

Janoušová, Lucie

## Chatwins' Hill

*Brno studies in English*. 2000, vol. 26, iss. 1, pp. [75]-83

ISBN 80-210-2523-9

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104274>

Access Date: 30. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

LUCIE JANOUŠOVÁ

## CHATWINS' HILL

Reading the novel *On the Black Hill* by Bruce Chatwin, one can feel both fascinated by the narrative as well as vaguely annoyed and unsettled. The writer appears to captivate the reader both by what the plot seems to promise and by never fulfilling the promise. In this paper, I would like to explore this contradiction.

In his essay "Aztecs in Troedrhigwair: recent fictions in Wales" Tony Bianchi discusses a number of contemporary Welsh novels written since the late 1960s. Being critical of works which do not move far beyond 'discourses of national identity and representational authenticity', he highlights those which do: the 'texts of radical ambiguity which cannot be adduced to reinforce one or another totalizing narrative'.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, he does not include Chatwin's novel, written in a rather traditional and more or less linear narrative style, among the texts of radical ambiguity and radical scepticism towards all narratives. However, neither does he mention it among those texts trapped within the 'grand narratives' of Welsh identity and continuity, among the fiction of origins, reductive roots romance, historical narratives, and texts aimed at realistic representation and fixed meanings. Given that Tony Bianchi favours hybridity and wants to discuss 'the reality of authors who write simultaneously from Troedrhigwair and London, Pandý and Cambridge; and the reality of those, like [him]self, who read as migrants, with ambiguous affiliations',<sup>2</sup> his omission of a well-known migrant 'English' writer of 'Welsh' origins, writing about the Welsh border country, is food for thought.

One of the possible reasons for this omission may be, of course, that Bruce Chatwin's novel *On the Black Hill* simply does not fit Bianchi's argument. For the sake of his argument, Bianchi divides novels which do not move beyond discourses of totalizing narratives, closing off ambiguity, from those other texts which are radically sceptical and ambiguous. He mentions a few that float be-

---

<sup>1</sup> Bianchi, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 47.

tween these two extremes. However, the more they move towards one, the less they seem to be the other.<sup>3</sup> This means a division according to the logic of 'either/or' rather than a hybridity of 'the more one is *both*, the more one is *neither*'. In other words, Bianchi ignores the possibility of a contradictory hybridity between a totalizing narrative and a text of radical ambiguity, of a *grand narrative of radical ambiguity*. The more totalizing such a text attempts to be, that is, the more subversion it aggravates. Its radical ambiguity springs precisely from the absurdity of any totalizing narrative.

In the Scottish context, for example, Dorothy McMillan in her essay "Constructed out of bewilderment: stories of Scotland", writes that novels such as Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* and Iain Bank's *The Crow Road* 'explicitly invite national allegory which they then subvert or complicate.'<sup>4</sup> In my view, the same can be said of Bruce Chatwin's *On the Black Hill*, in the Welsh context.

Set in the Welsh border country, the novel traces the lives of several generations of a rural community, the Jones family in its focus. As one generation succeeds another, and an heir is finally found by the childless twin brothers in their great-nephew, one might be led to believe in the cosy continuity of a family saga. The novel can thus easily appear as an affirmative fiction of origins and as a grand narrative of national identity and continuity. 'But our lives are not so simple,' as the Austrian war émigré, Lotte, says quietly when confronted with the intimate secrets and frustrations of the twin brothers.<sup>5</sup> The novel turns out to be far from giving the reader a conventional story of national identity and continuity with unproblematic solutions at its ending.

