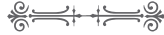


INTRODUCTION



ON 19 DECEMBER 1835, IN SIGHT OF NEW ZEALAND after the long sea voyage from Tahiti, Charles Darwin wrote: *These antipodes call to one's mind old recollections of childish doubt and wonder. Only the other day I looked forward to this airy barrier as a definite point in our voyage homewards; but now I find it, and all such resting places for the imagination, are like shadows, which a man moving onwards cannot catch.* These shadows that cannot be caught, resting places where there is no rest and no place, are my subject in the eight essays that follow. They are necessarily written from an opposite position to the one Darwin assumes: his antipodes is my home and his England, my antipodes. We are united, perhaps, in the recognition that both places, while mirror images, are also in some sense illusory, figments of the imagination; but the imagination is as much a contributor to what we call history as are the biological facts that Darwin spent his life assembling. It was an imaginary Japan that led Columbus to America; and for years we called the people he found there Indians.

Then there are those *old recollections of childish doubt and wonder*. When I try to recover a sense of the world I had when I was young, it seems to be more a matter of wonder than of doubt. I used to read and re-read Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, for instance, each of which suggests some aspect of the marvellous as a true origin of things in the world. This was so whether I was reading about the invention of the alphabet, King Solomon's ill-advised attempt to feed all the animals in creation or the better-known stories that explain how the kangaroo got its hop, the elephant its trunk, the rhino its wrinkly hide and the cat its unique privileges. I must have known that they were tales in which the truth of the matter is not really the point; at the same time, with the credulity of a child, I can remember thinking that they might have been true and hoping that they were. Perhaps this is where the doubt comes in, when we try to believe something we know cannot be the case.

I had a similar response to another staple of my early reading, various retellings of Greek myths. Once again the truth or falsity of those stories of metamorphosis and catastrophe was somehow beside the point. The fact that they had been written down and printed in a book meant they must have had some kind of reality. Like other children I had favourites – among the gods Hermes, the messenger, he with the wingèd sandals, patron of poets, thieves and travellers, who conducts the dead to the underworld, was my preferred exemplar. For a hero I chose Theseus, who with the help of Ariadne threaded the Cretan labyrinth and defeated the Minotaur at its heart. When, at a slightly later age, I read Mary Renault's diptych, *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea*, it seemed to lay down in my psyche templates of emotional response that have turned out to be lifelong. Or were those templates already there in mind, waiting for Renault's books, and the myths they retold, to activate them?

In the nature of things, a child doesn't really consider the larger facts of geography and history. Here and now is more important than there and then, and so both far past and distant places may be incorporated into daily reality. It isn't that the child doesn't know such and such happened a long time ago and in another country; rather,

the immediacy of imagination discounts the effects of those distances which then become, as it were, guarantees of wonder instead of fuel for doubt. Doubt comes later and with it a constant, endless recalibration of knowledge. The Māori and Polynesian myths that I read alongside their Greek equivalents were, I learned, despite their similarities, from an entirely different world. Or were they? How a story is told is as significant as what the story says: perhaps the same person, variously retelling myths from the Pacific and the Mediterranean, gave them similarities they did not possess in the originals? What are originals? The hall of mirrors that is the fiction/non-fiction divide was not built when the first poets, who were also mythographers, made their stories; and, to this day, poets do not have to answer the childlike question *But is it true?* in the same way that prose writers must. And then I think of Shelley, in *A Defence of Poetry*, insisting *the distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error*.

I WAS NOT AWARE that I might carry within me a different kind of consciousness until I went overseas in 1978. A year in the United States of America did not burden me with any particular sense of distinction. Americans were often weird but you could usually get on a level with them, you could communicate. In those days I was working in theatre and with music, we travelled a lot, both within the cities where we lived and between cities. At some point, in New York, we decided to cross the Atlantic for the summer. Our plan was to attend the Edinburgh Festival but this never eventuated. We stayed in London and worked around the city for a while; and completed a short season at another festival in Sheffield. A long-delayed pilgrim, I visited Canterbury; and crossed another sea to Amsterdam to try to arrange some gigs for us there.

