Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Coleridge

Robert Wood · Wednesday, May 9th, 2018

As a child, my mother's parents lived with us, and my papa and I would read the paper together before school and watch television news afterwards, him nursing a whiskey and I a glass of milk in front of a fire he kept blazing long after winter. He would tell me stories about Singapore during the Japanese occupation and what happened afterward when he was reunited with his family. From him, I understood what had hitherto been a distant war, a kind of sediment of cultural memory that was taught in school but little known through its living subjects. If Australia was involved it was peripheral, but straight from this horse's mouth I came to know something of the Asian theatre and the independence struggles that came out of it.

My grandfather was something of an Anglophile – he insisted on the eminence of the British, listening to their music, reading their books, dressing in white suits. He was only missing the pith helmet but it is possible he had one buried somewhere beneath the sarongs and the spice boxes. There was, of course, the pull of home, not least in how he piled his plate high with rice at dinner at each night or the way he felt the cold because it was less than tropical in Perth. But he was, in many ways, the exemplary colonial subject. For more radical views, one had to consult my grandmother.

I remember one time sitting with him talking about my day at school and what we had read, where he spoke about his upbringing. There was Kipling and there was Dickens, who I already heard of because of how they were arranged on the shelves at home, but he also suggested to me the name of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. That was my introduction to the Romantics and, as time went by, even after he died, I thought more about the legacy of English literature and how to read it.

I will not lie that in my house, the main source of mediated culture was American from television shows like *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld* to music from Elvis Presley and Dolly Parton to books by Ernest Hemingway and Edith Wharton. America was on top of the podium followed closely by local culture with England somewhere in the distance. But what is it to speak English and be separated from that nation? I do think that language is an individual matter; that it resides in the bodies of the people themselves, not in an abstract community that is imagined. And so, English has left that grey little island just as it did on a quest for spices, jails and slaves some time before.

When one reacts to English literature one is reacting to a set of actors, not necessarily a body politic that cannot be avoided. This is not to make a false separation but merely point out that literature, and the classics in particular, have a certain distance from where they were created and not because they are above the fray of their time or out of history's eye or simple the work of

genius. But because they are so of it, so particularly timely, that when one reads them right one can know that they are onto something entirely different. And that is the appeal of reading Coleridge in 1990s Wembley not withstanding my ethnicity, the prevailing winds or personal taste. In Coleridge, as with other British Romantics, we can see the seeds of rebellion even as there is the appeal to 'universal' issues of love, power, politics. Reading it now means being able to trade in metaphors, to learn from the utopian hopes of someone concerned with theology, consumerism and politics, not only poetry and translating that to our time and place. This means reading a decolonising aesthetic through the labour of negation into an archive such as this, in these classics one might find what one is not.

The vision of an independent Australia depends on the language games one participates in. To my mind, it needs to think through a 'continental republicanism', which does not focus either on the nation as an organising conceptual, legal or ontological framework, or on that which preceded it, which were the colonies proper. One cannot gloss the importance of Federation in 1901, or indeed, the work of poets in voicing that moment be they Dorothea Mackellar, Banjo Paterson or Henry Lawson.

That is the moment of 'Australia' which is historically distinct from the New South Wales colony or Northern Australia or New Holland. What might be more challenging is to live in a liberated consciousness that interrogates the historicity of each affective identity as it comes about in language. This is to say – how does this matter for the individual as they live their life in any given place? This is about entering more fully into the particularity of identity politics so that one can find allies and fellow travellers who are part of a coalition of the living that knows itself truly

This is a rhetorical strategy that has consequences beyond the academy. Every word can become inverted, and local identification means that we must come to know what connections grow and change in light of resistance and autonomy. However, the politics of decolonisation in a settler society such as Australia does essentially rest on the role of the 'white ally' who is in the majority. We must make people conscious of the fact that it is not only Indigenous subjects and fellows poets of colour, but all of us who know that power in politics and standardised English seems to emanate from the Crown. While there are different prisons that jail us differently, we all seek liberty. Coleridge knew this well as he came out for the Abolitionist cause two hundred years before.

That is where solidarity, imagination, expertise enters the conversation, not as a reification of identity politics that would yoke us to a faded and glorious pre-colonial past, but as a utopian undertaking that is rainbow in colour. That means we can still find worthwhile things in an archive that contains Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Blake to say nothing of Mary Alcock, Mary Shelley, Mary Robinson. This is if we have the right reading frame, which takes seriously a native intellectualism that is 'Australian', one that comes from the mislabelled continent not the nation. What then does *tarruru* actually mean when we speak of the poem itself? The world after all is a circle and where power lies might not be where we think it is. World literature is not only in the classics we recognise and remember, in Coleridge, but also in the reading practices they encourage inside us. The rhyme of the contemporary harbinger then is to be local and committed, concerned with a tradition against the grain, concerned with wattleseed not only wheat.

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