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The Chant of Thomas Keneally

In a half-serious parody of Engels, Viktor Šklovskij once claimed that "the mode of existence of the literary genre determines in the last instance the writer's consciousness." Characteristically, Šklovskij failed to recognise that genre is a socially determined and overdetermined structure; but his point has a certain validity. In this paper I want to examine the political consequences inherent in the genre of the well-made novel. I shall argue that a reading of The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith may tell us, not only what Keneally's novel explicitly states, that there is a limit to the understanding white Australians can have of aboriginal culture, but also why Keneally was forced by the limits of the novel form itself to draw this lesson in politically conservative terms.

Consider the word 'chant' in the title. A chant is a song or a poetic narrative, but it is also an incantation or a charm, and it is linked semantically to the concept of 'enchantment'. In the novel the word 'chant' can be equated with the Mungindi language and the high tribal culture for which it stands. Within this culture the chant functions as a ceremonial greeting. When Mort first joins Jimmie he comes 'chanting wild affection in Mungindi plainsong:

Breed of Emu-Wren, see your breed coming
Shouting the day's joy as you
Shout the day's welcome,
I sing my welcomes to you too
As I take you by the shoulders
And my hands clap,
Recognizing eyes, and beards
Jutted with smiling."

Chanting also has a narrative function, the function of fitting present experience into the patterns of the past. Thus Tabidgi, accompanying Jimmie to the Newby homestead, betrays his understanding of Jimmie's purpose by chanting a raiding song:

Men vault rivers,
Fear in their eyes.
Women surrender.
At dawn we are beyond your hill
At midday we stalk you on tip-toe from a distance.
At dusk we are at your throat,
Closer than child to pap. (p. 78)

2 Thomas Keneally, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 28. All subsequent references to this edition are given in the text.
Similarly Mort tries ‘to fit their movements into a tribal pattern’ (p. 105) by singing a song which is clearly improvised. Rather than taking over a ready-made poem, he uses a formulaic structure to translate his and Jimmie’s flight into epic significance. Finally, chanting works as a medium of contact with the world of spirits. Tabidgi wards off hostile spirits by singing to himself:

Ghosts started by my hand,
Spirits fleeing back to their totem fathers,
My bars deep in their bodies,
Come not near me,
Here in the night I reign,
Bullaw the great lizard,
Whose scream shakes the hills apart. (p. 83)

High aboriginal culture is expressed, then, in an epic or incantatory mode which corresponds to the ‘enchanted’ realm of the dreamworld. But significantly, Jimmie Blacksmith himself does not chant, except on two occasions during his initiation rites. On the first of these he has learnt the tribal secrets and sings, full of exhilaration:

Dash surprise from your eyes, my mother,
As crested parrots are dashed from the white branches of dawn.
On your brow put pride as proud as Dubra the berry tree.
Out of the chrysalis out of the lizard’s mouth your son comes man. (p. 3)

Later he chants ‘a fine song about an ancient raid’:

In the sting of our manhood,
Mungara’s daughters being few
As hills beyond Marooka, river snake – scant hills,
Mungara’s daughters scant,
Over Marooka we went singing,
Stalking Widgarru under dusty suns,
Came roaring at them from the moon
Painting blood on Widgarru men with strokes of war clubs,
Taking to us all the shrilling pee-wit women, daughters to Mungara,
Wives unto the men of Emu-Wren. (p. 4)

This clearly prefigures the later massacre committed by Jimmie, and it does so ironically by counterposing the massacre to the epic recitation of events which ‘had taken place during the English civil war, two and a half centuries previously’ (p. 4).

From this point on in the novel Jimmie doesn’t chant. The only approximations to it come when he uses poetic Mungindi to lie to Mort about the killings, turning the victims into the Newby men and so transforming a sordid murder into ‘the sort of thing old war-chants spoke of’ (p. 95); and when he justifies in advance the murder of Mrs Healy; she is ‘a devil woman and put magic on your kinsman so that he writhed and shivered to the edge of death. She has bewitched her husband. She is the fang of the coiled adder’ (p. 99). But this is a false chant, an abuse of symbolic language. At the sacred site Mort chants to placate the strange totems; but ‘Jimmie sang nothing and was afraid’ (p. 148).
THE CHANT OF THOMAS KENEALLY

Why then is the novel called The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith? We can read the title in another sense: as a chant about Jimmy Blacksmith, as in the chansons de geste. This sense points to the epic origins of the modern novel, but it points ironically: the novel is incapable of sustaining epic form.

