

# Johnny Domingo's Epic Nightmare of History

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ONE PERSISTENT PECULIARITY of twentieth-century thought has been the increasing fascination with both the newly malleable conception of human history and the individual's vaguely defined role therein. As inhabitants of the modern world, we are often to a distracting degree (like George in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*) preoccupied with history. This preoccupation has led to the introspective search for positive identity that so permeates the century's ethos. For Freud, the exploration of one's personal history is paramount for self-actualization and is ultimately of commensurate importance to the health of nations, religions, and families as to that of the individual. Any extensive probing of the formidable morass of one's psyche will lead finally to that psychic material which has been repressed not merely by the individual but also by the individual's family, culture, and race, back to one's ancient forebears. Freud used as an analogy for this psychic construction the cross-section of a tree, with the preconscious id at the heart enveloped by successive layers of increasingly conscious ego (123). Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace*, which, according to Antoni, is plotted in the concentric shape of a hurricane (Interview), represents the cross-section of Johnny Domingo's psyche and, by extension, that of collective humankind. By developing variations of many of the same formal techniques which intrigued James Joyce, Antoni expands provincial myth and Caribbean quasi-history into a universal fiction.

*Divina Trace* is, among other things, a postmodern epistemological statement; it consists of the character Johnny's cerebral quest for objective truth, the postmodernist's impossible *sangreal*. Antonio Benitez-Rojo suggests that postmodernity consists not of "any single truth," but of "many practical and momentary ones,

truths without beginnings or ends" (151). Throughout the infinitely boggling, circuitous course of Antoni's novel, Johnny sifts through the mental detritus of his ninety years — through half-remembered lies and half-understood truths, through nearly a century of living and being — in search of some *trace*, however vestigial, of the *authentic* story of Magdalena Divina and her crapochild. This search leads him to nothing more, however, than an imperfect recollection of the various versions of the story heard during different phases of his childhood and thus to an imperfect or variant truth, the hallmark of the postmodern episteme. Johnny Domingo ventures (one senses for the first time in his life) further and further into the age-worn catacombs of his psyche, one voice from the past succeeding and melting into the next until Johnny himself is not sure who is the speaker and who the listener in the search for truth, in the search for himself. The "errors" of Johnny's remembrance — most evident in glaring anachronisms — are perhaps deliberately analogous to the defects often found in Giambattista Vico's opus *Scienza Nuova*:

Vico quotes inexactly from memory; his references are vague; his memory is often not of the original source but of a quotation from it in some secondary work; he ascribes to one author what is said by another, or to one work what is said in another by the same author; he makes historical assertions for which his evidence has so far not been found. (Fisch v-vi)

Antoni makes it explicit that the terrain of Johnny's quest is the nebulous landscape of the unconscious, of the dream. In the first chapter featuring the narrative of Papee Vince, the "objective" historian, Johnny alludes for one of the few times in the novel to those memories of life not consumed with Magdalena and the frogchild:

Those were the days of football and cricket, of unending hours of schoolwork which began after six o'clock Mass each morning, continuing until they rang the bell for me to run myself to exhaustion on the football field again. . . . Only the nightmares interrupted the routine. (Antoni 27)

In one sense, the nightmares are, of course, Freud's psychoanalytic return of the repressed. To the student of early twentieth-

century literature, however, these nightmares are ominously reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus's definition of history as a nightmare from which he cannot wake (*Ulysses* 34). Johnny Domingo asserts his own impotence to act *ad nauseam* throughout the novel. Johnny carries the frogchild to Maraval Swamp because "that was the only thing [he] could have done: it was the thing conditioned in [him] to do" (41). When Johnny's father, Dr. Domingo, Sr., tells his own version of the fantastic birth, Johnny is "left without any choice but to sit here and listen" (101). Again and again, paragraphs open with the sentiment, "[n]ow I could not help but listen. Now I could not help but hear" (119), reiterating Johnny's powerless condition in the face of his own ever-repeating history. Johnny is thus trapped in the nightmare, "alive within the confines of [his] dream" (59), "stuck ankle-deep in the mud of [his] on-going dream," the dream of his omnipresent past, the dream that ultimately becomes the book *Divina Trace*.