The challenges of the novel, however, do not spring from an impossible analogy between the nation and the family. Many of those who have written on the concepts of a nation or nationalism have, in fact, found this analogy extremely fitting.<sup>6</sup> What Chatwin's *On the Black Hill* calls into question is, in my view, a *particular* notion of the family, and of the nation. R. S. Thomas, for example, towards the end of his piece *Cymru or Wales?*, appeals for the loyalty of the Welsh people to their nation, employing an analogy with the family in a rather standard, as well as dubious, nationalist style:

And as God made Wales, so she has made us, and we must love her as a son his mother or a bridegroom his bride. ... The marriage vow has been taken increasingly lightly in our day. Sometimes it is not easy to appor-

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 53-54. Robert Watson's *Rumours of Fulfilment*, e.g., turns out to be flawed by 'symbolic over-determination of narrative and character' and by 'deterministically pessimistic' conclusion. In Aled Islwyn's *Cadw'r Chwedlau'n Fyw*, 'disillusion with nationalist aspiration gives way to a more honest but severely pared-down personal resolution. Social purpose is undermined, but in large measure because the social agenda established at the outset is so selective.' Finally, Mary Jones's *Resistance* 'remains cast in fixed and limiting oppositions between inside and outside, closed and open, parochial Welsh speaking and rootless English speaking, and the dominant pathological metaphors of health and decay.'

<sup>4</sup> McMillan, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Chatwin, 194.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g. B. Anderson, D. McMillan, R. S. Thomas, J. Thompson, etc.

tion the blame for breakdown. I imagine a woman, deserted by her husband for someone else; her pain and loneliness after the intimacy they have known. I imagine Wales, beautiful at all times, deserted and betrayed by so many who should have remained faithful to her.<sup>7</sup>

What R. S. Thomas imagines is, in fact, a perfect contradiction. He mixes up two very different kinds of attachment. While the bond to one's mother is mostly unchosen and given by birth, the marriage vow is usually a matter of choice and conscious decision; let alone the fact that one is supposed to marry someone *outside* his or her family, someone previously unrelated. However, the last two sentences of the extract suggest that one has already been related to Wales, the Vow has been already made (in an undefined past), and deflected from, which indicates no more free choice of alliances, but an unquestionable duty to remain faithful, or be dismissed as a traitor. In other words, in his nationalistic discourse, R. S. Thomas mixes together what Janna Thompson calls a 'closed' conception of the nation (where one's national identity is given by birth, it is unchosen) and the 'open' conception (where national identity is a matter of choice, of a conscious commitment).<sup>8</sup> What R. S. Thomas imagines is, in fact, a picture of an 'ideal' family where both the 'natural', 'closed' ties to one's parents and the once 'open' ties to one's wife or husband are always already given and 'closed'. His way of thinking thus resembles that of a small child that cannot conceive of his parents as being unconnected strangers of once different families. To him, they had always already been related.

Similarly, when Janna Thompson speaks of the 'closed' conception of the nation, where '[b]eing a member of a nation is something that happens to an individual; it is a matter of fate and not choice,'<sup>9</sup> she adds that '[i]t is the closed conception of a nation that makes the analogy between the nation and the family so apt.'<sup>10</sup> However, this analogy proves to be a tricky one, since it presupposes, as R. S. Thomas does (as well as, surprisingly, Janna Thompson), an equally 'closed' conception of the family. It imagines the family as the 'ideal' example of a closed, fixed unit with 'natural', unquestionable boundaries. One thus tends to forget, as it was already suggested, that there is also the fragile 'open' side of his or her family, that what he or she takes as the 'natural' unit was once 'artificially' created out of two and more different families, and that, most probably, it will be one day similarly 'artificially' divided and interconnected with other different families. It is precisely this fiction of 'one blood' (an expression R. S. Thomas equally reserves for his 'thoroughly Welsh' compatriots)<sup>11</sup>, this grand myth of a 'closed' conception of the family, as well as of the nation, in my opinion, which is left uncomfortably open in Chatwin's novel *On the Black Hill*.

---

7 Thomas, 31.

8 Thompson, 162-163.

9 Ibid., 162.

10 Ibid., 162.

11 Thomas, 7, 25.

The first marriage of Amos Jones, for example, comes to nothing. The bride had been chosen for him by his mother so that he would not emigrate to Argentina. Their baby dies and soon is followed by its mother. It is, paradoxically, only when Amos decides to cross the boundaries of class and 'nationality' and marry Mary Latimer, the daughter of an 'English' rector, that the promise of continuity of his 'Welshness', of having 'a farm, and sons to inherit the farm,' (24) seems to realise for him. Their relationship is, however, never without contradiction. Their mutual attachment seems as indissoluble at times as their different backgrounds and implicit 'displacement' in each other's worlds threaten to disrupt their union. During one of their early meetings, for example:

