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J.M.Q. DAVIES

Refractions: Fiction, Historiography and Mo's *The Redundancy of Courage*

Commenting on Nietzsche's vitalist denunciation of the burden of the past in an essay in *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* which is also sceptical of positivist historiography, J.P. Stern points out that Nietzsche failed to anticipate the "full adverse consequences" this might have, for instance under Fascism, or to consider the value of "history as a deterrent" (Stern xvi, 91f). And he goes on to observe that

when the critic Walter Benjamin wrote that the destruction practised by the tyrants of his day was so total that it included their victims' past and the very memory of their lives, their deeds, their books, all for the sake of a healthy new "life," he was in effect describing the consequences of Nietzsche's "critical" history; though when Benjamin added that Marxism-Leninism would put an end to all that, he, an official visitor to Moscow in the months of the purges, was practising precisely what he so bitterly attacked. (xvi)

One of many post-war paradigms of the perils of historical amnesia and casualties of Cold War politics is the former Portuguese colony of East Timor, invaded by Indonesia in 1975 with the connivance of both governments of the United States and Australia for strategic considerations and off-shore oil deposits in the Timor Gap and overriding loyalty to a former ally against the Japanese (Taylor 64, 168f; Turner 207). An index of the extent to which, for over twenty years, Indonesia's brutal neocolonialist occupation of East Timor has managed to elude international attention — despite the best efforts of organizations such as Amnesty International and committed individuals like Noam Chomsky, and despite the refusal of the United Nations to legitimize the attempted annexation — is afforded by comparison with the Western media's daily coverage of the war in Bosnia.

When therefore in the opening sentence of *The Redundancy of Courage* (1991), a novel about East Timor, the Western educated Chinese narrator Adolph Ng declares of his fellow resistance fighters that "I don't want them forgotten" (3), Timothy Mo is clearly referring to the country as a whole and making a wider political point about the West's propensity for expedient historical forgetfulness. Indeed, to a degree this might be said to constitute the primary

impetus behind all of Mo's fiction. Himself of mixed Chinese and British parentage, and having spent his early years in Hong Kong, prior to reading History at Oxford, he is a culturally bifocal novelist in the mode of Conrad, Rushdie, or Kazuo Ishiguro. His five novels to date, although on balance comic and satirical in tone, are quite varied as regards to subject matter and intertextual influence and show considerable dexterity in experimenting with the novel's formal possibilities. But all of them constitute, as it were, chapters in an Orientalized alternate history, in that they give fictive voice to the forgotten lives of social groups at the margins or Imperial boundaries of Western metropolitan society. In *Sour Sweet* (1982), for instance, a light-hearted Chinese migrant saga with a sinister sub-plot which makes witty use of Chinglish, the misunderstandings between East and West are amusingly encapsulated in such scenes as the grandfather's inviting the elderly English neighbours to try out his coffin, or the heroine's distress at Western indifference to aged parents. The obstacle to assimilation presented by rigid adherence to tradition is symbolically represented by the Triads who dog the heroine's husband (Ramraj 479). In *An Insular Possession* (1986), by contrast, a much longer ruminative period novel about the founding of Hong Kong, it is the tiny enclaves of Westerners in Macao and the trading factories of Canton that constitute the outsiders in relation to Imperial China. But Mo is as critical of the British opium trade and gunboat diplomacy that led to the establishment of the colony, as he is admiring of his hero Gideon Chase's determination to learn Chinese. Yet despite his sympathy for the oppressed or marginalized other, Mo's fiction is seldom strident ideologically. This is partly the effect of his ebullient sense of the comic, but also perhaps a result of his historian's awareness of the complexity and unpredictability of human affairs. Musing on the implications of the Imperial Commissioner's destruction of the British opium stockpile in a letter to his friend Eastman, for instance, Gideon remarks that "Liu imagines he plays at billiards — whereas there are so many balls on his table that if he strikes one he will set all the others into undesirable motion. He believes his actions may take place in isolation. In reality, they are fraught with consequences" (370).

