

Introduction: narrating the nation

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Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation — or narration — might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. This is not to deny the attempt by nationalist discourses persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present of the *Volk*. Nor have such political ideas been definitively superseded by those new realities of internationalism, multinationalism, or even 'late capitalism', once we acknowledge that the rhetoric of these global terms is most often underwritten in that grim prose of power that each nation can wield within its own sphere of influence. What I want to emphasize in that large and liminal image of the nation with which I began is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality. Benedict Anderson, whose *Imagined Communities* significantly paved the way for this book, expresses the nation's ambivalent emergence with great clarity:

The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. . . . [Few] things were (are) suited to this end better than the idea of nation. If nation states are widely considered to be 'new' and 'historical', the nation states to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past and . . . glide into a limitless future. What I am proposing is that Nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which — as well as against which — it came into being. (19)

The nation's 'coming into being' as a system of cultural signification, as

the representation of social *life* rather than the discipline of social *polity*, emphasizes this instability of knowledge. For instance, the most interesting accounts of the national idea, whether they come from the Tory Right, the Liberal high ground, or the New Left, seem to concur on the ambivalent tension that defines the 'society' of the nation. Michael Oakeshott's 'Character of a modern European state' is perhaps the most brilliant conservative account of the equivocal nature of the modern nation. The national space is, in his view, constituted from competing dispositions of human association as *societas* (the acknowledgement of moral rules and conventions of conduct) and *universitas* (the acknowledgement of common purpose and substantive end). In the absence of their merging into a new identity they have survived as competing dogmas — *societas cum universitate* — 'impos[ing] a particular ambivalence upon all the institutions of a modern state and a specific ambiguity upon its vocabulary of discourse'.¹ In Hannah Arendt's view, the society of the nation in the modern world is 'that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance' and the two realms flow unceasingly and uncertainly into each other 'like waves in the never-ending stream of the life-process itself'.² No less certain is Tom Nairn, in naming the nation 'the modern Janus', that the 'uneven development' of capitalism inscribes both progression and regression, political rationality and irrationality in the very genetic code of the nation. This is a structural fact to which there are no exceptions and 'in this sense, it is an exact (not a rhetorical) statement about nationalism to say that it is by nature ambivalent'.³

It is the cultural representation of this ambivalence of modern society that is explored in this book. If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness': the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other; the comfort of social belonging, the hidden injuries of class; the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliation; the sense of social order, the sensibility of sexuality; the blindness of bureaucracy, the strait insight of institutions; the quality of justice, the common sense of injustice; the *langue* of the law and the *parole* of the people.

The emergence of the political 'rationality' of the nation as a form of narrative — textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative strategems — has its own history.⁴ It is suggested in Benedict Anderson's view of the space and time of the modern nation as embodied in the narrative culture of the realist novel, and explored in Tom Nairn's reading of Enoch Powell's post-imperial racism which is based on the 'symbol-fetishism' that infests his febrile, neo-romantic poetry. To encounter the nation *as it is written* displays a temporality of culture and social consciousness more in tune with the partial, overdetermined process by which textual meaning is produced through the articulation of difference in language; more in keeping with the problem of closure which plays enigmatically in the discourse of the sign. Such an approach

contests the traditional authority of those national objects of knowledge – Tradition, People, the Reason of State, High Culture, for instance – whose pedagogical value often relies on their representation as holistic concepts located within an evolutionary narrative of historical continuity. Traditional histories do not take the nation at its own word, but, for the most part, they do assume that the problem lies with the interpretation of ‘events’ that have a certain transparency or privileged visibility.

To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself. If the problematic ‘closure’ of textuality questions the ‘totalization’ of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life. This is a project that has a certain currency within those forms of critique associated with ‘cultural studies’. Despite the considerable advance this represents, there is a tendency to read the Nation rather restrictively; either, as the ideological apparatus of state power, somewhat redefined by a hasty, functionalist reading of Foucault or Bakhtin; or, in a more utopian inversion, as the incipient or emergent expression of the ‘national-popular’ sentiment preserved in a radical memory. These approaches are valuable in drawing our attention to those easily obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge – youth, the everyday, nostalgia, new ‘ethnicities’, new social movements, ‘the politics of difference’. They assign new meanings and different directions to the process of historical change. The most progressive development from such positions take ‘a *discursive* conception of ideology – ideology (like language) is conceptualised in terms of the articulation of elements. As Volosinov said, the ideological sign is always multi-accentual and Janus-faced’.⁵ But in the heat of political argument the ‘doubling’ of the sign can often be stilled. The Janus face of ideology is taken at face value and its meaning fixed, in the last instance, on one side of the divide between ideology and ‘material conditions’.

