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SOME FURTHER ASPECTS OF *RALPH RASHLEIGH*

John Barnes[1] has said "that Tucker's performance in *Ralph Rashleigh* is remarkable for the detachment with which he manages to describe the horrors he had been through as a convict, and for what is, by the standards of the period, a relative literary sophistication", and that irony is one of his defense weapons "against the raw and violent life which he is presenting"; and adds that "he (Tucker) is reassuring himself and us by being civilized". Irony does imply some detachment, yet paradoxically it is very much the voice of the author. The statement "defence against the raw and violent life" may be true, yet the mode chosen by James Tucker is essentially one of documentation, a survey which is itself by its very nature detached and civilized and therefore not self-consciously used as a "defence".

That the mode is picaresque is almost accidental, and not a matter of history. Yet it must be this too. Both Barry Argyle[2] and Barnes mention Tucker's debt to eighteenth century writers such as Defoe, Smollett, Scott. Argyle adds that *Ralph Rashleigh* has "nothing at all in common with the work of Dickens . . ."[3] It is so of the first mentioned authors; but there seems to be a touch of Dickens, too, in the naming of some of his characters such as Mr. Sobersides and Mr. Boniface. In addition there are hints of Gothic in the passage "Ralph Rashleigh had embraced the opportunity of a somewhat dry day to walk out as far as the ruins of Netley Abbey, a venerable monastic pile in the New Forest . . ."[4], and perhaps some of the later horrors owe something to the Gothic. But episodic it mainly is, and by a happy chance the picaresque mode affords opportunity for documentation and authorial comment, and this Tucker grasps with both hands in exclamations, explanations, in satirical tone, or italics. One feels that the exclamations and italics are an affront to one's intelligence. But the explanations, and the satire, function splendidly. The explanations often reveal his own interest in the local colour supplied by the men and women, their idiomatic speech, new Australianisms, and the setting of jail, court or farming country. He interrupts the story, and adds interest, to explicate for possible English readers the word "crawler"[5], and shows a literary awareness of the possibilities of his Australian English in such metaphors as "roasted like a snake in a log".[6] The following passage[7] is an example of neat satire and authorial comment:

> The shores of Port Jackson *then* possessed few charms, either natural or acquired: sandy bays opening to great distances inland, bordered apparently by stunted trees; rocky headlands between each inlet, crowned with similar foliage; and far away, on either hand, a background displaying dense forests of sombre green. There were *then* none of these elegant mansions or beautiful villas, with their verdant and ever blooming gardens, which *now* so plentifully meet the eye of

> the new colonist, affording abundant proofs of the wonted energy of the Anglo-Saxon race who speedily rescue the most untamed soils from the barbarism of nature and bid the busy sounds of industry and art awaken the silent echoes of every primeval forest in which they are placed.

This suggests veiled condemnation of the habits of Englishmen to reduce the natural beauties of primeval lands in order to plant their civilization therein. As some indication of just how strong is the tone of voice in the above passage, here is the same passage from the 1929 edition of *Ralph Rashleigh* greatly reduced by the publishers.[8]

> . . . and at this first gaze he found it forbidding, without charm or beauty. Sandy bays fringed by stunted trees, opened far inland between harsh, rocky headlands, with dense forests of glooming green covering the background. It appeared as a primeval uncultivated region, bare of any evidences of the softer tamer results of the work of man for which he and his comrades longed.

I will have occasion to refer to this edition later. Barnes might be more correct in the second statement, that he, Tucker, is reassuring himself and us by being civilized. One of man's basic needs is self-respect. Ralph does acquire some degree of it, and in this way he develops. But we cannot know if Tucker's need is satisfied. All the same, Ralph is not heroic. Although the novel is first and foremost about Ralph and what befalls him, it is also very much about convicts, aborigines, bushrangers – a survey, in fact. James Tucker sets out to use *Ralph Rashleigh* both as a vehicle for catharsis and to express his views of the extraordinary subject matter he had at his disposal in the penal colony of Port Jackson and beyond. I am led to believe that he does attempt to dissociate himself from Ralph and the events because of evidence of an imaginative impulse at work; but, although this is very strong, it is not strong enough to surmount his difficulties. Tucker is always present. *We* cannot dissociate ourselves from *him*; and this is what makes the book fascinating, gives it vitality and makes it worthy of attention. There are two forces at work: one cathartic, didactic and moral all at once – spreading the news abroad; the other is the imaginative impulse.

