“Grace of the Crocodiles”

Towards Deterritorialization of Culture in Robert Drewe’s _Grace_

In an article entitled “Minimal Selves,” Stuart Hall suggests that “identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture.”¹ This essay is an attempt to explore just such an articulation of identity, as it crystallizes at the boundary between the private and the public in one of Robert Drewe’s most recent novels, _Grace_ (2005). As we shall see, the very title of the book encodes this sense of the multi-layered construction of identity, and does so in a way which calls to mind its antonym _Disgrace_ (1999), J.M. Coetzee’s arresting statement about the white-settler predicament in South Africa after apartheid. Whether or not the reference is deliberate, Drewe seems to be reversing the political pessimism of his South African colleague, gesturing in _Grace_ towards the condition of goodwill and compassion between individuals and communities that might characterize the brave new world of the future in a place like Australia. While _Disgrace_ traces the ramifications of the white South Africans’ fall from privilege and descent into abjection, thus allegorizing continuing white-settler presence in the country in terms of a compromise with the unacceptable,² _Grace_ by contrast appears to be sketching a reverse itinerary, that of a slow recovery from anxiety and depression which may also have a more than personal dimension.

Interestingly for my purposes, Drewe’s utopianism involves the fraught project of relinquishing the territoriality that he nevertheless sees to be deeply

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etched in the genes of the human animal\textsuperscript{3} – apart from being a founding characteristic of Australia’s national culture – so that he ostensibly embraces a form of discourse which constantly runs the risk of pulling the rug from under its own feet. Indeed, it has been argued that “Australian culture’s provenance in landscape”\textsuperscript{4} depended for its formation on a constitutive gesture of historical forgetfulness; and that visions of the Australian imagination in terms of “engagements with place”\textsuperscript{5} would remain “seductive for Australians today so long as the relationship between national identifications and the violence on which they are premised can be elided or repressed.”\textsuperscript{6} Drewe’s repudiation of place as a matrix of culture thus betokens his embarrassment about, and rejection of, the nation’s indigenous policies past and present; but at the same time it signifies a quixotic wish to inscribe his own discourse outside of the cultural and literary tradition with which he engages.\textsuperscript{7} My aim in this essay is, then, to examine the fascinating moment of collapse which threatens a discursive position necessarily erected at the point of troubled intersection between the story of a liberal subjectivity intent upon the suppression of unjust boundaries, and a national narrative premised on the historical fact of exclusion and confiscation of land. In other words, it is my suggestion that there is an ambivalence about \textit{Grace} which possibly confirms Theodor Adorno’s harrowing perception that “society is integral,” in that “its organization also embraces those at war with it by co-ordinating their consciousness to its own.”\textsuperscript{8}

Drewe’s concern with the theme of border-crossing and its correlate, boundary-riding, points to his determination to interrogate “conceptions of a unitary national identity such as that projected by the Australian legend, with


\textsuperscript{6} McCann, “The Literature of Extinction,” 50.

\textsuperscript{7} A similar perception, that Drewe’s fiction works to decentre “the great explanatory codes of Western society” in general, and the “established record” of Australian historiography in particular, is articulated by Michael Ackland in “The Lesson of ‘The Yellow Sand’: Robert Drewe’s Dissection of ‘The Good Old Past’ in \textit{The Drowner} and \textit{Grace},” \textit{Westerly} 51 (November 2006): 89–91.