Writing Along Broken Lines: Violence and Ethnicity in Contemporary Maori Fiction.

Reviewed by Simone Drichel

Writing Along Broken Lines: Violence and Ethnicity in Contemporary Maori Fiction.
Otto Heim.
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While the fiction coming out of postcolonial countries such as India or Africa has received a massive boost in critical attention in the last few years, Aotearoa/New Zealand has—once again—been relegated to the margin and has therefore remained a largely 'undiscovered country' on the postcolonial map. However, 'undiscovered' this country and its indigenous literature might not be for very much longer. With the publication of Swiss scholar Otto Heim's *Writing Along Broken Lines,* "the first book-length study of [the] powerful and important works" produced by Maori writers since 1972 has appeared, thus bringing Maori fiction into the public eye and opening the critical debate on postcolonial writing in this country.

Heim's study comprises two main sections, framed by very dense introductory and concluding remarks. The first section investigates the accommodation of violence in Maori fiction and prepares the ground for the second one, in which "the forms of ethnic subjectivities that emerge from this accommodation of violence" (25) are analysed. The basic argument holding this structure together revolves around keywords such as 'violence', 'ethnicity', 'kaupapa' and 'culture of survival'. Heim maintains that because postcolonial Maori ethnicity is constructed around an experience of "constraints, both bodily and textual, that limit the articulation of selfhood" (229), Maori writing is particularly sensitive to the problem of (colonial) violence and evolves as an expression of a 'culture of survival'. As a result of this sensitivity to violence, Maori writers are confronted with a curious double-bind, for

> the narrativisation of violence always involves a certain disavowal of pain, whether in the blatant form of mockery or, less obviously, in the manner of rationalising or aestheticising representations. [...] To the extent that it is narrativised, therefore, the victim's pain or death becomes subject to a

> symbolic transference which amounts to something like a sacrifice in that the suffering is made to serve a moral purpose. (17f).

If ‘narrativisation’ cannot voice the victim’s pain without at the same time sacrificing it, then the question arises whether the articulation of grievances in their literature is actually in the interest of Maori. Heim articulates this dilemma in more general terms, asking whether there is a form of symbolisation that might be at the service of the receiver of (colonial) violence:

> This raises the question whether symbolisation cannot also be in the interest of the victim of violence. Could there not be something like a language of pain? Is there no form of narrative that is committed to survival rather than sacrifice? (18)

He finds, however, that “[t]he closest language can get to a representation of pain [...] is in an enactment of its own breakdown” (p. 19). Consequently, there cannot be a ‘language of pain’ as such. Language can (mimetically) express empathy with pain, but it cannot actually *represent* pain. Nonetheless, language—and therefore writing—is instrumental in articulating the concerns of the victim of violence:

> The act of rebuilding the shattered world begins with the recovery of a voice, which reaches beyond the isolation of the hurting body and enables us to reconnect ourselves to the collectively shared realm of a social world. In this reaching out for connectedness with the world lies the orientation of a language and a form of symbolisation that is at the service of the victim of violence. (19)

Heim insists that the significance of language here lies not in its representational (or metaphorical) function, which he sees as a sacrificial form of symbolisation, but “in its materiality” (19). The latter he regards as a form of symbolisation that “resembles the structure of metonymy in that it reassembles a shattered world by rearticulating the links of contiguity within materiality” (20). Whereas the metaphorical symbolism sacrifices the victim’s pain in narrative representation, the metonymic symbolism is at the service of the ‘culture of survival’, because it “proceeds in pursuit of an agency that is performative and worldly, opening up new narrative possibilities” (20).

It is these “new narrative possibilities” in Maori fiction that Heim sets out to explore in the ensuing four chapters. Following the three strands distinguished in the introduction—(mimetic) empathy, metaphorical transformation of pain and

metonymic projection of sentience—he analyses Maori writers' fictional response to violence. His perceptive readings of the accommodation of violence in texts by writers such as Patricia Grace, Witi Ihimaera, Keri Hulme, Alan Duff, Apirana Taylor, Bruce Stewart and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku unfold in four stages, ranging from violence in the relative privacy of the family to confrontations with abstract expressions of systemic violence such as terrorism and war.

The next three chapters are dedicated to an examination of the ethnic subjectivities that emerge out of the tension between the experience of (colonial) violence, on the one hand, and the commitment to a kaupapa, as a distinctive 'ideology' of Maori fiction, on the other. While violence is "instrumental in establishing contemporary Maori ethnicity as an inadequate and incongruent experience" (22), kaupapa is crucial in re-establishing a positive sense of Maori identity, because it "provides an enabling or empowering vision, a value to be sought" (23). Moulded by this tension, the emerging postcolonial Maori subjectivities carry the characteristics of a 'culture of survival'. It is thanks to this "empowering vision" of kaupapa, then, that postcolonial Maori culture is marked not by 'sacrifice', but by 'survival'. Within this crucial concept of kaupapa, Heim identifies three distinct dimensions:

