

ANALYSIS

Water Music (1982)



T. Coraghessan Boyle

(1948-)

INTRODUCTION

“The linguistic potential for T. Coraghessan Boyle is unlimited, and his is indeed a fresh, bright voice. Nearly all of his early novels and stories are tours de force; verbally sophisticated, witty, knowledgeable, indicative of a well-read person and well-stocked literary mind; a personality who questions everything and sees America in broad satirical terms. Boyle is clearly one of the ‘new,’ and yet something bothers: does he settle too readily for the brilliant effect while forgoing the longer, more exhaustive means of handling a subject? Heir to the innovative writers of the earlier generation—Gaddis, Hawkes, Pynchon, Barthelme—along with a strong indebtedness to Kafka, he seems to be searching for some overarching point of view, some syncretic vision of America. Yet at the briefer level of scene, chapter, story line, he is incomparable. No one except Salman Rushdie has his grace, vitality, and energy, a Nijinsky in words. Note the beginning of *Water Music* (1982), arguably his most fully wrought novel to date...

As a satirist, Boyle is interested of course in contraries, the bizarre episodes of the human condition as they confront the ordinary, the encounter of dissimilar elements in unlikely places, the yoking of such elements in a common quest, the unexpected found in the familiar and the familiar found in the unexpected. That is, a hem-stitched America, despite his exotic locales. He is a master of bringing together cultures—as in *Water Music*, with the Scotsman Mungo Park meeting up with Africa in his search for the source of the Niger; or in *East is East* (1990), with a Japanese runaway confronting American life at a writing colony; or in *World’s End* (1987), with a triangulated joining of present-day Peekskill, New York, with its Indian and Dutch past. But Boyle’s interest in dissimilars goes further. As a devotee of Kafka and his yoking of man and animals, he uses the ape in particular as a crossover with man, with wildly amusing results. ‘Descent of Man’ (1979) begins: ‘I was living with a woman who suddenly began to stink’.... His woman friend is having an affair with her ape, Konrad.... The references are to Kafka’s ‘A Report to the Academy’ (an excerpt of which becomes an epigraph for the volume of stories); Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with its descent into what the westerner sees as a primitive life; and not least Tarzan (also used

as an epigraph); with further references of course to Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, which linked man's biological history to his ancestors, the great apes.

Still, despite the satire on relationships in America, on expectations, on sexuality and food, despite the adroit prose and sharply angled scenic conceptions and arrangements, we ask what the reverberations are. We wonder if this is a command performance, dazzling in its working out, but ultimately a pro forma flattening of experience. Boyle, however, can be a deceptive writer, and he does not tip his hand as he works his comic riffs. He seems to be seeking out our cultural icons. 'Descent of Man' has all kinds of resonances, including our contemporary enchantment with what is primitive, atavistic, simple, and contrary to urban distractions. Boyle uses cultures and civilizations confronting each other on strange, often bizarre, grounds in order to direct us to our own forms of the bizarre.

The story following in *Descent of Man* is 'The Champ,' which is Kafka's 'A Hunger Artist' reversed: instead of starving, the main character, Angelo D., is an eating champion. Boyle is wonderful on food—offering a kind of 'in' joke, since all photographs of him show a man who looks almost anorexic. Yet food dominates his vision, whether the enormous, revolting, monstrous piles of food Angelo D. eats in order to remain an 'eating Champion,' or else the revolting 'delicacies' Mungo Park eats in *Water Music*, or the Japanese foods Hiro dreams of in *East Is East*. A full belly—whether for the starving man or for the competitor who must eat his way into a championship, in 'The Trenching Event of the Century'—places food, not sex, not enterprise, not ambition, at the center of Boyle's world. When Angelo D. takes on Kid Gullet, in attendance are Colonel Sanders, Arthur Treacher, Julia Child, James Beard, Ronald McDonald, Mamma Leone....

ANALYSIS

"In both parts of *Water Music*, the Scottish explorer Mungo Park and the London imposter Ned Rise are put into situations whereby food, or lack of it, fills their imagination and immediate needs. Ned starves in London, and Park starves in Africa as he searches for the Niger River source. But in this considerable novel, Boyle transforms and finally transcends the goods obsession; all his skills, including the culinary, come together in this novel, which can be read as a kind of parable for America as well as an engrossing adventure story in its own right. There are really several stories in *Water Music*.

