

FEARFUL SYMMETRIES: TRAUMA AND “SETTLER ENVY” IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN CULTURE

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While it is the case that the traumatic effects of colonization have been identified and investigated (see Žižek 1997: 28-51), so that an analogy between decolonisation and the process of recovery in therapy could also be sketched (see Lloyd 2000: 212-228), there is a danger that the conceptual apparatus proper to trauma studies may be too glibly transposed to the specific cultural situation of a former settler colony like Australia. In part this would be a case of succumbing to the lures of intellectual fashion. Gail Jones has pointed to the “discursive exorbitance and privilege” (Jones 2004: 159) enjoyed by a brand of theorizing predicated on a form of Derridean “hauntology”, which pervades current sensibilities as they become manifest in postmodern approaches to history, reality, representation. This suggests that an ambivalent perception of absence/presence, always susceptible to intuited accommodations of supplementarity, characterizes postmodern theoretical elaborations which necessarily displace a sense of the real felt to be ungraspable in its ipseity. This context accounts for the claims made by the trauma model not only on segments of psychology but also on phenomenological philosophy and on historiography, not to mention its further forays in the fields of “ethics, theology, legal studies, pedagogy, and literary theory, to name but a few” (Jones 2004: 161). Concurrently, in an important intervention Dominick LaCapra has warned against the consequences of confusing the concepts of absence and loss, which may result in the occultation of “the significance or force

of particular historical losses (for example, those of Apartheid or the Shoah)” (LaCapra 1999: 712). In other words, as against the postmodern tendency to subsume the real under its representations, and more particularly to privilege trauma so as to figure forth all of reality in its elusive ramifications, LaCapra reminds us that:

Historical trauma is specific and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has the right to the victim’s voice or subject position. (1999: 722)

This *caveat* constitutes a mainspring of inspiration for the commentary outlined in the present essay. Indeed, over and beyond the frequent epistemological obfuscations induced by postmodern sensibilities, my motivation for submitting what follows¹ is inseparable from the wish to further expose what Jones identifies as a “transferential gesture of victim surrogacy” (162), symptomatic of postcolonizing settler cultures, and to explore some of the forms assumed by this dubious transference in a selection of representative literary expressions latterly produced in Australia.

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Thus, it is imperative, if we approach trauma as a constitutive dimension of both the colonial and the post-colonial situations, that we should remain alert to the particulars of the historical circumstances subtending the correlated theoretical elaborations. On the face of it, there are of course clear substantial grounds for suggesting that trauma studies may prove analytically productive with a view to understanding post-colonial processes both in general and in the particular case of Australia. Generally speaking, one remembers Frantz Fanon’s famous declaration to the effect that colonialism is a nervous condition. In the same line of thought, more recent commentators have emphasized the resemblances existing between psychoanalytic recovery and the recuperative drive implicit in the construction of a post-colonial identity. Witness Leela Gandhi:

The colonial aftermath calls for an ameliorative and therapeutic theory which is responsive to the task of remembering and recalling the colonial past. The work of this theory may be compared to what Lyotard describes as “the psychoanalytic procedure of *anamnesis*, or analysis—which urges patients to elaborate their current problems by freely associating apparently inconsequential details with past situations—allowing them to uncover hidden meanings in their lives and behaviour”. In adopting this procedure, postcolonial theory inevitably commits itself to a complex project of historical and psychological “recovery”. (Gandhi 1998: 8)

It can be argued that this congruence of “historical and psychological recovery” bears pointed relevance to the narrative of national self-definition in Australia, which depended from the first upon the perpetuation of a singular collective

amnesia, but also on the further desire to transform this mnemonic gap into a form of historical memory. Trauma theory then seems adequate to the task of exploring this typical (post-)colonial ambivalence in view of its willingness to deploy itself at the limit of articulate expression, and to map out realities falling just outside the safeties of public acknowledgement. In this sense, though, it should be noted that the theories of trauma appear as themselves morally ambivalent, if only because the discharge of intense psychic suffering which it entails is seen to be vindicated, no matter how problematically so, by what it potentially offers in terms of heuristic progress. Indeed, more often than not the dimension of suffering is played down in trauma studies, in favour of a compensatory emphasis on the new intellectual purchase that it makes possible. The latter is typically underlined by Cathy Caruth when she proposes that, “in its repeated imposition as both image and amnesia, the trauma [...] seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence” (Caruth 1995: 153).

