inability of the ideologues to move beyond the abstract to simple enjoyment of the moment, asked "why is it that the leaves die wherever we go?" (p.103). For Koestler, the answer eventually came in the Spanish prison. Here he recognized the pleasure of the untrammelled intellect that can escape even the imminence of death to rejoice in the discovery of mathematical truth. His experiences also led him to recognize among his gaolers the simple goodness of ordinary people who nevertheless, if allotted the role by society, will commit

appalling atrocities (p.130). This recognition does not lead him to an abdication of responsibility, but rather to an insistence that we are all individually responsible for what we do of our own will, and particularly for our complicity in any system that accepts destruction as the cost of an unknowable future. He realized that the survival of the Soviet system was due to the uncomplaining integrity of those people, in all ranks of life, "created around themselves little islands of order and dignity in an ocean of chaos and absurdity", who maintained civic virtues in a regime that denied them, and who became the first victims of each new purge (pp. 114-5). Yet he understood also the nobility and self-destructive heroism of those who gave their loyalty to such a system, even to the point that, like the old Bolsheviks in the Moscow show trials, they conceded to its final demand that they accept the monstrous untruth of the crimes alleged against them rather than undermine the power of the Party to which they had given their lives.

Hardy's novel is similarly a tragedy, as it shows one man coming to understand that his life has been dedicated to an illusion. Hardy traces John Morel's descent through the maze of ideological certainty into empirical absurdity and personal chaos until, losing confidence in his ability to operate effectively as a subject in an objective world, he finds death his only option. In this, he resembles the old Bolsheviks in the novels of Koestler and Serge, except that they, held physically by the Party they have served, choose death as their last service, whereas Morel, held only by allegiance, chooses death because the beliefs he has held can no longer support his life. The questions Hardy poses about Morel are how he came to hold these beliefs, and why, of all his comrades, he is the one who is destroyed by their collapse. The answer he supplies to the first lies in Morel's personality, the product of a Catholic upbringing and idealistic parents - a Catholic mother and a free-thinking atheist and socialist, but intermittently violent, father. This produced what Koestler identified as a predisposition to revolution, but it also made him a lonely man "who needed the group but did not value it sufficiently" (p.47). The spectacle of poverty produced by an unjust society during the Depression provided the cause to which he could give his life - revolutionary socialism - and the group - the Communist Party. This quickly provided him with a career, absorbing his life so that there was nothing outside Party and ideology. Yet

his loneliness, his inability either to give himself completely to the group or to live without it, kept alive a conscience that could not surrender itself to the judgement of a Party that, denying any place for individual judgement, destroyed any possible basis of a community or commonwealth in which individuals could find themselves in collective experience. While Serge and Koestler show how this process begins in the subjectivity of the individuals who sustain it, and demonstrate its power, despite everything, to command their loyalties to the end, Hardy goes beyond them in demonstrating not just the corrupting effects of power, but the way it disintegrates and destroys the subjectivity of those who accept its demands.

In contrast to Hardy's panoramic novels, Amanda Lohrey's The Morality of Gentlemen uses a particular episode of union history as a focus through which to view the desires and ambitions of the people involved in it and the pressures of the institutions brought to bear on them. Lohrey shows the effects of two closed ideologies, the Marxism of the Communist Party of Australia and the Catholicism of the National Civic Council, or the Movement, on the pragmatics of a dispute that brings into conflict contrasting views of justice, organizational imperatives in unions and political movements, and the ideals and aspirations of particular politicians. The novel, which is loosely based on the Hursey case, shows the distance between the matters that activate individuals, the rhetoric they use to explain it to themselves and their constituents, and the closed systems of law and ideology by which society attempts to control their activities.

At one level, the novel pits against each other two ideas of justice, both essential to a democracy - the right of individuals to dissociate themselves from organizations they disagree with without suffering penalty, and the right of workers to band together in collective action to maintain their interests and support their views. Yet these abstract principles are brought into play as moves in a power struggle aimed at purging unions of communism and bringing them under the control of a national Catholic industrial movement. But on another level, the parts played by individuals in this struggle are dictated as much by family, church and union loyalties, political ambition or personal disposition as by ideology. To make an absolute value of either individual or organisation absolute is to enter a closed system that destroys all principle.

Koestler, Hardy and Lohrey all deal in their novels with the resistance of the masses to state or class tyrannies exercising power in the name of the common good. For racially excluded minorities, however, the commonwealth of the majority is itself the enemy. In England, David Dabydeen was admitted to some of the privileges of the ruling class, but at the cost of the recognition of his full humanity. In Australia, Sam Watson's fiction provides the imaginative grounds of his political action on behalf of a minority who are not only, like blacks in England, denied recognition of their role in imperial history, but denied even a history of their own. His novel is an attempt to regain the present of his people in terms of both their history and their own creation myth.

