



**THE PROBLEM OF THE PAST: THE TREATMENT OF HISTORY
IN THE NOVELS OF PETER CAREY AND DAVID MALOUF.**

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ABSTRACT

The intention of this thesis is to examine the novels of Peter Carey and David Malouf and analyse their treatment of history as a theme. I seek to locate their novels in the critical context which encouraged their problematisation of history and explore the political and philosophical influences which led to this problematisation. I argue that scepticism about realism as a literary form was extended to historical narrative in Carey's case and that Malouf's scepticism springs from his more radical doubts about the capacity of language to adequately represent the world.

The treatment of history in the work of these novelists is analysed as a process which varies according to specific novels and which becomes a less important emphasis as strategies for casting doubt on history's truth claims become conventional in themselves.

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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PREFACE

'History', 'historicism', 'anti-historicism' and 'neo-historicism' are terms frequently used in this thesis to describe certain modes of discourse in a broadly generalised fashion. There are two conceptualisations to which I refer as 'history', one being the conventional discipline which records and interprets events of the past involving people. The other is a more abstract ideal of the past as an unattainable yet profoundly desirable hyper-realistic grail which is perceived to be, often paradoxically, diminished by textual attempts to replicate it. In the novels I will analyse, this idealised perception of the past is frequently portrayed as being traduced by the limitations of textual history. It is this continual emphasis on the inevitable shortcomings of conventional history and the concomitant idealisation of the intrinsically elusive nature of the past to which I refer throughout the thesis with the term 'anti-historicism'. There is in these novels a sense of opposition to a formal discipline which has failed to fully represent the minutiae of people's experience and often wildly distorted the truth of past events because of its reliance on falsifiable documentation and its commitment to a contentious objectivity.

Occasionally I will use the term 'neo-historicism' when I consider the problematisation of history within the novels to be less combative and more constructive in implying that there are new strategies emerging for the portrayal of history. The term is used by Peter Pierce in 1994 to describe recent historical novels by Peter Carey, Robert Drewe, Rodney Hall and David Malouf in which they provide "a useful context for opening up discussion of current ways of writing 'history' through 'fiction' whereby both terms are held up for scrutiny and revision."(Pierce 1994a: 304)

INTRODUCTION

In the early seventies Craig Munro was commissioned to put together the first prose fiction list for the University of Queensland Press. Prophetically, the first three writers he chose were David Malouf, Peter Carey and Rodney Hall (Giese 18). Not only did Carey and Malouf go on to become the best known and most feted Australian literary writers of their generation, but all three went on to win the Miles Franklin award for historical novels: Peter Carey for *Oscar and Lucinda*, David Malouf for *The Great World* and Rodney Hall for *The Grisly Wife*. Rodney Hall is certainly well known and not without influence, but if any individual writers can be said to have shaped the perceptions of the Australian literary community, Carey and Malouf would have to be pre-eminent among them. My interest in these writers centres on their treatment of history and the effect that it has had on the way we perceive both it as a discipline and all other representations of the past.

None of these novels are uncomplicated reconstructions of the past such as Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Schindler's Ark*. Even though these novels confuse matters by having heroes who are hardly moral paragons, it is impossible to avoid extracting a moral from the stories that Keneally creates. We are invited to judge the historical milieu that forms Jimmie and condemn its oppressive social practices just as we are very clearly meant to revile the Nazi regime as represented in *Schindler's Ark*. The most striking difference in the way Carey and Malouf treat the past is that they are much more ambivalent about the purpose of historical depiction. In their novels, history tends not to be treated in such a way as to encourage something as decisive as moral judgement. The main reason for this is not that they lack any moral intention, but that their scepticism about the very possibility of accurately representing the past obviates this intention.

Both Carey and Malouf exemplify the postmodern paradox of recognising the insufficiency of language to fully represent reality by expressing this concept in language. Malouf, especially in *An Imaginary Life*, writes about the desire to attain a state beyond language, but is forced to do so in language. This paradoxical tension is intensified by Malouf's use of elegant and meticulously structured prose. Like Carey, he is not unambiguously celebrating form and pattern and offering *it* as the purpose of literature in the way that an aesthete like Nabokov does, but using it in a way that is in a sense provisional. Malouf is not fully committed to form as the *sine qua non* of his art; he deploys it because it is necessary and valuable but the content of his novels operates to undermine any notion of its primacy. Form, it is implied, can structure intimations of the emotional intensity of the lived moment, but its poignancy owes at least as much to the insufficiency of prose to fully realise the complexity of actual experience as to its capacity to suggest it.

At the heart of both Malouf and Carey is a radical ambivalence which tinges all aspects of their work with a sense that the meaning their work generates is endlessly provisional and contingent. Their intention, it is implied, cannot be conveyed pristinely; the slippage between sign and signified blurs their original conception which itself has to be translated into the distorting pattern of metaphor and narrative of which a novel consists. This is the abiding ambivalence which permeates virtually all the themes that they treat. They relish metaphor, revel in narrative invention and are deeply fascinated by language while at the same time highlighting the insufficiency of all these strategies. Carey's early stories illustrate this beautifully. Their form resembles parable, which tantalises the reader with the expectation that their odd images must add up to some discernible symbolic pattern of meaning. However, the stories resist any attempt to discover a consistent pattern and actually operate as anti-parable. Realistic touches are used to ironise realism and the tension between the form and the content of the stories creates a delicate balancing act between coherence and nonsense.

'Life and Death in the South Side Pavilion' has precisely this dream-like quality which both invites interpretation and resists it. What immediately strikes us as a satire of

corporate capitalism is too surreal to sustain such a neat summing up of the story, and as an explanation cannot encompass very convincingly oddities such as the narrator's impotence arising out of his desperate conclusion that "EVERY TIME I FUCK MARIE I KILL A HORSE" (54). The strangeness of the idea that someone should be employed simply to keep horses from falling into a swimming pool immediately suggests that the story is 'about' futility, but if we are to take this 'message' seriously, then we would have to question why, in the face of such futility, the story is worth writing. The point is that this story, like so many others by Carey, is opposed to and experiments with this sort of reductive attitude. The stories are designed to be as open to as many interpretations as possible without (and this is the site of continuing ambivalence) becoming vacuous or merely absurd.

There has to be some core of meaning, however vaguely apprehended, to sustain the reader's interest or to make the story explicable. What Carey is reacting to is the rigidity of the conception that the meaning of a story can be perceived in the mind of a hypothetically perfect reader and is an unchangeable essence that can be 'missed' if the reader is in the wrong mood or lacks the interpretive training to notice crucial nuances. The stories serve to illustrate the contemporary truism that the author's intention cannot be fully recovered and is not even necessarily clear to the author. Both writers resist the conception that their writing has a centre, a core, an essence or a heart. Malouf is always interested in exploring the margin rather than the centre but in so doing he is obliged to centralise the margin if he is to make it the focus of attention. Tomis is the capital city of *An Imaginary Life*, not Rome. Malouf's novels convey the sense of being trapped in a language that depends on differentiation, on binaries such as margin/centre, spatial/linear and personal/public. The radical implication is that it is desirable to somehow transcend this structural fundamental of language because it is a pattern of meaning imposed on the world and a way of generating meaning that defines everything negatively within a symbolic system.

Malouf's characters are often driven by this unfulfillable psychological desire. *An Imaginary Life* explores the Lacanian insight that the infantile state of being which recognises no distinction between itself and the world is an ideal state of integration that we

wish to recover. Certainly Ovid wishes to return to a pre-lingual state that not only dissolves the separation of the individual and the world, but collapses subjectivity to such an extent that time is no longer perceived as a fixed linear progression: "I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six." (152). It is hardly surprising in light of this that Malouf characteristically portrays history as problematic. Partly because of this tendency to focus on the individual psyche, the problems with history his novels expose are less broadly social than one finds in Carey's. This impression is bolstered by Malouf's proclivity for having the narrative perspective embrace the mental world of individual characters. In *An Imaginary Life's* almost imperceptible shifts from omniscience to partiality is embedded a suspicion of language's claim to have access to the past. As Amanda Nettelbeck points out: "In Malouf's novels, there is no verifiable 'history' of the world, but rather a complexity of private histories (or narratives) which each 'write' a unique world." (1995: 4).

Carey's problematising of history is more overtly political. Some of his novels pointedly associate Australian history with lies and distortions, highlighting the neglect of the most salient feature of Australia's past: the dispossession of the Aborigines. Carey addresses this as an issue in *Illywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda*, and alludes to it again in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. But Carey does not simply seek to rewrite Australian history as if he were to do for Australian fiction what Henry Reynolds has done for Australian history. Carey's fiction can also be read as calling into question the very possibility that history can lay claim to a truth value greater than that provided by fiction. Like Malouf's questioning of the verity of language, Carey has to use history to express his sceptical attitude toward it. The theme of Australian history as a fabrication is with him from an early stage in his career. This is evidenced by his fascination with the following quote from Mark Twain's *More Tramps Abroad*. Initially Carey thought he had no use for the quotation and suggested it as an apposite epigraph for Brian Kiernan's anthology of short stories, *The Most Beautiful Lies*. Finally, however, Carey used it in *Illywhacker*:

Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies; and all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of

surprises and adventures, the incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.