There is, of course, the historical Mungo Park, the Scottish explorer who traced the course of the Niger and died, drowned, at thirty-five in Africa. Boyle follows the rough outlines of Park's career. But a second story comes when Boyle re-imagines his real character and reshapes him into a fictive one. There is at work here an act of biographical imagination. Connected to this story is Park's own biography, whereby Boyle fills out the details from Park's life and from his book, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799). A third story, linked to Park's, both fictive and real parts, associates him with a Londoner born into worse than Dickensian and Hogarthian squalor, but survivor of it all, Ned Rise. Here, Boyle creates a tale which parallels Ned in London—as primitive and barbaric a place as 'atavistic Africa'—with Mungo Park and his ordeals. The fourth story is the association between Ned and Mungo when they link up on the latter's second journey to Africa. Of these four stories, so far, two are biographical, two are fictive; and we might say that the intertwining creates a fifth story: the way in which Park thinks he directs Rise, whereas in actuality Ned is driving Mungo.

With its reference not only to the Niger but also to Handel's musical piece, *Water Music* is a mutant form. Embedded in its fictional side are numerous biographical portraits of some depth: Dassoud, the Moslem chieftain who works his way to the top through cruelty, murder, intrigue; Allie Anderson, the woman Mungo leaves behind for years at a time, and who finally rebels at being the little lady waiting for her man to return; Boyles, Ned's drunken friend in London; and, not least, Georgie Gleg, a great triumph as a figure whose miserable life is turned magical by his association with Allie, whom he worships at a distance. Through an act of will, Gleg is transformed from oaf and victim to a successful medical man and professor.

The novel is triangular in its geography, extending from Selkirk, Scotland, to London, to West Africa. The geographical triangle suits the geometric proliferation of stories within stories. The literary antecedents are clear, especially for Ned himself, a rogue's tale deriving from the late eighteenth century.

Ned lives in filth, thinks in filth, acts out one scam after another to survive. His counterpart—with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* looming in the background—is another scam-artist of sorts, Mungo. To discover the Niger's boundaries, he must perpetuate one deception after another: among them, offering his African guide, Johnson, a quarto of Shakespeare, then in getting Johnson to return on a second trip with an offer of Milton, Dryden, and Pope, 'Leatherbound, gilt titles,' the Pope signed. He offers worthless money and goods to the Africans in exchange for foodstuffs and other necessities; he promises freedom to men in a prison colony if they will accompany him, although their chances of survival are slim. To carry out his will, a British-European determination to conquer, he must negotiate his kind of jungle, as much as Ned must negotiate his.

The winning of the American West is background for the exploration, and exploitation of Africa. Ned Rise's will to survive is the ultimate pioneer's desire to come through; Park's will to discover and chart the Niger is another sort of pioneer effort, where the need to explore pre-empts even the need to survive. Like the American frontiersman or cowboy, Park surrenders all personal comfort—sexual satisfaction, intellectual stimulation, even food—in order to achieve his inner mission. Ned is the opposite. As we see, he rises for material reasons, whereas Park plunges on for the greater good of British scientific circles, as well as his own needs for martyrdom. The allegory is the paralleling of African natives and native Americans: both a group of warring factions, savage in their treatment of each other, allied in their suspicion and hatred of the foreigner, the white man in America, the Moors in Africa, who in the name of Islam have their own agenda of slaughtering and exploiting.

The triangular arrangement works at several levels English explorers, native Africans, and Moorish killers as represented by Dassoud and the murderous group he assembles to gain power for himself. The opening up of Africa via the Niger—filling in the innumerable blank spaces on the map—has its counterpart in an America opened up by men and women who filled in the empty places on the map and then exploited the resources. The allegory reveals how societies function, how civilized forces impinge on the 'savage races,' how racism and condescension operate, how noble aims (and Park is the main noble) are pre-empted by greed, self-serving, and exploitative needs. Similarly, in *World's End*, Boyle replicates this world of plunder and power in the triangulation of New York State, Indian victimization, and the 1949 Peekskill race riots. He connects the elements historically as well as fictionally and biographically; but the allegories are clear: the Christian white man plunders, the pagan natives suffer, and the residue remains as racial hatred, violence, and, for many, economic success.