It is therefore extremely tempting —though not, I suggest, risk-free— to approach the settlement of Australia as such a historical “occurrence”, one that was characterized by an in-built inability to understand itself, thus remaining in settler memory as the kind of past that was never fully experienced, not at least at the moment when it came to pass.² Arguably this “void” typifying traumatic experience came to be encoded into the first settlers’ perception of the Australian continent as *terra nullius* (empty land). This is the name of the doctrine, an aspect of international law, which was invoked by the British as they took possession of Australia at the end of the 18th century. The rationale behind *terra nullius* is that it was indeed legal to lay hold of territory demonstrably owned by no-one. Hence the settlers’ decision to view the Aborigines of Australia as nomads tied in no way to the land by any relationship that could be construed as involving a recognizable form of official proprietorship. The fact that this depended on a misrepresentation of the Aborigines’ complex attachment to the land³ did not prevent the doctrine of *terra nullius* from remaining in undiminished force until the end of the 20th century. In this sense it constituted a blind spot, indeed an index of the non-indigenous Australians’ ongoing inability to register the full impact of settlement, which continued to inform subsequent attempts to trace the narrative of Australian history. In 1968, this vertiginous void at the heart of national self-representations was famously called the “Great Australian Silence” by the anthropologist W.H. Stanner, who considered that white historiography in Australia was governed by “a cult of forgetfulness practised on the national scale” (Stanner 1968: 25-26). This made for a skewed account of historical tradition, summarised by the historian Bain Attwood in the following fashion:

At the turn of the [nineteenth] century historical narratives were coalescing into a myth which could be summarised thus: following its discovery by Captain James Cook in 1770, Australia was founded by the British in 1788 when Governor Phillip declared British sovereignty and took possession of the entire continent. This was in accord with legal convention because prior to the coming of the white man the continent was inhabited by a relatively small number of nomadic savages whose culture was simple and unevolved and who did not cultivate the land and who therefore forfeited any right to it. The process of colonising the new land was, by and large, peaceful, and although Aboriginal society was more or less destroyed this was largely an unforeseen consequence of introduced diseases and tribal conflict, and inasmuch as there was any conflict between settlers and Aborigines the latter were treated in accordance with British justice and their suffering was alleviated by humanitarian endeavour. Besides, the Aborigines' decline was inevitable because they were a weak, inferior, archaic and unprogressive race which was incapable of adapting to the presence of the white man—in short a dying race which would pass away. By contrast, British settlers, drawing on the knowledge of intrepid explorers, settled upon the strange and alien continent, and with enormous courage, fortitude and hard work came to possess it by transforming it into flourishing pastures and the like, so that the countryside prospered, great cities were created, and the Australian colonies became a working man's paradise. Not only British people, but also British values such as equality, liberty and justice, and venerable British institutions, especially political and legal ones, were successfully transplanted. In time a new nation was born. (Attwood 1996: 101-102)

There is of course a sense in which this kind of narrative only confirms Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (Benjamin 1968: 255). This raises the interesting possibility that what is traumatic about history is not only the phenomenology of the past—the actual bloodshed— but also historiography itself—the accounts which get written, inasmuch as they continue to exert coercion and repression.⁴ This much has been acknowledged by Dori Laub in her work on trauma, specifically when she explores the difficulty of bearing witness about the Holocaust as a condition which affects both the victims and the perpetrators.