Mo's unusual perspective on things as a historian, Orientalist, comic novelist, and professional journalist make his two more extensive and overtly historical novels, *An Insular Possession* and *The Redundancy of Courage*, especially interesting in the context of the wider question of the relationship between historiography and fiction. Since Aristotle asserted that tragedy was more universal than history which deals with empirical particulars rather than exempla, the relativization of history — implicit in Marx and explicit in Nietzsche, Croce, and American New Historians like J.H. Robinson, Charles Beard and C.L. Becker (Collingwood 171f, 190f; Carr 20-21; Foley 216-17) — has been pursued by metahistorians emphasizing the emplottedness and textuality of historiography such as Peter Munz and Hayden White, to the point where the

boundary between history and fiction threatens to dissolve. The correspondence, moreover, between these developments and some of the more important narratological changes in the novel are quite striking. Mid-nineteenth-century positivist historiography's confidence that the facts speak for themselves, for instance, is broadly analogous to the use of omniscient narrators by writers like George Eliot or Flaubert. The British historian R.G. Collingwood, writing in the early modernist period, by contrast, was very much aware that "St Augustine looked at Roman history from the point of view of an early Christian; Tillemont, from that of an eighteenth-century Englishman; Mommsen, from that of a nineteenth-century German. There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible for the man who adopted it" (xii). Yet he did not relinquish the belief that there are criteria for distinguishing between historiography and fiction (Gossman 30-32), and would have agreed with Northrop Frye that "the distinction between fact and fiction is essential to sanity" (Fletcher 16). Collingwood's position could therefore be seen as analogous to the shift from omniscient narrators to more limited centres of consciousness in James and Conrad, or the multiperspectival experiments of modernists like Mann, Woolf and Faulkner, all writers who nevertheless remained committed to traditional humanist values. Mo's *An Insular Possession* belongs in this category perhaps, because while the omniscient narrative is interspersed with personal letters, excerpts from rival journals and so on, the cumulative effect is of an indictment of Imperialist exploitation and adventurism. With deconstructive metahistorians like Munz, where scepticism in the philosophy of history is pushed to the point of solipsism, the difference between historiography and fiction seems to implode:

Both André Malraux in *The Voices of Silence* and Ernst Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* have shown that artists do not 'copy' from nature but from each other.... Similarly the historian cannot copy from history, from what happened. He copies his style from somebody else and adapts it to tell his own special story. For the historian as much as for the artist, reality is not the sort of thing that can be transcribed. Neither artist nor historian can copy because there is nothing to be copied. The alleged 'model' is a figment of the imagination. (123)

The analogies here would be with, on the one hand, the kind of reflexive metafictional fabulation of alternate worlds pursued by writers like Vonnegut or Doktorow, and on the other the non-fictional novel in the tradition of Capote's *In Cold Blood* or Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* discussed by Barbara Foley and John Hellman — modes which David Lodge sees as extreme and opposite reactions to the same radical skepticism:

The assumption behind such experiments is that our "reality" is so extraordinary, horrific or absurd that the methods of conventional realistic imitation are no longer adequate.

There is no point in carefully creating fiction that gives the illusion of life when life itself seems illusory.... Art can no longer compete with life on equal terms, showing the universal in the particular. The alternatives are either to cleave to the particular — "to tell it like it is" — or to abandon history altogether and construct pure fictions which reflect in an emotional or metaphorical way the discords of contemporary experience. (33)

