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“Dinner by the River” and “Driving to the Airport”: Andrew Taylor’s Polish Ash Poems and Jacques Derrida’s *Cinder*

Abstract

Andrew Taylor (b. 1940), one of the most eminent living Australian poets, has had a lasting relationship with Poland and Opole in particular. As a result of one of his several visits to Opole, he wrote two poems, “Dinner by the River,” which was later included in the volume edited by Peter Rose *The Best Australian Poems 2008* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008), and “Driving to the Airport,” which appeared in *The Unhaunting* (London: Salt, 2009). Both poems were originally included in the volume *Australia: Identity, Memory and Destiny* (ed. Wolny and Nicieja, Opole 2008). The aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore the image of Poland, and the Odra River in particular, the Australian poet has created, alongside the memories of the past his visit to Poland evoked. The elements that unite the Polish poems are the ones connected with coal, soot, fire, ashes, embers and what Jacques Derrida called *cedre* (cinder) in one of his most important books, *Feu la cendre* [*Cinders*] (Minneapolis, London 2014).

[...] that whiteness of ash which belongs to destiny consumed and consuming,
to the conflagration of the flame which burns itself up.

Is ash the Good or the Evil of flame?
(Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit* [*De l'esprit*])

Andrew Taylor’s poetry has universally been associated with Australia, its cities and landscapes (*Folds in the Map*, 1991; *Sandstone*, 1995, and many others). Yet, the poet’s numerous travels resulted in him widening the range of perspectives from which he views the world (*Travelling*, 1986; *Götterdämmerung Café*, 2001; *Rome*, 2005; *The Unhaunting*, 2009, in particular, and most recently, *Impossible Preludes*, 2016). This geographical diversity implies also a certain emotional one on the part of the poet since he listens very carefully to the voice of the lands he trots and the people who cross his paths. The emotions that are evoked in his many encounters with Europe (his second home is in Germany, but his heart is in

Rome) cause that his poetry sounds so idiosyncratic to the Australian ear, making it almost impossible to imitate and, perhaps, to understand.

“Dinner by the River,”¹ is, generally, a reflection on Poland’s tragic past as evoked by the image of a passing barge carrying coal on the Odra River in Opole, Southern Poland:

And midway through the first course
of pickled fish in the restaurant
by the river that night
slid a black on black
barge
under the brilliantly lit bridge

Taylor constructs his opening image spatially with the use of his favourite short phrases and rhythm based on an unstressed/stressed syllable pattern to suddenly break it to introduce an object of his attention that somehow violates the tranquility of the dinner by the river – a black barge, which he contrasts with the brilliantly lit bridge. The contrast between the blackness of the barge and the brilliantly lit bridge builds an image of an imaginary boundary between the two worlds: the one of the (ancient) past – the underworld and the other of the contemporary times: the one is dark, the other is lit. The poet cleverly makes use of alliteration here: “black on black / barge” and “brilliantly lit bridge” that is supposed to create an impression of wholeness between the two contrasting worlds and make them complement each other. We also notice the silent and secret slither of the barge (“slid”), manifesting thus its surreptitious, sneaky and stealthy entrance into the world of the living who, at the same time, have been feeding themselves on the (pickled) fish. This interruption was ghostly and uncanny since the barge was:

silent
unmanned
unlit

and evoked the image of Styx, the Greek mythical river that forms the boundary between Earth and the Underworld, frequently called Hades. And, as the myth has it, when your soul has reached the Styx River, Charon, the boatman, will give you a ride to the underworld:

Souls
destined
for the underworld?
I ventured
to my friend but he said
it was only coal

At this point, the narrator realizes the reality of the setting, yet cannot agree with the plainness of his interlocutor's explanation: what for the latter was an everyday routine in the Silesian landscape over the Odra River – the coal transport from the coal mines nearby via the cargo port in Gliwice to the Baltic seaside port of Gdynia, for the former it carried far more meaning:

That silent
 burden of blackness was not
 only coal
 it was smuggling history
 through southern Poland
 it was dragging me back
 to the nineteen forties
 to when there was less light
 to when my friend
 hadn't been born
 to when the bridge
 was a broken arch
 to when carbon
 had another meaning
 falling like soot
 [11.10.06, 06.03.07]

The poet's image of Polish history focuses at that moment on the tragic and dark period of the Second World War ("to the nineteen forties / to when there was less light" and "when the bridge / was a broken arch") and the experiences of the Holocaust and massive extermination of millions of Polish and foreign citizens in concentration camps, where they were either gassed or starved to death. Then, their bodies were cremated in camps' ovens ("to when carbon/ had another meaning") to finally take the shape of soot ("falling like soot").