Dabydeen gained access to the privileged education that is one of the most exclusive privileges of British society, yet, as he explains in his essay 'On not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', this was at the cost of his full humanity.⁶ To become a writer he had to go back to his mother tongue, the Guyanan creole that is "angry, crude, energetic . . . reflecting the brokenness and suffering of its original users". His first published work, Slave Song, uses this language to recapture "the full experience of its users which is a very deep one, deep in suffering, cruelty, drunken merriment and tenderness. (p.15) In these songs he expresses the experience of a people alienated by colonialism from the land and their labour, even denied recognition as adult, fully sexual beings. These denials produce the brutality, but also the occasional moments of tenderness that keep alive an alternative possibility. Dabydeen's second book, Coolie Odyssey, mixes Creole with standard English as, from the perspective of contemporary England, he traces the journeyings of his people to their present, seeking the promised land of Eldorado that the colonisers had first sought in Guyana.⁷ The demand they make on their new home is not merely equality, but the recognition of their own past and the language that holds it on the same terms as the British are seeking to reclaim their own peasant legacy:

Now that peasantry is in vogue
Poetry bubbles from peat bogs,
People strain for the old folk's fatal gobs
Coughed up in grates North or North East

'Tween bouts o' living dialect,
It should be time to hymn your own wreck,
Your house the source of ancient song:
Dry coconut shells cackling in the fireside
Smoking up our children's eyes and lungs,
Plantains spitting oil from a clay pot,
Thick sugary black tea gulped down. (p.9)

The speaker is demanding that all the subjects of colonialism be given a home here, at the very seat of imperialism. To concede the demand would transform both the present of Britain into a commonwealth recognized as the heir of all the traditions that have been subsumed into imperial history. A Britain on this basis would transform the European Community from a club of imperial legatees into a community open to the world that imperialism integrated. At the same time, the acceptance of the different histories of the imperial subjects would allow people to reclaim their separate destinies from the impersonality of global economic imperatives.

Dabydeen's two novels take up the challenge of these transformations.⁸ The first, The Intended, is about growing up black in England, the second, Disappearing, about a black professional working in England.¹ In both books the central character overcomes his exclusions by keeping an intellectual distance that at the same time enables him to find a career. Yet both books are as much about the protagonist's acceptance of himself in a white society as they are about his division from it. Like the blacks in the Guyana of his earlier poems, who fantasize about reversing their subjugation by violating the white women who tyrannize them, the central characters of the novels have to establish their inner commonwealth, to accept themselves as worthy, before they can become free citizens of the wider state.

Sam Watson's The Kadaithcha Sung⁹ is an extremely angry novel. Its descriptions of the normal life of Aborigines in Brisbane, social realist in form, anticipate grunge by the violence of their subject matter. The violence, sexual and otherwise, is however neither an attempt to titillate the jaded emotions of the white

1.

liberal reader, nor merely a depiction of the nihilistic outrage of an alienated underclass or outclass. Rather, it is the inevitable response of a brutalised minority that is denied the right either to participate in the wider community or to develop freely its own rules and codes. Yet the novel does not stop there, for the portrayal of the community and the narrative of the struggle for power between its emerging leader and the quisling agents of state power is framed by the wider narrative of Aboriginal creation myth and an initiation ceremony that restores the connection between modern circumstance and timeless reality. The myth suggests a commonwealth resting on a compact between gods and humans, or the land, representing the unchanging laws of nature, and the particular people dwelling on it. By emphasising responsibilities to life rather than rights against neighbours or the state it provides a firmer basis for a nation state than the legalisms of a social contract. To the Aboriginal reader, this myth offers an imaginative connection between the despair of the present and a possible future. To the white reader, it offers a symbolic explanation of the plight of the Aborigines in terms that recognise their history of dispossession and its spiritual significance, and the reality of their regaining control of their future, of again becoming agents rather than victims of history. The mythology of the novel both anticipates and offers an imaginative counterpart to the vision of commonwealth formed from plural nationalities in a single state that Henry Reynolds explores in his latest work.¹⁰

While Koestler and Hardy, in their different ways, demonstrate the impossibility of imposing commonwealth by force, and Lohrey shows the inevitable gap between the ideals and reality of any commonwealth, Dabydeen and Watson, writing from the viewpoint of the dispossessed, point not only to the distortion wreaked by imperialist history on the ideal of commonwealth, but also to a future that, in Britain as in Australia, may recover the ideal as an alternative to, rather than a protection against, Hobbes' nasty, short and brutish individualism. While present political power in both countries is in the hands of those who daily prove themselves incapable of understanding, let alone advancing, any ideal of commonwealth, the force of the creative imagination keeps hope alive.

But Lohrey shows that the task of realizing this hope will be as painful as the destructive history of imperialism has been for its victims. Yet the conclusion we are led to is that a Commonwealth resting on Hobbesian repression will generate brutality - the only way forward is to pay the price of including the repressed rather than a broken commonwealth of difference.

This myth provides a second level of narrative - magical or learning - Tony integrates the unlearned with universal myths - African - Celtic - and gains an appreciation of their limitations

¹ Sasanka Perera, Living with Torturers, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 1995, pp. 46-55.

² Frank Hardy, Power without Glory, Lloyd O'Neil, Hawthorn, Vic., 1972 [1950].

³ *Ibid.*, But the Dead Are Many, Bodley Head Australia, Sydney, 1975.

⁴ Information on the origins of characters in But the Dead Are Many supplied by Pauline Armstrong, who also told me that Mortier's widow, Dulcie, supplied Hardy with information and assisted him with the editing, but insists that his portrayal of relationships between members of the family, and of particular episodes, is inaccurate.

⁵ Arthur Koestler, Bricks to Babel, Random House, New York, 1980, p.220.

⁶ David Dabydeen, 'On not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', in Geoffrey V. Davis and Henna Maes-Jelinek (eds.), Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English, Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1990, pp. 61-74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Coolie Odyssey, Hansib House/Dangaroo, London and Coventry, 1988

⁸ *ibid.*, The Intended, Secker and Warburg, London, 1991; Disappearance, Secker and Warburg, London, 1993

⁹ Sam Watson, The Kadaitcha Sung, Penguin Australia, Ringwood, 1990.

¹⁰ Henry Reynolds, Sovereignty, ~~1996~~ *Aboriginal* Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, Sydney 1996