The Colt from Old Regret: Staging Power and the Lineage of the Chase

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There was movement at the station, for the word had passed around
That the colt from old Regret had got away,
And had joined the wild bush horses—he was worth a thousand pound,
So all the cracks had gathered to the fray.
All the tried and noted riders from stations near and far
Had mustered at the homestead overnight,
For the bushmen love hard riding where the wild bush horses are,
And the stock-horse sniffs the battle with delight.

(The Man from Snowy River, A. B. ‘Banjo’ Paterson, 1895).

The opening stanza of The Man from Snowy River signals the chase to come. The ballad’s rhythmic canter carries the reader on the run that leads to the colt’s eventual recapture. Through rugged, changing and mountainous countryside the elusive colt gallops, challenging the men’s riding ability and testing their manhood in the wilderness.

The device that sets the poem’s canter in motion, that mobilises the gathering of noted riders and the preparations for the chase is not the escaped colt, but its parent, old Regret. Regret never appears again after the opening stanza but it is the background presence of Regret that establishes the terms of the ballad. The reader does not need to know the kind of phenotypical specifics that often mark a character’s/subject’s formation in literature today. The reader will know nothing of the look, the specific breed, the colour, the contours, the sex, the musculature of Regret, only that its lineage is assumed good.

The reader must understand that Regret’s colt is worth the chase, then, simply because it is the offspring of the former. The colt’s value is announced by its relationship to Regret and it is the anticipation of value lost that spawns movement at the station. Regret is the enabler, the almost-invisible source used to explain the movements that surround the absent presence of the colt.

Regret was for Paterson’s ballad the literary device that power has become for the social sciences today. Power is posited as so safe and standard a figure and with such a presumably good lineage that its description and ontology seem to require little articulation. The literary device of power functions, as does Regret; it is the source of enablements, of movement, the well from which springs the motion of the chase. To implicate power as an explanatory for an event is to evoke several lines of analysis which are by no means given but which operate behind and through narratives, silently establishing the terms on which a ballad can unfold. Power explanations point to a presumed or understood value in having a central character, they privilege lineage as an unspoken reason for a central character’s appearance, and they invoke only certain grounds for organising searches of a particular kind. In the register of wonderings called social theory it is understood that ‘power’, like
Regret, somehow exists as something and that it or its colts should be the object of many a chase.

It was not until the colt of old Regret, in the form of Foucault’s analytics of power, escaped from the station of Marxisms that it became more generally possible, though, to realise that there was a lineage to be considered at all. Still, the chase ensued because the lineage was presumed good. Foucault’s colt from old Regret became elusive, darting into and out of vision as rid(t)ers located glimpses of where they thought it was operating anew. The colt’s recapture represents Manhood satisfied—the control of the disorderly, fluid, shifting colt that seemed everywhere but nowhere. The colt, despite its challenge, its quest for freedom, eventually gets caught and returned to the stable which is stable for good reason—it signals that there is no freedom. Without the eventual confinement of the colt of old Regret to the fences which mark its boundaries and the destinations of its reach, would it be possible to tell the men from the boys, the rid(t)ers who can cope with uncertainty and shifting terrain and those who fear leaving the station?

Theories of power have shifted, traversing, like galloping brumbies, theories of order and disorder, running from the smooth patterns of the laws of ‘nature’ to the rugged topography of changing ‘cultures’, from the chase to the proof of Manhood. Theories of power have operated as the Regret of the social theory world, dressing and undressing in a variety of costumes which allow differential moves. For Foucault, the colt from old Regret is the character without organs, no body, and yet with a name. What made the birth of Foucault’s colt from old Regret possible, though? Was it an immaculate conception that just appeared, a revelation that could only be viewed in relation to the station of Marxisms? What follows is a story about different kinds of conceptions, about movement, at and away from the station, but consistently about movement nonetheless.

Opening

**Narrator’s voice:** Regret, as Paterson’s post-Newtonian literary device, is so precisely the body that can represent the intersection of histories of power and motion that it now seems impossible to disarticulate body from motion from power whether beast or ‘Man’. In the contraction and relaxation of the animal’s muscles, in the propulsion, in the gallop’s forward energy, we think we see power. What else could the straining muscles of a horse on the run be except powerful? And what could be a more potent signal of power in a man than the muscular contractions, the bulging biceps, brought forth through movement? The relationship between movement, the presumption of an underlying, invisible source or capacity and the naming of power constitute the boundaries of the following tale.