It is the project of *Nation and Narration* to explore the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of the nation. This turns the familiar two-faced god into a figure of prodigious doubling that investigates the nation-space in the *process* of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are *in medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of ‘composing’ its powerful image. Without such an understanding of the performativity of language in the narratives of the nation, it would be difficult to understand why Edward Said prescribes a kind of ‘analytic pluralism’ as the *form* of critical attention appropriate to the cultural effects of the nation. For the nation, as a form of cultural *elaboration* (in the Gramscian sense), is an agency of *ambivalent* narration that holds culture at its most productive position, as a force for ‘subordination, fracturing, diffusing,

reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding'.⁶

I wrote to my contributors with a growing, if unfamiliar, sense of the nation as one of the major structures of ideological ambivalence within the cultural representations of 'modernity'. My intention was that we should develop, in a nice collaborative tension, a range of readings that engaged the insights of poststructuralist theories of narrative knowledge — textuality, discourse, enunciation, *écriture*, 'the unconscious as a language' to name only a few strategies — in order to evoke this ambivalent margin of the nation-space. To reveal such a margin is, in the first instance, to contest claims to cultural supremacy, whether these are made from the 'old' post-imperialist metropolitan nations, or on behalf of the 'new' independent nations of the periphery. The marginal or 'minority' is not the space of a celebratory, or utopian, self-marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity — progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past — that rationalize the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative. In this sense, then, the ambivalent, antagonistic perspective of nation as narration will establish the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as 'containing' thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production.

The 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation. The address to nation as narration stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the 'irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic'.⁷ What emerges as an effect of such 'incomplete signification' is a turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. It is from such narrative positions between cultures and nations, theories and texts, the political, the poetic and the painterly, the past and the present, that *Nation and Narration* seeks to affirm and extend Frantz Fanon's revolutionary credo: 'National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension'.⁸ It is this *international* dimension both within the margins of the nation-space and in the boundaries *in-between* nations and peoples that the authors of this book have sought to represent in their essays. The representative emblem of this book might be a chiasmic 'figure' of cultural difference whereby the anti-nationalist, ambivalent nation-space becomes the crossroads to a new transnational culture. The 'other' is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we *think* we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves'.

Without attempting to précis individual essays, I would like briefly to elaborate this movement, within *Nation and Narration*, from the problematic unity of the nation to the articulation of cultural difference in the construction of an *international* perspective. The story could start in many places: with David Simpson's reading of the multiform 'body' of Whitman's American populism and his avoidance of metaphor which is also an avoidance of the problems of integration and cultural difference; or Doris Sommer's exploration of the language of love and productive sexuality that allegorizes and organizes the early historical narratives of Latin America which are disavowed by the later 'Boom' novelists; or John Barrell's exploration of the tensions between the civic humanist theory of painting and the 'discourse of custom' as they are drawn together in the ideology of the 'ornamental' in art, and its complex mediation of Englishness; or Sneja Gunew's portrayal of an Australian literature split between an Anglo-Celtic public sphere and a multiculturalist counter-public sphere. It is the excluded voices of migrants and the marginalized that Gunew represents, bringing them back to disturb and interrupt the writing of the Australian canon.

In each of these 'foundational fictions' the origins of national traditions turn out to be as much acts of affiliation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation. In this function of national history as *Entstellung*, the forces of social antagonism or contradiction cannot be transcended or dialectically surmounted. There is a suggestion that the constitutive contradictions of the national text are discontinuous and 'interruptive'.⁹ This is Geoff Bennington's starting point as he puns (with a certain postmodern prescience) on the 'postal politics' of national frontiers to suggest that 'Frontiers are articulations, boundaries are, constitutively, crossed and transgressed'. It is across such boundaries, both historical and pedagogical, that Martin Thom places Renan's celebrated essay 'What is a nation?'. He provides a careful genealogy of the national idea as it emerges mythically from the Germanic tribes, and more recently in the interrelations between the struggle to consolidate the Third Republic and the emergence of Durkheimian sociology.