In his epoch-making book, *Feu la cendre* [*Cinders*], Jacques Derrida espoused his most essential elaborations of his thinking on the legacy of the Holocaust in contemporary poetry and philosophy, famously arguing that the ashes – or cinders – are the best model for one of his master-terms, the *trace*, arguing that they are the most authentic manifestation of Being, entangled in the insoluble game of presence and absence. Ned Lukacher, Derrida's translator of *Feu la cendre*, starts his "Introduction" with the fundamental question, "Why does Jacques Derrida speak of the trace in terms of ash and cinder (*endre*)? "I would prefer *ashes*," Derrida has said, "as the better paradigm for what I call the trace – something that erases itself totally, radically while presenting itself" (*Cinders* 1). As Lukacher further explains:

Cinder is at once the best name for the absence of truly proper name for that which holds all beings and entities in presence, and by the same token just another name that

cannot begin to assess its distance or proximity to the final proper name (or names) of the truth of Being, whose very existence remains undecidable. [...] The naming of a cinder thus resists presenting itself as the privileged name or metaphor for that which brings things to presence and sustains them there. It is at the same time a name that resists the temptation to make the play of metaphor itself synonymous with the truth of Being. Cinders are neither proper nor metaphorical names; cinders name another relation, not to the truth as such, but to its possibility. (1)

In his whimsical style, Derrida elaborates on his subsequent master-phrase, *il y a là cendre*, on which he has founded his arguments in the book:

More than 15 years ago [the original French version of the book was published in 1987 by Des Femmes, R. W.] a phrase came to me, as though in spite of me; to be more precise, it returned, unique, uniquely succinct, almost mute. I thought I had calculated it cunningly, mastered and overwhelmed it, as if I had appropriated it once and for all. Since then, I have repeatedly had to yield to the evidence: the phrase dispensed with all authorization, she had lived without me. She, the phrase, had always lived alone. (21)

Il y a là cendre is the French phrase that contains a spelling error (*là* means “there” and takes the place of the feminine article *la*) and Lukacher translates it either as “ciders there are” or “there are ciders there”: “‘there’ where the marks of a divisible materiality within language, within its syntactic and linguistic stuff, trace the infinitesimal cinder quarks that remain from whatever it is that makes it possible and necessary that a language comes into being” (*Cinders* 1). Derrida explains his decision to change *la* to *là*:

Là written with an accent *grave*: *là*, there, cinder there is, there is there, cinder. But the accent, although readable to the eye, is not heard: cinder there is. To the ear, the definite article, *la*, risks effacing the place, and any mention or memory of the place, the adverb *là* [...]. But read silently, it is the reverse: *là* effaces *la*, *la* effaces herself, himself, twice rather than once. This sentence, in which each letter had a secret meaning for me, I used again later, whether a citation or not, in other texts: *Glas*, *The Postcard*, for example. (21)

Andrew Taylor’s subsequent poem, “Driving to the Airport,” brings us closer to the idea of ashes, the process of burning out and introduces the Derridian concept of the feminine in the ashes:

Last summer
 southern Poland
 a Porsche 4 wheel drive
the Merc couldn't be moved three months
because of the ice
 shirtsleeves now

*Would you like to see
 the lake?* She was swimming
 somewhere beyond the trees
 water rippled with her swimming
 the lake was on our way
 to the airport
 the Porsche maneuvered the jolty track
 through woods a plane
 mirrored her progress
 though we couldn't see her.
 We parked and walked down
 to the lake shore
 sandy but blotched with ashes
 of picnic and other fires
 her footprint captured within it.
 I remember glimpsing a road sign
 to Auschwitz
 as we left the lake
 (Perth, February 2007)

The feminine element so deftly introduced and intertwined into the body of the poem gives it an extra dimension in terms of wholeness of life and gender, the genuine Derridian *il y a la cendre* before it turned to *il y a là cendre*. In Taylor, it is both, and the direction is fundamentally the same: first, "there is *she* cinder there" to become, in the process of presence-turn-absence, "there is the cinder there," the only remnant of the passed time, the trace of being/Being, like the wake on the surface of the lake. The female swimmer spotted by the onlookers exemplifies the Heideggerian *Dasein*, i.e. "Being-there" transformed into somewhat Foucauldian "being-their [object of gaze]," the penetrating masculine look into the feminine matter (mother of all things) meant to restore and regenerate the stifled voices of absence. Like in Derrida, in an endless play of signification, the demonstrative pronoun "there" takes the form of the possessive plural "their" – the inaudible difference, which only emphasises the superiority of writing over speech. In effect, both poems, but the latter in particular, become the polylogues in which the masculine voices are entangled with the feminine ones (the swimmer, the lake, the ashes). For Derrida, the theme of cinders takes, technically and generically, the form of the polylogue:

an apparently unpronounceable conversation, really a writing apparatus that, one might say, *called* to the voice, to voices. But how can this fatally silent call that speaks before its own voice be made audible? How can it be kept any longer? In effect two pieces of writing come face to face on the page: on the right hand side, the polylogue proper, an entanglement of an indeterminate number of voices, of which some seem masculine, others feminine, and this is sometimes marked in the

grammar of sentence. These readable grammatical signs disappear for the most part when spoken aloud, which aggravates a certain indecision between writing and voice, an indecision already risked by the word *lá*, with or without the accent, in ‘cinders there are’ [*il y a lá cendre*]. (22)

What is most important, however, is that the polylogue is primarily and fundamentally meant for the *eye* in dealing with the tension between writing and speech and the vibration of grammar in the voice: “And this polylogue, it seems, is destined for the eye, it corresponds only to an interior voice, an absolutely low voice” (22). “Driving to the Airport,” too, is destined for the eye. Written on the sand, on the surface of the lake, is itself a wake, a furrow on the shore, the white trail left by the plane in the sky. The poem is itself an inaudible voice of multifarious voices; the masculine and feminine voices of the narrator, his interlocutor and the female swimmer who are the subspecies of woodland, the fire and ashes.

