

Symbolic Violence: Law, Literature, Interpretation—An Afterword

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In many ways law is colonialism's first language. The language of law, or more specifically, the performative aspects of legal discourse, provided the first European explorers with a dramatic medium by which they might familiarize the unfamiliar, a way to locate themselves as governing subjects in what was, for them, a new found land. During those terrorizing yet fascinating first moments of the colonial arrival European law functioned for the European imagination as a socially sanctioned theatrical process. This was a ritual by which their imaginations might move to a position of authority over what they perceived to be, not transgressive (at least not yet), but unintelligible. For those Europeans wandering in what they believed to be either *terra nullius* or (later) a land populated by barbarians, transplanted European law became the one singular method of both political order and psychological stability. Law from back home, as it were, became a method both of writing the new land into ordered existence and, later, of reading its inhabitants out of resistance and into control. Consider, for example, Christopher Columbus' "legalized" landfall in 1492.

Beginning with the most famous of beginnings (or endings, depending on your point of view), Stephen Greenblatt recalls Columbus' celebrated account of his first voyage. Possession of the "new" world occurred, in the first instance, as an action executed through a series of preordained gestures and speech-acts. Greenblatt cites Columbus' unfurling of the royal standard; his reading of a proclamation, and his giving of new names to various islands—all performed in front of the fleet's official recorder. Greenblatt also mentions a number of ritualistic actions performed by later explorers: the erection of crosses, flying of flags, saying of prayers, cutting of branches, throwing of sands, construction of houses or chapels, and, most important, the notarizing of documents

(56). Columbus' papers were then "carefully sealed, preserved, carried back across thousands of leagues of ocean to officials who in turn countersign and process them according to the procedural rules; the notarized documents are a token of the truth of the encounter and hence of the legality of the claim" (57). Perhaps most striking throughout the records is Columbus's explicit insistence that no person "contradicted" him while reading his proclamations. As Greenblatt points out, what is important is that Columbus followed the legal rules of proclamatory procedure: "*Why* there was no objection is of no consequence; all that matters is that there was none" (59).

To Greenblatt, it is imperative that we recognize just how strange these processes were—not only in their bizarre political posturing, but also in their psychological necessity. These speech acts, acts fashioned over centuries of mediated contact with other cultures, here constituted for Columbus and the other early Europeans "the reassuring signs of administrative order" (54), what Greenblatt, quoting de Certeau, characterizes as a "scriptural operation" (58). Faced with the absolute radical otherness of the American lands and peoples, Europeans "naturally" reached for the most familiar (and familiarizing) artificial procedures at hand: the written "script" of law. In Greenblatt's words, Columbus' display marks "the formality of the occasion and officially designates the sovereign on whose behalf his speech acts are performed; what we are witnessing is a legal ritual observed by men whose culture takes both ceremony and juridical formalities extremely seriously" (55).

Certainly the juridical process here functions as a familiarizing ritual (a series of verbal statements, theatrical performances, and writing activities) which somehow, not unlike magical rites in the face of The Great Plague, tries to render the unintelligible or the threatening both intelligible and tame. The process reinscribes the conventional superiority of writing cultures over oral ones; these acts, moreover, are public and official: as a representative of the king and queen, as a distant lieutenant of their power, Columbus follows a set of pre-ordained gestures in order to legitimize his actions. And, as a legitimizing discourse the performative aspects of law are then used both to install the Spanish crown's claim to sovereignty and to ensure Columbus' own status. Most significant in all

of these actions is a rationalization at the heart of Greenblatt's discussion: all of Columbus' quasi-legal actions "are performed entirely *for a world elsewhere*" (56). Legal ritual here functions, not for the edification or correction of the locals (they have not yet been encountered), but for the valorization of an imposing, alien culture. This statement is true not only in the sense that Europeans would later deem irrelevant (or, if not irrelevant, in need of adaptation) whatever the yet-undiscovered locals thought or felt; but this statement is also true, more crucially, in the sense that law here stretches time and space in order to sustain European epistemology. Conversely, European ways of knowing and thinking are themselves stretched to realize a chronology and a geography perceived as lawless and therefore essentially unreal. Let me elaborate.

