

Cultural Daily

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The Death of the Prodigal Son

Robert Wood · Wednesday, January 31st, 2018

After Patrick White

The Australian poet ever feels his twoness – having within reach the best commodities anywhere in the world, his lifestyle as comfortable as those of the global bourgeoisie in New York, London, Tokyo. But there is a yearning to be in the metropole, to be ‘where things happen’, thinking that the world orients itself to power and capital not the reorganising consciousness of true potential. The poet hears about the Michelin restaurants, *The New Yorker* events, the Saville Row suits, but a lack of confidence keeps him in check. And then, summoning the courage he flies there, to the other side of the world. When he arrives, he is disappointed, not on account of the indifference to him but on account of their very interest. It is a self-loathing that reaches into the pit of his stomach and he sees clearly how much he has been working for their interests. They speak the same language and the poet is in the grip of the rules they laid out some time back. He cares what they care about but cannot say why. He knows their references and can pass as an average citizen who has been made extraordinary on account of his biography. There are customs he finds curious, something that he did not expect from his fellow’s tales or has not read about in the books or ever seen in cinema from when he was a child. But, these observations are folded into a structure that he knows somewhere in his bones.

Yet, something gnaws at him and it is the feeling that he has been duped, that he is and always was a colonial, someone they are interested in because they are interested in their own self-loathing, someone they are polite to but truly hate because it reminds them of a shameful moment in their own past. And so, the poet reciprocates, he turns away, begins to critique the galleries and the books, the political talkshows that run constantly on the television. He learns how to see the empire as a place with flaws that was never his kin anyway even though he is yoked to it closer than ever before. He begins to yearn for ‘home’, projecting onto it a new idea of what is there, thinking that ‘Australia’ really is frontier like the metropolitans who surround him would believe; that it is all wilderness with death everywhere from crocodiles to snakes to spiders, that its high points of culture are when B grade celebrities tour ‘down under’ plying their trade in places that do not know the difference anyway.

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The poet neglects what is in his face back home, neglects the suburbs where everyone actually lives, searching for an authentic place that has as much material as history, seeing in ‘the land’ a

power that he had never considered. Some would confuse this for nationalism, but it is a homing instinct that defines itself against a global cosmopolitanism. And the poet sees amidst the New Yorkers or Londoners that they only really live on the Upper West Side or in Chelsea, that they are tribes dirempted into their own twoness, a twoness that is the opposite of his. Theirs is a rootless parochialism, one that does not know its locale is also only one among many, that it is short sighted and complicit in oppression, exploitation and privilege.

In the mirror of the metropolitan, the poet comes into a true consciousness of his twoness – a locatedness rooted in country and its social relations coupled with an idea of the world that can see his place for what it is. The poet begins to realise what he has to teach, to understand how he might build a bridge from the place he feels a deeper belonging to without neglecting the negation of that also, without forgetting the students he is surrounded by in the metropole. And so, as always he writes, begins to hope against hope that his projects can be realised where he prefers to dwell, and so, his mind wanders home, wanders back to where his body feels at peace, swimming in the ocean, eating his traditional food, watching the waves roll in.

He is not irrationally proud of his place for this would replicate the hubris of the metropolitan, but humbled by how it and the people make him feel in the archipelagos that allow him to rest, to recover from the alienation and longing he once felt so far from home. But that is as good as it gets because death will find him here also and that is where his twoness will become new. It will concern itself with time not space, and the Australian poet will find his place in history and the present alone knowing that he can never return as a prodigal son once believed he should.

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