London shocked me in a way that nothing I had found in America did. The day after we arrived, staying with my sister in Hammersmith, we went out to see if we could get in to a Dire Straits concert at the Odeon. This was mid-1979, they were hot, their song ‘Sultans of

Swing' was all over the radio. We knew from our experience in the States that scalpers' tickets could usually be bought on the night at or near the venue; we'd also learned that such tickets were generally more expensive the further away from the doors you were. In other words, the scalpers you met initially would charge the highest price and, if you went on, you would likely find cheaper tickets. So, after a bit of negotiation, we declined to buy from the original fellow we talked to. It was his response that astonished me. It still does. He put his face right up to mine and viciously spat out the words: *Fucking colonial!*

This was the first of many encounters in which the way I spoke and where I came from became a non-negotiable factor in how business or social affairs were resolved. Not all business affairs – some criminal bruvvers south of the river happily booked us into the Albany Empire in Deptford, where Dire Straits had made their name. (In an odd twist, the young drummer we picked up in London, Chris Whitten, ended up playing with the band on their farewell world tour in 1992.) Nor was every social encounter fraught; we made good friends and had good times. But the culminate effect was a disenchantment with the unyielding webs of class and privilege that bind up so much of English life in reticence, hypocrisy and exclusion. I remember, in Westminster Abbey where the poets are buried, thanking my ancestors for emigrating; and it was a relief at the end of that summer to go back to New York, in which news of our 'colonial' status would call forth another response entirely, usually expressed as *Wow . . . !*

That London experience made me wonder if there is a different way of being in the former British colonies of Australia and New Zealand than there is in the old country. Most people, nowadays, would answer that question with an impatient shrug: *Of course*. But what is that difference, how might it be characterised and why has it come about? Questions like these can never really be answered but once asked, they tend to persist, gathering to themselves material that might amplify or illustrate matters. I wrote little while I was in London in the early days of Thatcher's implacable rule but, in the few pieces I do still have, notice that I claim for myself and my kind a freedom not just from class and wealth as social determinants, but of

imagination itself: *Crowds made up of all the peoples of the earth passed in the street like ghosts seeking the blood of the living. He could not often distinguish the living and the dead. He wanted to speak to the people so that they would see the true face of the world that was passing away with the hours . . .*

MY FIRST ATTEMPT to write a work along these lines, *Fenua Imi: The Pacific in History and Imaginary*, was published by Alan Brunton's Bumper Books in 2002 – the last book Alan put out before his untimely death in Amsterdam in June of that year. *Fenua Imi*, a commissioned work, was written under various constraints. I was only temporarily housed at the time and did not have access to my books, which were packed away in boxes that I could not get at. Also I was living in a small, remote beach place north of Sydney, far from the great libraries and bookshops of the city. The internet was not then the indispensable resource it is for me now; and I had two small children, both under five, to look after. But the faults of *Fenua Imi* can't really be sheeted home to the circumstances in which it was written. They are more an effect of my own incapacity in the face of the enormous subject I had chosen.

The desire to write *Zone of the Marvellous* arose out of a feeling of frustration with what I had been able to achieve in the limited yet unlimited scope evoked in *Fenua Imi*. I felt that the form of that short book – linked essays, placed chronologically but not exactly sequential – was interesting and that I would like to see if I could make it work better. *Fenua Imi* is written in the third person, the neutral or passive voice that is used in a great deal of so-called non-fiction writing – and I wanted to experiment further with what might be possible within the restrictions imposed by adoption of that voice. I was also beguiled by the notion of a book of stories, anecdotes, brief biographies, historical encounters and so forth that would constitute an argument without explicitly stating that argument. This is a writerly dream with a respectable pedigree. Walter Benjamin wanted to construct a book

entirely out of quotations and some of Flaubert's work attempts a similar embedding of argument in quoted, though often spurious, material.

I am not a philosopher; nor do I read much theory: like William Carlos Williams I prefer my ideas in things. But, serendipitously, while I was wondering if I had properly resolved the problems inherent in this method, I came across a piece by Frenchman Michel Foucault that explained to me what I was trying to do. It is called '*Des Espaces Autres*' ('Of Other Spaces') and is the text of a lecture Foucault gave in Paris in 1967. '*Des Espaces Autres*' was not prepared for publication by the author but did, before his death in 1984, become part of an exhibition catalogue in Berlin. It's appropriate that such a piece, on such a subject, should have ended up, as its editor says, *not part of the official corpus of his work*. Reading it now has the effect of a concatenation of ideas exploding across hitherto unemployed zones of the cortex.

Foucault begins by suggesting that a paradigm shift has occurred. If the great obsession of the nineteenth century was history – *its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world* – we are now living in *the epoch of space*. But space too has a history and, for Foucault, its modern form was opened up by Galileo: *For the real scandal of Galileo's work lay . . . in his constitution of an infinite, and infinitely open space*. Within that infinite space, human societies establish sites that can be understood in a context provided by other sites: *we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable*. The bedroom and the boardroom, for example. And among these sites are some *that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect*. For him there are two main types of these anomalous sites: utopias, no-places, and heterotopias, other places.