Imaginative impulse is most clearly seen in Tucker's conscious use of symbolism or imagery, and, to a lesser extent, his organisation of the whole.

Symbolism begins at a very simple level with the naming of his hero Ralph Rashleigh; of the villain Foxley; of Mr. Sobersides, the hypocrite; of Lucy the good woman; and of Mr. Boniface, the innkeeper (but this last is ironic). There is a suggestion of moral tone in making the rash Ralph responsible for his own punishment, but that particular moral ends and the new moral centres itself on the question of just, or unjust punishment. Ralph becomes a symbol of an individual, a victim of his own self and of society, confined by it, but estranged, too, struggling to retain self-respect and regain his liberty.

It is not a story of the open road.[9] Gypsies are of the open road, the

wind and the heath. The open road symbolizes freedom, which Ralph never attains. He is slightly sketched: a "quill pusher", and slight of stature, both of which make him vulnerable. Argyle[10] draws attention to some aspects of the book which point to certain Australian characteristics recognizable today, such as emphasis on youth and vanity. Perhaps he could have added these early symptoms of anti-intellectualism exemplified by the insolence and contempt felt towards Ralph because he was a clerk, a "quill-pusher".

Tucker never probes deep into Ralph's heart but manipulates him like a puppet. Colin Roderick sees Tuckers as a pawn, going through a series of moves that carried him through a "chequer-board succession of experiences that lived in his memory to be reproduced in his novel *Ralph Rashleigh* . . ."[11] Ralph is a pawn in Tucker's hands. And James Tucker never boldly confronts his own fundamental pain. *Ralph Rashleigh* is a sustained agonized flinch from the moment of Ralph's boarding the hulk *Leviathan* where he is stripped, issued with convict garb, divested of whiskers and hair, and double-ironed, and becomes a stranger to his fellow-convicts.[12] "The metamorphosis was so complete that Rashleigh no longer knew any others who had arrived with him."

This symbolism of being divested of old clothes for new finds a parallel in the final pages when Ralph divests himself of his black skin. On both occasions he becomes a stranger to those who knew him well. Now, as a "new chum" Ralph is relatively passive. Things happen to him. The blows ceased to rain upon him but the fear never. This understanding of the book offers an explanation of the startling vindictiveness of Tucker against the aborigines:[13]

> . . . but the unhappy Ralph had long been dead, his remains having been cruelly maltreated by these blood-thirsty barbarians whom the mock philanthropy of the age characterizes as inoffensive and injured beings.

Why the sudden rounding upon the aborigines? It comes as a complete surprise. Bitterness is not Tucker's way. Nor is it a valid attack in the context of what has gone before both in relation to Ralph's life with the aborigines, and to Tucker's apparent lack of feelings of revenge. He is more likely to criticize and denounce in the grand manner, or in satire. Ralph's death at the hands of the aborigines, as Tucker relates it, is a clean cut affair compared with the former grim scenes. Is Ralph's death a symbol of defeat for Tucker? And can the lyrical outburst be cruel verbal revenge upon the aborigines with whom Ralph had once been happy, and who like his white compatriots, sent him into exile? Roderick says, "as Jemmy bears no malice, so James Tucker appears to have been a stranger to ill-will".[14] This attack on the aborigines seems to be the only exception. Whether he is being racist, and expressing his own attitudes, or reflecting the attitudes of the day is difficult to say. He seems to both admire and to patronize the aborigines in *Ralph Rashleigh.*