In this general theoretical context, Mo's *The Redundancy of Courage* is something of a textual hybrid, occupying a site on the border between conventional realism and the non-fictional novel, and persistently confronting the reflective reader with questions about the extent to which its models belong to historiography or fiction. In contrast to *An Insular Possession* it is a fast-moving linear narrative, and Mo exercises the novelist's prerogative in inventing characters and episodes. But although classified as fiction, its objective is to keep alive the memory of a horrendous chapter in the history of an actual nation. Moreover, Adolph Ng's first-person narrative gives events an immediacy and vividness normally only achieved in eye-witness accounts like Herr's Vietnam *Dispatches*. Indeed readers familiar with East Timor typically find the mimetic illusion Mo sustains utterly convincing. The novel is meticulously researched and follows the main events of Indonesia's invasion and occupation of East Timor with considerable fidelity. The location, topography, place-names, colonial history, Japanese invasion and political structure of Mo's fictive Danu all closely correspond to those of the real East Timor. "The main parties," we are told, "were the Amalgamationists, the Independence Party, and the Federationists" (56), and there has recently been a civil war in which the IP's left wing FAKOUM, corresponding to the historical Fretilin, has emerged victorious (Taylor 25-67). Mo's FAKOUM party members are characterized with an eye to suggesting the complex social, racial and ideological hybridity of Fretilin and more widely East Timorese society (Dunn 1-14). There is the ex-seminarian Martinho Olivera with the "dark face of an Iberian grandee" (32) and his more charismatic younger brother Oswaldo, who has seen service in an African colonial war — the chief protagonists in Mo's story and perhaps suggested by the historical Lobato brothers, although the circumstances of Oswaldo's violent end are quite different from those of Nicolau Lobato (Taylor 97). Then there is Rosa Soares, "descended from a tribe of reformed headhunters from the central mountains of Danu," who wears a "Guevarist" beret, is a "great chewer of betel" (33), and an ardent feminist who runs a crèche to help her sisters in oppression. Maria Nolasco da Silva, the doctor, is described as "utterly Chinese in appearance," despite the name, "with an extremely dark skin and the ... purple, bee-stung lips of many attractive Chinese women" (33), and portrayed as a battler who continues to operate on the wounded under the heaviest bombardments. Adolph Ng himself, who on his return to Danu revives the Literary Society where FAKOUM members discuss Malraux, Orwell, Fanon, Mao and Gandhi, is the intellectual of the piece and his being at once Chinese,

cosmopolitan and homosexual helps to substantiate a sense of the cultural diversity of Danu.

Mo's verdict on his FAKOUM liberationists is that, although politically inexperienced, they are idealistic, courageous, better informed than the typical American Midwesterner, and egalitarian in their principles; and his portrayal of the international power-broking that predetermines the outcome of their struggle further consolidates the parallel with Fretilin. In one of many passages of quasi-historiographic analysis, which also illuminates the novel's title, Adolph reflects that

We were correct to think that we had no control over our destinies: to consider that resistance was futile and bravery superfluous. From the start, our fate was determined not by ourselves, not locally or by the invader even, but abroad, in Canberra and Washington. That was why the *malais* had tried to destabilise the FAKOUM regime, to disseminate a campaign of lies. In purely military terms a straightforward surprise attack would have been the most efficient strategy, entailing the least loss of life and material for them. I think such had been the desire of most of the Colonels and many of the Generals. A former divisional commander himself, their President had to listen to his officers, as the head of any military dictatorship prudently does, but in this instance he had to allow the suaver diplomats to have their way. International opinion had to be assuaged, the Americans cultivated. In fact, I am sure they had the benefit of US advice, for public (meaning civilian) opinion was not something the Generals knew much about. The distortions of the press campaign provided so many pretexts which, however intrinsically flimsy, could be used to veil the issue, obfuscate. The disinformation ... was as vital to the success of the invasion as the strafing and the barrage. Just going in without warning would have been too blatant, too startling to the Aussie and US public The American executive could not keep the invasion totally secret, otherwise they would have opted for the covert; so it had to be clever PR, followed by a blackout on news emanating from Danu. They smeared FAKOUM with the Commie brush And the question of legitimacy, that spurious, sterile, legalistic argument paraded up and down the international debating halls ever since, has come to assume proportions no sane person could have imagined at the time. The Danuese had the right to self-determination, and the government they chose was FAKOUM. To say they wanted the *malais* or the *malais'* puppet was fantastical! (110-11)

Years later outside the United Nations building in New York, Adolph bumps into a fellow exile, "Joaquim Lobato, the ex-FAKOUM Minister of the Exterior" (403) — Mo's fictive version perhaps of Jose Ramos Horta, East Timor's representative to the United Nations. And from him he first hears of a "deepwater channel off Danu" (404), allowing "a nuclear submarine safe passage" (405) between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, preventing which from falling within the Soviet sphere of influence was of course a crucial determinant in US acquiescence in the invasion of East Timor (Taylor 74). So at the very end Adolph grasps the full implications of the American President's — President Ford's — visit to, and departure from the *malai* capital on the eve of the

invasion (Dunn 277).