By the time Carey wrote *Illywhacker*, his focus was unequivocally on the idea that Australian history is a lie. However he must have been struck by Twain's peculiar enthusiasm, since Australian history was generally regarded as a dull business of exploration and settlement without any of the significant political turmoil and spectacular war that characterised European and American history. In fact, in 1978, Malouf was able to say :

And think of the good fortune of Australian history! As a new world country it has made enormous steps towards the creation of an open and in some ways (compared with elsewhere) just society - and has experienced, for example, nothing like the American Civil War. And yet, Australians seem absolutely riddled with guilt. (Shapcott 30)

Nineteen years later Malouf remained uninterested in the political dimension of history; he was by no means indifferent to atrocities, but preferred to dwell on the minutia of an individual's daily life:

And you know when we talk, for example, about forty thousand years of Aboriginal history in Australia, almost none of this is recorded but a great deal happened. And it seems to me that fiction is always interested in all those parts of life, of ordinary lives, and there are many, many of those. That never gets into the history books. They're not involved with large events at all. They're involved with the ordinary, mundane things of living from day to day. (Malouf , speaking in the ABC television production *An Imaginary Life*)

This is the sort of history that is impossible to record; in a sense, it can only be lived. The capacity of observers to record history accurately is portrayed as hopelessly distorting in, for example, the scene from *Remembering Babylon* in which Gemmy's account of his life with the Aborigines is coaxed from him by Mr Frazer. The punctilious Mr Frazer is obliged to make guesses about what Gemmy is saying, a distortion which is further warped by having the school teacher, George Abbot express his resentment at being used as a clerk in view of his pupils by deliberately altering minor details of Mr Frazer's dictation and substituting his own fanciful touches. The immediacy of George Abbot's feelings of

frustration and his pleasure at making little alterations of fact are what the text conceals but which are the truth of that moment: "he appropriated a little of the occasion to himself, stepped in and concealed himself, a sceptical shade, at this and that point of the minister's Colonial fairytale" (19).

The impression that Australian history is a colonial fairy tale riddled with omissions and misrepresentations is implicit in several of Carey and Malouf's novels. They are not entirely anti-historical in the sense that the attempt to understand the past is regarded as utterly futile or hopelessly textual, but one can detect in them a postcolonial scepticism about the use to which historical discourse has been put by imperial authority.

Both novelists share the experience of having read Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* before it was published in 1988. In the Fryer Library's Peter Carey collection, included with a manuscript of *The Road to Botany Bay*, is a letter from Paul Carter dated 3/1/86 thanking Carey for his interest in the book and revealing that David Malouf also saw the manuscript. Carter says in the letter: "I have found the generosity of spirit which both you and David Malouf have shown quite humbling" (UQFL 164 Accession 880700-1 Box 12 Item 4). Carey and Malouf were subsequently referred to as practitioners of what Peter Pierce termed neo-historical fiction (Pierce 1994.a.) and their exposure to Carter's concept of spatial history coincides with the writing of their major historical novels, *Oscar and Lucinda* and *The Great World*.

Just precisely what influence Carter's book may have had on Carey and Malouf is impossible to say, but their endorsement of his scathing attack on conventional history indicates a willingness on their part to support his views, if not to incorporate them into their fiction. Malouf in particular has expressed enthusiasm for Carter's ideas. A broadcast conversation between the two (Carter 1989) makes it clear that Malouf sees at least some of his work sharing a similar desire to reinvent history or to explore a neglected dimension of it. Carter's concept of spatial history is not something that is easily or sharply defined. Its principal emphasis is on intentionality: that is, a way of looking at history that encompasses both the results of people's actions *and* their intentions in pursuing those actions. Because

one cannot deduce an historical figure's intentions empirically, Carter's approach tends to be highly speculative.

What matters about Carter's work is the intellectual and philosophical eclat that it has provided for an approach to history that is openly hostile to the limitations of methodical empiricism. Carter says that

it is the specificity of historical experience that is the enemy of positivist history: it is the actual charge of historical time *and space that* undermines the cause-and-effect patterning of lives, events and facts into something significant. (4)

This yearning for specificity in the face of 'cause-and effect' historical discourse features in several of Malouf's novels, although Carter's distaste for what he sees as Enlightenment assumptions and his association of history with imperialism are only present in a muted form.

One aspect of Carter's work which has a particular resonance in Malouf's novels is the way in which naming is conceptualised: "It was the names themselves that brought history into being, that invented the spatial and conceptual coordinates within which history could occur" (1987: 46). This brings to mind the emphasis on naming in *An Imaginary Life* and is an idea employed to demonstrate Gemmy's re-entry into history in *Remembering Babylon* :

The word flew into his head as fast and clear as the flash and whistle of its breath. *Axe. Axe.* Circles of meaning rippled away from the mark it blazed in the dark of his skull. (30)

In the Australian context, Carter's criticisms of the limitations of "stage history" as practised by historians he characterises as 'imperialist' (such as Manning Clark) were well received by writers and critics who were already influenced by international scepticism about history's capacity to objectively evaluate the past. The combination of this with a manifest bias in Australian historiography until the nineteen seventies toward notions of orderly settlement rather than invasion created an intellectual climate which encouraged the nation's major novelists to adopt a deeply sceptical attitude to history. Scepticism about

history's truth claims also became an important critical emphasis, particularly in the late eighties in response to Australia's bicentennial celebrations.

A number of theorists have called into question the claims of history to objectively report reality. Michel Foucault said that "The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled" (124). His objections to conventional history are echoed by Hayden White who contends that "There is an inextinguishable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena" (1997: 392). In his book *The Content of the Form*, White argues that narrative is imposed on reality and in its selective re-ordering of chronology reveals events "as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence"(5) Narrative, White says, "far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing." (xi) White sees himself in the early seventies as part of a long line of thinkers opposed to historicism:

Continental European thinkers - from Valery and Heidegger to Sartre, Levi-Strauss and Michel Foucault - have cast serious doubts on the value of a specifically "historical" consciousness, stressed the fictive character of historical reconstructions, and challenged history's claims to a place among the sciences. At the same time, Anglo-American philosophers have produced a massive body of literature on the epistemological status and cultural function of historical thinking...which justifies serious doubts about history's status. (White 1973: 1-2)

This "massive body of literature" increased enormously in the decades following such that doubts about the epistemological status of history became an expected part of postmodernist fiction. As Brian McHale says in his 1987 *Postmodernist Fiction*, this casts doubts on history:

by violating the constraints on "classic" historical fiction: by visibly contradicting the public record of "official" history; by flaunting anachronisms; and by integrating history and the fantastic. Apocryphal history, creative anachronism, historical fantasy - these are the typical strategies of the postmodernist revisionist historical novel. (90)

Carey's *Illywhacker* makes use of a number of these strategies and has also been defined by Linda Hutcheon as an "historiographic metafiction". In her 1988 book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, she acknowledges that "the provisional, indeterminate nature of historical knowledge is certainly not a discovery of postmodernism" (88), but is nonetheless one of the salient features of postmodernist fiction. Her suggestion that "The particular, the local and the specific replace the general, the universal, and the eternal" (99) is applicable to many of Malouf's novels. He and Carey are commonly analysed as postmodern writers and by the late eighties much of the content of their novels falls within the generalised postmodern poetics proposed by Hutcheon.

Parts of their work resist being defined as opposed to "empiricist and positivist epistemologies" (106), but the bulk of the critical attention their work has received has focussed on how the novels express a radical uncertainty about not simply the constructions of history, but the constructedness of their own narratives. Carey's stories can be seen in terms of their "valorisation of textuality, irony, and the arbitrary" over "the corresponding devaluation of expressive and formal elements in art" (Slemon 157). The very process of being a writer is presented as a problem in Malouf's examination of the slippage between sign and signifier in *An Imaginary Life* and in Carey's moments of self referentiality.

SECTION 1

THE PROBLEM OF FORM: AMBIVALENCE IN MALOUF'S EARLY NOVELS AND CAREY'S SHORT STORIES

CHAPTER ONE

JOHNNO

For what else was his life aiming at but some dimension in which the hundred possibilities a situation contains may be more significant than the occurrence of any one of them, and metaphor truer in the long run than mere fact. (164)

Johnno is Malouf's exploration of his attraction to the romantic: to the anti-authoritarian and the anti-historicist. Johnno is introduced to us as a documentary fraud, appearing in a photograph in a school magazine disguised in spectacles and supposedly a member (ironically, in light of his later drowning) of the Stillwater Lifesaving Team. Johnno's defiance of authority is his essential quality. The novel explores how this rebelliously romantic figure disturbs Dante's childhood conformity and introduces a profound ambivalence into Dante's world view. Dante cannot reconcile the way in which he is both attracted to and horrified by Johnno's excesses. Johnno's challenge to Dante's notions of discipline and order is not something which he can wholly embrace, but which attract him nonetheless and leave him as guilty in his inability to do this in the metaphoric sense as they do when he cannot embrace Johnno in the physical sense. The anguish Dante feels when he is unable to give Johnno a farewell hug on his departure for the Congo encompasses his relationship with the past :

Awful! Awful! Awful! I burned with embarrassment. I had just stood there, stiff and unresponsive. Maybe in the shock of the moment I had even pushed him away. That would be typical! I tried to recall the moment. What was the last thing I had been thinking before it happened? But it was all a blur. If only it could happen over again! Only *slowly* so that I wouldn't be caught unprepared. (105)

This passage neatly brings together several of the threads running through the novel. We have the self-revelatory first person narrative, Dante's deeply conflicted attraction and repulsion toward Johnno and the anxious desire to have the past back so that it can

be 'properly' read. The voice of Dante is both self conscious - "I had just stood there, stiff and unresponsive" - and inadvertently revealing - "If only it could happen over again!" He knows that his response to Johnno is inadequate, but is unable to grasp that his desire to carefully replay the scene is exactly the opposite impulse to the one he is embarrassed by. Despite its attraction, too many aspects of Johnno's rebellion are irrational and excessively emotional for Dante, who has diligently internalised the rules and regulations of his conformist middle class family, to adopt.