Ralph stands out in all his misfortunes and incompleteness as one of the pathetic figures of Australian literature. The editors of the 1929 edi-

tion, by making Ralph a little braver have, (if we compare the two books) actually high-lighted the fact that Tucker depicts him as anti-heroic. Finding Ralph lacking in heroic qualities, the editors feel obliged to give him some not intended by his creator:[15]

1929 1) Ralph's *cowed manhood suddenly flamed*, and he rushed at Foxley begging him to be merciful;[15]

1952 2) Rashleigh, whose blood began to curdle within him at the horrid anticipations he formed respecting Foxley's purpose, jumped out of his seat and entreated . . .[16]

In a second example we find:

1929 1) He resolutely refused to do this, his *reawakened manhood* being proof against the kicks and blows . . .[15]

1952 2) This he steadily refused to do, notwithstanding the blows and kicks which he received . . .[16]

And in a third:

1929 1) *Some tough qualities of constitution and spirit, however,* bought him through his continuous ordeal, and after a month or so he was convalescent . . .[15]

1952 2) Under even this discipline, however, Rashleigh slowly recovered, and became convalescent just in time to go . . .[16]

The emphasis in all three examples from the edited *Ralph Rashleigh* are mine.

Neither the book, nor Ralph, nor Tucker reaches full potential but this does not necessarily lessen the poignancy because Tucker, besides attempting to vindicate himself, happens also to be a good writer. "Happens" is the key word. It is as though by accident *Ralph Rashleigh* came into being, born of Tucker's punishment that transported him to Port Jackson aged nineteen, his irrepressible writing skills, and the compulsion to distance himself. They make ill-assorted ingredients for a unified work of art.

But to return to symbolism. It may be that we read too much into the function of, for instance, Bob Marshall and his wife as symbols of a reformed convict who can be a success. Marshall himself was a brutal overseer if Foxley is to be believed. Perhaps this is Tucker's intention: Marshall plays a fairly important role as exemplar of domestic happiness and honest labour. But if more definite evidence is needed for symbolism we have it in such phrases as "sullen doors"; "dark as Erebus"; "Slough of Despond"; "that vast field of waters that severed the exile from his native land". These are evidences of an imaginative impulse at work, but none is as powerful (or as mystifying) as that of the transformation of black into white. It transcends all others.

Sometimes we come across passages in literature, which, no matter how we probe, will elude and fascinate and in some obscure way be profoundly and mysteriously suggestive. Such a passage in *Ralph Rashleigh* is

that in which Ralph discards his black skin and assumes his white. One might even be presuming in regarding it as symbol. (But compare the same passage in the 1929 edition. Not only is the vocabulary and phrasing changed, but the tone of passage is completely different.)[17] Yet there it is, the token of his former protection, now "stained black and hanging in rags" bearing no resemblance to the redemptive beneficent cool shade of black in Blake's poem *The Little Black Boy*, this token now is juxtaposed against his newly-formed cuticle, his embryonic self, tender and delicate; "(it) appeared to him much more delicate and pure than ever he could recollect it to have been before". Ralph's whiteness appears to him as an emblem of rebirth into a new phase, as his cropped head and beard and convict clothes were previously. If Tucker is not being ironic, is he treating Ralph with cruelty? For Ralph's "new phase" as is next shown, although undoubtedly less harsh, is still one of service, of assignment.

You ought to serve him very faithfully.

And you are now assigned to him for the present.

Ladies, permit me to introduce my new servant to you.

Indeed. And one feels that black or white is all the same as long as the servant is good. For Ralph may feel "delicate and pure and youthful", but Mrs. Barbry said "And yet I shall always think of my preserver as a black man".[18] Ralph remains a victim of systems. Service itself does not deny basic dignity. Rufus Dawes, Jean Valjean, Ivan Denisovitch are all essentially noble. Ralph is not. Perhaps Tucker is more of a realist. Yet what I think is missing, is pity and love and compassion. Yet one feels uneasy in saying this. Perhaps it is more true to say that just as the suffering is helpless and silent, so the plea for pity, love and compassion is also silent.