In her analysis the point is again that the incomprehensible nature of the event precludes its own witnessing outside some predetermined mental framework:

[As the Jewish Genocide unfolded,] it was inconceivable that any historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness, that is, to be sufficiently detached from the inside so as to stay entirely *outside* of the trapping roles, and the consequent identities, either of the victim or of the executioner. No observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity—a wholeness and a separateness—that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing. The perpetrators, in their attempt to rationalize the unprecedented scope of the

destructiveness, brutally imposed upon their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane, point of reference in the witness. (Laub 1995: 66)

It may not be the least consequence of this kind of perception, which is reminiscent of Althusser’s definition of ideological interpellation or indeed of Derrida’s approach to hegemony in his “Violence and Metaphysics” (1978: 79-153), that it posits trauma as the source of a bond between the murderer and the victim — a highly problematic notion which finds a disturbing resonance in the context of contemporary Australia, for historical and political reasons that will be outlined below. For the moment, suffice it to insist that, as David Lloyd points out, the frequent numbing of sense —which Freud had already identified as a major symptom of trauma— can be seen in this context to correspond to the denial of the means of understanding the traumatizing event “outside the terms that constitute the common sense of hegemony, a phenomenon that places considerable onus on the postcolonial historian to make other sense of the event and of the narratives that congregate around it” (Lloyd 2000: 215).

In Australia, the challenge of stepping outside the totalitarian frame of reference in which the genocidal event occurred, by providing an independent viewpoint through which the past could be observed, lies at the heart of the ongoing public debate known as the History Wars. In the wake of Bill Stanner’s forceful pronouncement about the “Great Australian Silence”, a number of progressive historians have addressed the task of filling in the void by writing up the forgotten pages of Australian history. These crusaders for another truth include Charles Rowley, Henry Reynolds, Bain Attwood, Andrew Markus, Heather Goodall, Ann McGrath, Tim Rowse and others. For example, in his book *Why Weren’t We Told?* Henry Reynolds referred once more to the “great Australian silence” and to a “mental block” which prevented Australians from coming to terms with the past” (Reynolds 1999: 114). Thus it was that a new strand of Australian historiography emerged, which paid much greater attention to the violence that was inflicted on indigenous Australians by the British settlement of Australia.⁵ Also, in a sense, the identitarian melodrama of the History Wars emerged as an aspect of the Reconciliation, a political process and cultural phenomenon which, as various commentators (Gooder and Jacobs 2000; Nettheim 2005) have shown, exerted a considerable impact on the psyche of the Australian nation from the late 1980s onwards. Roughly speaking, the Reconciliation can best be described as a communal awakening to the more unpalatable aspects of the nation’s past, triggered by the release of disquieting information on a number of occasions including, in the chronology offered by Tony Birch, the conclusions of

the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (established in 1987), the Bicentennial ‘celebrations’ of 1988, the High Court’s Mabo land rights decision of 1992 (and subsequent Native Title amendments), and the reception of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s *Bringing Them Home* report of 1997 [...] which was the published outcome of [an] inquiry into the history of removing indigenous children from their families and communities during the twentieth century. (Birch 2004: 137)

The discourse generated in these Reconciliation years would be typically divided between, on the one hand, spontaneous expressions of fellow-feeling, shame or guilt, and of course on the other hand requests for absolution on the part of the settlers.