Johnny cannot escape the burden of his past because, as Sam Selvon writes, "the wheel of history groans and squeaks as it repeats itself" (qtd. Gikandi 124). Hinduism, one of the major religions which inform the novel (there are several minor ones), is based largely upon massive historical cycles running in ascending and descending order. The four repeating stages are called Maha Yugas, and the cycle runs first in descending order from Krita Yuga to Kali Yuga where it breaks down into a fertile, if destructive, chaos, then ascends from Kali Yuga back to Krita Yuga (Frawley 46). Hence, one completion of the cycle can be plotted as such: Krita-Treta-Dvapara-Kali-(Chaos/Cataclysm)-Kali-Dvapara-Treta-Krita, a sequence that parallels the chiasmic sequence of narrators in *Divina Trace*. The Hindu theory of world/history cycles is explicitly enumerated in the highly allusive Hanuman section of the novel, which itself corresponds nicely to the chaos stage of the above cycle (*DT* 210).

Theories of historic cycles are not, however, exclusive to the east. Figures such as Spengler, Vico, Yeats, and even Hesiod have postulated recursive historical schemes in which the seemingly linear progression of events reaches a critical mass, breaks down, then begins again from the ruin of the previous cycle.

The three-part division of *Divina Trace* corresponds to Vico's three-part cycle consisting of the ages of the gods, heroes, and men (the *corso*), followed by chaos and then by an altered repetition of the cycle (the *recorso*). Joyce, admittedly a major influence on Antoni, was himself strongly influenced by Vico's concept of repeating ages, and by the Viconian idea that the end of each age was signified by "thunder" or cataclysm. Vico postulates that the human faculty of speech had its inception in the faltering attempts of prehistoric humans to mimic the sound of the thunder, the "boodoomboom!" which appears throughout the Hanuman section as well as in other portions of *Divina Trace*. Oswald Spengler, influenced by Hesiod's scheme of descending ages of gold, silver, bronze, and iron, devised a similar four-act historical drama in which great civilizations rise, prosper, decline, and expire, giving rise to new ones. *Divina Trace*, particularly the Hanuman chapter, is rife with direct and indirect references to these cycles as well as to their eastern counterpart.

For instance, the linguistically compressed " $4+4+2+2+4+4+6+6 =$  a manly 32 assurassourorange, /sec/sec, one blow – boodoom!" (*DT* 201) hearkens back to Leopold Bloom's constant mental repetition of 32 feet per second per second, the law of falling objects. A "sour" orange falls from the tree at this constant rate of speed. The preceding equation is a simple dentition formula used to identify a species of primates that is remarkably similar to *Homo sapiens* — "gertyterblanchteeth" — and thus a possible human predecessor. Taken together, these allusions — to a prehistoric man, the law of falling objects, and a fruit — suggest the Biblical fall from grace corresponding to the Viconian/Spenglerian Age of the Fathers. In the next passage — "Eh-eh brother! Where you stumbling dat short walkingcane? Secondsin — boodoomboom!" (201) — "cane" and "Secondsin" allude to Cain's slaying of Abel and the Age of the Sons, wherein the descendants of the patriarchs vie for power. When one son has vanquished the other(s), the Age of the People begins, and the common people are violently subjugated. Hence, the ascendancy of one leader over another, adapted from the story of the *Ramayana*, is indicated in passages such as, "Bali extinct fatrue, Sugriva mandrill new, marmoset he gibbon he

monkey-throne!" (201). In the same paragraph appears both the word "Douctatorial" and an injunction to the conquered to praise the new leader or prime minister: "Cac you monkeys cac, loud you celebessing, bluehowler fa you new PM!" In the context of the theme we have examined so far, the two rather oblique references to David and Goliath which follow are indicative of the last age, the Age of Giants or the stage of restorative chaos.

Antoni exemplifies the above cycle(s) not only in the strikingly symmetrical, chiasmic structure of the novel itself, which constitutes a perfect Viconian *corso-recorso*, but also in the chiasmic syntactic constructions scattered throughout the work. A few examples include "inside-outside [ . . . ] outside-inside" (155); "Mantras-chanting, chanting-mantras" (188); James Ussher's theoretic year of creation, "4thousand4" (198); two-three [ . . . ] three-two" (206); "Mnnm-mnnM" (211); "Uproaring-uproarious, uproarious-uproaring" (216); "Blessed son of dey Mother son-blessed" (217); and "Future-past, past-future" (224). In addition, an amalgam of the western theories mentioned above appears in ascending Arabic numerals (1-4) in the Hanuman chapter (207), followed three pages later by the Hindu counter-formula in descending Roman numerals (IV-I) to complete the *recorso* (210). Another curiously chiasmic element is evident in the way the frogchild's birth and death are inversions of Christ's, signifying perhaps a common source or the dissolution of opposites. Moreover, there are dozens of references in the novel to having reached the end only to find the beginning, as in *Finnegans Wake* or the "world without end" of *Ulysses*. Our historian, Papee Vince, comes to the realization near the close of his second narrative that "history *could* be led in a circle. It could be led in one circle after another" (395). He goes on to proclaim, "[w]e story had reached its end, or at least it had reached the beginning of another circle." As Johnny finds himself thinking and reiterating in one form or another throughout the novel, "*There is no end to any of this. There is only beginning, and in between, and beginning again*" (62), the three-part Viconian cycle.