The source I’m drawing on for a definition of the novel in terms of its derivation from and its discontinuity with the epic is Georg Lukács’ The Theory of the Novel. For Lukács the novel is ‘the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem’; it is ‘the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God’, and its constitutive structural principle is therefore irony, the ‘self-correction of the world’s fragility’. This definition, despite or even because of the essentialism of its categories, is directly relevant to The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, which internalizes it in terms of the contradiction between the poetic discourse of high aboriginal culture and the ironic discourse appropriate to the degraded world of white oppression. Within the language of aboriginal culture Jimmie has an epic status. Dulcie sings a chant of Jimmie Blacksmith which is marked by epic hyperbole:

I fall is my son going away,
The mountains will feel his heel,
And his hair catch in the stars. (p. 8)

But the novel can allow only a limited validity to this language; it is simply and painfully inadequate to Jimmie’s status in the white world. Hyperbole is therefore juxtaposed with litotes, the ironic undercutting of epic language. In the same way the poetic Mungindi language is juxtaposed to the ‘Cockneyfied version of English that natives spoke’ (p. 5). Wongee Tom moves directly from

‘There’s a woman here . . . She isn’t Mungara. She yawns for men and not with her mouth. She weeps for men and not with her eyes. She drinks men down. She is a cave for men’ to the pidgin English of ‘But she don’t keep the rain off. We git together in the paddock behind the Caledonian. We git a young whitefeller buy us sherry. We gotter drink ’im bloody fast because bloody p’lice come round every hour’ (p. 12). The novel’s ironic structure corresponds to the split between black and white culture, a split which is reproduced in the language spoken by the aboriginals. Through this structure Keneally elaborates a world of disenchantment which stands in contradiction to the enchanted world, the world of the tribal chants.

There are two levels of disenchantment, two levels of degradation in the novel. The first is that of black culture, and its destruction is perhaps most vividly read from the tjuringa, the soul stones destroyed by picnickers. ‘Here the history of mean death and lust for booze and acquiescence to the white phallus, gun, and sequestration and all the malaise of black squalor, here it was, legible in the fracture lines of soft stones’ (p. 150). The second level, which comprehends the
first, is that of white Australian culture. When Gilda comes to marry Jimmie she engages in romantic role-playing, but "the cruel thing was . . . that girls in romances don't allow themselves to be rolled by half-castes on a river bank in the world's south" (p. 57). "In the world's south": the phrase implies that Australia is by definition a place of disenchanted, and it is this sense that generates all the novel's images of the meanness and the bad faith of a social order wrong from the start.

However the title of the novel is not simply ironic. Its ambivalence reflects the dual structure of discourse on which the novel is built, and this splitting of language is made necessary by the fact that the book is straining at one of the limits of the genre: the presentation of aboriginal consciousness, of a consciousness which can't be contained by European categories. It is because of this immanent limit that the novelistic discourse strives towards a densely figurative language to convey the psychology of the full-blooded elder Tabidgi: "Jackie Smolders, Mungindi elder and cherisher of enchanted teeth, had given up. He had seen four women's blood, when the sighted blood of one was sufficient to bring on catastrophe. He had laboured in the potent blood of women's throats and hacked-out wombs. He closed his eyes and blood slanted in torrents across the darkness behind his lids" (p. 86). Such a passage fails doubly, in gesturing towards categories which it perceives to be beyond its reach, and in striving for 'poetic' effect.

If this novel works, it's only insofar as Jimmie is treated, not as an aboriginal but in the pattern of the social bandit. The fact that Jimmie is a half-caste mission black makes him to some extent amenable to ironic treatment. He is described in terms of his interiorization of white values, especially property-values: he had 'landowning ambitions, ambitions for contracts, for bonding one's word and sticking to a job until it was finished' (p. 11). He is marked by his identification with the aggressor, and the novel charts the movement from 'possession was a holy state and he had embarked on it' (p. 15) to his being torn between 'possession and being possessed' (p. 82).