One of the key issues for Derrida is the experience of the holocaust, which he extends far beyond the Jewish tragic experience of the Second World War and that is why he always de-capitalises the word. Clutching to the tiniest trace of Ash-Being beyond the dichotomy of presence and absence, the logic of vacuum and void, Derrida drives us to the places where a different kind of memory is impossibly possible. In search of some other ways of memory, there are questions tracing down the fate and voice of a “girl” (the “la” changing to the “lá” – an audibly indiscernible difference, parallel to his master-term “différance” of *De la grammatologie*). As a result, the “girl’s” proper name becomes Cinder (*Cindre*) like in the case of Taylor’s female swimmer.

The momentous and tragic experiences of the Holocaust of which the poet has heard and/or read about furrowed in his memory what in Derridian language is metaphorically called a trace, an evidence of authentic Being-there: the inaudible voice of the girl as the ashes, the inaudible voices of the Holocaust victims as the ashes; the ashes speak in inaudible voices thus giving us that great gift of memory, which we are unable to return. And the symbolic catharsis by fire: “The symbol? A great holocaust fire, a burn-everything into which we would throw finally along with our entire memory, our names, the letters, the photos, small objects, keys, fetishes, etc.” (Derrida *Cinders* 62: xi). The great holocaust fire made the children see the invisible even though – and maybe because – the fire will blind them: “Holocaust of the children / God himself / had only the choice between two crematory ovens [...]” – “They will only see it through the fire (they will only be blinded by it)” (xi–xii), which, in effect, will make them immortal in the passers-by memories.

As has already been mentioned, Derrida finds ashes as the better paradigm for the trace – something that erases itself totally, radically, while presenting itself which, in all cases, signifies both presence and absence. In Taylor’s poems, ashes, alongside the full glossary connected with it – coal, carbon, fire, cinders – denote

what he believes constitutes the essential part of Poland's recent history and Polish national identity – the memory of Auschwitz, which erases itself totally while presenting itself as ashes.

Nietzsche, Derrida's grand master to whom he refers very frequently, proposes to treat cinders as part of the wholeness of the world. He cautions us, at the same time, against believing in that the world and the universe is organic:

Let us be on our Guard. – Let us be on our guard against thinking that the world is a living being. Where could it extend itself? What could it nourish itself with? How could it grow and increase? We know tolerably well what the organic is; and we are to reinterpret the emphatically derivative, tardy, rare and accidental, which we only perceive on the crust of the earth, into the essential, universal and eternal, as those do who call the universe an organism? That disgusts me. [...] Let us be on our guard against saying that death is contrary to life. *The living being is only a species of dead being*, and a very rare species. (109; emphasis mine)

And that is why, over a century after him, Derrida is postulating *ashes* as the best model for the trace, the trace that cannot be denied and forgotten and that which will stay forever.

Andrew Taylor's "Dinner by the River" and "Driving to the Airport" present themselves as a continuous dialectic between presence and absence which alternates with the logic of space and motion, in which the poet uncovers, in an evocative and thoughtful manner, the most human elements in clusters of images, condensed phrases or short words, not infrequently alliterated ("unmanned, unlit"), constructed by the use of negative prefixes, such as "un-," also in the title of the whole volume of poetry, *The Unhaunting*. His thinking defines itself as a persistent questioning of the origins of the language and the human, which inevitably leads, at least as it is in the above cases, to soot, cinder and ashes – the effects of fire's both destructive and constructive energies and activities. What remains of the human is the trace, not so much as the footprints on the sand, which are vulnerable and ephemeral, but rather as cinders and ashes that are there to stay. Thus, Derridian deconstructive reading and his grammatological strategy, contained particularly in *Cinders*, allows the reader to see the invisible and hear the inaudible in Andrew Taylor's Polish ash poems.

Notes

- 1 "Dinner by the River" and "Driving to the Airport" made their debut in the post-conference volume which I edited with the help of Stankomir Nieceja, *Australia: Identity, Memory and Destiny* (Opole 2008) and were contained in the Appendix (129–130). "Dinner by the River" officially appeared in *Australian Book Review*, July-August 2008, then in *The Best Australian Poems*

2008 (ed. Peter Rose, Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008: 128) and *The Unhaunting* (London: Salt, 2009, 64) alongside “Driving to the Airport” (63). I, thereby, express my sincere gratitude to Andrew Taylor for participating in the September 2006 Opole symposium on Australian culture and literature organised by the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Opole.

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