In the first instance Columbus' legal actions seem to perform a simultaneous action of erasure and inscription. Stephen Slemon has astutely observed,

If colonial discourse's first act of tropological figuration is to constitute the site of the Other as discursively unscripted, its second act is to fill that space. . . . For within the 'totalizing global vision' of the colonizing gaze, no territory can be left uncharted, no region can remain incognita or nameless or unclaimed. . . . Within this process the guarantee of 'knowledge—the matrix upon which the Other is made subject within discourse—is not observation or empiricism, but rather, *authority*.' (qtd. in Brydon and Tiffin 105)

As an authorizing force, the law, even in Columbus' most attenuated, delegated, and performative form, seems to perform this double action of violent appropriation. Precisely this concept of a legalized authoritarian "violence" underlies Walter Benjamin's famous 1928 essay on law, his "Critique of Violence," as well as the superb essays contained herein by Christopher Bracken, Ravit Reichman, and Valerie Karno. Any kind of native symbolic system (including, most notably, that of law)—whether it be based on oral custom or hieroglyphic tablature—is erased by the legal inscriptions of the European arrivistes. Functioning as a kind of theatrical displacement or exorcism of European anxiety, the invoca-

tion of European juridical forms always, already, and also places the yet-to-be-encountered Other within the discursive grids of Eurocentric authority. The othered subject exists, in effect, always and already as an object to be known, a transgression waiting to happen—or, in Isobel Findlay’s elegant argument, a “difference” about to be elided. Likewise, any potential symbolic systems of the other are emptied of meaning, or filled with negative meaning in need of rectification, long before those symbolic systems are encountered, as a pre-condition of their impossibility.

From their earliest beginnings European literatures contain, not a simplistic, but a tremendously ambivalent attitude toward the law. English writers, for example, from Chaucer and Langland onwards have persistently and sardonically deployed legal imagery to explore shifting political, social, or moral themes. These explorations, predictably enough, cover the entire spectrum of interests of their various authors, and one can produce myriad examples for myriad positions. From Chaucer’s own sleazy Seargeant at Law, through Shakespeare’s trial of Shylock, to Dickens’ plaintive Mr. Bumble (“the law is a ass”), to Forster’s famous trial scenes in *A Passage to India*, even onto Agatha Christie’s sepia-tinted novels of suspense, intrigue and horrid murder, British writers have systematically deployed images of law (or, at the very least, of its corrupt practitioners) to expose political immorality and human folly.

Yet interestingly this same law—warts and all—is also consistently foregrounded by English writers as the originary model for all *legitimate* legal systems throughout the Empire. English law, whatever its shortcomings, marks for the Eurocentric imaginary the single point of origin, the beginning of legal civilization for everywhere that exists beyond British boundaries, particularly throughout the British Empire. Consider, for example, Edmund Spenser’s 1596 image of English and Irish legal systems in his *A View of the State of Ireland*, an image that falls squarely into the orientalized binarisms of Self and Other, Sameness and Difference, so well-known to present-day postcolonialists. For Spenser, British law is a system of regulations “ordained for the good of the common-weale,” a system bluntly contrasted to the “barbaric” “ceremonies and superstitious rites” of the indigenous Irish (4, 11). Renisa

Mawani makes similar powerful and convincing arguments about the North American Aboriginal.

My point here is that the ambivalent and at times contradictory literary representation of law is hardly the sole preserve of an oppressed postcolonial elite, a marginal activity practiced outside of, and against, Britain (or France or Spain or America). On the contrary, the ambivalent literary imaging of law is, in the first instance, a European legacy; but one that colonial and postcolonial writers continually subject to the most intricate forms of hybridization, adaptation, and deconstruction. As Jason Gottlieb superbly illustrates in his essay herein, the imaging of law becomes one way to interrogate postcolonial voices, subjective agency, and political urgency.