Not only has Dante absorbed the social conventions of his time and milieu, he has intensely identified with its intellectual underpinning. Johnno is not just fascinating because his behaviour is eccentric. It is his radical challenge to Dante's world view that most disturbs him. Dante is less troubled by Johnno's tilts at the conventional sacred cows of trust in authority or patriotism than he is at the way in which Johnno undermines the apparently concrete certainties of history and geography. Johnno does this in several ways. Most obviously there is his deliberate mocking of documentary history implicit in his appearance in the school magazine. As well as Johnno appearing in black speedos in a photograph as part of a group to which he does not belong, he is also disguised by some "Round gold-rimmed glasses that might have belonged to his grandmother." (10) His apparent subversive plan is not just to disturb some future witness to the photograph by being an extra unidentified boy (the unlucky thirteenth), but to compound that confusion by being difficult to recognise. Dante notices Johnno's smile while flicking through the Brisbane Grammar School Magazine for 1949. After he has been bewildered by his attempts to remember Johnno in glasses and diligently counted the boys and checked their names, he sees the joke, realising that "Those glasses, if one could check them, would turn out, I was certain now, to have nothing in the frames." (11)

The school magazine, usually an infallible aid to personal history, becomes in this novel a site of ambivalence. Ironically, Johnno's attempt to subvert history has the opposite effect of spurring Dante's careful account of their shared past. Even Dante's name is derived from a contribution he made to the school magazine which,

unsurprisingly, is a concealment of the truth: " Once, years ago, he had called me 'The Prof'. Now, after the appearance in the school magazine of a poem 'To Beatrice' (its real subject, in fact, was a sleepy, chestnut headed sixth-former), he dubbed me 'Dante'." (49) This naming of Dante acquires a further layer of irony when we discover that one of the reasons Malouf chooses this name for a character who is in many ways based on himself is a private joke about the city in which the novel is written: "Florence did perhaps have its influence, in the ironic nickname I found for my otherwise nameless narrator" (Malouf 1998a: 10) So the nickname 'Dante' hints at the pretensions and evasions of both the narrator and the author himself. This taste for irony structures a great deal of the book. It ranges from the opening absurdity of the arrival of a doctor's report declaring Dante's father to be "A1 in every respect" (1) on the morning of his funeral, to Johnno's suicide in a river he had carefully traced in school. All these ironies are encompassed by the larger one of Dante's fulfilment of his complaint that "what Johnno called life bore an uncanny resemblance, it seemed to me, to what the rest of us called 'literature'." (84)

Irony is one of the main subversive strategies which characterise Malouf's treatment of history. It challenges the literal meaning of words and by implication a straightforward reading of events. The mature Dante is charmed by Johnno's deception because it repudiates the cliché that the camera never lies. It is significant that Johnno was not "staring out like the rest of us into some sort of rectilinear future, but had cocked his head up, away from Mr. Peck's covered tripod, and was staring diagonally out of frame" (9-10). The rest of the narrative concentrates on this 'lateral' quality of Johnno and we are invited to read it as the essence of Johnno's appeal.

It seems reasonable to assume that Johnno's appeal is to Malouf himself as well as to his fictionalised version of himself. Malouf has talked about Dante as if he were himself in an interview with Jim Davidson. More to the point, he based Johnno's suicide and Dante's guilty reaction to it on a crucial episode in his own life. Malouf says that the novel deals with :

the death, by accident or design, of an old schoolfriend, John Milliner, who in 1962, in the last of many puzzling disappearances, had managed to drown himself in the Condamine, at a place and in a depth of water where no one could drown. (Malouf 1998a: 10)

To a considerable degree this novel is a personal history in which Malouf comes to terms with how most truthfully to represent the past. He had already dealt with John Milliner's suicide in a poem entitled "The Judas Touch" which, as the title suggests, concentrates on Malouf's "uneasy sense of having failed or betrayed him" (Malouf 1998a: 10). In *Johnno*, Malouf is once more engaged in exploring his guilt over this incident, but in a way which partakes of Johnno's sceptical rejection of the suburban ordinariness of the 'real' story.

The novel's Shakespearean epigraph succinctly captures the approach that Malouf has taken toward writing the story of a close friend's death:

I have great comfort from this fellow. Methinks he hath no drowning mark upon him; his complexion is perfect gallows. Stand fast, good Fate, to his hanging! Make the rope of his destiny our cable, for our own doth little advantage. If he be not born to be hanged, our case is miserable.

If we think of Johnno as the character whose complexion is "perfect gallows", we can see that his impending death is in some crucial sense liberating, and that we should "make the rope of his destiny our cable". It is about deriving value from the apparently criminal; the way in which Johnno rejects the values of his world will lead to his demise, but give us hope. Here again there is irony in suggesting that Johnno "hath no drowning mark upon him". Furthermore, the epigraph is not simply ironic, it is also ambiguous. Dante may well be "this fellow" in whom we "have great comfort". He will not drown, but that is because he is guilty (the novel is his trial and we condemn) of not taking Johnno's love seriously. As an additional self-referential irony, it is revealed in Johnno's letter, received by Dante after Johnno's death, that he has been using him "as a character in one of your funny stories" (154).

Something about Johnno's creed is not only desirable but related to truth: a 'metaphorical' mode of understanding "truer in the long run than mere fact"(165).

Johnno's suicide is able to "defy the powers of medicine and the law to establish their narrow certainties" (164). Johnno's romantic anarchy and his inability to accept reality are juxtaposed with Dante's conventionality and 'paralysis' in order to expose Dante's shortcomings. At least part of what is being exposed is Dante's foolish narrowness in clinging on to aspects of history that could be seen both as part of the foundation of conventional thought and part of what underlies Dante's inability to act spontaneously. Early in the novel it is established that Dante's initial understanding of history is deeply conventional. He says of himself that he was "happiest at home under the tentflaps, reading my favourite Dumas and dreaming myself back into those marvellous Olden Days when people wore satin and spoke French and everything that happened was History" (20). History is understood as being elsewhere and abstract: "Australia was familiar and boring. Now was just days, and events in *The Courier-Mail* - even when those events were the Second World War. History was The Past." (20)

Dante's vision of the past remains hopelessly textual and romantic later in the novel when he is still clearly in pursuit of it in Greece, armed with his Blue Guide and cajoling Johnno into a fruitless search for a spring reputed to be "a fountain of Diana or Venus" (138-139). Johnno, although as much a romantic in his need to abandon Australia for Greece and Paris, is far too disorganised to have visited any sites of significance in either place. What he objects to in Dante's dogged quest for such sites is its drearily meticulous nature which interferes with the present and destroys spontaneity. Instead of being able to enjoy the sweet, cold water spurting from a ram's head, Dante feels he must find its source and they waste twenty minutes clambering over a steep hillside in the midday sun. In contrast, Johnno's previous Greek experience of farcical hunger and his pathetic greed in scoffing the last the acid drops he and his friend had decided to ration comes across as the more authentic history. Absurd and banal, it is nevertheless a story that illustrates something about Johnno's engagement with the world that Dante's text bound pursuit of a mythical source lacks.

Neither is Dante able to abandon his belief in cause and effect as a rationale for explaining behaviour. Neilsen declares that Dante is guilty of "conferring on the past an absolute deterministic power it does not have" and that "These distortions and mystifications of the past are attempts to evade personal responsibility" (1990: 27). Explanations for Johnno's behaviour such as Dante's assertion that "the reason for Johnno's wildness, it was universally agreed, was that he was a war child" (22), are inadequate. Johnno is too shot through with contradictions and idiosyncrasies to be reduced to such a fatuous deterministic formula. Neilsen says that Dante "quotes his theory about Johnno with what seems like scepticism" (27), but his qualification of this statement ("seems") is telling. Dante cannot abandon generalising explanation; he is suspicious of it, but does not want to destroy it. The key words in Dante's comment are that "it was universally agreed". There is no doubt that this clause has an element of irony in it, but only an element. Dante is finally unable to reject the universally held values of his society in the way that Johnno claims to be able to do. The position Dante takes is more uncommitted and unsure than sceptical. He oscillates uneasily between rebellion and conformity and is only able to watch Johnno's excesses without joining in.

