Creating narratives of creation

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In this old world, there is nothing new but ourselves.

I was saddened to read of the death of Gore Vidal last week. It is difficult to know exactly what to say when one reads of the death of someone one is only just discovering through his work, except that the usual platitudes sound silly. I have started reading his narratives of empire series, and they offer a fascinating insight, not just into American history, but into historiography, and the way in which a nation comes into being, which gives me all sorts of interesting ideas for my work.

The ‘old world’ quoted above is the world of the fifth century BCE, and one of the characters rues that everything that can be thought, said, imagined or invented has already been done. While this may make the twenty-first century reader feel suitably superior to the naive fifth-century narrator, who does not know how many new things are yet to be discovered by this old world, it is equally true that by this time certain questions have been asked and certain issues have been raised that, across the centuries, we have returned to rather than invented anew.

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The line above is from *Creation* by Gore Vidal, a fascinating book, which follows the travails and travels of Cyrus Spitama, grandson of Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism. As ambassador of the Great King Darius, Cyrus travels to the ‘East’, that is, to certain kingdoms of present-day India, and to ‘East of the East’, that is, to Cathay. Both diplomat and religious seeker, in India Cyrus converses with Mahavira, the twenty-fourth Tirathankar of Jainism, with Gosala, the founder of the Ajivika movement and with Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. In Cathay, he learns from Master Li, founder of Taoism and from Confucius, founder of Confucianism. His conversations frequently return to two motifs: creation, ‘how did the world come into being?’, and annihilation, ‘what happens after death?’ The different cultures that he encounters have developed their own answers to these questions, their own narratives – tales of gods, of one god, of cycles of births and re-births, and of ancestors. All the co-existing cultures in *Creation*, whether they be Persian, Buddhist, Jain, Tao, Confucian or Greek, are charmingly convinced of the superiority of their own narratives and dismissive of the narratives of others. As a Zoroastrian, Cyrus believes in and follows Ahura Mazdah, the Wise Lord, as the one true God, opposed to the old Aryan gods, the ‘false gods’ worshipped by quite a few of his Persian contemporaries. In a universally pantheistic paradigm, Zoroastrianism is the only nascent monotheistic religion. As such, the religious opinions that Cyrus voices are the closest that we get to a ‘modern’ monotheistic ideal of the divine, and that too as an upstart contender rather than as the dominant paradigm. Eastern conceptions of the divine comprise ideas of circularity, dispensing with the idea of a definite beginning and an end, and they regularly dismiss Cyrus’ beliefs as juvenile manifestations that their philosophies have already left behind. The text suggests that Cyrus’ sense of certainty in definite and knowable good and evil, and in linearity, is shaken by his eastern encounters, and by the questioning of his ideas.

In *Creation* Vidal constantly played with history and historiography. The novel begins with the now old and blind Cyrus holding the perilous position of Persian ambassador to Athens. Cyrus’ age and recent blindness allow him to function as a wise and prophetic seer-like narrator, a suggestion heightened by the anecdotal recollection of his having been the only witness to a vision of the Wise Lord at the death of Zoroaster. At the same time, Cyrus is an
unreliable narrator. He narrates his life story in flashback as a corrective to a public recital of the Persian wars by ‘a self-styled historian’, the Greek Herodotus. Cyrus’ account is motivated by the desire to provide a counter-history to the Greek version, and to show the Greeks how insignificant they are in the grander scheme of things. Thus his autobiographical narrative is a fashioning both of himself and of the Persian Empire, a self-conscious attempt ‘to set the record straight’ against the Greek telling of the tale.

This also arguably makes Creation post-orientalist. At the beginning of Orientalism, Said identified Aeschylus’ The Persians, ‘the earliest Athenian play extant’ (Said 1978: 56), along with The Bachchae of Euripides, as marking the inaugural moments of the discourse of orientalism, a discourse that sets up a hierarchy of the West’s superiority over the non-West. Creation is not post-orientalist because of its temporal or geographical settings. Setting a text in the fifth century BCE or in the Persian Empire rarely means the absence of orientalism in a text. If anything, it usually indicates otherwise – most ‘historical fiction’ can be remarkably orientalist in the way in which in recreates the Orient and the West for modern consumption. What makes Creation post-orientalist is that it renders a world wherein Greek culture is just one among the various contemporary ways of being in the world. Creation imagines an Orient without positing the West as a superior reference point.

Creation is neither a counter-history nor an anti-history, meaning history written from a subaltern or alternative point of view. Instead, it is a historiographical history. That is, it is a narration of events that does not distinguish between ‘events’ and ‘the narration of events’, that does not represent reality as existing outside of and prior to the narration of it. The events are constituted within the act of narration itself, that is, various narratives of different kinds, both mainstream and marginal, together discursively constitute the reality of the world being described. It is not a static medieval period, with all the labels that we retrospectively attach to it, but a dynamic living and breathing history that confronts us. For example, a series of wars are referred to as ‘the Greek wars’ or ‘the Persian wars’, depending on who is doing the telling. How is one to tell the more ‘accurate’ term? Creation constantly highlights the process of narrativisation at work in all matters – personal, political and religious. What
we label ‘philosophy’, ‘religion’ and ‘storytelling’ flow into and merge with each other. Whether it be Zoroaster, Confucius or Buddha, none enjoys the luxury of unmediated enunciation; there are always interpretations, oral and written, by disciplines, devotees, students, observers and so on. *Creation* has so many layers that it is possible to unpack it endlessly, making a book that one can return to over and over again. Even as *Creation* reinforces the futility of expecting original enunciation, I wish to give Gore Vidal unmediated last words here: ‘The first principles of the universe are atoms and empty space; everything else is merely human thought.’

**References**