The representation of law, moreover, not surprisingly dominates both the historical and literary narratives of colonial settlement. As a social and moral cartography, British common law was traditionally understood within British colonies to articulate the customary body of communally held moral and social values. In addition to governing the social relations of subjects, it was used, obviously, to demarcate borders, establish property, and set out the limits of accepted and unacceptable behaviours. In North America one thinks immediately, perhaps, of The Royal Proclamation of October 7, 1763, in which King George generously gave “Power” to the Governors of Quebec, East Florida, West Florida, and Grenada, and politely invited them “to make, constitute, and ordain Laws, Statutes, and Ordinances for the Public Peace, Welfare, and good Government of our said Colonies . . . as near as may be agreeable to the Laws of England” (6). “As near as may be agreeable,” that is, the same but different. Law, in a flourish of common sense, here embodies not only distant British communal values (happily imported into North America), but also the entire epistemology of Western morality.

Written colonial law was no less poetical, and was also meant to be perceived and presented, ideally, as independent of the discourse that embodies it; ideally again, written law was to be experienced as the fixation of natural regulations necessary to preserve and protect the health of an *entire* body politic. Colonial law emerges within and for colonial cultures as *the* necessary forceful inscription of authoritarian desire, or what

Pierre Bourdieu so poetically calls “the entire [official] activity of ‘world-making’” (838). As Ronny Heaslop, E.M. Forster’s vapid Magistrate, remarks in *A Passage to India*, “We’re out here to do justice and keep the peace . . . I am out here to work, mind, to hold this wretched country by force . . . We’re not pleasant in India, and we don’t intend to be pleasant. We’ve something more important to do” (50).

Ronny’s unpleasant faith in Britain’s imperialist burden, however, unconsciously implies its own fearful corollary. That is to say: the construction of a colonial legal system, and the worldmaking that it constitutes, is hardly an unresisted or uncomplicated political or psychological process. The imposition of colonial law—from the first symbolic actions during the first colonial encounter, through to the actual bloodshed of armed settlement and deracination—is a violent process comprised primarily of resisted force. But a force (and series of resistances) undreamt of in Ronny’s philanthropy. Colonial law, as Ravit Reichman shows in her wonderful argument, is a force remarkable, not only for the ease with which it could mystify the brutal massacre of indigenous peoples and cultures, but also for the uneasy smoothness with which it could (and continues) to mask both its own internal fissures and pressures and its external opponents who threaten continually to undermine its effectivity.

The law, colonial or otherwise, in other words, is hardly a unified, univocal phenomenon. It is, as Eric Cheyfitz and Peter Fitzpatrick subtly interrogate in this issue, a site of desire, both authoritarian and resistant, a site where desire is actualized. Even as a discourse of control, needless to say its most dominant manifestation, law is always riven by internal divisions and external upheaval. The force of law, then, is remarkable principally for its multivalent violences, the virtual panoply of strategies (both complementary and contradictory), with which it struggles to institute and replicate itself as the central discourse of official power. Amongst these many strategies are an inherent theatricality, a hegemonic realignment of indigenous systems of law, and a deployment of both physical and symbolic violence. These multiple aspects of the state apparatus, these chameleon-like strategies of colonial law, are what form the nucleus of this very special issue of *ARIEL*.

As all of the essays in this special issue attest, the “Law and Literature” movement has come a long way since its inception within Anglo-American literary and legal circles so many years ago. The movement itself has been a complex and multivalent interdisciplinary enterprise, one in which law is recognized, *prima facie*, as a specialized language or narrative, a series of performative acts governed, in turn, by a variety of rhetorical or literary tropes and regulations. James Boyd White, Stanley Fish, Sanford Levinson, Costas Douzinas, and Ronnie Warrington, to name but a few, have already shown us that the figure of law not only permeates our cultures of the past and present, but is itself a “literature” complete with its own rhetorical tropes, poetical paradoxes, and points of contested interpretation. As Canada’s Tina Loo so succinctly puts it, the discourse of law is characterized by “a particular language and a way of seeing and explaining the world. The ‘person’ is the law’s ‘object of attention’: it defines what and who a person is or may be” (7).

It is a mistake to see the Anglo-American Law and Literature movement, however, as a unified group of academics working on a single topic. Certainly the principal part of the “movement” began with people like James Boyd White and soon after the likes of Fish, Posner, Weisberg, Graff, and Mailloux, a group made up, primarily, of legal and literary academics in America and critical legal theorists in England who began to explore the crossovers between literary theory and legal writing. Early critics of their efforts scoffed at the idea of literary scholars “practicing” bad law and good lawyers “doing” bad literary theory. Some legal theorists also saw the movement as trivializing the processes, workings, and application of “real” law.