But even in Jimmie there is a residual blackness, a 'beyond' which Keneally attempts to cope with through a religious discourse. Mort and Jimmie are 'raiders and outriders and adjuers but also pilgrims, bearers of onus, seekers for justification, desirers of exorcism' (p. 147), and this is not, as is suggested here, simply a question of 'the residue of H. J. Neville's Christianity'. The whole adventure-story structure is mediated through images of tribal warfare and of the pollution caused by women's blood. This leads to an attempted restoration, through the ironic mode, of epic categories as a hinted-at transcendence. It leads, too, to a mythicization of Jimmie. Reading the Bulletin cartoon 'he saw the remote potential of becoming a figure of myth' (p. 137): his prospective destiny merges with the retrospective destiny imposed by the novelist who needs the myth to redeem Jimmie, however partially, from the disenchanted world.

Ultimately this falsification is imposed by the structural categories of the novel, and above all by the figure of the omniscient and ironic narrator whose
mythmaking fills the vacuum left by the absence of epic categories. The narrative voice, with its obtrusive stylistic neatness, acts as a constantly mediating presence. Thus Jimmie leads Newby’s horse ‘faithfully, as if the beast were fitted with a tachometer’ (p. 56). The collusion between implied author and reader against a character who is necessarily ignorant of the metaphors controlling his existence works as a kind of well-mannered dig in the ribs. It was of this function of irony that Barthes wrote that it ‘is, in principle, a quotation of what someone had said; however, irony acts as a signpost, and thereby it destroys the multivalence we might expect from quoted discourse. A multivalent text can carry out its basic duplicity only if it subverts the opposition between true and false. . . . irony can only add a new code (a new stereotype) to the codes, to the stereotypes it claims to exorcise.’6 The function of irony in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is to draw a clean line between the true and the false, to close off the resonance of discourse.

There is a very clear example of this closure at the beginning of the novel: ‘And certainly, Mrs Blacksmith had been rolled by white men. For warmth in winter, she once said. For warmth in winter and for comfort in summer’ (p. 2). The play of quotation and counter-quotations endows the narrator with an invulnerable and privileged insight which can only diminish Dulcie. The narrator controls, too, the categories through which aboriginal experience is translated into and recovered within an alien conceptual framework. Jimmie, returning to Brentwood, is in a state of shock—‘perhaps in what anthropologists would call culture shock later on, too late to help Emu-Wren’ (p. 31). As with the image of the tachometer, the frame is imposed retrospectively, scaling the world of the novel in pastness and guaranteeing the narrator’s god-like authority. One final example: escaping from Pilbara camp Jimmie ‘was certain of his own death. Too frightened to move or stand still, he remembered the presage of women’s blood, and then the virgin Christ barbarically used; but could not find a mode in which he should prepare for dying . . . Anyone else who saw Jimmie Blacksmith and Mort would have said they were moving with great craft on the dark side of the shanties on the north of the camp. They did not look like men filled with complex dread’ (p. 116). The contrast with a hypothetical limited observer reinforces, here and repeatedly throughout the novel, the narrator’s absolute command of the distinction between illusion and reality.

This structure of linguistic control is duplicated thematically within the novel, above all through the fact that the aborigines are defined as those who are dispossessed of language. There is a sort of ironic parody of the violence of linguistic command in the newspaper accounts of Tabidgi’s trial, with their editorial interventions and especially the use of the cruelly pedantic ‘sic’ (p. 126-7). After reading this article Jimmie abandons his idea of writing a testamentary letter because ‘he imagined the press reducing the importance of his will of love to something inane and comic, as they had reduced Jackie Smolders with their “sic”.

“Sic”, Jimmie felt sure, was a term of superior mockery (p. 128). Jimmie’s history as a mission black is a history of acquisition of white values, but he comes to learn that he and Gilda ‘had very little right of reply in a population that spouted blunt precept’ (p. 58) (it is perhaps for this reason that Mrs Healy is shot in the throat).