Figuratively, he cannot take the plunge into such a chaotic and dangerous river in the way that Johnno can when he dives into the swollen Brisbane River. He invents excuses for himself and reveals his profound need for society's approval in his complaint that "besides, I would have to appear in an hour or so at my aunt's house, where the family were at dinner. How could I turn up stinking of river water, having dried off on my shirt, and with mud in my hair?" (103) A "piker" is what Dante may well be, but what is the experience he is denying himself? Sitting on the bank watching Johnno's frolics is a compromise. Dante allows Johnno to be his proxy. He can see the attraction in Johnno's total rejection of historicism: "Twenty -four causes of the French Revolution and all that Bullshit" (75). But Dante cannot follow him so far as to endorse Johnno's deluded notion that the world is run by a conspiracy involving "World Jewry, the Church, the Masons - all three of them working together"

(76). Fantasies about conspiracies and diving into flooded rivers are the distressingly foolish consequences of letting go of conventional wisdom.

Johnno becomes increasingly ridiculous and hypocritical in the latter part of the novel. But his absurd behaviour in pursuing Binkie and his childish pranks at the brothels are described by Dante in such a way as to highlight *his* inadequacies rather than Johnno's. For instance, his failure to enter fully into the spirit of Johnno's fantasy of being pursued by the police is reported as if it were a dereliction. Even the episodes when Johnno goads the Madams into calling the police is portrayed with resigned admiration: "The fantasy was fact at last. He had made it real." (82) Part of the reason for this continued admiration is that the relationship between Dante and Johnno is one in which each of them is attracted to the qualities in the other which they cannot express. For Dante, Johnno is all that he cannot be : irrational, disordered and non-conformist. Throughout the novel Dante and Johnno play out oppositions such as passive/active, diligent/reckless, calm/disturbed, methodical/spontaneous and so on. It is significant that Dante's early attempt to ingratiate himself with Johnno by imitating Johnno's delinquent behaviour is quickly perceived by Dante to be an insulting mistake because their interest in one another cuts both ways; Johnno is just as attracted by Dante's stability as Dante is by Johnno's rebelliousness. Consequently Dante is embarrassed when he presents Johnno with the stolen items because "all I had revealed was my low opinion of *him*" (44).

Johnno is Malouf's first exploration of the difficulties of attaining some sort of reconciliation of these types of binary oppositions. The novel sets up the ambivalent tension that dominates all of Malouf's subsequent fiction. Malouf is a writer who is acutely aware that his creative processes in an important sense run counter to his content. This is much clearer and made quite explicit in *An Imaginary Life* , but is still implicit in *Johnno*. The relationship between Dante and Johnno is a dramatisation of Malouf's desire to reconcile the relentless division of the world into self and other (among other divisions), but a dramatisation that is highly structured and therefore

totally dependent on the fundamental binary divisions that language imposes on reality.

The same kind of tension and ambivalence underpin Dante's reasons for writing the book at all. He is inspired to write a truthful account of their shared history because of Johnno's lying presence in the school magazine. That particular flash of "pure devilment" (12) connects Dante to the past in a manner that is more complex than accurate factual reconstruction or nostalgia. Johnno's presence in the photograph exposes the way that official records often conceal the subtleties of everyday life. This is an area to which Malouf returns again and again in his subsequent novels. He characteristically juxtaposes the historicist concept of significance with everyday banality. In this particular case in *Johnno*, the official history of the school magazine (who was in which class and what club) is a part of a whole complex of inadequate and yet complete documentary sources.

One of these is the novel itself. It begins as if it is to be a reconstruction of the life of Dante's father, opening with a sentence full of biographical promise: "My father was one of the fittest men I have ever known." (1) The reader is then guided through the narrator's return for his father's funeral and his musings about "how little I had really known him." (5) In sorting out his father's affairs, Dante discovers "pretty well every document the family had ever acquired" (6). This is the context of Dante's rediscovery of Johnno: it is random and fortuitous. What Dante actually has is all the material from which to construct an historically accurate biography of his father, but what he does is burn it and write instead his personal account of Johnno. Johnno's story is effectively a lateral shift away from the expectations which the narrative initially sets up.

Dante's father does not have the glamour of Johnno and appears to represent exactly the sort of solid, self-made, bourgeois success that Johnno finds so empty. Dante resists his father's efforts to shape his character with sport by refusing "absolutely to have anything to do with it: swimming, boxing, football, the lot." (71) He retreats into a literary world that his father has no time for, but at twenty he feels

"some need to make reparations" (71) and accompanies his father to the Fights before meeting Johnno for "our tramp around the town." (73) It is at the Fights that another dimension to his father's character is hinted at. His father goes there to observe failure. He is able to notice the "particular fault" of the boxers which "made every fight for him an Aristotelean tragedy" (72). But he takes no malicious delight in this as a formerly successful boxer and self-made man:

'He's a good lad.' my father would say as the trainer cuffed the ear of a loser. 'He put up a good show.' It was the losers he kept his eye on. (72)

What is more, Dante's father is unconcerned about what he might be doing with Johnno "in that disreputable part of Brisbane so late at night" (73) and is also unfazed by the hot dog man's cry of "If you've been t' the fight and yer going t' fuck, y' need a hot dog" (73).

Dante's father is perhaps, after all, not the predictably consistent and staid man which Dante implies he is by claiming that two decidedly unromantic books his father owned explain his character. The books are probably more significant for what they reveal about Dante. One of the books is merely an empty ledger containing "a curious chart that had been traced on tissue and pasted neatly between the leaves." (166) It is a graph tracing the peaks and troughs of the Australian economy from 1913 to 1994. Dante says that his father used it to guide his life, allowing it to plot "every turning his life had taken in the world of public triumphs and disasters" (166) This dry and public record of success and failure measured in economic terms is portrayed as being at odds with Dante's sensibility and even with his very existence since his birth date fits "one of its most insistent lows" (167). The implication is that Dante's father believes in historicism's promise of predictability and the reduction of life to economic imperatives. Dante says regretfully: "That line on the page was what he had tuned his soul to, taking, as the graph did, the shocks of history" (167).

The other book is a celebration of the success of James MacRobertson, a famous chocolate manufacturer:

It was a book, I suppose, that my father turned to as other men in other places have turned to Homer or the *Pilgrim's Progress*, the palpable record of a great national mythology. (168)

This, it must be said, is very much Dante's supposition. He is the one who fits the story of his father's life to the rise to success chronicled in MacRobertson's *A Young man with an Oil -Can*, claiming that his father's "oil-can had been a horse and dray" and his "equivalent to James MacRobertson's factory was our heavy, overfurnished house in Arran Avenue" (169). Dante turns out to be an unreliable narrator or at least a highly ambivalent one if one considers that the graph he declares his father ran his life by was something Dante "spent long hours of my childhood poring over" (167) and that *A Young Man with an Oil -Can* "had been one of the most treasured objects of my childhood" (167). The question of who it is that is actually consulting these books is, as so much in the novel, gently ironised.

Dante considers the historical mythology of rags to riches and dry economic predictions flawed modes of understanding which belong to a previous generation. But he is attracted to them nonetheless. He cannot bring himself to burn the books and instead puts them aside so that "Someone else could deal with them" (170).

One reason he finds it so difficult to destroy *A Young Man with an Oil-Can* is that it "seemed as beautiful to me then as anything I had ever seen or could imagine, a sort of colonial Book of Hours" (167). To burn it "would have been like putting a match to the National Gallery" (170). Dante's aesthetic sensibility is one which values the ordinary over the grandiose. The colourplates of chocolates in MacRobertson's book are lovingly described and much of the novel is concerned with how Dante eventually comes to appreciate the beauty of "shabby and makeshift" (83) Brisbane. Ivor Indyk says that "Since the book enacts Dante's accession to the vocation of writer, the path would seem to be clear: against the father's material success, against Johnno's anarchic self-destruction, Dante sets the supreme value of writing, of art" (1993: 3). He goes on to qualify this interpretation of aestheticism by expressing some uncertainty as to what the "proper domain" of such artistic writing should be, given

that the two worlds that are represented in *Johnno* (the wider society's and Johnno's) are rejected by the novel's "doubly ironic structure" (2). There is a strong case to be made for this analysis, but reading *Johnno* in the light of Malouf's later work makes me suspect that the novel is not so much doubly ironic as wholly ironic and intentionally resistant to any neat categorisation. Malouf *is* interested in aesthetics: the quality of his prose, the tight formal structure of his novels and the sense that his work is always striving for the sublime all attest to the value he places on the effect of exquisite patterning. But I doubt that *Johnno* can really be said to subsume the concerns that it raises under a belief in the supreme value of art. Johnno's life has been transmuted into art, but this is an ironic process for a character who is said to live his life as if it were literature. The idea of writing having a "supreme value" is deflated by the letter of Johnno's which attacks Dante for using him "as a character in one of your funny stories" (154). The letter exposes Dante's shortcomings: he is a friend who is prepared to sacrifice his relationships for mere creative effect. Malouf's ironically self-conscious narration in the end celebrates nothing but uncertainty, rejecting both Johnno's ludicrously impractical attitude to life *and* Dante's fictionalisation of Johnno.