But the movement itself, as the essays in this collection illustrate, developed into a number of diverse and intriguing areas, which include predictable topics such as censorship, and interpretations of American constitutional law; identity politics and law, the discourse of land claims, narrative and story. The movement, in other words, developed into a series of movements, ranging from the simplistic (identifying images of law in literature or film; exploring the narrative techniques of summaries and/or addresses to the jury) to the extraordinarily complex (for example, Greenblatt on Columbus’ legalistic rhetoric as a key

justification of the colonizing project). Recently, attention has begun to be paid to the intersections of law and literature within a postcolonial context and there have been notable achievements by all of our authors, as well as such books as Eve Darian-Smith and Peter Fitzpatrick's *Laws of the Postcolonial* and various articles in journals such as *Mosaic* and *Studies in Law and Literature* (most notably Joseph Pugliese's fine study, "Rationalized Violence and Legal Colonialism: Nietzsche contra Nietzsche").

A subtle and complex thread throughout the study of law and culture, moreover, has been the political psychoanalytical critics who approach the legal site as a place where narrative takes on a highly specialized meaning. As Walter Benjamin argued in the early twenties, the law inscribes and re-inscribes its own violent interests behind a facade of transcendent univocal judgment so that the figure of law thus constitutes, in one sense, the perfect metonym of that colonial symbolic network which both installs subjects within an economy of hierarchical values *and* inexorably forms, in the minds of those subjected, an internalized epistemic reliance on the legitimacy of its own force. Uncannily prefiguring Iraqi responses to American belligerence in contemporary Iraq, Frantz Fanon wrote in the early 1950s:

In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the *spokesmen* of the settler and his rule of oppression . . . by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action [they] maintain contact with the native and *advise* him by means of rifle-butts and napalm not to budge. It is obvious here that the agents of government *speak the language of pure force*. The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home and *into the mind of the native*. (29; my emphases)

Yet in its very ambivalence, what I will argue later is its implicit psychic "splittedness," the law also stands most importantly as a metonym of imperialism's always and already threatening condition of implo-

sion. Ironically, the ambivalent, internally conflictual, and hybridized language of imperialist law also provides many postcolonialists with the state's weakest link, its most fragile social ritual, one ripe for the revisioning. And revisioning, in an inescapable logic, never exists "outside" its own oppression; as an intrinsic aspect of the differential/deferential ambivalence that is the colonialist equation, "revisioning" is itself a mirrored series of constant re-arrangements, re-alignments, and re-negotiations.

The notion that these various kinds of "narrative" and "interpretation" are key concepts in law (as well as in literature and film) is a truism in the early Law-as-Literature movement. Early theorists and critics, represented especially in Sanford Levinson's and Steven Mailloux's *Interpreting Law and Literature: A Hermeneutic Reader*, concentrate on law as storytelling, a state-sponsored written narrative that enshrines the commonly held values of communities and is subject to interpretations by legal authorities. In a lucid and provocative essay, for example, Sanford Levinson invokes the image of the magistrate as a literary critic deployed by the State to interpret the "true meaning" of legal narratives. In an odd echo of both Pierre Bourdieu and Percy Bysshe Shelley, he depicts law and the legal enterprise respectively as a textual object and an interpretive process, as well as a kind of Ozymandian hieroglyphic: "Constitutions, of the written variety especially, are usefully viewed as a means of freezing time by controlling the future through the 'hardness' of language encoded in a monumental document, which is then left for later interpreters to decipher" (Levinson 156).

Levinson's remark is important for a number of reasons: it highlights what he calls "the centrality of textuality to the lawyer's enterprise" (156); it implicitly notes "the centrality to law of textual analysis" (157); it registers the early Law and Literature movement's fascination with law as a social narrative, a story that can be best decoded with the tools provided by literary theory (most notably, deconstruction); and it sets in place a way of looking at law that continues to reverberate in analogous critical fields such as film (a notable example is David A. Black's description of film and law as types of "narrative regimes" 34).