**Act 1: The voice of tragedy and comedy**

**Stage directions:** The stage here should be designed so that the limits that construct the space into which an idea of power can fall are spotlighted. Aristotle’s ‘dynamis’ and the potency/act continuum are to provide the initial ground for ‘seeing’ power. The backdrop should illustrate Aristotle’s arguments against the Eleatic monists, that is, his presumption that motion is real, visible, and not an illusion.

Aristotle, like all central characters in the play, is mute—he can only speak through the utterances of present day actors. Although the body that represents Aristotle’s will be present on stage, it will be spoken through and of as though it is not there. From time to time, though, appeals to the body on stage will be made for verification.
Scene 1 [Enter Aristotle and Aristotle’s Interpreter]: To be able to read ‘power’ as though it is a ‘thing’, and a thing in muscles, visible through motion, or operating in and across ‘bodies’ at all, we need Aristotle to posit that things moved. [Aristotle nods]. What else could one do, if one desired to claim distinction from the Eleatic monists, other than posit that there were separate things and that they moved? [Aristotle shrugs, agreeing]. Separability and identity of things via motion was the new proof of Being. The grounds for argument had ‘moved’ from motion as illusory to motion as ‘real’ because ‘real’ and Being were now represented by the movement of discrete bodies or objects. The movement of things was the proof of motion’s reality, was the proof of Being, was the proof that ‘things’ could be separated. Aristotle’s motion, like the social sciences ‘power’ in the present, was presumed in the subjects to which it became applied [Aristotle stands silent].

Motion was for Aristotle the internal principle of nature. Natural beings were natural by virtue of their ability to generate motion from within. Being natural was articulated to the criterion of motion and the co-ordinates of time, place, form and matter which signalled motion’s motion. What was the source of this movement, though? Some things just seemed to move, like the sun, without anything like a human hand pushing or pulling them. If things moved, what set motion in motion?

[Enter Regret dressed as power-as-potential]. Power was for Aristotle the potential of natural bodies to generate motion from within. It was also the possession of an eternal unmoved mover which must have set motion in motion. [Aristotle hops up onto Regret]. Power was the invisible thing (noun) which was used to explain the visibility of physical motion and the theology of its origin.

Scene 2: Aristotle’s method suggested that if there are separable things and if those things move, then we have to explain why [Aristotle agrees]. His descendants say that his method was a form of dialectical reasoning but not through splitting the general from the particular or the phenomenological, sensory, and apparent, from the abstract and non-empirical, but from gauging the opinions of others through that which the ‘logic’ of motion and its theories (as posited by Aristotle) are to be believed as the ‘observable’ and ‘visible’. Anyway, there’s lots of debate over whether his method constitutes a ‘dialectical’ kind or not, and it depends on what you want to ‘see’. [Aristotle looks confused].

The main point is that motion becomes the ground of visible proof for articulating cosmological order. Under Aristotelian reasoning power was the potential for coming-to-be, for moving into existence, for being natural and only able to be articulated a posteriori. [Regret whinnies with Aristotle in its back] Power’s value across the ‘natural sciences’ is thus established on the stage of Life through an appeal to nothing, to invisibility. Power’s immaculate conception takes place between the legs of motion as visible and real and an assumption of an invisible source or cause for what one ‘sees’ afterwards.

Stage directions: Closing of Act 1: Regret becomes naked, translucent, almost invisible, a character that is inferred and hardly seen. Regret is clothed only by that which surrounds the space to be occupied in explaining movement as physical and is named only after motion has passed across the stage. Power, Regret, thus enters as the invisible source of motion and becomes crucial to the proof of Being. It will be difficult to do without the invisible Regret in articulating the visible from now on. Regret will become a central character in the play and its moves. Aristotle passes on Regret in the form of power-as-potential. Unwittingly, power as a concept will have the potential to become other things itself.
Act 2: The Voice of Objectivity

*Stage directions*: The stage should be such that Newton can deploy mathematics no longer simply as the measurement of quantities but as the proof for natural philosophical points of view. Math had to be rearticulated to 'why' questions, not just 'how' questions. Galileo Galilei and Descartes had to have already entered for natural/unnatural motion to be destabilised and for inertia and resistance to be viable explanatory. Their images can be fleeting parts of Newton’s apparel. Motion has to be present on stage as a normal character to ask questions about, although it should seem at the time that what Aristotle had done for motion in making it real had been forgotten, been done away with as wrong-headed, erroneous, and old-fashioned because of his details of motion’s features. Latin had to be the language of communication in academically Royal (Society) terms and it is understood that natural philosophy had to posit a unified system for explaining the universe uni-vocally in Latin.

