
Book Reviews

James Boyd White, *Acts of Hope: Creating Authority in Literature, Law and Politics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

As the sub-title indicates, the theme of the book is on "creating authority in literature, law and politics". Persons of this reviewer's background (of living many years under authoritarian regimes) could perhaps be forgiven if they hastily presume that the book deals with the "political" question of authority albeit it also encompasses the "allied" fields of literature and law. But, to quote from a speech given in a different context by an Asian authoritarian leader, who shall remain nameless, that presumption or classification would "though not absolutely wrong, be only partially correct". Undoubtedly the question of political authority, especially unjust political authority, is expressly discussed in at least one, possibly two chapters of *Acts of Hope*. (Those that deal with the speech given by Nelson Mandela at his 1964 trial and the refreshingly perceptive, novel and sympathetic way in which the author dissects and analyses "Plato's *Crito: The Authority of Law and Philosophy*".)

But the most educative and refreshing parts of the book have been those that deals with what I would, perhaps inappropriately, call "soft authority" or at least non-political authority in the narrow sense of the word. The author's panoramic discussion of apparently disparate literary texts covers Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Emily Dickinson's poetry. They are read and explained with the purpose of detecting and judging "claims of authority made by authors upon us", determining the issues as "to which institutions and social practices we [should and do] grant authority", and creating "authorities of our own through our thoughts and arguments".

Richard II deals with kingship and the legitimacy and the authority of the crown. White claims that though it is pointless to ask "whose side Shakespeare is on the issue of political (and especially royal authority)", the play "works out a way of addressing it by including the possibilities of speech on either side and by showing what is likely to happen when these possibilities are poised against each other".

Mansfield Park is examined through the prism of "creating the authority of the self" by the main character in the novel, Fanny Price. White finds the theme of "Making the Self Out of and Against the Culture" in Fanny's subtle struggle, of which perhaps she was not consciously aware, in resisting the "social and intellectual practices" of Mansfield Park. "The authority of the self" which Fanny Price ultimately successfully tried to assert, is in relation to the institution of, and understanding about marriage inherent in the milieu that she found herself in.

The Chapter on Dickinson's poetry is sub-titled "Transforming the Authority of Language". The author initially states that Dickinson's poetry consists of "half-rhymes or part-rhymes... [Dickinson's peculiar use of] voices... subject matter... [and] extraordinary violations of grammatical expectation". Avers the author: "... her poetry was by the standards of her day regarded... as defective". Due to the expert and innovative literary and interpretive skills of James Boyd White, most readers would, by the end of the chapter, probably agree with White that because of (rather than in spite of) all these "defects" Dickinson's poetry, established a kind of authority "perhaps a little like that of a legal precedent... a kind of authority [which] is not that of command but of performance" making her "one of the most particular and homely of poets, and one of the most philosophical".

There are "spill-overs" from reading these literary chapters. As a dilettante but one who is eager to learn, I found the excerpts of the poetry of Dickinson, the verse of Shakespeare and prose of Jane Austen enriching and a delight to read. It was also a joy to read the narration and nuanced interpretation of these texts from the author who is a Professor of Law and English, adjunct professor of classical studies and chair of the Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan.

I said "spill-overs" because some of the literary texts that White analyses give rise to thought which is not about authority *per se* or perhaps even per chance. For instance, one of the first thoughts that comes to mind after reading Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for Death" was how comparable Dickinson's poem is with the Buddhist concept of *Anicca* (Impermanence) and perhaps the even more deeper concept of *Anatta*, (roughly translated as "non-self"); White's explanation and distinguishing of the concepts of "Immortality" and "Eternity" as used by Dickinson in the poem strengthens my opinion that in so doing and notwithstanding the "gulfs" of culture and history, I am at least comparing "apples and oranges" and not "apples and Apple Computers". Perhaps this "comparison" through "cultures" is a testament to White's contention that "talk

about 'culture' or 'tradition' at such a degree of generality is not quite right. I am not simply the product of a finite number of texts all promoting the same social and cultural values, nor are you".

White makes this statement in relation to a matter which was in the back of my mind; so to speak, almost before I read the book. White himself addresses this concern when he quotes and reply to a friend who in effect states that "with the partial exception of Mandela, [the] book treats works that are all drawn from the humanistic tradition of Western high culture". Professor White's sincere acknowledgement that he "defines" himself as "belonging to a certain culture" and that he makes "no claim for the priority of this culture... or for these texts, but I do for their value... in the increasingly pluralistic world we inhabit" is reassuring although judging from the breadth of his vision it was almost unnecessary.

If White's explanation of possible cultural provincialism of his work almost completely assuages one's concern in this matter then a curiosity about another related issue arises: what other and multifarious texts outside of the "Western liberal tradition" would lend itself to addressing the question of "creating authority" in the broad sense of the word?

For example, can one extrapolate the same patterns of creating, disputing, confronting, affirming and discussing "authority" from, say, the great and ancient religious, literary, political and legal texts and traditions of Asia, such as *The Bhagva Gita*, in the writings of Confucius, or from Sufi thought? It is also worth delving into the modern literary tracts in the English language which are arguably not entirely of "the Western liberal tradition" with a view towards discerning whether these texts also embody issues and pointers on "Creating a Public World" on "The Authority of the Self" leading to "The Creation of an Authority as an Act of Hope". I refer to the works of Asian, African and Caribbean literature in English, what is sometimes known as "Commonwealth Literature".