As Nettelbeck points out, "irony is the very narrative feature that ensures the meaning of its subject remains unsettled" (1995: 24). The novel avoids absolutes and closure and the binary oppositions that structure the novel are not deployed to generate meaning in the familiar either/or manner of analysis, but to demonstrate the complications that resist this mode of understanding. An example is the nature/civilisation binary. At times the natural world holds a deep attraction and exposes the shortcomings of the ordered world. We see this in the moments when Dante leaves off organising his father's documents and possessions to sit on the steps and be seduced by spring:

The whole garden sizzled and hummed. Big slow-flying grasshoppers, so heavy they could barely stay airborne, barged across the lawn or lofted over a wall to the hibiscus. The air glittered, and bees were busy in the cups of creepers that were just bursting into flower, cascading over a trellis or choking a fence. (7)

This rapturous description of nature works structurally to balance the dutiful reordering of the past which Dante is engaged in at this point in the novel, but the attractions of nature are not permitted to remain a benign alternative. The garden is rapidly reverting to wildness with goannas beginning to invade and "The darkness under the thickening boughs was alive with midges and heavy with the smell of rotting vegetation, jungle-damp and sickeningly sweet" (8). In the context of the careful organisation in which Dante is engaged, the incipient wildness of the garden is attractive, but its function as a balancing opposition to control is upset as it moves further away from cultivation.

Malouf said in an interview with Ray Willbanks that he is

interested in exploring those oppositions. The powerful attraction and rejection between those two characters is a way of working out my own swings between a kind of recklessness and anarchy and a wish to be centred and not to move. I think all the writing I do has to do with this sort of opposition between the two complementary or oppositional types, involvement and withdrawal, action and contemplation. I go back and back to that kind of opposition. (147)

The key word in this quotation is 'exploring'. The oppositions are not being deployed as an either/or proposition but as shifting points along a continuum. We are attuned to perceive Johnno and Dante as representing opposite poles, but Malouf is just as interested in breaking down that polarity and discovering similarities and ambiguities. Johnno is at times a model student and has a career as a successful geologist. Dante is the one who spends a feckless summer in a relationship with "a boy from Sarina" involving riding his motorcycle "suicidally into the darkness off country roads, seeking some sort of romantic dissolution" (109).

This brings us to one of the major binaries of the novel: the perceived opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Stephen Kirby has said of the novel's treatment of homosexuality that "Malouf celebrates the subversive possibilities of such desire in a way that obliterates its sexual component" (390). The sexuality of Dante and Johnno is more part of a formal structure of oppositions that Malouf wants

to reconcile than a manifestation of actual erotic desire. What Kirby glosses over in his essay (in which he deftly establishes that both characters have clearly indicated homosexual orientations) is that Johnno and Dante are heterosexual too. It is possible that Johnno's pursuit of Binkie is really a desire to get closer to Dante, but it is just as possible that he genuinely desires Binkie, especially since he pursues her when she has other boyfriends. His escapades in *Surfers* as an adolescent with "the wives of Melbourne bookmakers and nurses up in groups for the winter" (55) might not just be fabulous tales. Dante nearly marries and regards as one of the great turning points of his life his rejection by Roseanne Staples at Moss's Dancing Academy on the grounds of his inability to pivot. This is not a 'gay novel'. It evinces no interest in the advocacy of any sexual orientation. Malouf says of the book that:

Readers of a later and more knowing time have taken this to be a gay novel in disguise. It is not. If I had meant to write a gay novel I would have done so. If there was more to tell about these characters I would have done so. (Malouf 1998a: 10)

Sexuality does not dominate the novel's pattern of meaning except insofar as the indeterminacy of Dante's or Johnno's orientation could be perceived of as hostile to the homosexual/heterosexual binary. That neither character is decisively heterosexual or homosexual negates any attempt to define the book in terms of an identity politics that reifies homosexuality as opposed to a hypocritically 'normative' heterosexuality. At what Michael Bartos interprets as the other extreme of queer theory, "queer stands for a destabilization of any and every identity claim, asserting the irreducibility of difference itself" (126). *Johnno*, with its relentless interrogation of the processes of identity formation, could be seen as supportive of "a radically anti-identitarian position" (Bartos 126) and therefore as a novel which prefigures that aspect of queer theory which emphasises the complex continuum of human sexuality rather than the distorting simplicity of a straightforward division between homosexual and heterosexual. The novel clearly complicates a binary which Gary Dowsett says

".provides comfort to some in their conclusions (and prejudices) about others, for it is also read at times as right/wrong, good/bad, righteous/evil, natural/unnatural" (21).

What David Malouf begins to do in *Johnno* and continues to elaborate throughout the rest of his work is to pursue a kind of balance between issues which seem to call for decisive commitment by casting doubt on aspects of both sides in what he has called "my usual way of not wanting to come to conclusions" (Malouf 1998a: 10). In doing this, his work continually probes at the limitations of historical discourse, because, as he says:

A lot of what a writer has to do is to go against the grain, to go against your own nature if you are ever going to shock yourself into discovering new things, so the past is something I can go against and reject in terms of what I want to do now. (Willbanks 146)

CHAPTER TWO

IRONIC STRUCTURES: CAREY'S SHORT STORIES

While it is true that Carey's short stories are by no means the first forays into surrealism in Australian literature, they were among the first blatantly anti-realist literature to gain a wide readership and a solid reputation. The peculiarity of the stories is attributable in part to Carey's original style, but also to a desire to be part of literary internationalism and as a reaction to the perception that Australian literature was largely dreary social realism that reflected the political and cultural conservatism of Australia in the late sixties and early seventies. At the outset Carey's work has a political dimension that appears comparatively absent in Malouf's output. Very often the setting of Carey's stories is against a background of social collapse that leads to totalitarian oppression. Capitalism is invariably portrayed as rapacious and lurching toward economic disaster. History is the report of Nancy Bowlby in "The Fat Man in History" which both observes and manipulates in the service of a powerful establishment. Individuals are victims of inflexible social systems.

Carey's broadly left politics are evident in those elements of the story I have just mentioned, but his literary anti-formalism overrides and fractures any clear political aim. An analysis of the stories which seeks to reduce them to satire or attempts to extract any particular story's "meaning" is resisted by the stories themselves. They refuse to settle down into neat little moral fables. They are structured like parables and as such seem to promise a readily understandable moral, but continually disrupt the reader's expectations. They are shot through with ambivalence, both in terms of structure and sense. In this sense they reflect Hayden White's contention that narrative, "far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing" (1987

xi). They are both science fiction and fable; and they draw on fantasy and realism. "Do You Love Me?" is fantastic in both setting and action, but is also peppered with sharply realistic references to Australian urban life such as the Shell and ICI buildings. "American Dreams" can be read as both opposed to cultural imperialism (the pathetically eager local consumption of Hollywood) and to its reverse, the packaging of local culture for international consumption. Some stories such as "Exotic Pleasures" are recognisably science fiction, whereas others, for instance "Peeling", are surreal. Most of them mix these genres. Carey has said that the stories have their own internal logic. It is more the case that they have their own internal ambiguities.

Even the most accessible of them, "American Dreams", demonstrates this tendency to indeterminacy in the contradictory tensions within the story. It appears on the surface to be to be fairly straightforward social commentary. The residents of Carey's fictionalised Bacchus Marsh are so lost in their American dreams that they are unable to appreciate their own town. The description of the Dream in isolation is mildly but unmistakably satiric:

We saw our big smooth cars cruising through cities with bright lights. We entered expensive night clubs and danced till dawn. We made love to women like Kim Novak and men like Rock Hudson. We drank cocktails. We gazed lazily into refrigerators filled with food and prepared ourselves lavish midnight snacks which we ate while we watched huge television sets on which we would be able to see American movies free of charge and forever. (180)

The irony of the story is that what they actually get instead of this consumer nirvana is real Americans who treat them as movie stars.

Gleason's model of the town invites symbolic interpretations. What Gleason has done is to make an exact copy of everything in the town frozen in one moment. Mr Dyer is moved to remark that "Gleason had got the faded "U" in the BUTCHER sign of his shop" (177). In effect Gleason is the archetypal social realist who has produced, if the main criterion is verisimilitude, the perfect work of art. Everything is observed and faithfully recorded; nothing is suppressed, not even the scandalous relationship between Craigie Evans and Mrs Cavanagh. The town is initially

delighted, and then so horrified that the council votes not just to censor it, but to obliterate it altogether. Gleason's work can be thought of as a pure art of national identity in its capacity to examine society in all its detail and then hold up to it Shakespeare's proverbial mirror. Nothing, it seems, could be further away from the town's American dreams.

Whatever one decides the model town represents changes the direction of the story's satire. If we accept that the model town represents social realism, then the satiric focus moves away from the people in the town who profit from it and then suffer the tiresomeness of being constantly on display to Gleason and his intentions. One could say that the story is less about the foolishness of the people in the town than the unpredictable consequences of making any one moment in time and space a memorial. Its very stasis destroys its pretensions to replicate 'reality' and what it reveals about the town is therefore intrinsically false and inevitably disappoints the tourists who come to make comparisons.