What is arresting in this collective outburst is the scope that it was given in the public sphere, as well as the intensity of affect characterizing the attitudes respectively manifested by all parties, including those who stubbornly resisted any decentring of their carefully honed identities as post-colonial subjects. Thus what is at stake in the History Wars, as indeed in the Reconciliation, is a form of anxiety, on a national scale, at the prospect of losing one’s moral integrity, or the legitimacy of one’s identity as national citizens. Although, once again, a wide spectrum of response was deployed in this context, ranging from self-deprecation to a form of narcissistic love for the former idealized self-image, this rarely took the shape of an offer of material reparation for the victims. If anything, what came to pass was a reversal of the respective positions of the privileged and the underprivileged, since the claims of the former (to be suffering no less than the latter) eventuated in a condemnation of the victims, or at least in a dismissal of their demands for compensation (see Sunder Rajan 2000: 167). What is also interesting is that this banal political arrogance appears to have been underwritten by sincere (if self-indulgent) manifestations of distress, as the destabilized settlers under Reconciliation seemed to be suffering from a sense of the traumatic, “seemingly irreparable rupture” (Gooder and Jacobs 2000: 235) of their earlier sense of belonging to the nation. The irony of the matter is that, by contrast, the Aborigines were invested with precisely those qualities, construed in terms of authenticity and continuity of occupation of the land, of which the settlers suddenly felt deprived. This is why it has been argued that the latent spirit of the Reconciliation may well be a form of envy (see Moran 1998), as experienced by the settlers in the very gesture of conferring ‘authenticity’ upon the natives. This curious “settler envy” (Gooder and Jacobs 2000: 236) would thus typically involve some strategic gesturing towards “an indigenous equivalence” (236) —a nativist posture which has been a long-standing one, as shown by Terry Goldie who described this kind of identity politics in terms of “indigenization” in his classic *Fear and Temptation* (see Goldie 1989).

There is then an eerie sense in which the settlers under Reconciliation, by dint of their very empathy with Aboriginal suffering, exhibit the desire to take possession of the wound itself, fantasized as that which will allow one to entrench one's entitlement to a ‘full’, restored Australian citizenship. In other words there may well be, as a further aspect of settler envy, such a thing as trauma envy, a notion actually envisaged by John Mowitt who refers to “the gain of pain” that accrues as an effect of the link established between traumatic injury and moral authority (Mowitt 2000: 276). In the context of the Australian predicament, it seems evident that trauma has come to be invested with such a capacity to produce empowerment that it elicits a desire to have suffered from it —if not because of the event of invasion itself, then as an aspect of the discursive aftermath it has produced, notably in the years of the Reconciliation. Clearly, again, all this makes for the emergence of a self-seeking discourse which obfuscates the materiality of exploitation in the present and allows the speakers (or indeed, as we shall see, the writers) to achieve legitimacy by proxy, through the pursuit of an experiential equivalence with the victims. Thus it can be shown that a form of trauma envy traverses an incredibly large proportion of today's discursive production in Australia. Because one can hardly be exhaustive within the scope of a brief essay such as the present one, a few significant examples will be highlighted in what follows.

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It is certainly the case that “settler or trauma envy” crops up where one was least expecting it, as for example in Germaine Greer's pamphlet, *Whitefella Jump Up*, which offers an implacable reading of settler history as well as, among other things, a caustic castigation of the settler Australians' catastrophic mismanagement of their environment. Greer links contemporary ecological disasters to a whole history of settler alienation from the environment:

In Australian literature, the Europeans' corrosive unease expresses itself in a curious distortion of the pathetic fallacy, which characterizes the land as harsh, cruel, savage, relentless, the sky as implacable, pitiless and so forth. The heart of the country is called “dead”. [...] It was not the country that was damned but the settler who felt in his heart that he was damned. His impotent cursing, which has left a legacy in the unequalled degree of profanity in Australian speech, was a classic piece of transference. We hate this country because we cannot allow ourselves to love it. We know in our hearts' core that it is not ours. (Greer 2004: 10-11)

What Greer is really saying, in a sense, is that the wilful destruction of the land by the settlers is a consequence of envy, in keeping with Melanie Klein's contention that envy, defined as “the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable”, can take the form of spoliation of the desired object (Klein 1986: 212). The irony of the matter is that Greer herself considers that the only way for the nation to outgrow this attitude would be by embracing Aboriginality wholesale, which testifies to the intensity of her own settler envy, of the kind which

consists of a wish to take away the coveted object. Indeed she explains that “jump up”, in the Kriol language, means to “leap up to a higher level”, and therefore, “to be resurrected or reborn”. The whole argument of *Whitefella Jump Up* is then that settler society ought to espouse Aboriginality if it is to rise from its “dead” condition, to become rejuvenated and redeemed of its current spiritual exhaustion. The paradox is then that a sense of settler envy, and hence an acquisitorial or neo-colonial impulse, can be seen to characterize even the most radical condemnations of white exactions in Australia.