Edward Said in his treatise *Culture & Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993) discusses some of these works under "Resistance and Opposition" to imperialism, and therefore to a form of what I would call "hard authority" since it is an explicit political (and economic) authority that these works "resisted". Interestingly and if I read him correctly, Said also analyses *Mansfield Park* from the viewpoint of authority but from a rather different perspective of White's: the authority of Sir Thomas Bertram on the estate of Mansfield Park, contrapuntally to be studied with the "authority" of colonialism and exploitation in his administration of his plantations in Antigua. My point here, however, is to inquire whether the issues of creating authority (in the not so political sense of the word) and transforming both self and authority in the process, could be discerned in such "non-Western" works in English such as modern Commonwealth literature.

This brings us to the more political and legal texts that White analyses. Ever since I had read about Socrates' trial and execution as recorded in the *Apology* and *Crito* I was struck by a sense of irony and dichotomy. I

found myself in agreement with Socrates for not escaping from prison but I always thought that the reasons Socrates gave for refusing to take up the offer of escape provided by his friend and disciple Crito, were unsatisfactory. After reading White's interpretation of the Crito, one may not see Socrates' point "face to face" but at least some of the fuzziness that appeared through that "glass darkly" has abated.

The *Crito* can be considered as a legal and political testament in addition to being a philosophical one. White also discusses what can be described as a text expounding issues of religious authority: Richard Hooker's Preface to the *Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, written about the late 1580s (16th century) where Hooker "at nearly the same time that Shakespeare was confronting the problem of authority in his play *Richard II...* was trying to find a way to live in another part of the culture, the church, in which an old authority had recently been lost [in England]".

The two chapters that follow Hooker's *Lawes* are legal texts. One deals with the issue of law reform in England in the late 17th century in what might nowadays be called a "position paper" written by Sir Matthew Hale. The other deals with a concurring opinion of a 1992 ruling of the United States Supreme Court in which the Justices who wrote the opinion, in a work of "ethical and cultural art", affirmed the controversial 1973 US Supreme Court ruling regarding abortion. Most of the judges who wrote the joint concurring opinion, which White analyses, would not probably have voted for the *Roe v Wade* (410 US 113 (1973)) decision had they been on the Court at the time the ruling was made. Yet they let stay the "authority" of *Roe* intact. James Boyd White analyses why and how "the Authority of the Past" matters to those Justices.

Hence one could say that the three religious and legal texts mentioned are in contrast to the arguably "radical" stance of Austen and Dickinson's work more of a "conservative" kind but White rightly sees value too in "Constituting Authority in Argument" as Hooker did and "Determining the Authority of the Past", which was the purpose of Hale.

Now to the most political of the texts analysed: "Mandela's Speech from the Dock" in his 1964 trial for "sabotage and attempted overthrow of the (apartheid) government". White draws our attention to the fact that Mandela's speech from the dock, like that of Socrates to the Athenian jury, could well have been his last. He also makes the comparison that Mandela, like Socrates, did not ask for clemency. But while Socrates, at least in the *Crito*, appeared to be asserting an "absolute obligation to obey the law" Mandela's purpose was to highlight the injustices of the South African laws which he admitted that he broke, and at the same time to challenge the authority of them. The dignity of Mandela's speech was such that the reviewer is reminded of a statement issued by the late Martin Luther King Jr during the American civil rights movement. King's "While We Can't Wait: Letter from Birmingham Jail" also touches, if I recall correctly, the issue of civil disobedience.

White states that Mandela in his speech "claims the authority of West-

ern civilization. He does not, as he might have done, oppose Africa to Europe rejecting the latter and affirming the former". Instead Mandela "claims Western civilization for himself and his movement; these are the terms in which he defines the government as barbaric". This brings to mind the current "Asian values v. Western values" "debate", especially in relation to the issues of democracy and human rights. The debate on these issues are, it seems to the reviewer, mainly engendered by certain Asian elites, who may have an axe to grind and whose nature of governance can, in quite a few ways, be described as authoritarian.

Mandela might have been making a strategic move, in his reliance on the values of "Western civilization" as his line of defence and attack at the time of his trial — frying a carp with carp oil as the Burmese say. But are certain Asian elites taking a "strategic" or self-justifying stand when they deny the moral authority or relevance of certain provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for Asian societies? While not assigning these challenges of the "authority" (of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) as "acts of cynicism" in their entirety, it is heartening to see "acts of hope" in the recent writings of Burmese freedom fighter Aung San Suu Kyi and South Korean opposition leader Kim Dae Jung. Both Kim and Suu Kyi dissent from these "challenges", affirming the moral authority and universality of democracy and human rights.

What, then is the significance of James Boyd White's *Acts of Hope*? The blurb says that it is "elegant and accessible". One could add that it is persuasive, enlightening and "authoritative" in the "soft" and complimentary sense of the word. *Acts of Hope* is indeed an affirmative, hope-inspiring piece of literature on the subject of "creating authority in literature, law and politics" — a subject the author has so ably and sensitively explored in this superb book.

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