

Writing back (to the centre): practising my theory

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king's english

the conqueror never
sub
mits
even as we chop off his fingers
at
the
nub

even as we sliver & shiver
as we sliver
skeins of his
tight white skin

as counterpoint to
our *taonga kua tāhae*;
seared *mokomokai* -

heads
stored
in
surrey or some such
sibilant.

yes,
the conquistador never
surr
end
ers

even as
we write
with his tongue.

[*taonga kua tāhae* – Māori – already stolen treasures; *mokomokai* – Māori – shrunken heads]

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In their seminal book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989, second edition, 2002: 7) the editors write of determined efforts by many colonized-by-Britain writers to write back against the standardized English the colonizer had imposed on them as a means to control and subjugate them and their own respective indigenous cultures. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin nominate such anti-colonialist, postcolonial efforts as writing in English – a deliberate lower case oppositional ploy to English -

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities...Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice.

I have written elsewhere about the domineering and deleterious impacts of English language agencies worldwide, most especially on indigenous cultures and their tongues and most manifestly through this dominant language, the so-called ‘standardized’ (Anglo-American) English language: see *English language as Hydra*, 2012. In this book, my co-editor, Pauline Bunce, and I, posited a plethora of burgeoning, stubborn, regenerative Englishes globally, prompted initially and fueled always by the BIG hydra head – ‘standardized’ English, agents of which were also wont to eat away and suppress even some of these local cousins, such as Hong Kong English. These (Western) prime agencies include the British Council; the conglomerate custodians of TOEFL and IELTS; The World Bank; many established universities/’public’ schools and their flourishing overseas branches; as well as an array of English-trope publishers; and several others – all economically and ideologically determined to never relinquish and in fact to exponentially extend their hegemonic regnant domain, to the inevitable detriment of their so called ‘Other’.

In their important 2000 papers in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, both Cheryl Waerea-ite-rangi Smith and Takirirangi Smith describe the divergent epistemological and thus, ontological nuances contained in English language as Western philosophies; succumbing to the demand to speak and write in only English language, devitalizes, enfeebles, vitiates – ultimately annihilates – Māori Weltanschauung completely: “English does seem disconnected when examining it alongside Māori” (CW Smith, 2000: 49). I would also refer readers to the seminal work of Anna Wierzbicka in which she draws out these cultural nuances as contained within English words, phrases and syntax.

For Ashcroft et al, then, one of perhaps three ways to counter this dominant English language hydra head of ‘standardized’ English is to write back to the empire (the centre as made up of the gatekeepers and power-brokers in situ in, for example, London and Cambridge, New York and Washington); to write against it via non-standard English; to in effect ultimately quell it, abnegate it, disintegrate it, disempower it and the concomitant economic, social and political potencies all wrapped up in its very words and their usage.

The other two ways are (1) to write so well in English so that readers really have to take note, although as Dasgupta (1993: 2003) is quoted in the Introduction to our Hydra follow-up, *Why English? Confronting the Hydra* (forthcoming, 2015), that even then these guardians of standardized English would tend never to admit entry into their echelons anyway, or would, more worryingly, ultimately merely incorporate such efforts as theirs’. He notes, “Hence the striving by Indians to attain near-native command, to count as individuals who may be co-opted into the metropolitan Herrenvolk.”

Or (2), more decidedly, to write primarily in one's own indigenous tongue (thus abrogation), which both Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Md. Hj. Salleh decided to do as their own responses to the burden of writing in English and as so well codified in their bookend contributions to *English language as Hydra*. Indeed, I find myself writing more and more in my first language, as I poke my own tongue out at these pale agents of English language and the English mores and English 'traditions' inherent in their language, which hold absolutely no significance for me and indeed, never have.

Back to writing back. This process can be potentialized via several methods, such as appropriation, which is itself a compote of code-switching/mixing and an incorporation of indigenous words and phrases; and also by what Zabus (1991) nominated as 'relexification' – the deliberate hybridization of English, which involves using English vocabulary but retaining one's indigenous structures and rhythms.

If one took my poem as above, one could quite easily sight examples of these processes, from sporadic code-mixing and the incorporation of *te reo* Māori words and phrases through – inevitably – to a rather relexified overall ambience, whereby I have indeed replaced much of the indigenous lexicon with an English, but have also consciously retained my own indigenous perspectives, rhythms and repetitions. Overall, I have appropriated the conqueror's language, whereby English has become an English; another hydra head to flail against its big brother English. At the same time I am demanding through this written-back lingo, that our *mokomokai* be returned to their *tūrangawaewae*, Aotearoa, by the very *Pākehā* (Caucasian) conquistadores who wrenched them away in the first place, at that time and for a long time subsequently, insisting that our own language be expunged, annihilated. King Hydra Head then, quite literally stole the heads of allegedly alien others, to wit, *ngā tangata* Māori.