But it is above all in the scenes based on some of the most notorious episodes in what the historian John G. Taylor has labelled *Indonesia's Forgotten War*, that *The Redundancy of Courage* seems to cross the fine divide between realistic fiction and the non-fictional novel. Particularly memorable are the parachute invasion of the capital and the executions on the wharf, where in line with eye-witness testimony of the actual events, the crowd is forced to count, and where Adolph finds himself among those disposing of the bodies (Taylor 69; Turner 101-6). That "Sonia Ferreira, mistress of Oswaldo Oliveira, who was the real driving force behind FAKOUM" (18), is among the victims alludes to the fact, documented in detail by Amnesty International (77-78) in 1985, that Fretilin family members were also widely targeted. The massacre of the Chinese welcoming delegation appears to be based on two episodes reported by James Dunn, a former Australian consul to Dili who interviewed many East Timorese refugees in Lisbon — one in which a welcoming group of Chinese community leaders was gunned down in the street, the other in which Chinese ensconced at the top of the three-storey Toko Lay building, who had displayed the Australian flag, were massacred (Dunn 284; Turner 101-6). There is an episode corresponding in essentials to the murder of five unarmed journalists, two Australians, two British and a New Zealander, by Indonesian troops near Balibo (Dunn 233-50; Turner 95-97). Equally authentic are the accounts of *malais* attempts to stamp out FAKANTIL (corresponding to Falantil, the military wing of Fretilin) resistance in what is described as "perfect guerrilla country" (116): combinations of bombing, artillery attack and paratroop assaults using the latest Western military hardware, and later by means of the notorious "Fence of Legs" (239) tactic of advancing behind a human shield of unarmed civilians (Taylor 117-20; Budiardjo 22-51). The rift between Oswaldo and Martinho may be taken as synecdoche for dissensions within Fretilin (Taylor 96). Mo's pursuit of historical authenticity extends to the minutest details of his novel — the effect of the wet and dry seasons on the fighting, the tuning in to radio transmissions from Darwin, the loneliness, the diarrhea, the food shortages caused by resettlement, the island prison near the capital, even down to the red berets of the specially trained assassination squads (Taylor 108-9; Turner 139). They, like the sinister Colonel Goreng surrounded by his hunting trophies, who smilingly observes to a closely monitored party of visiting Western journalists that to hunt men is interesting (350), epitomize the total disregard for human life the Bishop of Dili publicly deplored in 1983 (Budiardjo 129). The freedom (within strict Muslim limits) of the Colonel's wife, who employs the captured Adolph as tutor to her son, may have been suggested by reports that in 1987 the Governor's sister "was allowed to move around as she wished" (*I am Timorese* 15). That Adolph is only able to leave Danu by tapping his overseas inheritance makes less equivocal reference to the many testimonies that exit permits from East

Timor often required massive bribes (Turner 156; *I am Timorese* 34-36). The cumulative effect of these historical parallels is to lull the reader for long stretches into forgetting she is reading fiction.