Antoni has described the structure of the novel as an "inverse evolution," such as one might undergo during psychoa-

analysis, a backward journey into the dark night of the soul (Interview); it consists of “seven versions of the same vision each told separate in seven different languages” (Antoni 158). Granny Myna’s narrative, which opens the novel, is a highly personal account, that of the subjective individual. As the outward, conscious bark of Freud’s psychic tree, it is also the first to be stripped away. The second narrative is Papee Vince’s semi-objective historical account of the events of Magdalena and the birth of the crapochild; Papee Vince is fond of speaking in “facts” qualified by a mild postmodern epistemological sensibility. The next two narratives exemplify alternative ways of dealing with the mysterious: Evelina’s narrative is filled with superstition and uncertainty, in contrast to the investigative, scientific approach of Dr. Domingo. As the reader nears the middle of the novel, Johnny descends nearer the core of his psyche, where he must confront the repressed. Hence, the narrative of Mother Superior Maurina concerns repressed guilt and sexuality, which Freud regarded as necessary catalysts for the birth of religion. In the section of the novel that records Magdalena’s poem, Johnny moves outside the subjective and into prehistory, where he encounters the mythic, the archetypal, and Jung’s collective unconscious. Next comes the most challenging part of the book for both Johnny and the reader: the final descent into the Dantean abyss of seven rings, which correspond to Antoni’s seven narrators, in the *penultimate* destination of this inverted evolution, Hanuman’s tale. The novel’s structure is, then, as Mother Superior Maurina tells us, an intricately balanced chiasmus: “thirteen with a division of three that is five and three and five in truth is one with a division of two” (159).

The Hanuman section of the novel, like *Finnegans Wake* which inspired it, attempts to explode the arbitrated boundaries of language, dislocate conventional syntax, and verbalize the semiotic — to name the Kristevan unnamable. The middle section reads like a palimpsest upon which the ancient, half-legible texts underneath infuse the new with variant meanings and vice versa, resulting in a maddeningly multi-textured narrative shot through with myriad allusive and associational “meanings.” On one hermeneutic level, the Hanuman chapter recapitulates the

story of the novel; on another, it recapitulates the story of the *Ramayana*. Bleeding through these slightly more linear accounts, however, is a convoluted wealth of neologism and allusion incorporating major purveyors and detractors of evolutionary theory, pioneers of anthropology and linguistics, somewhat altered passages from *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, and exhaustively encyclopedic lists of both extinct and extant simians and hominids. For the reader — or more accurately, for the interpreter of these heteroglossic tongues — the chapter yields an infinitely accruing proliferation of semantic indicators, becoming, in the psychic and linguistic sense, the place at which all roads meet, described by Richard Patteson as “the swampy matrix” of human consciousness (163). And it is at this fertile nexus in the wild heart of *Divina Trace* (the road to the divine), beyond both the symbolic and the semiotic, that Johnny Domingo (along with his reader) finds the only truth, the only divinity which post-modernity can approximate. According to Jung, the “incomparable useful function of the dogmatic symbol is that it protects a person from a direct experience of God as long as he does not mischievously expose himself. But [ . . . ] if he leaves home and family, lives too long alone, and gazes too deeply into the dark mirror, then the awful event may befall him” (592). Upon reaching the foil mirror in the novel’s heart, both Johnny and the reader have approached that which is beyond the protective symbology of words: the god within, who, Jung says “has no knowable boundaries, who encompasses him on all sides, fathomless as the abysses of the earth and vast as the sky” (650).

Unavoidably, Lacan’s mirror stage of psychic development also comes to mind, along with what Kristeva describes as the inception of the “spatial intuition which is at the heart of the functioning of signification” and the idea that “positing the imaged ego leads to the positing of the object, which is, likewise, separate and signifiable” (Kristeva 100). Johnny beholds in the mirror the creator and the created, the signifier and the signified, “mirroring” as it were primitive humanity’s first strides toward the appropriation of language and identity. Likewise, the unsuspecting reader is forced into an engagement with his own subjective presence in the novel as both a receiver of the message and a

contributor to its creation. As Antonio Benitez-Rojo suggests, "literature is a pretext until read," a collection of groundless signs and symbols awaiting the reader's interpolated meaning, the proverbial tree falling in the forest with no one to hear (23).