But Levinson's enthusiastic handling of the literary legal text received both outright condemnation (for example, Owen Fiss's infamous rebut-

tal that Levinson was a nihilist, 166), as well as an extremely interesting qualification. Two years following the initial publication of Levinson's "Law as Literature," Robin West, one of the movement's important participants, made the following important critique in the fine essay, "Adjudication is Not Interpretation: Some Reservations about the Law-as-Literature Movement:"

The analogue of law to literature, . . . although fruitful, has carried legal theorists too far. Despite a superficial resemblance to literary interpretation, adjudication is not primarily an interpretive act of either a subjective or objective nature; adjudication . . . is an imperative act. Adjudication is in form interpretive, but in substance it is an exercise of power in a way, which truly interpretive acts, such as literary interpretation, are not. Adjudication has far more in common with legislation, executive orders, administrative decrees, and the whimsical commands of princes, kings and tyrants than it has with other things we do with words, such as create or interpret novels. Like the commands of kings and the dictates of a majoritarian legislature, adjudication is imperative. It is a command backed by state power. No matter how many similarities adjudication has with literary linguistic activities, this central attribute distinguishes it. If we lose sight of the difference between literary interpretation and adjudication, and if we do not see that the difference between them is the amount of power wielded by the judiciary as compared to the power wielded by the interpreter, then we have either misconceived the nature of interpretation, or the nature of law, or both. (Qtd in Black 36)

West's caveat is tremendously important because it opens up the field to so many crucial further qualifications. On one hand the statement constitutes a healthy salvo against the pretensions of literary academics who over-value the modest political and social effects of their so-called "interventions." Likewise, the analogy of law to a royal imperative nicely delineates the Foucauldian genealogy of modern law starting in the classical view that law is a scriptural embodiment of the king's body and

hence of the king's will (Foucault x). But there are also many begged questions that qualify, if not undermine, West's insistence on the essential differences between adjudication and interpretation, and these problems emanate, I think, from an understanding of four key concepts: power, subjectivity and its performative aspects, truth affects and the nature of literary interpretation.

For West, adjudication is an "imperative act" (an exercise of power backed by the state), and therefore something essentially different from, though similar in form to, "truly interpretive acts" of either a subjective or objective nature; different from the amount and nature of any "power wielded by the interpreter;" and, most importantly, different from non-judicial "linguistic activities" which are implicitly powerless in comparison to the formidable forces of state power. Now, West's argument seems to depend on the premise that "power" is a tool possessed by some and not by others. The state possesses power; interpreters do not. Or, at the very least, literary interpreters possess *less* power than the judiciary. Certainly a "real" judge who sentences a "real" defendant to prison possesses more social power than a literary critic who protests against the sentence. This is clearly the case, for example, in the unjust sentencing of Donald Marshall or David Milgaard in Canada despite powerful counter-arguments testifying to their innocence, or most recently, the execution of Stanley "Tookie" Williams notwithstanding large protests against (alternative interpretations of) the death penalty in California.

West's one crucial error, I think, lies precisely in this binaristic view of power and, consequently, the assumptions that (1) law is autonomous from other social discourses; (2) there is the possibility of "objective" interpretations, not to mention "truly" (as opposed to "falsely") interpretive acts; and (3) power is something tangible that can be possessed rather than something intangible that can be negotiated. This is clearly not the case, for example, in either the 1928 judicial decision that categorized D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as "pornographic" or the more recent "interpretation" and "adjudication" by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* or the conflicting interpretations of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed by a variety of in-

terpreters both within and outside the Islamic world. In the former case literary “interpreters” made notable progress in *negotiating* the balance of power, and with the hindsight of the 21st century we can see who ultimately possessed *in this case* and *over a period of time* more or less power concerning censorship and publication. In the cases of Khomeini’s infamous *fatwah* on Rushdie and the recent spate of violent protests over journalistic cartoons, we have cases where “literary” interpretation is not only an act of adjudication but also an act of theological speculation and judgment with real life and death consequences.