> [A]t the level of individual experience, a kaupapa allows people to recognise a sense of purpose in the disparate facts of everyday life. At a collective level, it represents a shared ideological position, a cause worth fighting for. And at an even more general level of cultural action, the kaupapa manifests itself in a commitment to a principle of action oriented on the extension of physical and spiritual well-being. (23)

These three dimensions of kaupapa provide the structure for the second section in Heim's study. Chapter 6 analyses fictional accounts of attempts at bridging individual disconnectedness, while chapter 7 focuses on articulations of collective disconnectedness and documents how Maori fiction interrelates with Maori political ideology in "drawing attention to the blind spots of [dominant] ideological articulations" (172). Finally, chapter 8—to my mind the most successful and important chapter in this book—analyses three of the main "symbolic concretisations" (p. 190) in which a spiritual connectedness to the world is rendered in Maori fiction: a particular sense of the past as present, the whare whakairo "as a repository of tribal stories" (p. 190) and the mauri as the life force that runs between and connects people with their world.

As with any 'first', Otto Heim's book on contemporary Maori fiction will surely be picked up and leafed through with great interest. Besides, that the first of such

studies on Maori literature should not have been undertaken by either a Maori or a Pakeha New Zealander, but by an overseas scholar, will possibly add to its attraction. As an outsider, Heim can be expected to remain on neutral ground in the heated debate about ‘race’ relations in this country. For this reason, his book is likely to be taken much more seriously by both sides of the Maori-Pakeha divide. Yet regardless of such positive disposition to attract a wide audience, the book will have to prove to its audience that this interest is indeed justified.

From my own perspective, as someone working on a PhD in a similar area, Heim’s book is certainly a valuable addition to the rather limited pool of extended critical readings on Maori literature. Yet I cannot praise this book unreservedly, which, I suspect, is more the result of editorial constraints, than of any shortcoming of Otto Heim’s. Originally a PhD thesis submitted to the University of Basel, Heim’s study was “about double the length of this book [and] then included large sections on the reflection on violence in contemporary critical theory and in the social sciences, on postcolonial theory and on Maori culture and history” (p. 7). Cutting these sections, Heim has not only ‘succeeded’ in his declared intention to “focus the book more clearly on the discussion of Maori fiction” (p. 7), but also in ousting his study from the realm of cultural studies (in which any study of postcolonial literature firmly belongs) to the much more narrow realm of ‘English Literature’. This impression is re-inforced by the fact that Heim frames his study by a discussion of what makes ‘good writing’. In doing so he displays a concern about a ‘canon’ (and an inclusion of Maori literature therein) that remains a favourite hobby-horse of a more traditional-minded study of literature, while it is repeatedly being challenged by the more recent discipline of cultural studies.

Yet this cannot have been Heim’s intention. Some of his comments in fact clearly indicate an awareness that the study of postcolonial literature needs to establish the particular contexts or ‘postcolonial condition’ in and against which the literary texts should be read. He describes his own approach, for instance, as an “attempt to read texts by Maori writers as tactical interventions in the semiotic field of colonial discourse” (p. 191) and—quoting Said—expressly subscribes to a particular postcolonial notion of discourse and con/textuality. Yet while such comments are scattered throughout his study, none is elaborated upon to a satisfying degree. As a result, the argument, as presented in the introduction and afterword, appears so condensed that, for a reader without a reasonable understanding of the basic theoretical principles underlying cultural studies, some passages will be barely comprehensible. For the ‘common reader’ it will hardly be sufficient, for example, to find an argument built largely around the perceived

significance of the materiality of language, when all there is to supplement this perception is the evasive remark that this “is a complex matter” (p. 19). The reader’s curiosity about this complexity is then merely fobbed off with a footnote stating that the author’s own understanding of the matter is in keeping with “the notion of performativity that Butler theorises” (p. 26, fn. 14). For the reader unacquainted with this particular intellectual heritage, it might not be at all obvious why survival should be understood “as a rearticulation of the body with the world” (p. 19). Yet no further explanations are given.

Resulting, possibly, from this lack of transparency, the first section appears strangely unfocused. While the actual readings of individual texts are impressive in their perceptiveness, they seem to be rather too loosely arranged around the structuring centre indicated in the introduction. The second section, by contrast, is much more successful. Equally lucid in its interpretations as the preceding chapters, it challenges some of the prominent (Pakeha) readings of Maori fiction and unfolds its argument convincingly around an analysis of the three dimensions of kaupapa outlined in the introduction.

It is always easy to criticise a book for what it hasn’t done, for the aspects it has left uncovered or the instances in which it hasn’t gone far enough. This is particularly so when the book in question is a ‘first’ in a field that, so far, has received little critical interest. As with any ‘first’, the scope of what *could* have been explored and discovered in this book is, of course, vast. Bearing this in mind, I believe that—despite the aforementioned shortcomings—we should congratulate Otto Heim on his achievement and hope that this ‘first’ will be welcomed in Aotearoa/New Zealand as an invitation to discuss the issues that are at stake in *this* postcolonial country and thereby help it gain greater prominence on the postcolonial map.

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