On the whole Tucker's skill lies more in depicting scenes than in characterization, but even there, there may be a tone more appropriate to comedy, or burlesque or parody, than to an expose of the convict system. This may be seen as part of his defense mechanism. The diction may be trite, the tone moralistic, or pompous. In such scenes, notably that one which describes Ralph's first flogging,[19] and that in which the girls are raped by Foxley,[20] Tucker is less successful; in them we can detect that "defense against the raw and violent life he (Tucker) is presenting", reassuring himself and us by being civilized; the moralistic and didactic presence, compelled to document all, getting in the way of his imaginative impulse.

"Defence against the raw and violent life" may take the form of escapism. Ralph is passive, inert. It is significant that the situations in which he wishes sincerely to give practical assistance are such that he is rendered helpless. The situations are of Tucker's making. Tucker has Rashleigh absent himself, so to speak, by concealing him in a thicket, having him unconscious, or suffering loss of memory for fourteen days.[21] He is inoperative; not heroic. And it is on these very occasions that the 1929 edition

gives him more heroic qualities of toughness and manhood than Tucker ever does. Rashleigh is the antithesis in all ways of Foxley the villain who is resolute, burning with energy and revenge and hatred, spluttering, always perpetrating new exploits and managing them successfully. If one believes that Rashleigh is Tucker's *alter ego* then one can see this as escapism.

There are episodes which show Ralph in a ludicrous position. In the early chapters they are pure comedy. Ralph, having "escaped" from Newgate is disclosed at daybreak sitting atop a wall "fifteen yards" from the ground having travelled about that distance since he escaped.[22] This kind of humour is in the long tradition of British comedy beginning with *The Shepherds' Play*, while Ralph's name even resembles that of Ralph Roister Doister. Should this view of Ralph as a non-hero, not even especially likeable, seem to be exaggerated there is further support in Tucker's designation of "wight" for Ralph. This word, now obsolete, derives from the Old English word "wiht" meaning "thing", "creature"; the monster Grendel of *Beowulf* is called a "wiht".[23] Later the term came to mean "a human being", often implying, in Tucker's day, some contempt or commiseration.[24]

While the burlesque is not always appropriate there are scenes of idyllic happiness and comedy which are entirely successful. I have touched on the characterization of Ralph to show that Ralph is more clearly defined than might be expected in a picaresque novel. I have mentioned Tucker's conscious use of symbolism in the figure of Ralph. Now I wish to show how the pastoral scenes, juxtaposed against those of degradation, successfully direct attention to Ralph's enslavement, and that they function as symbols for peace destroyed by evil.

> The houses were for the most part embosomed in the peach orchards . . . The maize fields, too were now in full blossom, and gracefully waved their lofty tasselled tops . . . , until the iron hand of Foxley . . .[25]

And the ironic comment "a new phase in the life of a convict"[26] is followed by placing a mild and beautiful nature background at Emu Plains against the threatening grimness of the manmade immediate foreground. The success of this technique involves both the short view and the long view over the work as a whole. Tucker's mastery over the latter is not fully sustained. All the same it is in such passages as these that the imaginative impulse gives rise to the written word which expresses implicit sympathy towards the man, lonely in the landscape who "values life". "The yellow lustre of the harvest moon (which had) illuminated all the surrounding scenery with its mild radiance" does not shine on Ralph again once he had left the pleasures of honest labour and the hospitality of the reapers and the Marshalls. If at any time the symbol of the open road and freedom is appropriate it is in the play-acting and pastoral scenes. But it is a very conditional "if" as far as Ralph is concerned because he is merely taking a share of the liberty of others.