The most significant aspect of Carey's approach in this story is his refusal to construct it in terms of polarities. A critical tone such as may be detected in the passage describing the town's American dreams does not necessarily imply a condemnation of cultural imperialism on the one hand or a valorisation of local culture on the other. "American Dreams" complicates these issues by taking them out of an either/or polarity into an unpredictable world of apparently arbitrary contingency. Why are the Chinese toiling to build Gleason's wall? Is it an oblique reference to Edward Dyson's widely anthologised comic story, "A Golden Shanty", about Chinese labourers who attempt to steal an Irishman's pub brick by brick so as to extract the gold from the clay? Is it a subtle reminder that Victorian country towns tend to ignore the contribution of Chinese labour? Or is it simply an eccentric detail? Although "American Dreams" is less open to interpretation than many of the other stories, it still invites this sort of indeterminate speculation. More often than not, of course, this type of hermeneutics produces too many inconsistencies within the story to sustain it. It is this dislocating confusion between the form of the story and its interpretative openness

that is the stories' most consistent effect. Gleason's motivation remains an open question, despite the narrator's assertion that "there are in existence some personal papers [which] will show that Gleason knew exactly what would happen" (177). This remark is made at the outset of the story and its implication of some resolution of this mystery at the conclusion impels the reader forward, but typically it is left unresolved. This in itself is suggestive of some further "hidden" meaning such as the story being "about" Carey's conflicted stance on the creation of nationalist or regional literature. Like the other stories which imitate genres that are transparently allegorical such as science fiction and fantasy, "American Dreams" refuses to yield a clear meaning and continually upsets the reader's construction of allegory.

But if they were to operate constantly at this level they would be practically unreadable. It is interesting to note in this context that the original ending of "American Dreams" - a couple of extra sentences saying that the boy and his friend Brian are saving up the dollars they are gleaning from their humiliation to escape to America - was dropped on the advice of Carey's editor at UQP, Craig Munroe (Ahearne 1980: 53). Carey wanted it because it made a more complex point and added another dimension, but it is easy to see that this sort of development is implicit in the story anyway and tends to overload the story's conclusion. What it demonstrates is Carey's desire to add complexity rather than aim for interpretative clarity.

Clarity is the domain of cartographers and census takers. In "Do You Love Me", their function is to define the unseen. They are representers; they create the nation's symbolic landscape. A map is an abstraction. It stands for the thing it represents, but it is not the thing itself. A cartographer is in the business of making abstractions and passing them off as the real thing. In this, they are intrinsically deceptive. Eventually, in this story, the cartographers are genuinely deceptive, and fake in the missing sections of the map to prevent unrest. Like many of the other stories, "Do You Love Me" works by association rather than strict logic. The idea of the vanishing world in the story is developed in this way. Initially, what is not inhabited or used becomes merely representation; that is, it becomes only a symbol

and not an actuality. The merely symbolic is characterised as profoundly inauthentic, false and not something that can be loved. Additionally, the symbolic is associated with power and corruption.

Those who impose their symbol system upon the world are arrogant and have an impossible desire for exactitude. Everything must be counted. The narrator's father looks "as proud and cruel as Genghis Khan", and manages "to retain his authoritative air" when "lying on the beach clad only in bathers and sunglasses" (3). He has the explanation for why things and people are disappearing (that they are no longer loved), but is neither loved nor needed himself. Ian Adam points out that "the father in Carey's story expose[s] the insufficiency of the language attempting to contain them" (18). He goes on to argue that in this story Carey is resisting the insufficiency of the cultural signing system imposed upon him by inscribing the insufficiency of such a system onto his work. The story is again relatively open, but the conflation of power and explanation in the figure of the father who is then portrayed as being antithetical to all that the story implies is desirable strongly suggests a deep suspicion about the hegemonic modes of discourse in Australian society. It is no surprise that the first things to disappear are the large companies Shell and ICI.

Cartographers are only the most obvious guardians of symbol systems. The story implies that they are of a piece with bankers, politicians, bureaucrats and academics. They are, in short, representative of the establishment. Carey's early work characteristically has a vaguely malevolent and shadowy establishment controlling the action offstage. In an interview of that period, whilst discussing his victimised characters, he remarked : "Then there's fear of C.I.A./I.B.M. which I've also said enough about" (Ikin b: 37). His conflation of the C.I.A with I.B.M reveals this anti-establishment bias. He also said in the same interview that the vagueness of the stories' locations was a way of avoiding being "subjected to the trivial limitations placed upon me by geography or history or anthropology" (Ikin b: 37). "Do You Love Me" is the story that stands out as the most opposed to the authoritarian restrictions of geography.

The story that is most critical of anthropology is the first collection's title story, "The Fat Man in History". The genesis of the story was

an article about a tribe called the Sirono in Bolivia or somewhere. They spent their winters marooned in the middle of swampy waters, with no canoes, with only one story to sustain them, with little food to eat and all winter to eat it in, they were only remarkable in that they never argued about sex, only food. (Ikin b: 31)

Effectively Carey's starting point is a version of Nancy Bowlby's anthropological report at the end of the story. The essential core of the story appears to be related to its setting in a post-revolutionary society with government agents exploiting the trust of its dissident hero in a satirical scenario reminiscent of 1984. However it is not critical about the manipulation of the truth in the way that Orwell is. What it does is to deploy the style of a report that describes what is happening correctly, but in a manner that dehumanises its subject.

The story's satirical focus is less on the use to which the discourse of power is put, and more on the discourse itself. Like "Do You Love Me", "The Fat Man in History" characterises official state sponsored modes of discourse as merely expressions of power. Nancy's report combines supposedly dispassionate psychological analysis and an appeal for additional funding. It is not just the limitations of anthropology that are being highlighted. History is also implicated in the story's title. What is the history that the fat man is in? Presumably something like Nancy's report which has no interest in the banal emotional detail of the fat men's lives, but observes them clearly and objectively, stating only the bald facts.

This is the sort of history that Carey eschews in those stories in his collections that might be described as historical parables: "Fragrance of Roses" (originally published as "The Rose") and "Kristu-Du". In "Fragrance of Roses" historical fact intrudes right at the end of the story, when it is revealed that the patient old man is none other than the former commandant of Auschwitz. Anyone familiar with the history of Nazi Germany would be aware that the old man in the story is nothing like the actual commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Hoss. Hoss was captured shortly after

the war and executed. He was not tracked down by the Israeli security service and did not donate clocks to some vaguely Latin village of exile. This blatant distortion is not in itself a sardonic observation on the inadequacy of history, but does indicate an approach to the use of history in fiction that is derived from a distrust of "factual" sources and an idea that history is essentially mythic.

The type of Nazi portrayed in this story by Carey is almost a cliché. The old man is gentle and civilised and accepts the petty torments of the post office clerk with uncomplaining forbearance. All he wants to do, apparently, is breed roses. The revelation that he is, in fact, the overseer of genocide on a grand scale makes the not altogether original point that the Nazis were not slaving monsters but ordinary people with unremarkable manners. The subtlety of the story is in its deft symbolism and the uncertainty the reader has as to where its satirical focus is principally directed. Carey's version of the banality of evil is given complexity by his having the old man breed roses. The old man is playing out, in a symbolic sense, the Nazi eugenic fantasy. Plant breeding requires careful selection and ruthless extermination. The old man has been creating in his beautiful glasshouse, but he has also been massacring all of the ordinary looking roses. The black rose is a symbol of the exclusive society the Nazis thought they could attain through wholesale slaughter.

But why does the old man produce it at all? Is it defiant or regretful? It is possible to read the story both ways because any condemnation that the story contains is not directed at the archetypal Nazi (he is too obviously a figure of evil), but at the town which profits from his legacy and the tourists who are attracted to it. Carey's narrator at the end of the story is talking about 1974 and the continued existence of the rose "carefully nurtured by the townspeople and shown with pride to visitors" (296). The old man's motivation is as mysterious as Gleason's and what matters is what the town does with the artefact it has been bequeathed. In the case of the town in "Fragrance of Roses": "They have named it 'the Auschwitz Rose' and have printed a cheap colour postcard to celebrate their peculiar good fortune" (296). Even though a story's conclusion can only tentatively be said to define the meaning of a story in

Carey's collections, this ending is unequivocal in its disapproval of the town's exploitation of "their peculiar good fortune".

But it also creates an ambivalence about the way that history is actually absorbed and understood. I have mentioned earlier that the idea of history being essentially mythic plays a prominent role in this story, and it is this type of mythologising about which the story is curiously ambivalent. On the one hand there is the myth of the cultured Nazi, which, like most myths, has its roots in some true observations but gains most momentum from fictional accounts which emphasise interesting contrasts like this to captivate their audience. Carey employs this tactic himself, with the story being dependent on the sudden, dramatic revelation that the old man was in control of the most infamous concentration camp in Nazi Germany. Because it fits into a broad moral consensus about how we understand the Holocaust (the rose is black, Nazis are evil) it can be said to treat historical myth making positively. The facts do not matter in this context. But on the other hand is the story's negative treatment of the same process. Here the facts do matter. The insistence of the locals "that you can smell the mass graves of Auschwitz in the glasshouse, and that the heavy, sweet odour of death emanates from this one black rose" (296) carries a hint of scepticism that this mythologising is occurring to attract an audience merely for profit.

This negative emphasis prevails because the story is only peripherally concerned with moralising about the Holocaust itself and more concerned with exploring what people do with historical myth making. The story is an early consideration by Carey of what happens *to* history rather than what history is. The dissonance between what actually happens and what people make of it can be good or bad, but the fact that there is this dissonance is, even at this early stage, taken for granted. Mythologising is in this story portrayed as self-serving, anticipating Carey's later, more thorough-going interrogation of Australian historical myths in *Illywhacker*. The change of the story's title from "The Rose" to "The Fragrance Of Roses" is a clear

indication of Carey's desire to have the reader focus on what the townspeople make of the rose and the implications of that, rather than on the symbolic black rose itself.