The sight in the text of one's face, "you own monkeyface," is at once comical and inexplicably unsettling, concomitantly liberating and existentially terrifying. This wordless page, containing infinitely more "truth" and mystery than any other in the novel, is the divinity alluded to in the title, "the imagining I," or the "I of [the] imagination" (170). Here in the middle of the book, where "you create de very fossil of you predescenders imagination," Johnny fully realizes his earlier intimation that the same primal power which was "controlling [him] from without, was manipulating [him] also from within" (170). The truth he has sought beyond himself can only be found and validated within, a proposition that is as empowering as it is debilitating.

Hanuman's tale may then be regarded as Antoni's post-modern rendering of the *omphalos* (the navel of the world or *axis mundi*), "the point at which subterranean, terrestrial, and celestial worlds all [meet]" as well as the place from which all life originates (Biedermann 246). The psychoanalytic parallels are obvious. Maraval Swamp, the novel's objectification of Johnny's primordial unconscious, is representative, as a generic swamp, of the place where most evolutionists contend life began, furthering its association with the *omphalos*. Nearby is the samaan tree, traditionally a symbol of fertility in the Caribbean because it folds its leaves at night to allow rain to feed the grass beneath. The samaan is thus another version of the ubiquitous tree of life. Its roots buried in the subterranean, its trunk on the earth, its branches reaching skyward, the tree is one of the most ancient symbolic intermediaries between the three worlds, three ages, three heroic stages, and thus the three divisions of *Divina Trace*. The Norse revered Yggdrasill; the Egyptians, the sycamore; the Sumerians, Dumuzi; the Druids, the oak; the Buddhists, the bo tree (Biedermann 351). Campbell writes of this universally sacred, life-giving place:

Beneath this spot is the earth-supporting head of the cosmic serpent, the dragon, symbolical of the waters of the abyss, which are



the divine life-creating energy and substance of the demiurge, the world-regenerative aspect of immortal being. The tree of life, i.e., the universe itself, grows from this point. It is rooted in the supporting darkness; the golden sun bird perches on its peak; a spring, the inexhaustable well, bubbles at its foot. (41)

In *Divina Trace*, Evelina associates the crapochild with the Yoruba deity, Eshu (Edshu), the West African personification of the *omphalos*, the energy of which is neither inherently good nor evil (Campbell 324). Since Eshu transcends all ordered pairs of opposites, the good or evil nature of the crapochild is necessarily indeterminate. Inasmuch as the raw psychic energy which engenders a postmodern lie (or fiction) may lead to a truth, the crapochild may be both the son of God and the spawn of the devil; or, as we have seen earlier, the power for good and evil may spring from the same source. Thus, Magdalena may be both virgin and whore. As Evelina herself tells us, "from de beginning of dis crapostory everything is a boldface lie, but time as you reach de end, everything ga turn out true as truth-self too" (*DT* 325). Campbell relates an instructive anecdote concerning the essentially amoral, Dionysian energy of Eshu (the *omphalos*):

One day this odd god came walking along a path between two fields. He beheld in either field a farmer at work and proposed to play the two a turn. He donned a hat that was on the one side red but on the other white, green before and black behind (these being the colors of the four World Directions [ . . . ]) so that when the two friendly farmers had gone home to their village and the one had said to the other, "Did you see that old fellow go by today in the white hat?" the other replied, "Why, the hat was red." (45)

The energy which infuses and informs the work of the artist must needs be of a similar, possibly amoral constitution, welling from the primordial slime of the unconscious, raw and rich and Dionysian. If the flow from this well is impeded, the artist suffers, just as, according to Freudians, the patient who is unable to come to some confrontation with his/her repressed anxiety remains in a state of psychosis. Thus the rejuvenating descent into the deeper psyche, represented by the Hanuman section as well as by the metaphor-laden Maraval Swamp, is to be understood, not merely in terms of the conventional psychoanalytic

interpretation, but also as the initiation of the artist. The conception of the artist's descent into the mines of his psyche to extract the raw and precious ore as an analogue for the process of psychoanalysis is at least as old as psychoanalysis itself. Jung claims that the artist, who ventures into the primordial world of symbol and semiosis, must then "translate" that inchoate material "into the language of the present, and so make it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life" (321).

Regardless of his monumental discovery, then, Johnny has not yet completed his arguably epic journey. Although he has gone down, Dante-like, into the swampy bowels of unconscious memory and prehistory, he has completed only *two* stages of the essential *three* in the hero's journey, each stage again corresponding with the three-part division of the novel. For his psychic quest to be fulfilled and for the balance of the chiasmus, Johnny must stage the hero's return. As Joseph Campbell writes in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*,

[w]hen the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, [...] the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin in the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds (193).