What kind of a cultural space is the nation with its transgressive boundaries and its 'interruptive' interiority? Each essay answers this question differently but there is a moment in Simon During's exposition of the 'civil imaginary' when he suggests that 'part of the modern domination of the life-world by style and civility . . . is a process of the *feminisation* of society'. This insight is explored in two very different contexts, Gillian Beer's reading of Virginia Woolf and Rachel Bowlby's study of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Gillian Beer takes the perspective of the aeroplane — war machine, dream symbol, icon of the 1930s poets — to emphasize Woolf's reflections on the island race, and space; its multiple marginal significations — 'land and water margins, home, body, individualism' — providing another inflection to her quarrels with patriarchy and imperialism. Rachel Bowlby writes the cultural history of readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that debate the feminization of American cultural

values while producing a more complex interpretation of her own. The narrative of American freedom, she suggests, displays the same ambivalence that constructs the contradictory nature of femininity in the text. America itself becomes the dark continent, doubly echoing the 'image' of Africa and Freud's metaphor for feminine sexuality. George Harris, the former slave, leaves for the new African state of Liberia.

It is when the western nation comes to be seen, in Conrad's famous phrase, as one of the dark corners of the earth, that we can begin to explore new places from which to write histories of peoples and construct theories of narration. Each time the question of cultural difference emerges as a challenge to relativistic notions of the diversity of culture, it reveals the margins of modernity. As a result, most of these essays have ended up in another cultural location from where they started — often taking up a 'minority' position. Francis Mulhern's study of the 'English ethics' of Leavisian universalism pushes towards a reading of Q.D. Leavis's last public lecture in Cheltenham where she bemoans the imperilled state of that England which bore the classical English novel; an England, now, of council-house dwellers, unassimilated minorities, sexual emancipation without responsibility. Suddenly the paranoid system of 'English reading' stands revealed. James Snead ends his interrogation of the ethics and aesthetics of western 'nationalist' universalism with a reading of Ishmael Reed who 'is revising a prior co-optation of black culture, using a narrative principle that will undermine the very assumptions that brought the prior appropriation about'. Timothy Brennan produces a panoramic view of the western history of the national idea and its narrative forms, finally to take his stand with those hybridizing writers like Salman Rushdie whose glory and grotesquerie lie in their celebration of the fact that English is no longer an English language. This, as Brennan points out, leads to a more articulate awareness of the post-colonial and neo-colonial conditions as authoritative positions from which to speak Janus-faced to east and west. But these positions across the frontiers of history, culture, and language, which we have been exploring, are dangerous, if essential, political projects. Bruce Robbins' reading of Dickens balances the risks of departing from the 'ethical home truths' of humanistic experience with the advantages of developing a knowledge of acting in a dispersed global system. Our attention to 'aporia' he suggests, should be counterpointed with an intentionality that is inscribed in *poros* — practical, technical know-how that abjures the rationalism of universals, while maintaining the practicality, and political strategy, of dealing professionally with local situations that are themselves defined as liminal and borderline.

America leads to Africa; the nations of Europe and Asia meet in Australia; the margins of the nation displace the centre; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis. The island story is told from the eye of the aeroplane which becomes that 'ornament' that holds the public and the private in suspense. The bastion of Englishness crumbles at the sight of immigrants and factory workers. The great Whitmanesque sensorium of America is exchanged for a

Warhol blowup, a Kruger installation, or Mapplethorpe's naked bodies. 'Magical realism' after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world. Amidst these exorbitant images of the nation-space in its transnational dimension there are those who have not yet found their nation: amongst them the Palestinians and the Black South Africans. It is our loss that in making this book we were unable to add their voices to ours. Their persistent questions remain to remind us, in some form or measure, of what must be true for the rest of us too: 'When did we become "a people"? When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one? What do these big questions have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others?'¹⁰

Notes

- 1 M. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 201.
- 2 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), pp. 33–5 and *passim*.
- 3 T. Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 348.
- 4 Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country* (London: Verso, 1985) and Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Hutchinson, 1987) are significant recent contributions to such an approach.
- 5 S. Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 9.
- 6 E. Said, *The World, The Text and The Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 171.
- 7 J. Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), p. 221.
- 8 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 199.
- 9 G. Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 251.
- 10 E. Said, *After the Last Sky* (London, Faber, 1986), p. 34.