The other story which could be regarded as an historical fable is "Kristu-Du". Unlike "The Fragrance of Roses", its references to Nazi Germany take the form of background research on which the story is based, instead of referring to the Nazis explicitly and ignoring historical detail. Gerrard Haflinger is a highly fictionalised version of Albert Speer, Hitler's favourite architect and, coincidentally, probably the most important model for the mythic figure of the cultured Nazi. The Kristu-Du is a direct copy of Speer's Kuppelhalle which was designed as a vast meeting hall to accommodate full scale Nazi rallies and was to have been the largest dome in the world. The idea that such an enormous copper dome would act as a condenser and conceivably produce rain is also derived from Speer, including the lateness of the architect's realisation of this possibility. Speer only thought of his dome as a likely condenser when he was spending some time after the war in Spandau prison. Furthermore, Gerrard's passion for social utopias brought about by monumental architecture is also something he shares with Speer.

What all these historical references add up to is not at all clear. Although the story obviously encourages disapproval of Gerrard's culpability in putting utopian ends before humane means, it is only incidentally a commentary on Speer. Insofar as the story has a contemporary political point of view, it is that brutal African regimes (Ongala is reminiscent of Idi Amin) are as appalling as the Third Reich. History in this story has useful resonances, but does not operate as a theme. The story's focus is on self-delusion and rationalisation - something that may well have been inspired by Speer, but which by the end of the story has been dramatically altered from a sense that the architect's behaviour is reprehensible to the portrayal of Gerrard as insane. The story's conclusion is ambiguous and open:

Gerrard Haflinger had designed a prison, but he did not know this yet and for the eighty seconds that it took him to force his way through the hysterical crowd he still remained, more or less, sane. (37)

Is the "prison" he has designed an actual prison or a metaphoric structure that imprisons him as an ally of a dictator for the rest of his life? Does sanity in this context mean that he still hopes that his building will bring together the tribes and lead to Oongala's demise? Of course there is no decisive answer to these questions because, like most of the other stories, it resists clear allegorical closure. Aspects of Speer's life are used to historicise a story structured like a fable, but a story which employs that structure in the interests of exposing the limitations of fable and, by implication, the simple reflex morality of historicist judgement.

Carey complicates and humanises his Speer character. This is not surprising; we would hardly expect a sophisticated writer to produce sermonising condemnations of historical figures. The process of transforming Speer into Gerrard Haflinger is just one example of an unusual allusive use of history. In Carey's second collection of stories, *War Crimes*, the sense that the stories are in some way a commentary upon popular perceptions of the Second World War is unavoidable. Carey was well aware that the collection's title is suggestive of the Second World War and German atrocities (Ahearne 1980: 43) and although he has expressed a preference that this impression should be worked against and contradicted by the book's cover (Ahearne 1980: 43), the collection does invite the reader to draw some comparisons between a generalised view that the Nazi era is a kind of paradigm of evil and the reality that the stories suggest of people's capacity to act just as ruthlessly in the context of a contemporary social system.

Despite the historical allusions, it is still the case that the stories are more focussed on a critique of the limitations and consequences of consumer capitalism than they are on historical antecedents. My point is that the stories represent an attitude to history rather than any conscious appraisal of it as a theme. It is clear from the stories I have analysed that no anxiety about the status of history as such is being unambiguously expressed. Nonetheless, the perception that history is allied to corrupt authority are critical to the way they work as stories. A pedantic historian might note

the discrepancies between historical reality and the world of the stories and dismiss them or wonder just why Rudolf Hoss has been given a new personality, interests and future. At least three reasons could be given. The most cynical is that Carey did not know or care who the actual commandant of Auschwitz was and simply wanted to use a representative figure of the Holocaust to satirise tourism. Another less cynical justification would hold that the discrepancy is deliberate because part of what the story is exploring is contemporary myth-making and the way that society symbolises, fictionalises and then commodifies its past. Having a "mistake" in this context actually serves to bolster the story's vision of history as being hopelessly at the mercy of contemporary interests. A third is that the story is anti-historicist and is manifesting a wholly justifiable cynicism about the claims of historians to be able to establish incontrovertible facts.

A catch-all term of the nineteen seventies which could easily be applied to the whole of the stories is that they are "anti-establishment". The way that the state controls information and distorts it to serve its own interests is a consistent feature in all of the stories that I have discussed. The bland accuracy of Nancy Bowlby's report ignores the way that Alexander Finch perceives the world and that the fat men are repressed by the new regime. "Do You Love Me?" conflates census takers with geographers, government bureaucrats and, by implication, historians. The story portrays them as part of the apparatus of state that does not care about its citizens. In "Kristu-Du" the regime is straightforwardly corrupt. Other stories such as "Crabs" and "Life and Death in the South Side Pavilion" are set against a background of distant and apparently mindless regulation. Authority is most starkly presented in the figure of Mr Jacobs in "The Uses of Williamson Wood" where his exercise of power is predicated on his belief in pain and money. Record keeping in this story is merely falsification for personal profit. The arbitrariness of imposed geopolitical boundaries and people's conditioned respect for them provides the thematic structure for "A Windmill in the West". Government and all the activities that support its hegemony are treated with

suspicion in the stories. Unrestrained capitalism is represented as invariably leading to social and economic collapse, especially in "War Crimes".

Even narrative itself is consumed by the stories' unrelenting scepticism. "Report on the Shadow Industry" and "Concerning the Greek Tyrant" are both ironically self-referential in a way that calls into question the process of writing itself and the way in which it colludes in the perpetuation of power structures. Writing and the act of imagination are depicted as oppressive and without purpose in "Concerning the Greek Tyrant". The story's focus is on a retelling of probably the most famous incident in Homer's epic poetry, the ruse of the wooden horse in the battle for Troy. Carey does not give us a different version or an obviously politicised reconstruction, but dwells instead on the processes of the poem's conception. The characters and the settings of the poems are entirely provisional, dependent on Homer's state of mind and the demands of what Homer decides is good dramatic construction. In Carey's version all kinds of disturbing and contradictory things have happened because Homer has a fever. But we are also made aware that Homer is a character in Carey's imagination. The result is a confusingly "closed in" story which is a fantasy about a feverish fantasy that is to be deleted. Instead of using prose to hold up a mirror to the world, this story holds up a mirror to a mirror. It becomes impossible to determine what is reflection and what is actuality.

There is some significance in Carey's decision to use Homer and the story of the siege of Troy to provide the basis for this unsettling little anti-narrative. Homer's original decision to kill Echion is the story's starting point. This particular Echion is accorded only one entry in Robert Graves's compendious reference work *The Greek Myths*. His only act is to break his neck in his eagerness to be the first out of the Trojan horse. Carey's Homer tells Echion that "...this business in Troy is what I needed you for, I need you to fall from the horse,' the poet says, 'for the irony'" (115). Echion's only function in this great mythological edifice is merely to serve Homer's magisterial need for a moment of dramatic irony. For the rest of the time (ironically) he is a creature of Homer's "fevered" imagination.

What is happening in this story is that the inevitably selective process of creating narrative is being characterised as tyrannical. Echion's defiant words scrawled in the dust: "KILL THE PIG TYRANT HOMER WHO OPPRESSES US ALL" (116), could just as easily refer to "the pig tyrant" Carey. Stories suppress and reject more material than is in their final form. Echion's whole existence "has a thick line drawn through it diagonally, as if it were some kind of mistake" (114). The things that survive in a story only reflect the particular interests of a particular person at a particular time and yet in being written down they acquire a sort of permanence and continuing influence. But that which does not make it to the page has no verifiable existence at all. Echion is the victim of Homer's personal hierarchy. The implication is that Carey is equally ruthless in writing his stories because it cannot be the "real" Homer who decides at the conclusion of the story to erase the whole incident concerning Echion on the grounds that he "no longer found the incident interesting enough to tell" (116). Carey's interest in ensuring that the story has one final ironic twist is what dictates the ending.

As I said earlier, there is some significance in Carey's decision to use Homer in this story. Homer's status as one of the most important and fundamental writers in Western literature means that the exposition of his mundane and yet far reaching editorial decisions both expands the implications that such a decision may have (Homer's influence is so vast and various) and employs Homer as a representative for literature in general. The relationship between this and Carey's treatment of history superficially looks somewhat tenuous, but considering that the stories do encourage the reader to link myths and history, the self-consciousness about the processes of narrative formation found in "Concerning the Greek Tyrant" and "Report on the Shadow Industry" has implications for the way that history is conceptualised.