To decline the heroic/artistic responsibility to return may result in socio/cultural sterility or, in psychoanalytical terms, in madness or an inability to function in the waking realm of consciousness. It would be difficult to imagine a life lived in Hanuman's world of the atavistic unconscious. For every Dionysus there must be the counterbalancing Apollo. To sleep is restorative, but to sleep without waking is death, as Stephen Dedalus — in many ways the precursor of Johnny Domingo — knows.

The *recurso*, then, is not simply a reflection of the previous *corso*, just as the hero's return does not follow the same, though inverted, course as his going forth. Whatever perils are encountered in pursuit of the healing psychic bounty — *Divina Tracce's*

metaphorical "piece of pommerac" — the artist/hero/seeker must undergo a seachange, a revaluation of principles or priorities, or an altered or enhanced perception. Self-actualization may take place only when the subject is able to "divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona on the one hand, and the suggestive power of primordial images on the other" (Jung 123).

Johnny Domingo, like Leopold Bloom before him, is the modern epic hero brought to life in a retelling not of *The Odyssey* but of the Hindu *Ramayana*, on a quest for identity not merely for the Caribbean but for all humanity. Just as Homer's work is important to more than ancient Greece, *Ulysses* is important to more than Ireland, and *The Divine Comedy* is important to more than Italy, *Divina Trace* is "all-embracing all-comprehending expansiveness" (347), for "every race and religion" (267). The nature of the novel's universality does not detract, however, from its fidelity to the aim of its predecessors to forge a Caribbean identity; rather, the novel broadens the terms of that fidelity. Through his use of provincial myth — exactly the approach used by Joyce in *Ulysses* and in *Finnegans Wake* — Antoni is able to transcend provincialism in ways that V.S. Naipaul and Earl Lovelace, among others, do not, and thus render the affirming message of *Divina Trace* applicable and accessible to non-Caribbeans. I argue, then, against the somewhat short-sighted position of John Hawley, who stresses the Caribbeanness of the novel and disregards as "misleading" any comparisons to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* which extend beyond mere stylistic analysis (91).

I have as yet omitted a discussion of Johnny's heroic return, the final redemptive stage of the journey which further suggests its universally inclusive nature. As I have argued above, *Divina Trace* is a novel constructed atop a firmly postmodern foundation, another point which reveals its significant divergence from the traditional Caribbean novels of writers like Naipaul. Objective truth, though the initial aim of Johnny Domingo, is as much an impossibility in the world of postmodern fiction as in the world of "fact," and the authentic story of Magdalena ultimately eludes him. The novel exhibits the self-awareness we have come to expect from postmodern meta-fiction, while at

the same time illustrating the difficulty we often have differentiating fiction from reality; consider, for example, this passage: "Barto is speaking of heself now like another third person as if he is some kind of made-up storybook character belonging to real life instead of the paperback novel sleeping on the shelf in the supermarket" (153).

What, then, do we bring away from this novel besides the now tiresome revelation of the relativity and insufficiency of human knowledge? Why do we, like Virgil, escort Johnny into the night of prehistory, or why does he escort us? On the strength of Papee Vince's promise, we know we must bring away something: "this story you hearing might be nothing more than a simple island folktale, telling of simple island folkpeople, but I can promise you one thing: it not ga leave you belly empty" (341).

The restorative last word, Papee Vince tells us, is reserved for Myna alone. She is, as Hawley judiciously puts it, "the Molly Bloom of this novel, soliloquizing in much the same life-affirming way" (99). And what has she to tell us? What affirmative "truth" is profound enough to pierce the jaded skin of the postmodern ethos? The answer, according to Antoni, is simple, life-embracing faith, what Papee Vince calls "love fa life, even in the face of death" (398). To say "*Yes. I live*" (138) is to vanquish the postmodern specters of epistemological incertitude and the individual's meaninglessness in the face of a nightmarish recurrent history. It is humanity's ability to venture the Kierkegaardian leap which sustains and lifts us from existential despair as well as from the millennial drone of Selvon's wheel. Faith, the fathomless well-spring of life and hope (our postmodern *omphalos*), is the communal callaloo offered us by Granny Myna and by the postmodern epic *Divina Trace*. Just as Trinidadians, whatever their religio-ethnic origins, believe in *La Divina Pastora*, we know "it is not so much the telling of this story. It is the *believing* in it" (396).

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