*Scene 1*: [Enter Newton and the same Interpreter]. Newton had complete and utter faith in Regret to explain the visibility of what was by the mid-1600s the standard and everyday-ish phenomenon of motion. Despite the possibility of motion’s unstable status that Aristotle’s struggle to establish its reality had signalled centuries beforehand, motion could no longer be contested as illusory. [Newton looks up in surprise]. Motion was objectively real. There were no perhaps, maybe’s or possibilities in the language. Only certainty with equally certain, careful qualification of the conditions under which certainty operated. Axioms spoke motion’s reality but within certain confines, fences. Newton is a strong character, almost incontestable when it comes to bodies in motion at an everyday level and not, we now can claim, in relation to micro-micro movement or macro-macro distances. Still, Newton’s findings secure for him the position of the consummate natural philosopher. He becomes an objective man [Newton stimulates audience applause].

For Newton, the appeal to truth, to proof, was no longer guided only by being able to explain away errors in other philosophers’ points of view or in the erroneous common-use of terms in everyday language, but it was guided by an appeal to an intermediary arbitrator—the experiment [Newton nods gravely]. The conduct of local experiments from which the order of the universe would be extrapolated solidified the reality of motion which Aristotle had awakened. Motion was measurable and no debate could be entered into on that point, only on what the measurements were taken to mean.

*Scene 2*: [Enter Regret dressed as power-as-force]. The invisible Regret is brought into the *Principia* through the interchangeable terms, force and power. Forces were what set motion in motion. The visible movement of bodies could only be explained through an appeal to force. Force was the terminus of change which was now signified by a belief in discrete beginnings and endings. Force, as the final point of appeal in explaining why something moved was also the final point of appeal in identifying something as a ‘change’. [Newton looks bored at the obviousness].

Forces were invisible to the eye except through reading their movement effect *a posteriori*. Power-as-force was thus Regret’s new apparel, the emperor’s new clothes, the invisible threads which hung to the beast’s frame for explaining the visibility of motion as though it were a natural, timeless feature of the animal. [Newton mounts Regret].

Power-as-force was not just the made-visible invisible thing which explained movement. Power-as-force was also a possession, a little like Aristotle’s notion of power-as-potential, a quality in the interior of something. Interior now meant ownership, though, and hence a
relatively new inscription of a Christian God now owned power-as-force. The eternal unmoved mover of Aristotelian reasoning was for Newton, as for Aquinas, a Christian God inscribed with the ability to plan and guide motion, qualities with which Aristotle had not attributed his prime mover. [Regret bucks].

Power-as-force was both externally acting on bodies in motion and a possession of an omnipotent God. It was also understood in opposition to resistance, especially as mass where the greater the mass generally the greater the resistance [enter a perception of the adult male body as more 'power-ful' than all other human bodies]. Power-as-force thus also operated as a capacity to resist moving or to generate movement in other bodies, a theory well-suited to the dynamics of imperialism. [Newton and Regret charge across stage into the darkness of the wings].

**Stage directions:** Closing of Act 2. After Newton exits, the source of motion is no longer the line of difference between natural and unnatural objects. Force effects all bodies in the same way, from human ones to planets making the terrestrial–celestial split no longer feasible. The grounds for proof are still motion and cosmology is still articulated in regards to the observation of motion as visible and as real. Regret has changed uniforms, though. While still the invisible source of movement symbols, the team for which Regret now plays is the 'objective', mainly external team of power-as-force. Power was eminently knowable and measurable through the way in which it could redirect the action or movement of bodies through impressed or centripetal force. Power could score a goal, direct the motion of something else and it was imbalances in power-as-force that determined the direction. Even in the realm of social motion, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau agreed (surprisingly). There was a thing called power and it was observable in the movement of bodies, minds, or wills in one way or another.