Within the novel there are two figures who represent the narrator as controllers of language. The first is the English cook, who is impressed by Jimmie’s command of indefinite articles and who is the real father of Jimmie’s child; he is of interest mainly because in Schepsis’s film version of the novel the role was played by Keneally. The more important representative of the narrator is McCready, who acts substantially as a mouthpiece for that part of Keneally which is a liberal intellectual. He is strongly idealized in that he gives Mort and Jimmie ‘room to speak in their true selves’ (p. 137). And he acts as a convenient medium for the transmission of information and moral generalizations concerning the oppression and destruction of aboriginal Australians. At the same time the novel does attempt to present something of the ambivalence of his role as a commander of language. He very quickly comes to dominate Jimmie and Mort: ‘it was clear that the teacher would emasculate and sunder them; and that he intended it’ (p. 139). However his inadequacy as a liberal is compensated by his role in extending and deepening the novel’s religious thematic. This takes place above all through the rebuilding of the sacred site, through an attempted symbolic reparation which would somehow reverse the course of history. What the novel explores through McCready is the realm of white guilt; and this exploration takes place on a number of different levels which transcend McCready’s perspective.

The first of these is the political level, which presents a parable of a nation born on a basis of genocide: ‘People laughed in their state of grace, the old crimes done’ (p. 177). A second aspect of this level is the complex parallel drawn with the Boer War. On the one hand the Boers are perceived as anti-imperialist rebels: one of the party hunting Jimmie argues that ‘all they wanted to do was to have their land and keep the black man in his place’ (p. 107). On the other hand, however, the parallel is with Jimmie, successfully evading his pursuers. The complexity of the parallel lies, then, in the suggestion that the birth of the nation involves both a rebellious struggle against imperialist ties and at the same time the passing on intact of relations of domination.

The second level of guilt is what, for want of a better word, I shall call the socioeconomic level, where power relations are mediated by ‘the white phallus, powerful demolisher of tribes’ (p. 20). The essential guilt at this level involves white men’s desire for black women. Dowie Stead hunts Jimmy not because of the murder of his fiancee but because of his shame at having found his own father sleeping with the lubra whom he himself was visiting. Desire for black flesh is seen to be degrading; and the other face of this shame is the envy which prompts Newby to expose himself to Gilda. This envy, which in the case of Constable Farrell turns the phallus into a murderous weapon, is linked with the whites’ need
for aborigines to fail. Healy is ‘undermined’ by Jimmie’s competence, and so works to create his incompetence, to the point that Jimmie is ‘stung by the mystery: that a wondrous landowner should need to degrade him’ (p. 23). And later: ‘Healy, Lewis, now Newby had each staked his soul on Jimmie’s failure. If they were so supreme on their land that they didn’t need to be political, why should they yearn so for Jimmie’s mistakes . . . ?’ (p. 52).

Fantasies of racial domination are important, too, in the question of paternity. For the assimilationist Jimmie the fact that he is not the father of Gilda’s child is crucial; but for Mort and Tabidgi, for whom the only begetter is Emu-Wren, the technical question of paternity is irrelevant; they are to that extent immune from the structures of paternalism and patronization. Jimmie mirrors within himself the fantasies of white domination; he internalizes racial hatred and uses it against himself as a black man. When working as a police tracker, for example, he becomes the avenger of the murdered white boy: he ‘was in a vindictive state of mind. The Verona people were to be punished for their vulnerability. There was a lust in him to punish the race through the man who had done the killing’, and he ‘hated them for their innocence, for not being able to dominate even the clumsiness of Farrell’ (pp. 38, 40).

In the same way Jimmie mirrors the white man’s desire for black flesh and takes Mrs Healy as ‘a symbol, a state of blessedness, far more than a woman’ (p. 21), mediating, either as ideal or as victim, his relation to white power. And at the crucial turning point in Jimmie’s life he realizes that it is not Newby that he wants to kill but Miss Farrell, for example: ‘He wished to scare the schoolmistress apart with his authority, to hear her whimper’ (p. 78).

A third level of guilt involves, I think, a very personal meditation on the status of the Irish in Australia. It is perhaps worth noting that the name ‘Healy’ rhymes with ‘Keneally’, and it is perhaps significant that Healy is unable to write. The relation of Healy’s forebears to Anglo-Irish landlords is in some ways comparable to that of Jimmie to Healy; domination is never shaken off, it is passed down the line. On the other hand, the Irish in Australia are a minority culture, and this fact complicates the model by setting up a provisional equation between the two cultures. Keneally’s complex identification both with the rebellion of the blacks and with the culture which oppresses them is partly, and wryly, expressed through the rhetoric of the Irishman Toban, who likens the Australians to the Boers, and for whom ‘there wouldn’t be any Australia if it wasn’t for the downtrod of Britain’s filthy cities and the victims of tyrannous British eviction’ (p. 108).