Both were bursting with things to say to each other. Both felt, at that moment, there was nothing more to say; that nothing would come of their meeting; that their two accents would never make one whole voice; and that they would both creep back into their shells... (21)

The next time they meet, they:

...followed the old droveroad, arm in arm, talking with the ease of childhood friends. Sometimes, she strained to catch a word of his Radnor dialect. Sometimes, he asked her to repeat a phrase. But both knew, now, that the barrier between them was down. (24)

And yet, when already married:

The truth was that Mary's 'improvements' made him more, not less, uncomfortable. Her spotless flagstones were a barrier to be crossed. Her damask table-cloths were a reproach to his table-manners. He was bored by the novels she read aloud after supper- and her food was, frankly uneatable. (34)

As both the threat of their breaking up and their love seems to come and go with the seasons, the couple is thus never allowed but a promise of a definite, settled union.

There are many other instances where family ties and unity are called into question. While Amos's father Sam, before the birth of the twins, for example, behaves as though 'he, not his son, were the father,' (40) always thinking of ways to please Mary, Amos's mother finds it very hard to accept Mary into the family. While the twins, Benjamin and Lewis, are clearly very fond of Sam, they are wary of their father. He, on the other hand, pets their sister Rebecca. 'And Rebecca, who sensed Mary's lack of affection, would glare at her mother and brothers as if they were tribal enemies' (78). Reggie Bickerton runs off from Rosie Fifield who expects his child. Haines of Red Daren, on the other hand, mistakenly believes the baby of Mrs Musker to be his own, behaves like a man possessed and begs the young widow to marry him.

While all these and similar examples may be taken just as much as simple stereotypes intended to make the plot more attractive and more recognisably 'realistic' for the reader, the novel is fundamentally complicated by the presence of the 'identical' twins. There can be no other people of a better claim to share 'one blood' or 'unified identity' than 'identical', monozygotic twins. And yet, the sense of the boundaries of Benjamin's and Lewis's 'self' tends to differ and clash among them, the boundaries being constantly remade and undermined by their sameness and differences. The tension between their sameness and differences is, in fact, not very much unlike the contradiction between Amos and Mary.

Lewis, for example, feels trapped at the farm and yearns for far-off places and dreams of flying in an airplane. He is interested in and likes the 'outside world', and would like to marry and have children. For Benjamin, on the other hand, the centre of the world is Lewis, their mother and the farm, *The Vision*:

He never thought of abroad. He wanted to live with Lewis for ever and ever; to eat the same food; wear the same clothes; share a bed; and swing an axe in the same trajectory. There were four gates leading to *The Vision*; and for him, they were the Four Gates of Paradise. (88)

There is also a lot of contradiction inside each of the twins, just as there is inside Mary and Amos. When Lewis as a child wallops Reggie Bickerton behind his knees, for example, Mary feels 'crushed and ashamed—ashamed of her boys and ashamed of being ashamed of them' (53). When she finally receives a long-expected letter from Mrs. Bickerton which saves them from having to move away from the farm, her thoughts wander off to distant sunny places and she thinks that this letter, 'the letter she had prayed for, was it not also a sentence to stay, trapped for ever and ever, for the rest of her existence, in this gloomy house below the hill?' (146). Amos throws his favourite daughter Rebecca, pregnant with an Irish Catholic, out of the house, then misses her terribly and desperately wonders: 'Why did I put her out?' (147). As Amos's widow, Mary wants at least one of her sons to marry and have children, but as the mother of twins, she wants 'to keep both sons for herself' (156); and while there are times when she chides Benjamin for not finding himself a bride, at other times, knowing he would not marry, she takes Lewis by the elbow and makes him 'promise never, never to marry unless Benjamin married, too' (156).