But Boyle is not boorish; he sees both conquest and victimization as part of an inevitable process and, therefore, as comedic. As a satirist, he has a suitable structure and a grand theme, American to his core. The cowboy and Indian set of mind is not far behind. The Africans do not ride horses into battle, but they use canoes, mass for attack, suffer near annihilation by the settlers' guns, until, finally, the Africans prove too ubiquitous and numerous. Employing malevolent schemes, the ennobled explorer himself fills out his crew with murderers, pimps, drunkards, the scum of English society (recalling in America gunfighters, gin-slingers, army riff-raff, sewer rats); and in turn, each has his own need, including Ned Rise, who has risen from the dead so often he joins exploration as his means of escaping another death. For him, survival, not exploration, is all. The novel leaches out much of the late 1970s and early 80s. In its spaciousness, its need for discovery (self and otherwise), its conflict between so-called civilized elements and so-called savages, in its need for a man like Mungo to prove himself, in the violence Boyle turns into entertainment—in all of these, he is writing prototypical American fiction full of social resonances: that hybrid of fiction and biography which has become a curious new subgenre.

Perhaps more than anything else, the spirit of our times is caught in Park's will to make his way regardless of the carnage in his wake. An unknown figure rises, virtually from nowhere, to assume an imperial role. At the end of *Water Music*, the explorer is treated as a god by a colony of pygmies. Although he will drown on his second journey to West Africa, in the meanwhile he has pulled together all the forces of his society to do his bidding and to create a pattern for his life. As a Scotsman, Park possesses all the Protestant ethics we associate with American success, and he is stoical in the face of terrible personal defeat and physical suffering. He is naïve about consequences, and only the wise old Johnson, his guide, saves him from successive disasters; until Johnson recognizes the inevitability of final defeat and vanishes, Boyle here plays on stereotypes: then naïve but driven Scotsman, the all-knowing African; the

innocent westerner, with his will to knowledge and power, and the regional native, who knows that all such quests end in disaster. Like the wise Indian in the American western, Sitting Bull expounding philosophies of nature and spirit, Johnson applies local knowledge; and that is superior to anything Park knows, despite his will to power.

Water Music is parable, allegory, biography, fiction, a cautionary tale; but also a narrative of how personal emergence works. Boyle recovers the survival instincts of Dickensian characters; he views the jungle as a far more perilous place than Faulkner's big woods; he perceives the murderous clash of cultures, such as we find in Conrad; he encapsulates the experience of the explorer, the quintessential danger and the suffering for some ideal. In so doing, he brings together the matter of the picaresque, the story of a rogue, as well as the ingredients of the apprenticeship novel, with its emphasis on re-forming and reshaping. *Water Music* is a catch basin of a novel, one of the few contemporary American attempts to be inclusive rather than particular.

Boyle runs roughshod over minimalist ideas, not only in the conception of the book but also in its language. He creates an individual rhetoric to match the boldness, nastiness, and bizarreness of his characters' experience. The Niger River itself becomes some magical, totemic force—recalling Faulkner's 'old man'—more than river, close to God; and Park's quest for the source and direction of the river's flow has within it a Faustian pact, a sellout to the devil. Although the Niger has great geographical and scientific potential, Park's obsession with it derives from a kind of personal delirium, as though once he had experienced Africa, he had to go on until he drowned in it. He is driven on further than is needed, not for the scientific discovery but for the inner emptiness which only Africa and the Niger can possibly fill.

In historical terms, Park becomes the ultimate capitalist, so energized by personal compulsions, he feels stifled, strangulated, almost dead when he cannot move ahead with his quest. In London, he vegetates... As against this enervation in London, Africa offers a full plate of horrors: cannibalism among tribes for whom white people are the devil incarnate; unspeakable tortures and butcheries; insects, mites, snakes; warring factions, in which Islamic Moors descend on native villages to pillage, disembowel, pirate, or collect slaves; an oppressive, unrelenting climate, the threat of crocodiles lying in wait near river banks, bacteria floating in air and water—all of which make life not too good a bet. With death so ever-present in multiple forms, Park is energized by an inner will: to triumph over death, one needs more than good health. One needs desire, determination, the ability to transcend pain, suffering, discomfort, everything that is anathema to the so-called civilized man. Boyle perceives in all this a kind of balance, in which Africa absorbs the white man, while the latter struggles back to emerge through perseverance, desire, strength of will. It is a tale, apparently, not of the previous centuries, but of our time."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 108-18