USE OF THESES

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CONVERTING SALVATION: Protestant Missionaries in Central Australia, 1930s-40s

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Conclusion

Using in particular the life and thought of the missionary JRB Love, and the mission site itself of Ernabella, as the principal points of reference, this thesis has examined the discourse and praxis of Central Australian missionaries in the 1930s and 1940s. The treatment of the missionaries has been approached from the perspective of what I have called, following Levinas and Derrida, a politics of hospitality: that is, that some missionaries approached the indigenous Other in a spirit of hospitality and generosity, despite the larger context of a ruthless colonial dispossession and appropriation of indigenous land, and that in turn indigenous people ‘welcomed’ the missionaries.

I have argued that while the mission sites of Central Australia contained significant elements, as we have seen, of conflictual, power-laden and paternalistic relations designed to control and re-form the indigenous body, the evidence of both discourse and praxis calls for a reassessment of postcolonial and postmodern readings of mission sites as places predominantly of domination and hegemony. In line with this argument I have also read the contact zones that we have looked at as shedding light on the question of power relations between white and black. We are still too often dazzled or angered by the presumptions and power of the colonial enterprise to see that power relations on these sorts of sites could be more diffused and complex than was once thought, and that the dynamics of power could and did run both ways. I suggest that the existence of these separate (although not necessarily equal) sets of power relations on the mission site may have allowed the quotidian negotiation of a politics of hospitality, already present at the initial face to face encounter when it was understood by the indigenes that the missionaries had not ‘come to kill’.

I have also argued that the orthodox missionary imperative of salvation was, in a sense, ‘converted’ by significant Central Australian missionaries from a notion that carried a principal freight of Christian or spiritual salvation to one that focused more on a physical ‘saving’ of the indigenous body and the indigenous collective, and that we are forced to take cognisance of the urgency and priority
the Central Australian missionaries, even theologically conservative Lutherans such as FW Albrecht, put on ‘saving’ the indigenous body and tribe. One of the early Hermannsburg missionaries succinctly articulated these notions when he described the mission’s objective as the salvation of the Aborigine ‘in time and in eternity’.\(^1\) The discourse of missionaries such as Love and Albrecht, and that of important contributors to the language and practice of the Central Australian mission site such as Duguid, differed significantly from the more general settler discourse (partially typified in this study by John Flynn) by representing the Aboriginal Other as someone for whom to take responsibility. These men felt profoundly that dispossession had created a powerful moral imperative to ‘save’ the Aborigine, whether it was Albrecht’s cry of ‘have we a right to dispossess the Aborigine?’ or Love’s justification of the dispossession but his coruscating sense of the obligation conditional on that dispossession.

According to Emmanuel Levinas, responsibility in its most elementary, originary form begins in the encounter with ‘the face of the Other’. The other is encountered ‘neither as a phenomenon nor as a being (to be mastered and possessed)’ but as a ‘face’, something unknowable; in Levinasian terms, infinite in its alterity.\(^2\) The alternative to this transformation of vision, the avaricious gaze turning into generosity, is the endeavour to absorb or appropriate the other, constructing what Levinas calls an economy or imperialism ‘of the Same’.\(^3\) The originary language spoken at the encounter is a ‘discours before discourse, a founding conversation’, a language or relationship with the other that maintains the distance of infinite separation ‘yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance’.\(^4\) It is in this ‘earlier’ sense of discourse that Levinas can say that ‘the face speaks’ [le visage parle]. This originary language or relation is characterised by non-comprehension and non-reciprocity; it is a founding speech, it is speech with ‘the stranger, the destitute, the proletarian’.\(^5\) The other is ‘always, in relation to me, without

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\(^3\) See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 39.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 41; see also Robbins, “Visage, Figure”, p. 138.

\(^5\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 75.
country, stranger to all possession, dispossessed and without dwelling.⁶ I am responsible to the other, responsible for him even to the point where I must ‘feed him with bread from my own mouth’.⁷ Above all, I am responsible for him in the sense that the other cannot be left to die alone, which is to say that I must stay with him and always do more until there is no more to do.⁸

I have found the Levinasian construction of originary encounter hauntingly resonant of the ‘face to face’ encounter of the Central Australian missionaries with ‘their’ Aborigines. I am not suggesting that a historicization of an ethics of responsibility is unproblematic, or is on all fours with Levinas’s more abstract and philosophical articulation of the face to face encounter. To suggest that we can transfer the Levinasian encounter fully to an analysis of the historical conditions and context of colonial, early to middle 20th century Central Australia would be to invite sentimentality as well as understate the complex and contesting forces at work on the mission site. The ‘missionary struggle with complexity’ was often a losing battle.⁹ Missionaries were also at times inevitably, even willingly, complicit in the introduction of European colonizing and imperialist practices that tended towards the oppression of a subaltern people. The politics of hospitality also included strains of the politics of dominance and hegemony. The avaricious gaze did not turn always or fully into Levinasian generosity. The imperialism of the self, the desire to master and possess, was a political and historical condition that often came with a European mother’s milk. The desire to re-form the female indigenous body, for example, to wrench it from kinship and cultural complexities that were little studied and less understood by missionaries, to keep it ‘clean’ and safeguarded from male abuse, both black and white, was a central concern of these white, middle class, Christian, male protectors of female virtue and purity.¹⁰ White missionaries were ineluctably

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⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 142. See also Oona Ajzenstat, *Driven Back to the Text*.
⁸ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 175.
caught in the matrices of discourses of racial hierarchies and differentiations, of
blood and whiteness that characterised the white Australian settler culture. In
relation to the troubled question of the removal of ‘half-caste’ children, Love
himself seemed unable to break free of these Foucaultian discourses that
structured or ‘programmed’, in a sense, what he said and thought about
Aboriginal people.