Similarly, it is only '*sometimes*', as Lewis says, that he thinks he would be better off on his own, lies awake and wonders what would happen if Benjamin was not there: 'Then I'd have my own life, like? Had kids?' (194). Other times, he slides back without resistance into the closed, tight bond of mutual dependence with his brother; and each time of the few instances when he tries to get away from the confining relationship, he is 'drawn irresistably in the direction of home' (180). From his early childhood, Benjamin is thought of as the weaker twin, yet it is always Lewis who relents and does what is expected of him, and who admits once that 'he was not just afraid of hurting Benjamin: he was afraid

of him' (159). Benjamin is considered a coward, inseparable from his stronger brother. Yet, during the war, when the two brothers ask for an exemption from service before a tribunal, it is he who dares to challenge the panel by his pacifist views, and is not granted the exemption. He then firmly refuses Lewis's offer to go instead of him: "No," said Benjamin. "I'll go on my own" (108).

Not only does it thus remain rather unclear to what degree the twins share a common identity among themselves, but also whether they could have just one bounded identity with clear affiliations each within themselves.

Similar doubts can be raised as far as the *continuity* of the family is concerned. If one cannot clearly say where one family ends and another begins, whose continuity are we then to follow? In his very stimulating book *When Was Wales?*, Gwen Williams puts forward an interesting paradox. He stresses the inventive nature of Wales and the Welsh, the fact that they 'have lived by making and re-making themselves in generation after generation,' and in the same breath, he speaks of the Welsh who have survived 'for a millenium and a half' as the 'First of the British', who 'look like being the Last.'<sup>12</sup> He stresses, in other words, the constant process of re-creation, and yet insists upon the image of a survival of the somehow same 'they', a 'distinct' people, the First and the Last of the British, linked by a continuous line of one millenium and a half. Gwen Williams, of course, never explicitly claims any 'continuity of the same' for the Welsh. However, perhaps unwittingly, he tends to favour an image of the continuity of the 'whole', while any 'continuity' seems to be always extremely selective, involving a vast number of other broken patterns. Any moment one is leading in one direction, he or she leaves the other possible directions of that moment dis-continued. Any continuity of the 'same' would thus always have to be restricted to 'some of the same', which is never 'completely the same,' and involves many disruptions. *On the Black Hill* does not conceal these disruptions of (dis)continuity, despite the fact that it uses the frame of a more or less biographical narrative of continuity, or perhaps precisely because it attempts to trace such continuity.

Mary's marriage to Amos, for example, is an undeniable disruption of her previous way of life. It is seen as a 'betrayal' of her class and family, and would probably never have happened, had her parents been still alive. She is warned that 'it would not have been [her] father's wish' (28) and fears that her sister might come from Cheltenham and ruin the wedding; 'She sighed with relief to read the letter of refusal and, when she came to the words "beneath you", burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter and tossed it in the fire with the last of her father's papers' (30). At first, she feels happy and as though 'she had been a farmer's wife for years,' and her daily activities in the farm 'were not things she had learned but had come as a second nature' (33). Soon, however, she feels caught in a continuity she has chosen, links with her previous life as if forgotten:

---

<sup>12</sup> Williams, 303-305.

There were days when it occurred to her that she had sat for years in the same damp, dark room, in the same trap, living with the same bad-tempered man... She even lost the memory of having a father and mother. The colours of India had faded; and she began to identify herself with the one, wind-battered thorn-bush that she could see from her window, silhouetted on the escarpment. (37)

Competing 'continuities' appear also when Amos and Mary think about what passage their children should follow. While Mary has plans to send her son to a boarding school, imagines he would win scholarships and 'grow up to be a statesman or a lawyer or a surgeon who would save people's lives' (37) Amos pictures 'a brawny little fellow who would muck out the cowshed' (37). After the twins are born, Mary fears they would grow up 'yokels', 'that's if their father has his way!' (56) while Amos is annoyed at the thought of them going to school, fearing they would grow up with educated accents and then leave the farm. He even beats them for speaking in a 'classy' accent, and they learn 'to rephrase their thoughts in the dialect of Radnorshire' (78). For a long time, he assumes both twins would marry and continue to farm. When this does not seem to be happening, he is clearly disappointed in them, and would finally gladly accept even the foreign blood of Rebecca's husband, the Irish Catholic, who 'couldn't be worse than those two halfwits' (147). Once again, same blood seems to lead to sterility, while life is fuelled and at least *some* 'continuity' ensured by letting in the 'outside', foreign branch.