It is certainly the case that settler or trauma envy in Australia gave rise to a form of identity politics in which Aboriginality is apprehended as a source of role models to be imitated, no matter if most indigenous experience in itself hardly seems appealing in sociological terms —indeed all the more so if the circumscribed collective experience comes across as crippling, since it is precisely the quality of suffering which is felt to be empowering in the context of a delegitimized settler history. Interestingly for my present purposes, the search for an equivalence between non-indigenous and Aboriginal history sometimes results in spectacular speculations —in the literal sense that white Australians tend to imagine for themselves life conditions which symmetrically reflect, like a mirror image, those of their unfortunate partners in grime, even to the point of downright identification. For example Robert Drewe, in a novel entitled *Grace*, indulges in a quaint anthropological fiction about the origins of mankind, probing the consequences of a change of scientific paradigm that would replace the “Out of Africa” theory by an “Into Australia” model of explanation. Clearly this is a form of indigenization writ large, since it would automatically follow, if the first humans turned out to be Aborigines, that everybody else (including, incidentally, the settlers) could claim as part of their natural inheritance a share in the sort of atavistic bond to the land that ostensibly typifies the natives and that is seen to justify belonging and possession in equal measure.

Strategically, then, the novel sets up a dialectical relationship between past and future, perceptible in John Molloy’s irrational feeling that “in her genes his daughter [Grace] preceded as well as followed him” (Drewe 2005: 175). Indeed the book sustains a sense that future directions are bound to depend upon reinterpretations of the past, and perhaps vice versa, which is crucial to its meaning and inseparable from the polysemy of its title. John, Grace’s father, is an anthropologist who named his daughter after his discovery of the cremated remains of an ancient skeleton on the western edge of the Great Sandy Desert. When assessing the skeleton’s age at the time of death he establishes that he is dealing with a young female hominid whose body presents the “exciting anomaly” of being “anatomically ‘modern’”, for while “anthropology had taught him to expect the ancient skeletons on this continent to be robust rather than gracile”, his find is

characterized by her surprising, “petite ballerina’s frame” (104). On account of these features he gives this ancient human being the name of Grace, as he does his new-born child, fittingly so as it turns out since the latter will grow into a slender and athletic young woman. His impression that, “as well as his sole genetic link to the future, she was his only connection to the past” (174), thus appears to derive from an intuited bond between the two Graces, which creates a strange temporal loop whereby the quality of gracefulness emerges as one that “spanned the ages and races” (101).

What the two Graces have in common is notably a vestigial dimension which points to unsuspected ways of becoming liberated from the determinism at work in the genetic groove. John wonders at the “total mystery” (174) presented by his daughter’s remarkable gracility, which cannot be correlated to his own or her mother’s hereditary stock, so that she comes to embody the vertiginous challenge implicit in a quantum leap, beyond atavism, towards utter freedom of self-definition. It is relevant to this ontological challenge that John himself is an orphan, deprived of precious identity-giving information about his own genealogy, so that he tends to rely even more on clues afforded by his daughter in order to solve the riddle of himself. Intriguingly in this respect, his orphanhood is presented in terms of an alternative, settler version of the trauma experienced by the Stolen Generation, as “thousands of children were denied their backgrounds” as a result of the diligence manifested by “a whole host of busybody, self-righteous organisations and individuals” —“churches, municipal councils, charities and governments”— to destroy “their orphans’ birth records” (185). Quite evocatively, the point is made also that “the British Government had since apologised for such nineteenth-century colonial behaviour prevailing into the mid-twentieth century” (185-186). In the face of such identity deficit, Australia itself is then embraced as a unique opportunity for self-invention, indeed as if the incentive towards evolution represented for the Aborigines by the Stolen Generation had to be exploited by the settlers also.