Given all these qualifications, there remains a part of the Central Australian
missionary experience which, when read metaphorically and provocatively,
resonates with the Levinasian language of hospitality, of the incapability of
‘reaching out to the other with empty hands’, of the sense of the other as
unknowable, as unaccountably different, with the ‘speech between the strangers’
often incomprehensible due to the ‘space’ between them, of the inability of
cultures to understand each other, of the sense of being guests in their own
homes, of inviting someone who has already invited them, ‘the subject both a
guest and a hostage, someone who is, before every invitation, elected, invited,
and visited in his home as in the home of the other, who is in his own home in
the home of the other’,\(^{11}\) of seeing the prohibition of murder in the face of the
other, of feeding ‘dispossessed men without food’ as an originary ethical impulse,
of being unable to leave the other to die alone, of the avaricious gaze turning into
generosity, of the gesture of reparation, of the conversion of salvation.

These words, too, from a hermeneutics of Levinas, also resonate, as if from the
mouth or pen of an exemplary missionary: *Face to face with this other who
suddenly appears before me – this stranger for whom I, too, am and shall always
remain a stranger, this being who by the appeal of his naked and vulnerable face
solicits, even condemns, me to take responsibility for him, and calls me into a
relation where strangeness and intimacy, distance and proximity coexist.*\(^{12}\)

Emmanuel Levinas once wrote that ‘it is through the condition of being hostage
that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon, proximity – even the

\(^{12}\) Richard Stamelman, “The Strangeness of the Other”, pp. 120-121.
little there is'.\textsuperscript{13} The word ‘hostage’, though it might strike us at first as strange in this context, embodies something of the nature of the identification a missionary like Love had with Aboriginal people: almost against his own instincts, his desire to be with ‘his own people’ in their civilised whiteness, he was hostage (‘condemned’) to a strong, almost inexorable, sense of obligation and duty, of responsibility born as much of an awareness of what ‘his own people’ had done to ‘the blacks’ as of his Christian faith. He was captured, as were Albrecht and Duguid in their different ways, by the obligation to save in time as well as eternity, and held fast by the burden of that responsibility. And the weight of the burden was augmented by its vicarious quality: the responsibility was taken on behalf of a nation of which Love was (strangely) both representative and a representative.

There is finally one more matter to deal with in this thesis. My father, Ronald Martin Trudinger, did (eventually) succeed JRB Love as the superintendent of Ernabella Mission Station in 1949, the year that I was born and began the first of my eight years on that mission site. RM Trudinger had been the first white teacher at the Mission. He was the one who had first met the Pitjantjatjara in that liminal space, the creek, the karu, where both black and white had begun learning from and about each other. The sense of responsibility that this thesis suggests was present in the Central Australian missionary experience was, in the event, a layered and finely balanced phenomenon, often incorporating discordant strands, paternalism, social and cultural superiority, bewilderment and incomprehension, a complex of desires to possess and control and exercise power. The possibility always existed that these discordant, ethnocentric and egocentric elements might come to predominate, that responsibility could turn into something else, perhaps more resembling its opposite. That this happened, on other mission stations, in other ways, is uncontested. In any case, the facts are that in 1957, after a hurriedly convened sub-committee at Ernabella of the Presbyterian Board of Missions, which included Dr. Duguid, my father was forced to resign his superintendency and, later his ministry, and leave the Mission. This followed his admission to a number of serious allegations involving

\textsuperscript{13} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, p. 117.
sexual misconduct with Aboriginal women at Ernabella. He served three months in a Port Augusta gaol for an offence under a South Australian Criminal Act. He then commenced another life in Sydney with his wife and family, and later in England. As far as I know, he never spoke openly about this part of his experience at Ernabella to anyone. It was as if it had been erased from memory. By such means, and others, he survived a downfall so humiliating and public that it would very likely have broken a more sensitive man. It is probably idle to do so, but on occasion I wonder if my father ever thought in his later life of the exemplary missionary and whether, if he had taken the advice offered by him, things might have turned out differently.

In 1987, and in a number of subsequent years before he died in 2002, my father returned to Ernabella on the invitation of senior people in the indigenous community, and assisted with translation and gardening projects. This invitation demonstrated something that has been displayed many times in the history of over two hundred years of the face to face encounter of European and indigenous Australians, that is, the capacity of Aboriginal people for toleration and forgiveness, the capacity to generate a politics of hospitality with the white people that far outweighed, on any reckoning, the meagre and isolated bundles of similar virtues occasionally offered to them by these Civilised and Christian intruders.
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