Life itself, however, undermines the sameness of the twin brothers and the continuity of their being indistinguishable. After each major event of their lives they are never the same as before. When Benjamin returns from the Hereford barracks, for example, his own mother has difficulty recognising him: 'She called out, "That's not Benj-" It was Benjamin' (111). On the other hand, when Lewis loses his virginity, Mary can instantly see:

He was walking differently. His eyes roamed the room like stranger's. He stared at her, as if she too were a stranger. ...He went on staring as though he'd never sat at supper in his life. (179-180)

And a few months after that, Lewis staying away for some time, Mary comes to see him: 'She gave a start at the sight of the bony, sulken-eyed man, in dirty dungarees. His hair had gone grey. Around one wrist there was a vicious purple scar' (180-181).

Not unlike Mary and Amos, even the twins have each quite a different idea about which way the continuity should go. While Benjamin buys more and more land to 'push back the frontier of the outside world' (173), Lewis would like to have a wife and children. They finally agree that there is no point in owning land unless they have an heir. But not before Benjamin sees their little great-nephew, Kevin, 'the spitting image of [them] both' (205), does he accept him in the family. And, of course, Kevin soon grows out of this 'spitting image',

and marries, ironically, a daughter of one of the adoptive girls who was raised at the Rock, home of the old neighbour Watkins, a former enemy of the twins' father Amos.

What the twins do agree on, unquestionably, however, is the memory of their mother. For fear of cancelling out the memory, nothing is ever changed or renewed in the kitchen, and the place starts to resemble a museum. Such continuity is, nevertheless, a rather dubious one, since in museums, things are kept 'fixed' as they once *were*, and not as they continue to *be*. Let alone, what the twins try to preserve is a particular way things had been during their young age, which is not the same, as they might imagine, as it 'always' has been. Once again, one may find it difficult to believe that what seems to him or her as an unquestionably their 'natural' home, might once have been quite a new and strange place to their parents.

However, towards the end of his life, Lewis is allowed to fly an airplane, to float in the clear air, where he escapes for a moment any confining concept of identity or prescribed continuity:

And suddenly he felt—even if the engine failed, even if the plane took a nosedive and their souls flew up to Heaven—that all the frustrations of his cramped and frugal life now counted for nothing, because, for ten magnificent minutes, he had done what he wanted to do. (240)

Benjamin, on the other hand, after Lewis's death, does not protest, surprisingly, against Kevin's young wife redecorating the kitchen and shovelling their 'museum' into the attic. 'He seems to be quite happy as long as he can spend an hour in the graveyard each day' (249).

The author mentions other characters of the novel at its very end and leaves them go on with their lives, towards whatever future lies ahead. The prospect of any one final comment, or affirmation of a certain direction, is not realised. The would-be totalizing narrative is never completed, the contradictory forces of a re-start and an end are again left together, hand in hand.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> There are, of course, many other interesting aspects of the novel which would be equally worth discussing. For example, the explicit references made to nationality and the politics between the Welsh and the English, especially during the war; Benedict Anderson's concepts of the 'Census, Map, and the Museum'; Janna Thompson's concepts of 'interlocking communities', 'divided loyalties' and the 'freedom of association'; the 'people, place and the past'—three main things nations imagine to share, and yet these three and the loyalty to them are often in conflict with each other, especially in this novel, etc., etc.

## WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London, New York: Verso).
- Bell, Ian A., ed. (1995). *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press).
- Bianchi, Tony (1995). "Aztecs in Troedrihwgair: recent fictions in Wales", in Bell, Ian A. (1995).
- Chatwin, Bruce (1983). *On the Black Hill* (London: Picador, Pan Books Ltd.).
- McMillan, Dorothy (1995). "Constructed out of bewilderment: stories of Scotland", in Bell, Ian A. (1995).
- Thomas, R. S. (1992). *Cymru or Wales?* (Llanndysul, Dyfed: Gomer Press).
- Thompson, Janna (1992). "The Nation as a Community", in *Justice and World Order: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- Williams, Gwen, A. (1991). *When Was Wales?*, reprint (London: Penguin Books).