Ralph is referred to by various authors as essentially a passive thing in a landscape, on a stage, on a chess board. This suggests that the setting is as important as the man. It reflects the conflict between the cathartic, didactic and moral force and the imaginative impulse. The former expends itself on the panoramic view, the latter on the concept of Ralph. Argyle[27] suggests that "Tucker shared that 'negative capability' which has been taken as one of the marks of the great novelist". But he goes on to suggest further that the negative capability may also be constraint, "constraint of a man unsure of where literature ends and life begins", and that this uncertainty is Tucker's dilemma. I agree with Argyle's viewpoint. Faced with the dilemma of producing a work of art, or a survey, we find that his "relative literary sophistication" falls short, for in the end the panorama wins. But what a panorama! The agricultural and bushland reaching from the Hawkesbury and Nepean Rivers to the rugged terrain of the far north east coast of Australia. But the panorama is not only one of setting – it includes a variety of English dialects, Scottish, Irish and Australian; it includes Aboriginal ethnology; a shipwreck and rescue; first hand information on the convict system; and humour.

There are quite memorable comic scenes like that where Ralph, emerging from the hole, is seen by the watchman who says" 'Do you know I thought you came up out of the middle of that big hole just now.' And he laughed heartily at the idea."[28] And there is at least one sentence worthy of inclusion in a dictionary of quotations: "I had lost all my *browns* gaffing with a *chummy*".[29]

Not mentioned so far is that quality of extremism, or aggressiveness found in the scenes of cruelty and Ralph's never-ending adversities. Their function is of course to make an impact, to confront the reader with the message of excessive punishments which do not fit the crimes, and their brutalizing affect on those engaged in them. But there is a danger that the weapon can be employed for its own sake. The question to be asked is "Is it effective?" One feels that a book with such suffering and non-redemptive resolution would give rise to the emotions of compassion and pity. This it does, but only because of the reader's imaginative sympathy with Ralph and the situations, not because of the "intensity of the artistic process" gone into creating them. This fundamental intensity was not a powerful enough force to throw off a work of art, unique, separate and whole, like a mandala.

It is interesting to contemplate the road that Australian literature might have travelled if *Ralph Rashleigh* had been published in 1849 rather than 1952. (I have deliberately passed over the 1929 edition). Marcus Clarke's voice is passionate, melodramatic, sentimental, exploiting the emotions of his readers much more than does the strange detachment of Tucker. To what extent is Clarke responsible for our consciousness of guilt in our convict heritage and the Australian "cultural cringe"? Tucker's novel feeds neither of these attitudes.

NOTES

[1] John Barnes, *The Literature of Australia*, ed. Geoffrey Dutton (Penguin, 1964), pp. 144-5.

[2] Barry Argyle, *An Introduction to the Australian Novel 1830-1930* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 62-3.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[4] *Ralph Rashleigh* (Sydney, 1952), p.6.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 85. See also S.J. Baker: *The Australian Language* (Second Edition, Sydney, 1966).

[6] Baker, p. 418.

[7] *Rashleigh*, p. 68.

[8] *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh. A Penal Exile in Australia 1825-1844* (Jonathan Cape, 1929; 1940), p.84.

[9] Argyle, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

[11] James Tucker, *Jemmy Green in Australia. A Comedy in Three Acts.* ed. Colin Roderick (Sydney, 1955), p. 2.

[12] *Ralph Rashleigh*, p. 49.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 303.

[14] *Jemmy Green in Australia*, p. 29.

[15] *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh*, pp. 214-215, 73.

[16] *Ralph Rashleigh*, p. 190, 191, 59.

[17] *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh*, p. 346. And the same passage in *Ralph Rashleigh*, p. 301.

[18] *Ralph Rashleigh*, p. 302.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 190.

[21] *Ralph Rashleigh*, pp. 183, 190, 204, 213, 283.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[23] *Beowulf*, l. 120.

[24] *O.E.D.*

[25] *Ralph Rashleigh*, p. 167.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 72-3.

[27] *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

[28] *Ralph Rashleigh*, p. 20.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 31.