He isn't very interested in utopias because, while they may present society in an ideal or an inverted form, they are fundamentally unreal.

Heterotopias are different. They are real. And of many kinds. All human societies construct them and so they are universal. He gives instances: sacred places in traditional societies where initiations or other exclusionary ritual practices are carried out; boarding school dormitories; honeymoon suites; rest homes; prisons; psychiatric hospitals. Cemeteries, theatres, gardens. Museums and libraries, which he calls, wonderfully, *heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time*. Fairgrounds. Themed holiday destinations, for example those in which you go to live for three weeks in a 'traditional' Polynesian village. Saunas and harems. Motels and hotels that exist primarily for the purpose of sexual rendezvous. And so on.

There are, he suggests, two poles to the functions a heterotopia may have: they create an illusion that shows other sites of human activity to be equally illusory; or make a space that is real but at the same time ordered in a way that exposes everyday sites as messy, jumbled and badly put together. Foucault calls these types, respectively, heterotopias of illusion and of compensation. A theatre is a heterotopia of illusion, while a monastery, particularly one that offers retreats to lay people, is a place of compensation. These are my examples, not his; he identifies brothels and colonies as extreme types of heterotopia and between them, as a kind of mediation, sails the boat – *the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.*

He makes another point: that a site held in common between utopias and heterotopias is the mirror. Mirrors are utopias, no-places; but they are also other places. *The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point that is over there.* This sentence is hard to grasp, it escapes the mind the way mirror images so often do; but I think it means that heterotopias, like some books, are at once fictional and non-fictional, both real and imaginary. Foucault does not elaborate, moving on to a discussion of the means by which the

diversity of heterotopias might systematically be described. *As a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live*, he says, *this description could be called heterotopology.*

IT WAS INVIGORATING to find a name for the activity in which I was engaged, the outlandish heterotopology. I like, too, its echo of Pessoaan heteronymity. Mine is a heterotopology of the antipodes, the archetypical other place, and what I am seeking to do is describe how this other place was first rumoured, then imagined, then looked for, discovered, plundered, colonised and finally domesticated. And how memory traces of all these activities linger in our consciousness today. The book is thus also about the way other places become our places and thereby lose, though not completely, their otherness. It seems to me that a clue to my immature alienation from Englishness is contained here – and the absence of that problem among Americans who are, like us, born of a conjunction of the matter-of-fact and the make-believe. I am in some sense a reversal of the people my ancestors were, not so much a true mirror image as one in a distorted mirror. For me, formed out of historical conundrums, the divide between fact and fiction is fluid, volatile because, as an antipodean, I was a creature of imagination before I was even born. This suggests another reason for writing a book like this: to emancipate myself from the imagination of the Europe that dreamed me.

Foucault's idea of a paradigm shift, from a history- to a space-based understanding of the world, from time-line to network, also makes sense: so long as the world was unknown in its entirety, we narrated our progress towards its discovery; as soon as it was known, our focus shifted to the webs of communication with which we would surround the finite world. This book, although its chapters are chronological, is a web not a time-line; association is more important than progression. I think of the eight essays as shafts in time, in analogy perhaps with the cores that geologists drill out of ice, or lake beds, or obdurate rock. These time cores are moments, some of them rather long moments,

during which certain understandings developed. It is in the nature of imaginary things – whether or not they are ‘true’ – to persist in the way Atlantis has persisted. Human memory is not sequential but accumulative. It collects but doesn’t necessarily discard. A lineage for the hybrid mix of utopianism and practicality that characterises settler societies is what I’m looking for.

It is a vast subject, one I could approach only in a discontinuous, partial and idiosyncratic way. There’s nothing definitive here, nor is there meant to be. Many voices are evoked, many others that might have been here are not. My inclination is to go into areas where I am curious, where I think there might be something that could answer a question, or where too little knowledge has made me want to know more. In some respects the result resembles a collage of images and voices that may, for some, decay into incoherence but for others might unexpectedly cohere. Borges has a fragment about a man who spent his life assembling images to no preconceived plan, intuitively, perhaps randomly; at the moment of his death he realised he had made a picture of his own face. This is not meant as a self-portrait; but, as the result of one person’s trawl through the detritus of the past five millennia, looking for the sense and the resonant non-sense that keep alive our feeling for the marvellous, it may be mistaken for one.