The reference to an apology,⁶ together with the allusion to those same official bodies —“governments, churches, police forces and welfare agencies” (Gooder and Jacobs 2000: 230)— which were also involved in the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, testifies to the wish to fashion an inventory of settler suffering modelled on indigenous patterns of experience. More generally even, it has been shown that a similar patterning, along symmetrical lines, of the Australian temperament, informs the construction of settler spirituality, too, in terms chosen to “set up an artificial resemblance” (Crouch 2007: 102) with indigenous modes of reverence for the land. Indeed a conception of mimetic spirituality is endemic to many settler Australians as they attempt to articulate their sense of belonging to the land in ways which reproduce common representations of Aboriginal

60 mythology. It is central to the work of a historian like Peter Read, for example, whose book *Haunted Earth* sets out to investigate “the very wide experience of inspirited place” which he sees to be a feature equally shared “across the diversities of Australian cultures” (Read 2003: 11). The same derivative, ready responsiveness to native belief is evidenced in the specific tradition of the ghost story which, in Australia, privileges narrative strategies that tend to displace the established tropes of the genre. David Punter has made the point that the “post” in a word like “post-colonialism” makes “uncannily [...] appear before us [...] the very phenomenon [it has], in a different sense, surpassed” —thus giving the traumas of the colonial past “the status of spirits haunting the apparently purged landscape of the contemporary” (Punter 2000: 62). In this view, the phantomatic topology of Australia normally betokens a sense of unsettled geography, since the spirits plaguing the settlers remind them of the infamy of the nation’s beginnings and therefore express their deep worry about the validity of their possessions in and of the land. The ghost then operates as a “figure for displacement” and, in this sense, it supposedly fulfils “a postcolonial function” (Gelder and Jacobs 1998: 32). However it turns out, as against this explanation, that the spectre of indigenous possession tends to be raised, in many recent fictional apparitions, only to be retrieved into the mental space of white mythology. Within this modified framework the Aboriginal ghost signifies primarily inasmuch as it solicits the settler imagination, which then comes across as marvellously susceptible to the wonders of the place. At best this narrative strategy ascribes to the settlers a capacity for supernatural response equal (if not superior) to that of the natives, while at worst it becomes “a way of silencing an indigenous presence within a discursive structure that asserts the legitimacy of non-indigenous occupation” (Crouch 2007: 102).

It appears, then, that the search for cultural equivalences between indigenous and non-indigenous histories, just like the construal of the relationship between the two communities in terms structurally informed by the figure of symmetry, usually conceals repressed hierarchies implicit in the attempt to secure land for only one of those groups —which remains, as Patrick Wolfe contends, the ultimate project of all settler colonialism (see Wolfe 2008). This sort of discursive stratification, in which an egalitarian rhetoric on the surface fails to be matched by the deeper political structure underneath, possibly accounts for the mixed reception reserved by the critics for Alex Miller’s novel of reconciliation, *Journey to the Stone Country*. This book has been read as an attempt to gauge “the increasingly fraught relationships around land, modes of occupation and divergent discourses of indigeneity and belonging” that have characterized Australia in the wake of the socio-legal revolution brought about by the Mabo judgement of 1992, with its implied revocation of *terra nullius* (Mullaney 2008: 1). The context is then one of intense anxiety about the legitimacy, not to mention the possibility of legitimate

settler occupation and exploitation of the land, which accounts in Miller’s novel for the white characters’ eventual propensity for “ceding ground” (Mullaney 2008: 17), in all senses of the phrase, in the face of mounting Aboriginal requests for compensation. Yet it has been noted that the book itself concurrently gestures towards “an indigenous philosophy of time and land which is in collision with western epistemologies” (Ashcroft et al 2009: 178). Banal as this may seem in view of the massive indigenizing archive typical of post-Reconciliation Australia, the distinctiveness of Miller’s vision inheres in his dependence on a twofold, “precisely particularised knowledge of land (derived from *both* Indigenous *and* pastoral lived familiarity)” (Ashcroft et al 2009: 183; my emphasis). Once again, such bothness posits the equivalence of two traditions of past experience, so that, possibly by way of an amalgamation of the notions of symmetry and similarity, a form of deferred settler belonging may be (re)invoked, through the appeal to “a shared future” (186) actually reminiscent of Drewe’s temporal circularities.