For the sane reader of course (to again invoke Frye's dictum), and for what Jonathan Culler (125) would describe as the "competent" reader aware of literary conventions, the boundary between Mo's fictive narrative and the non-fictional novel or historiography proper is never really in doubt, and the reasons are as simple and etiologically as complex as the distinction between sanity and madness. For one thing, as Barbara Foley has pointed out, realistic fiction and the non-fictional novel enter into what she describes as different forms of "contract" with the reader, with different attendant expectations and assumptions (Foley 42-63). And in the case of Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, she instances readers who have felt betrayed on discovering that actualities had been tampered with for aesthetic reasons (15). The contractual understanding implicit in a historical novel like *The Redundancy of Courage* is that its relation to actualities is metaphoric, whereas that implied by a non-fictional novel or historiographic account would be metonymic. Furthermore, it may be true, as Hayden White and others have maintained, that historiography is as emplotted as the novel (Fletcher 33-35), and even that, at a high level of abstraction, they may be modally and ideologically cognate. But at the level of rhetoric and narratology the two remain distinct. This is partly because the fictive quest for representativeness and the positivist ideal of disinterested presentation of all the facts call for different types of structure. Partly it is because, while intertextuality may, as Munz insists, play as large a shaping role in historiography as in fiction, each discipline builds on its own set of quite different intertextual antecedents. Some of the historian's narratological difficulties are highlighted by David Hackett Fischer, who writes that "the truths of social history are for the most part nonlinear. The subject moves on many lines at the same time" (Fletcher 117). And he points to various devices historians have used to create a "braided narrative" which is at once empirically exact, analytic, narratologically buoyant and aesthetically pleasing.

These are issues that Timothy Mo as both historian and novelist would (consciously or unconsciously) be well aware of. What distinguishes his *Redundancy of Courage* most sharply from the many different texts regarded as non-fictional novels is that, for all the astute political analysis and presentational realism, its structuring models are predominantly literary. Like *An Insular Possession* it focuses on a crisis period in history in the manner Georg Lukács found to be typical of the great historical novels of Scott, Tolstoy and Manzoni (Lukács 32f). And like them it presents ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstances, rather than foregrounding the leading protagonists of actual history (Lukács 34f). Set against a "braided narrative" like Taylor's *Indonesia's Forgotten War*, it seems closer to a Conradian tale of violence and

betrayal in some forgotten colonial outpost, with the detached and cynical Adolph perhaps inspired by Déoud in *Nostramo* or Heyst in *Victory*. And the fact that events are filtered exclusively through the consciousness of a Chinese outsider might also be interpreted as a tacit acknowledgement that this is a partial picture — as an abrogation of the historian's responsibility to cover everything. There are, for instance, many insightful passing comments on the *malais*, as when Adolph remarks that "the *malai* military were the lineal descendants of the piratical run into main text rajahs and sultans in their island nests. You trod carefully. Their moods were arbitrary" (102). But except in the brief last section recounting Adolph's sojourn with the Colonel's family, there is no closer look at *malais* culture, and direct discussion of Islamic social issues is avoided — perhaps with Rushdie's experience in mind.

The Redundancy of Courage also has affinities with the *Bildungsroman* tradition, as the allusion to Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (33) at one of the Danu Literary Society meetings prompts us to observe. Like Hans Castorp, Adolph too is a mildly comic antihero, but in a sense his education represents a sequel to and completion of Hans Castorp's. For whereas Castorp's loss of innocence is essentially intellectual and his involvement in the First World War merely anticipated at the end, Adolph is intellectually mature at the beginning but undergoes a terrible baptism by fire, which forces him to relinquish his intellectual detachment and adapt to the roles of munitions expert, guerrilla fighter, gardener, tutor and interpreter in order to survive. In both novels moreover the relationship to historical actualities is metaphorical, and as with the Triads in *Sour Sweet*, Mo also makes use of Mann's technique of giving characters allegorical significance. The effect is to suggest a level of significance transcending the specific historical events alluded to in the mimetic narrative. To some extent this is apparent in the portrayal of Oswaldo and Martinho, the two FAKOUM leaders between whom Adolph vacillates in his allegiances, like Castorp giving ear alternately to Naphta and to Settembrini. In the Renaissance the two brothers might have been seen as emblematic of the active and contemplative temperaments respectively. Oswaldo has the qualities necessary for leadership in war: he is disciplined, courageous and capable of generosity, but also fanatical, a man "for whom the world was black and white" (231), living without much thought for the longer term; and his principles are manifest in the manner of his death, releasing a grenade while clasp the sadistic *malai* commander Rebus. Martinho, by contrast, is described as "a man whose best qualities were brought out by peace" (232): less daring than his younger brother and more concerned as an ex-seminarian with status and advancement, he is also more religious, more imaginative and more deeply affected by the atrocities of war.