My point is that West’s argument operates within a conservative modernist field where there is such a thing as “objective” truth; where a unified authentic essential subjectivity is a given; and where power is narrowly defined as the ability to act in a particular way, or to make socially sanctioned (and sanctioning) decisions, which last into perpetuity. But power, as Foucault has shown us, is never merely an instrument in the pay of one historically specific group or individual; power, rather, is the force emanating from below, the energy that is everywhere and always being negotiated by a myriad number of participants.

As this entire special issue of *ARIEL* demonstrates again and again, it is a state illusion, an ideological construction that the law is anything other than an historically specific construction built by a culturally specific group for application in a particular time and space. W. Lance Bennett and Martha S. Feldman elsewhere remark, “[The] achievement of justice is not so much dependent on the procedure, *per se*, as on the societal acceptance of the procedure and the coherence of societal beliefs with the procedure” (cited in Black 47). Or, as my flimsy examples of Lawrence, Rushdie, and the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed illustrate, power is something that is never static but always and already in a state of change. Add to this dynamic sense of power the fact that the public practice of law (as in the public trial) is primarily performative, although hardly the “showbiz” represented in the fluffy film *Chicago*, law is nonetheless a series of speech acts and choreographed movements performed by a variety of “actors,” very few of whom have any accurate perception of their social and political dispensability, all of whom have significant self-serving interests.

West's own image of royal prerogative, in other words, contradicts the main thrust of his argument. Foucault has clearly shown that, if the law embodies the monarch's will, indeed, if the law is the scriptural written embodiment of the king's (and in time, the state's) body, then any law is by definition the embodiment of desire. As an embodiment of desire, furthermore, the law cannot help but become the embodiment of various biases—class, gender, national, racial and so on. Law (or power or adjudication) is hardly a transparent “imperative act” *similar* to “linguistic activities;” it is, rather, an essentially *linguistic* activity practiced by a warring group of individuals with varying amounts of power, an activity that, in turn, narrates a myriad of desires and biases. As such, law is never, as Levinson argues, a freezing of time through the “hardness of written words” (156) nor, as West posits, a transcendent act of semi-divine decision-making. Law is, rather, a language that embodies state power, a language constantly being spoken, written, interpreted and shared by all who are contained in and by it. Adjudication, in a word, is not “different” from interpretation but is in fact merely one of the latter's many forms, one of many state exercises that we call *discourse*.

The crucial point here is that the practice of law by lawyers and judges, of course, has a different effect on individuals in the community than the writing or reading of a novel by literary interpreters; magistrates obviously have more impact on people's lived lives than poets or literary critics or theorists. But *as* a discourse that narrates a series of categories in social and political life, as a performative process, law is *never* an autonomous, self-contained, seamless, hermetically sealed body of writing resistant to continual refinements through continual interventionist interpretation. Law as power as representation is always, rather, a site of conflictual adjudication, a site whose “imperative acts” are always open to question, resistance and interpretive refusal. And it is this redoing or re-writing that concerns the representations of law in this issue of *ARIEL*.

In many senses Christopher Columbus's quasi-legal theatrics constitute the seeds of what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the “symbolic violence” of law. For Bourdieu, the term describes the structured ways different social groups differentiate between themselves and others, be-

tween desirable and undesirable, between permitted and transgressive, and how these divisions (and, more generally, how any symbolic representations (languages, conceptualizations, portrayals) are “imposed on recipients who have little choice about whether to accept or reject them” (Terdiman 812). In a nutshell, symbolic violence is, according to Richard Jenkins, “the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate” (104).

As a symbolic act, the earliest proclamations, the earliest rituals of possession set into place a symbolic order which will, in time, be installed inexorably as the general social order. Indigenous symbolic systems (especially law) are not so much erased as so radically realigned and repositioned as to be virtually invisible. Columbus’ early actions constitute a grim mummery indeed, a mime of order which would violently replace existing systems as the effective mode of governance, the dominant mode of socially symbolic meaning making. In this sense the imposition of European law creates a “truth” imbricated by and founded upon European paradigms of discursive knowledge. But a “truth” radically undermined by its own ambivalence. It is this ambivalence, these inner contradictions of law, literature and representation, that form the crux of the challenging essays in this issue of *ARIEL*—essays that the editors have been honoured to read, interpret and debate.

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