**Act 3: The Voice of Subjectivity**

[Enter Foucault and the same Interpreter] Foucault announces that the colt from old Regret has been born but no one reads the birth notice at first because the colt runs around madness and not around money and class. [Foucault keeps working away on stage]. The colt is initially disparaged as a bastard, of no value, partly because it does not appear to be related to power at all. The colt seems to be apolitical, relativist, or a dangerous challenge to the station of Marxisms and neo-Marxisms whose stable categories and easy whippings had brought the beast of power to order. [Foucault yawns].

The colt continues its wild run, though, and women particularly seem to enjoy its chase. Some feminisms take up the colt especially and ride with it. The colt does not so much leave the station though as require it. Its daring run contrasts the order of the station with the disorder and wilderness of the bush. That is, the order of things, regimes of truth and systems of thought are juxtaposed against local disorder, the specificity of things and subjugated truths. The ride seems not so much to depart the station, then, but to confirm it as the backdrop from which its daring can be drawn. [Foucault raises his eyebrows].

[Enter the colt from old Regret dressed as power-as-effects]. Discursive movement is what surrounds the colt. Ceasings and beginnings in discourse are the continuities and ruptures which shape the chase. The greater continuity lies, though, in the appeal to motion although Foucault doesn’t say why. Why motion? Instead, the naming of the colt takes place in terms of power-as-effects, as fluid, as in circulation, as visible *a posteriori* and in contradistinction to what Foucault called the static and the inert in Marxist conceptions of power. [Foucault mounts the colt from old Regret].
The colt is busy, disorderly, elusive and yet everywhere. It lies inside in regard to subjectivity and 'its' formation, and outside on the ensurfacement of bodies (subjectivity personified). It hides everywhere in the everyday-ish, mobilising and shaping discursive space. It is completely cultural, not natural, but it can still subject all bodies to its 'field of force'. Discursive movement, through which bodies are read, is thus attributable to power as technique, mechanism, strategy and tactic, the ammunition of the guerilla war which produces social (discursive) motion or inertia and which genealogy traces as continuity and rupture in the conditions for truth. The riders leave the station on the wild chase, but how will it end? Where will they go to from here? [Foucault and the colt disappear].

**Stage directions:** Power-as-effects suddenly appears and disappears. It can be everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing because 'it', power, is always already present. It can be read in surfaces, actions, words, bodies, technologies, anything where there is movement and where a source needs to be implicated, even if that source is posited as an effect of other sources also called power. It can be ascending but also topdown, it can circulate horizontally but also vertically and it requires resistance to make it visible, to exert itself against. It does not require absolute space as Newton's power-as-force, however, because power-as-effects is the new absolute space to which all things social can be reduced or attributed. It is no longer explicable in relation to an omnipotent God, but power is now the center of itself—the terminus of change, just as force was the terminus of change for Newton. Power-as-effects takes place in discursive space, living on despite the quantum threat to its status. The colt of old Regret thus maintains its lineage, eventually settling for the station of a will-to-know power better and the ability of humans to control it's productive and repressive potential through more or different knowledge of where it might run and where it might be hiding. The sacralisation of the mundane is the final effect of the colt's absent presence. The backdrop should depict the descent of heaven into human hands and power as the new God, not fully knowable or describable until death, but an image that can be approximated, strived for, and gestured at. Heaven, like freedom, is depicted as outside human grasp.

**Closing**

**Narrator's voice:** The presumption of worth via lineage is what enables Regret and its colts to operate as silent, central characters, almost beyond contestation. Regret seems always on stage in relation to movement—projectile, planetary, discursive movement. The post-Newtonian movement from the serenity and enclosure of the station, from order, pitted against the foray into the wild bush, the disorder of the outback re-centres power in the form of the colt, as a necessary character in the telling of a social tale. Old Regret is, then, the device without which the story of *The Man from Snowy River* and the deployment of power as an 'analytical' tool in science could not be told. Regret, in the late twentieth century, arrives back almost at its Aristotelian conception through its colt's clothing; it has the potential to be the new prime mover—of itself, to be the explanatory for the (social) universe, and to occupy the meaning of change. Power begets power begets power. It is centred, the stable is in order even when it is in disorder, and Men can seemingly act confidently amidst uncertainty, kicking goals with a new knowledge of power to boot.
REFERENCES (SPRINGBOARDS)