Specifically, *Journey to the Stone Country* documents the search for archaeological vestiges constituting an aspect of the struggle led by Aboriginal or land rights activists, whose demands for territorial restitution, according to the terms of the current Native Title legislation, must be accompanied by firm evidence of “significant occupation” (Miller 2002: 15) on the part of the claimants. In this context, it may not be innocent of Miller that he should represent settler history as equally in need of an archaeological excavation of its own. If cultural remains have gained a higher status on an Australian political scene which is determined by the contestation of land rights, then of course the settlers must be given ancient artefacts and sacred places of their own. In the novel this is done through the depiction of an old pastoralist homestead—formerly home to the Bigges family, on Ranna station in a valley of the Queensland ranges north-west of Mackay—as a multilayered ruin well worth exploring, all the more urgently since it teeters on the brink of annihilation, for the library in particular is the prey of termites devouring the books from within, “shuffling across a landscape of infinite extent [...]. Millions of white ants at their blind work, recycling the world and returning it to some kind of cosmic dust, unconscious and inert” (181). Thus the “infinite extent” of the white “world” is felt to be threatened with extinction, lest a new historiography should be inaugurated, in which the relics of the pastoralist past would be consigned and preserved. Miller’s ambiguity is then that he finds an opportunity to the History Wars, with their call to explore the darker dimensions of Australia’s past, in order to urge a reconsideration of settler experience too, which is placed on a par with suppressed knowledge about the sufferings endured by the Aborigines—down to the reference to the ‘pioneering’ pastoralists as a “vanishing race” (151).

Clearly the logic of pairing at work here (and elsewhere) corresponds to a dynamics of cross-cultural identification and appropriation quite in line with the long tradition

of impostures and insecurities which has determined settler history since its inception. My suggestion has been that there is a danger that this manipulative brand of rhetoric may be allowed to posture as more progressive and less self-seeking than it really is, if it is coupled with a fashionable discourse about the universality of trauma which tends to obscure historical and sociological specificities. The novel by Alex Miller discussed above constitutes a revealing case in point, as it obviously seeks to provide a fictional exploration of the traumatic events which happened on the colonial frontier in Australia, but it does so in a way which ultimately likens the perpetrators to the victims. It may well be the case that, as Dominick LaCapra argues, there is such a thing as “perpetrator trauma” (see LaCapra 2001: 79), but this should by no means constitute a justification for the blatant attempts at self-exoneration and diffractions of responsibility which have characterized Australia’s cultural discourse since the Reconciliation. One way of circumventing the difficulty presented by what comes across as a lack of conceptual fit between trauma theory and the actual socio-political situation of a former settler colony like Australia, would consist in extracting a capacity for greater nuance or subtler distinctions from within the theory itself. This is attempted by Sheila Collingwood-Whittick in a recent (unpublished) article on the Miller novel, which does draw on trauma theory but distinguishes, with reference to LaCapra’s nomenclature, between “acting out” and “working through”, two antithetical approaches to traumatic experience since the former constitutes “an arrested process in which the depressed and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, remains narcissistically identified with the lost object”, whereas the latter qualifies rather as a form of mourning in which the traumatized self not only confronts the past but also attempts “to counteract the tendency to deny, repress of blindly repeat” the situation that generated the trauma (Collingwood-Whittick 2010: 3; see also La Capra 1997). By reading *Journey to the Stone Country* as an instance of acting out on the part of the author, Collingwood-Whittick provides an excoriating critique of the novel’s politics; yet it remains to be seen whether, by consenting to view today’s settler as a “depressed and traumatized self”, and therefore presumably as an irresponsible one, she may not in fact be conceding too much.

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Notes

1. I wish to thank Professor Dolores Herrero for her invitation to deliver, on 27 February 2009 at the University of Zaragoza, a lecture entitled “The Australian Predicament in a Post-Reconciliation Age”, which provided an incentive for writing this article.