Therefore Māori are willing and able to have feet in both hot pools (their own language and English/english) – if and when they choose to. Rika-Heke (1996:155) wrote -

Māori writers writing in the dominant language English use literary strategies which ensure that our texts are transmitted in the way we want them to be. Many Māori poets... writing in English, incorporate aspects of oral literature into our texts or use the various genre of oral literature as a foundation for contemporary texts.

Rika-Heke also notes the deliberate use of Māori words and phrases, "often without translations for monolingual Anglophones" (ibid.) as Māori deliberately utilize *te reo* Māori (Māori language) as a confrontational mechanism versus *ngā Pākehā*, who had then to learn Māori in an effort to comprehend what was being written – often about them, eh! The English language can therefore also become an identity marker for those indigenous people who make it their own.

Parakrama (2012:107) further suggested writing back (from the so-called periphery in Sri Lanka) to the Empire and wrote accordingly in *English language as Hydra*; deliberately writing in English, when he chose to, as a ploy to insurrect, make uncomfortable his supposed (post-)colonialist 'masters' –

This piece is written partly in non-standard language-register-discourse to dramatise the fact that the use of broader (uptonow unacceptable) standards affects neither intelligibility nor clarity, except in the usual substantive ways by which all language-

use is governed. The rule-breaking may be arbitrary and inconsistent, but so are the rules they break. In fact, I have succeeded if you are unsure whether the *errors* are deliberate or not. In this context, both “authenticity” and “appropriateness” need to be re-examined as functions of arbitrary-but-not-innocent categories which mask their ideological underpinnings through representation as (an impossible) neutrality. I will not gloss “Lankan” terms: if you need to know what they mean, please take the trouble to find out, just as we have to with “British” or “US” usage. We all need to earn the right to eavesdrop on other contexts and cultures – an always (productively) difficult and fraught process – any shortcut that seems to make understanding easy does serious disservice because it oversimplifies, trivialises and distorts...

Significantly, Pennycook (1994: 265, 267) also stresses the idea of ‘worldliness’ as vital in this entire process – any writing back goes well beyond altering and reinterpreting lexis and grammar and syntax, and must also attain new ‘meanings’, convey ontologically different worldviews necessarily contained in the redressing of the tongue –

Language is not merely a *means* to engage in struggle but it is also a principal *site* of struggle, and thus to take up a cultural political project must require a battle over the meanings of English... Writing back, therefore, *produces* realities as well as reflects them... This is not, of course, to say that changes of syntax, lexicon, phonology and so on are not important, but rather to argue that we need to highlight meaning above structure and to see meaning as struggled over within a larger question of cultural politics rather than as a representation of reality or a shift within a system.

The English language hydra is, then, all rather ironically and paradoxically, capable of turning back on itself. One swollen head can bite the others in its attempts to keep the beast in shape. Yet this head-biting behaviour also holds true for these englishes, as they snarl back at exonormative Anglo-American English. Wrote Mazrui (1975: 191), “What are often overlooked are some of the anti-Commonwealth tendencies which are also part of the English language.” I am preaching from my pulpit the manifest point that one can indict the English language, more specifically its agencies, ‘merely’ by utilising it in subterfuge ways: this glorious contradiction as duly noted and savoured like a garrulous gobstopper.

Indeed, as Eoyang (2003:13) points out, many critics of the English language are writing in English, publishing in English - but unlike other imperial languages, many such critics of the hegemonic English language have a particularly anti-hegemonic thrust to their critiques. He informs us that, “ironies abound: English is at once demonized as the language of the imperialist, yet it is also the preferred language for anti-imperialist, postcolonial theory”. I have here done the same, even given that even to be published I had to follow the strict trivial regimens of APA referencing formalizations and the escalating and emasculating rigmaroles of how many quotation marks are acceptable, how to indent ‘properly’ blah blah blah, te mea te mea te mea.

I write poetry, where there is more chance to escape these standardizing and straitjacketing regimes (given that even in English language poetry there are guardians who espouse and admit only poems written in their proscribed and sanctified ways, most particularly in the all-too-often closed closet of Aotearoa-New Zealand poetics.) Baudrillard (1990) called this possibility ‘seduction’, whereby the dominant discourse, in this case the hydra of standardized English, eventually may be ‘beguiled into submission’, be undermined by crafty subversion in an ongoing process of play. As, perhaps, here -

your poetry ain't mine

eschewing your ignorant spiel

I
cond
e
s
c
e
n
d

to
defibrillate your
poetry
into *analienother*,
varooooooooom In g
life-form.