The fourth and most crucial level of guilt in the novel is religious. At this level the hybrid Jimmie is caught between and fatally excluded from both tribal love, which ‘would have been written into the order of his day. All his acts would have been acts of solemn and ritual preference. Love would have been in their fibre’ (p. 27); and white love, which is episodic and sent from God. He becomes ‘Mr Jimmie Blacksmith, mighty terrorizer, lost beyond repair somewhere between the Lord God of Hosts and the shrunken cosmogony of his people’ (p. 148). It is
through such an imposition of Christian categories that Jimmie is patronized; thus we are told that Mr Neville, who had 'a true talent for religion', understands Jimmie's 'sickness', his 'obsessive spiral' (p. 109). Jimmie becomes the hero of a religious quest-novel, of a kind not unknown in Australian fiction. This occurs above all through the equation of the aboriginal sense of pollution with the Christian sense of sin. The equation is vivid in Mort's chant:

Woman's blood cleaves to a man.
If he wash his eyes over and over in Marooka,
His outer eye does not see it again.
But the stain is on the inner eye. (p. 129)

Through an increasing density of religious reference the novel elaborates a rising counter-ironic structure, built around the themes of love, grace, and expiation, and culminating in Jimmie's 'rebirth' in the convent which is superimposed on his initiation.

This mythical structure works against the level of social analysis and the possibility of any action based upon it. Against religious guilt there is no secular remedy. The novel does however also continue to refuse this myth and to sustain its ironic mode until the end. The insertion of the letters from the Sydney politician to the schoolteacher's wife seems almost gratuitous unless we realize that their function is simply to prolong ironic discourse in order that epic structure may be refused. There is a similar use of newspaper accounts, as mediating discourses which distance and ironize the novel's apogee, making a full 'epic' culmination impossible. And the last sentence of the novel — 'Mr Hyberry was away three days in all, and his fine boys could cope with the customers' (p. 178)—nearl balances two contradictory functions: that of deflating the death of the hero, and at the same time suggesting, by the number of days the hangman is away, its mythical dimension.

The novel sways, then, between chant and disenchantment, between a possible epic structure of experience and the degraded experience which is the stuff of the novel. I emphasize this structural ambivalence because two of the most interesting critical readings of the novel fail to perceive it. J. J. Healy (sic) condemns the book for performing 'a violence of shallowness and misconception on a subject of great moral significance in itself and of great political significance for Australian culture', because of the inadequacy of simply 'transferring Jimmy Governor from villain to hero who turns the tables on a self-righteous white society'.7 His argument, couched in humanist terms, is for a moral rather than a sociological representation of aboriginality, since 'the field within which Aboriginal man, man himself, moves is ultimate and intimate; it is not, in any primary sense, social. And it is essentially as a disturbance in the collective social waters of eastern Australia that the Aboriginal problem manifested itself in the 1960s.'8 Terry Sturm makes the same point in positive terms: 'The whole

8. Ibid., p. 249.
direction of the novel, quite properly, is an attempt to identify the "Aboriginal problem" as, for whites, a white problem, a problem about the nature of their own society." Both accounts set up an implicit dichotomy between a social and an ontological frame of reference; and both accounts miss the point that the novel's ironic and 'sociological' mode is merely the negative counterpart of a predominantly metaphysical framework. This framework is sustained by the generic conventions of the 'well-made novel'. Sturm defines the book in terms of its use of 'a much wider range of expressive effects than are possible in naturalism', and its emphasis on 'the role of artistic contrivance, the imaginative patterning of events to reveal underlying significances, in order to make history available in contemporary ways'. It is precisely this structural relation between 'expressive effects' and 'underlying significances', not the technical question of the adequacy of the particular rhetorical strategies used to realize it, which constitutes the problem. The inadequacy of the novel is a function of the security provided by an easy symbolism and an ironic collusion with the implied white reader, a collusion which, in bravely attempting to include blacks in the thematization of Australian society, in fact excludes them and patronizes them.

10. ibid., p. 266.
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