This allegorizing tendency is most apparent however in the case of Adolph Ng himself, who is not merely a fictive individual accidentally caught up in a

genocidal conflict, but a Chinese Everyman or Monkey figure representing the plight of the Chinese in Southeast Asia generally — and perhaps an object lesson. The status of the Chinese in Danu is emphasized at several points — their economic power and lack of political rights, their honesty, their "remittances to Taiwan, China, Macao, and Hong Kong" (89), their readiness to welcome the new *malai* masters, and the fact that "in South East Asia [they] never qualify as ordinary people" (115). And Adolph with his expensive foreign education, his intelligence and detachment, his hotelier's business sense, his comically presented cowardice and instinct for survival, and his outsider status among the freedom fighters, embodies many of the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese in Southeast Asia (Pan 128f). His homosexuality too, unconvincing and undeveloped on the mimetic level, seems to cohere quite well on a more abstract plane both as an emblem of cultural hybridity and as a reminder of further forms of othering and social discrimination. Although Adolph's sense of humour — a Mo hallmark since the success of *The Monkey King* (1978) and *Sour Sweet* — prevents his allegorical function becoming too obtrusive, the extent to which he remains a construct becomes clear when he is set against such enigmatic real-life figures as Oscar Schindler, Gary Gilmore, or the improbable Tim Page in Herr's *Dispatches*.

For the sane and "competent" reader familiar with the different forms of "contract" possible, these structuring literary intertexts and allegorical and comic tendencies have the effect of distancing *The Redundancy of Courage* from both the non-fictional novel and historiography, achieving a human representativeness of which both Aristotle and Lukács could have approved. Oswaldo's leadership, Martinho's doubts, Maria's dedication and Adolph's reluctant heroism and vacillating loyalties transcend the local Danuese/East Timorese context and become symbolic of the choices and dilemmas faced everywhere in war. Mo cleverly offsets any impetus toward ideological one-sidedness generated by the historical events themselves, by noting the Achilles heel not only of his comic Chinese hero but also of the two FAKOUM leaders. On hearing of his mistress Sonia Ferreira's murder, Oswaldo is betrayed into indiscriminate retaliatory killings; and Martinho betrays the freedom fighters' cause by seeking a compromise solution with the *malai* invaders. So that as one stands back from the picture, to use Frye's familiar analogy, the novel becomes not merely an indictment of Indonesia's brutal occupation of East Timor and the West's self-interested connivance or indifference, but like Vargas Llosa's great parable of the fanaticism and madness at the heart of the Latin American historical experience, *La Guerra del Fin del Mundo* (1981), a vision of the folly and horror of war itself.

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Classical Chinese Poetry: A Catalytic "Other" for Anglo-American Modernist Poetry

The history of cultural exchanges between the East and West is replete with failed encounters and successful dialogues, frictive confrontations, and fruitful mutual learning.¹ In modern times, however, these exchanges seem to be dominated by a one-way flow, i.e., the movement from the West to the East. There are some exceptions to the rule. One of them is the impact of classical Chinese poetry upon Anglo-American poetry in the beginning of the twentieth century. In the early years of this century, Anglo-American poets, excited by the stirrings of modernity, felt that something had gone wrong with English poetry. Dissatisfied with the stultified form and diction of Georgian poetry and the sentimentalism of the Romantic tradition, and considering current literary conventions inadequate to express the spirit of a new age, they thought it necessary to create new poetic forms and new poetic language which would break up current modes of perception and attitudes (*Modernism* 1-19, 313-23).

In the Far East, the anxiety of Modernism hit Chinese intellectuals in a similar fashion. Some enlightened Chinese scholars and writers felt that classical Chinese poetry, which had developed uninterruptedly for three thousand years, had gone into a blind alley and could no longer express the reality of modern times. Some Western-educated intellectuals, headed by Hu Shih and Cheng Du-xiu, began to attack literary conventions and initiated a "Literary Revolution" whose chief aim was to replace the stultified classical language with the vernacular as the medium for literature (Hsia ch.1). While they shared their

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