Ngā
mōteatea
tika

[*ngā mōteatea tika* – real Māori song-poetry]

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However, I also have to point out that Greenblatt (1990:41) makes the particularly valid comment about what he calls “subversive discourses” that dominant discourses “co-opt” and “assimilate” and “neutralize”. Subversive voices are then “produced by and within the affirmations of order, but they do not undermine that order.” The hydra that is standard English is one hell of a voracious beast in that it can also deliberately feign subversion so as to ultimately contain: postcolonial literature is now a staple diet in many university English departments globally. Wikipedia also reifies this gobble-up process as ‘recuperation’, namely

the process by which politically radical ideas and images are twisted, co-opted, absorbed, defused, incorporated, annexed and commodified within media culture and bourgeois society, and thus become interpreted through a neutralized, innocuous or more socially conventional perspective. More broadly, it may refer to the cultural appropriation of any subversive works or ideas by mainstream culture.

Such, then, is the malchemical potency of this huge hydra head, that it is going to take a very concentrated and continued assault by several englishes and non-englishes and localized calques and jargons to ever disempower it, to eviscerate it, to resist its ultimate embrace. Writing back to the centre, the Anglo-American Empire pulsating heart, requires guts, gumption and grist, given also that such processes are themselves not unilateral in manner or meaning, because aspects of different location, ethnicity, gender, patois/dialect make for a vastly wide-ranging skirmishing armoury here. As Pennycook (1994: 270) stresses, “there is no easy route to such writing, no way in which it can be simply achieved through a certain writing approach.”

I would add here also that ‘literature’ here encompasses all forms of both writing and speaking english and that the entire locus is complex and cannot be simply reduced to the

binaries of empire and colony; centre and periphery, Other and Self; for in such simple elision power remains with English, the glib swift loquacious proselytizer of such yin-yang. As Ghandi (1998:175) points out in ironic postcolonial reaction to *The Empire Writes Back*, “these critics once again repeat the tired colonialist assumption that it takes the West...to bring the ‘rest’ to the condition of intelligibility.” Even the adherents of english may well be English double agents, potentially systematizing an inevitable contra to their very own interpretation of one, are in effect strengthening the very foe they write so well about...

All the more reason to write back and then through the episteme! Writing back to the Centre is to existentially de-centre so as to abnegate any peripheries whatsoever. Let’s mutiny.

sloop of discourse

so, you whiteman mariners
c o n t i n u e
to skim your sagging seas
of perfidity.

exporting your barmy lexis
for warm flurries of money,
girding your gallivant
galleons
in academy rigour,

a logomachic cargo
fishing for finance
with name-dropping élan,

while
netting the neophytes
who pay for your prattle:

so they’re c a s t
a d r i f t

london’s
smug sails/salesmen,

as
i e l t s rules the waves.

[First published *Carillon*, England, 2012]

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& let's build a new *waka*, re-write the book, lets english-up/down/all around the world by ignoring English completely....c'mon, it's not that difficult, eh. have a *squint* below, before you go...

aroha mai, apirana

[Ko to ringa ki nga rākau a te Pākehā,

In your hands the tools of the Pākehā,

Hei oranga mo to tinana.

As means to support and sustain you. – Sir Apirana Ngata, 1920s]

aroha mai, apirana,

aroha mai taku hoa.

every day, every damned day

I strangulate this tongue,

ram it deep back d

o

w

n

its own throat,

bastardize it in any way I can

& french kiss it to death.

my garotte hands flex

any nearest extempore–

schwa; tmesis; zeugma; umlaut –

[??? what are these???, I gag]

to asphyxiate its squawky whimpers,

exsiccate its spongy velar

supplicate its fancy frissons

into brute submission

let's murder this motherfucker once and for all

ko mate, mate, mate me kāore he ora mo tēnei arero

ko Hirini te kingi

&

today I maybe

won.

[So long as Māori can only assert the values and attitudes of their culture in English, they necessarily remain victims of the colonial legacy. Only when Māori writers can rely upon there being a sizeable body of readers in the Māori language will Māori culture truly be able to assert its independence – Hirini Melbourne, 1991].

[ko mate, mate, mate me kāore he ora mo tēnei arero – Māori – it's death, death, death and not life for this tongue.]