2. Immediately, however, the callousness of this sophisticated rhetoric makes itself felt: can one really maintain without blushing that a traumatic event such as, say, frontier violence in Australia necessarily “lies outside people’s capacity to

make cognitive or emotional sense of it” (Attwood 2005: 177), in the face of those who suffered its action in their own flesh, or indeed in that of their descendants?

³. It is now generally acknowledged by anthropologists that one aspect of the Aborigines’ complex custodianship of the land involved a form of management by fire called fire-stick farming, along with a myriad other ostensible practices, imagined by novelist Kate Grenville as follows: “[The first settlers] couldn’t have pretended for a moment that [Australia] was an empty land. Along every stream, the thousands of axe-grinding grooves would have been clear and fresh, the newly scraped stone gold against the dark. Narrow sandy paths would have wound through the trees. The trees themselves would have carried fresh bleeding wounds where canoes and shields had been prised out of the bark. Every rock overhang would have been blackened by a cooking fire, scattered with bones and shells from past meals” (2007: 138).

⁴. In Australia commentators still routinely deplore the way in which the national history continues to be “reduced to singular interpretations that conform to one narrative”. Thus Christos Tsiolkas: “The Liberal federal government’s intervention in education was centred on the teaching of an approved Australian curriculum that offered history as an undiluted progression of democracy and capitalism in our nation, in which every sickening manifestation of racism—genocide, White Australia, the Stolen Generation, One Nation, the detention camps— would be identified as exceptions because the mantra runs that we are not racist, that we have always been good, decent, courageous” (Tsiolkas 2008: 34).

⁵. Immediately, however, a fierce counter-attack was launched by more conservatively-minded historians, chief among them Geoffrey Blainey who stigmatised what he called the “black armband view of history” held by his colleagues. The phrase was popularised and came to be used pejoratively by commentators and politicians who refused to endorse a historical narrative seen to be

overly concerned with the shameful dimension of the national legacy. These commentators gained prominence after the election of the conservative Federal coalition government in 1996, with the former Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, openly endorsing their views. Thus Howard was heard publicly regretting that “the ‘black armband’ view of our history reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination” (Howard 1996). This politicisation of the issue probably explains why what was initially mainly an academic debate came to be largely reflected in Australia’s media culture. This is then the context which surrounded the publication in 2002 of a study by Keith Windschuttle entitled *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen’s Land 1803–1847*, which in all likelihood would not otherwise have enjoyed the kind of resonance that it did. In this book, Windschuttle disputes the accuracy of the evidence established by Reynolds and others, focusing especially on the Black War in Tasmania—a strategic choice since, as is well known, the Tasmanian Aborigines have been completely wiped out by colonization. Yet the historian argues that fewer than 120 Tasmanian Aborigines can be said to have been directly killed by the British, attributing the other casualties to various forms of collateral damage, including introduced diseases like smallpox which decimated the natives. It seems symptomatic that the polemics which ensued in the printed press centred essentially on the definition of genocide and whether or not the wiping out of an entire race of human beings should be considered as such if it was not correlated to a demonstrable form of intentionality. In other words, the controversy unfolded as a form of intense navel-gazing by those settlers who seemed more preoccupied with the task of exonerating themselves from collective guilt than with the fate of the Aborigines then and now.

⁶. The revelations of the *Bringing Them Home* testimonies about the practice of large-scale removal of Aboriginal children, which started in the 19th century but continued

until the 1970s in some rural areas, motivated hundred of thousands of ordinary Australians to sign "Sorry Books", as a gesture of personal apology presented in a context when the Federal Government obstinately ignored the demand that an official apology should be proffered (see Gooder and Jacobs 2000; Jones 2004). This situation was only modified when

the recently elected Labour Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, finally pronounced his "sorry speech" on 13 February 2008, in which he acknowledged at long last "the profound grief, suffering and loss" inflicted on the Aboriginal population of Australia, notably (but not exclusively) through a succession of child removal policies (see Dolce 2009: 114).

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