

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Alberto Manguel. *The City of Words: Understanding Civilisation Through Story* (ABC National Radio and University of Queensland Press, 2008)

The City of Words: Understanding Civilisation Through Story comprises five essays presented as the 2007 CBC Massey Lecture Series. With broadcasts in Canada in November of 2007 and *ABC National Radio* in April 2008, Alberto Manguel asks us to consider the common denominator of all people, across all time, and in all space, as language.

He begins this inquiry into the ruptured social fabric of the twenty-first century with the simple question of *why are we together* (1). The dramatic introduction straightway isolates the fulcrum of post-modernity in twentieth-century Europe's attempt to self-destruct. In that bloody calamitous epochal holocaust, he sees the 'birth of two opposing impulses. One was to enlarge the notion of society ... The other was to reduce society ...' (1). Therein he locates the problem that provokes the question of the twenty-first century – can we live in harmony? The short answer *what's the alternative* motivates five essays: *The Voice of Cassandra*, *The Tablets of Gilgamesh*, *The Bricks of Babel*, *The Books of Don Quixote*, and *The Screen of Hal*.

With clarity, coherence, and concision Manguel plumbs the depths of his imagination, stretches the range of his reason, and emerges with Excalibur rising in the mist. Without resort to Logos, he reminds us that writing is 'an action that [sifts] through our present into our future, a constant flow of language that [allows] words to shape and name the reality which is always in the process of being formed' (5). With emblematic simplicity he says that 'Makers shape things into being, granting them their basic identity' (13). And in so doing, he echoes Heidegger's position in *Poetry, language, thought*. For Heidegger, poetry is an 'indispensable function for human life: it is the creative source of the humanness of the dwelling life of man'.¹ Grounded in the material thoughts of historical writers, Manguel achieves with *The Voice of Cassandra* a powerful and emotional argument via a lively discourse on the power of story to change our life.

From the individual as centre of the universe, he takes us to *The Tablets of Gilgamesh* where he continues to reflect on European history. 'In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the fear instilled by the growing mechanization of human activities ... gave birth to the notion of the other as the tangible presence of a hidden self: the other seen not as foreign ... [but] nor as a flattering reflection of an idealized self-portrait' (14-15). Linking political history to literature he follows in the fiction of writers such as Hoffman, Heine, and Poe the appearance of the Doppelgänger, a hidden psyche. Manguel sees the distance at which we position other as a delusion, for, we can never think *I* without referring to *other*. *I* and *other* operate in a relationship of syzygy such as yin and yang. Thus, the personal relationship exemplified by friendship is what 'a multifaceted society may strive for, not only between two but between all its members' (52). With a profound emblem Manguel puts the intimate personal relationship based on care at the centre of social life – 'If

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), p. xv.

you pressed me to say why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed, except by replying, because it was him *and because it was me*' (53 original italics).

Next, Manguel visits *The Bricks of Babel* where he establishes a position between two of Kafka aphorisms, #18 and #48, and a contrast between chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis and a medieval Jewish exegesis of the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Within this quaternary relationship, he approaches a conundrum that threatens his own thesis. To wit, the family tree of languages suggests the natural propensity of language is to bifurcate. Through political history, Manguel demonstrates the antithesis of his own position. 'Most of the time, we demand that our own language prevail' (58). Although unconsciously revealing a bias he characterises the thought 'You must understand me, even if I don't understand you' as the coloniser's banner (58). Nevertheless, he orients us to a problematic perspective for he provides two views of culture: 1) the historical progress of diverse cultures in diverse languages and 2) the need to spread diverse cultures in a common language. Thus, in *The Tower of Babel* he conjoins the personal with the social – identity and place. The goal he says is not to assemble 'our different characters, our various speeches, under a common but restricted language [rather] it may be possible to interweave them all and turn the curse of the Tower of Babel into a gift of many tongues' (85).

In *The Books of Don Quixote* Manguel links Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's classic story about 'a bookish and impoverished old gentleman' to the story of Troy. Drawing on the ancient world, he characterises Virgil's *Aeneid* as 'the story that granted Rome its identity'. From there, Manguel folds the social back into the personal and demonstrates the syzygy of personal and social, I and Other. The chapter functions as a historical exegesis of the spread and influence of Roman imperial culture. With forthright clarity he draws to a conclusion his foray into the history of national identity as reflected through story likening national identity to fiction – 'the creation of Don Quixote's Arabic author, in turn reflected in the invented character of a knight errant who is really nothing but an old gentleman with a passion for adventure stories, are the fruits of a society that attempt to create for itself a forged identity' (114).

The last chapter, *The Screen of Hal*, opens with a pithy, albeit negative, summary of the preceding chapters – 'the inimical other has long been "a kind of solution"' (118). The question he asks in this chapter is can we imagine a world without *the barbarian*. He describes *the barbarian* as our ineffable ideal that underpins culture, for these 'social structures function as political machineries, and also as economical, technological, and financial ones. They are both the internal and the external skeleton of our societies, allowed for by our laws and customs, and also the source of our laws and customs' (118). Eschewing Logos and celebrating Mythos, Manguel closes with a visionary statement: 'Stories can tell us who we are and what are these hourglasses through which we sift, and suggest ways of imagining a future that, without calling for comfortable happy endings, may offer us ways of remaining alive, together, on this much-abused earth' (146).

With *The city of words: Understanding civilisation through stories* Alberto Manguel ranges through English literature toward a vision of the post post-modern.

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