Hayden White regards the idea that narratives "extracted from the evidence and displayed before the reader to have their truth recognized immediately and intuitively" as a "relation between historical story-telling and historical reality [which is]...mistaken or at best misconceived" (1997: 392). White's ideas have a bearing on

these stories because the notion that narrative is intrinsically artificial is central to them. This is why "Concerning the Greek Tyrant" is so fantastic and makes absolutely no attempt to replicate reality. Similarly, "Report on the Shadow Industry" relies for its effect on creating fabulous but analogous scenarios. The shadows are analogous but not exactly like the things they suggest: advertising, films, television, books and unnecessary consumer items. The point is that all of these things are imitations of reality; they are literally shadows. The impossibility of fully communicating experience to someone because every individual will contaminate what he or she hears or reads is hinted at in section 2 of the report: "the shadows are merely mirrors to the soul and that the man who stares into a shadow box sees only himself, and what beauty he finds there is his own beauty and what despair he experiences is born of the poverty of his spirit" (138).

This complicates the idea that stories because of their structural demands alter and distort experience with the suggesting that the individual reception of them is equally problematic. Carey twists even this conundrum by having the narrator of the story disown the above quotation by prefacing it with the qualification that such an opinion belongs to those who are explaining "a direct statistical correlation between shadow sales and suicide rates" (138). Always the core of meaning is elusive, provisional and dependent upon the reader's interpretation. In this story Carey also ironises the potential reception of his work in the academy in telling us of the university teacher's "feeling of emptiness, [and] awful despair that comes when one has failed to grasp the shadow" (139).

Part of the story's enigmatic quality is due to its form. It calls itself a report and is divided into sequential but not plotted sections. This mimics the paradoxical quality of historical chronicles that White has pointed out in his book, *The Content of the Form*. The chronicle appears to eschew narrative in its lack of emplotment, but White suggests that we still construct narrative from such fragments as, for instance, the story of scarcity and hardship implied by the recording of good and bad harvests in the annal of Saint Gall (1987). As readers of "Report on the Shadow Industry", we

provide the plotting. We infer all sorts of narratives from its skeletal structure. This is not surprising because, despite its pretensions to objectivity, this report has to fall back on to the classic narrative pattern of beginning, middle and end to attain any clarity. The paradox is that the narrative pattern is an imposition on the disordered mass of experience it seeks to explicate. In the interests of making itself intelligible, even a report has to distort its fundamental subject matter.

History is portrayed indirectly in the stories as being like reports. The titles of "The Fat Man in History" and "Report on the Shadow Industry" could easily be interchanged to read "Report on the Fat Man" and "A History of the Shadow Industry". History has formal limitations that Carey later explores more thoroughly, but the stories definitely contain the germs of what Carey's subsequent novels make increasingly clear: a desire for history, both politically and aesthetically, to take on the insights of literary postmodernism. Section 5 of "Report on the Shadow Industry" provides us with something approaching a manifesto:

My own feelings about the shadows are ambivalent, to say the least. For here I have manufactured one more: elusive, unsatisfactory, hinting at greater beauties and more profound mysteries that exist somewhere before the beginning and somewhere after the end. (139)

CHAPTER THREE

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF LANGUAGE: *AN IMAGINARY LIFE*

"I am making the spring" (31) declares Malouf's fictional Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*, encapsulating probably the most essential idea elaborated by Malouf's novels. Malouf embraces the counter-intuitive idea that language is the principal determinant in our construction of reality rather than the notion that language merely describes the world. This structuralist concept is not only the core, but also the starting point of this novel. The crucial episode in which Ovid happens across the scarlet poppy and from its inspiration constructs in his mind the other elements of the linguistically structured spring that he knows was, according to Neilsen, "written a year before the rest of the novel" (1990: 47). Furthermore, no considered criticism of the book can avoid focussing on it or discussing its implications. What is most intriguing about it is just how radical is its challenge to the commonsense notion that words are responses to concrete stimuli:

Scarlet!
It is the first colour I have seen in months. Or so it seems. Scarlet. A little wild poppy, of a red so sudden it made my blood stop. I kept saying the word over and over to myself, scarlet, as if the word, like the colour, had escaped me till now, and just saying it would keep the little windblown flower in sight. Poppy. The magic of saying the word made my skin prickle, the saying almost a greater miracle than the seeing. I was drunk with joy. I danced. I shouted. Imagine the astonishment of my friends at Rome to see our cynical metropolitan poet, who barely knows a flower or a tree, dancing about on broken sandals on the earth, which is baked hard and cracked in some places, and in others puddled with foul-smelling mud - to see him dancing and singing to himself in celebration of this bloom. Poppy, scarlet poppy, flower of my far off childhood and the cornfields round our farm at Sulmo, I have brought you into being again. I have raised you out of my earliest memories, out of my blood, to set you blowing in the wind. Scarlet. Magic word on the tongue to flash again on the eye. Scarlet. And with it all the other colours come flooding back, as magic syllables, and the earth explodes with them, they flash about me. I am making the spring. (31)

Neilsen observes that the structural linguistics of Saussure are in operation in this passage, and also, interestingly, immediately infers that social meaning is central to it:

social 'meaning', social reality, is not 'reflected' in language, but is constructed *through* language. We do not create an individual language as a response to reality 'out there'; on the contrary, we can only make sense of 'out there' because we already share language, which is socially produced. (49)

There is no doubt that this idea *is* expressed in the novel, particularly by way of the figure of the inarticulate and socially isolated wild child, but the passage under scrutiny is more about an intensely individual experience. The 'meanings' that Ovid is generating have no social function whatsoever. What is being revealed to Ovid about language here initially takes the form of an entirely personal insight. There is no-one with whom he can share the realisation that language is self-generating; his overwhelming pleasure at being able to invent the spring is related more to the momentary integration of his past, his perceptions and his physical senses than with any understanding of the social import of his new insight. A couple of key words indicate that something more than an elegant exposition of the reciprocal relationship between subject and object is being touched upon. These are 'magic' and 'belief'. The emphasis in the passage *is* on the complexity and subtlety of language's interaction with the phenomenal world, but explanation is eschewed in favour of mystification. The commonsense notion that language is applied to the world is being rejected, but not necessarily in favour of a purely structuralist conceptualisation. Associative relationships between words and colours and flowers and place and time is the engine driving Ovid's creation of the spring, but there is also the element of fantasy:

Suddenly my head is full of flowers of all kinds. They sprout out of the earth in deep fields and roll away in my skull. I have only to name the flowers, without even knowing what they look like, the colour, the shape, the number of petals, and they burst into bud, they click open, they spread their fragrance in my mind, opening out of the secret syllables as I place them like seeds upon my tongue and give them breath. I shall make whole gardens like this. I am Flora. I am Persephone. I have the trick of it now. All it needs is belief. (32)

This is more than a fantasy spring put together by linguistic association. Some of the flowers are doubly unreal; not only are they imagined, they are invented. If Ovid does not know the flower to which its name refers, he creates his own flowers. He is actually celebrating the total breakdown of symbol and referent. All of this carries the suggestion of a creative shift in meaning and the dynamism of language. For Ovid, at that moment, a rose may be a daffodil and if he were to teach the child this, then the linguistic metamorphosis would be put in train. Malouf has said that he is particularly sensitive to the arbitrariness of words in describing objects because of his childhood experience of having his grandfather speak in Arabic, which he did not understand, but which taught him early that words are imposed upon objects and that their stability is socially determined (Fabre 60). However, one of the more intriguing elements of this passage is the space that it allows for the magical and the fantastic: for all those aspects of language that require belief. One of them clearly is the religious, succinctly and suggestively contained in this sentence: "We give the gods a name and they quicken in us, they rise in their glory and power and majesty out of minds, they move forth to act in the world beyond, changing us and it" (32). Ovid's cynicism is diminishing as he realises how important the element of invention is. For the reader, the implications are considerable. Because it is not just the religious that requires belief, but the entire language system.

The natural tendency of language, it is implied, is toward the fictive. There are some bases in reality, like the poppy, but the elaboration (which is what matters) is dependent on the associations that an individual can bring to such a base *and* their ability to invent by using these associations. The implications of this for empirical history are obvious. Even though Ovid does remember his past in Sulmo, the point is that it is a reconstruction of that past tailored to Ovid's emotional state at that particular moment. Ovid is not interested in 'knowing' the facts of his childhood or explaining something about it, but incorporating it into his present perceptions in a way that enhances his self-knowledge. If the reality of his childhood is distorted in the process, it is of no consequence. Similarly, the novel itself is defiantly uninterested in

historical research whilst at the same time concerning itself with the past. In response to a question as to why he included an afterword about his research, Malouf said: "I wanted to say that I had done little or no research, that it was not intended to be a historical novel in the usual sense" (Fabre 64). Unavoidably, however, by giving the novel a pseudo-historical setting and writing it in the first person as a letter to the future, Malouf has written a novel which might be construed as a speculation on the nature of our constructions of the past.

It is significant that Malouf's sources for his fiction are, in terms of historical research, dubious. Malouf is well aware that Ovid's own account of his exile in Tomis, *Tristia*, is not reliable, given that Ovid is "very much an actor [and] inclined to exaggerate for effect" (153). What Malouf is doing is not unlike what Ovid does in the poppy scene: writing "a fiction with its roots in possible event" (153). You could even go further and say that the novel has based itself on events that are at the very edge of believability. Malouf admits that his wild child has no basis in fact, but still directs the reader to Itard's account of Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron. Itard's observations are, as Malouf says, painstaking, but they do not really yield the sort of convincing evidence needed to confirm that Victor actually did spend his childhood totally alone in the woods. It is the sort of possibility that appeals to the imagination and illuminates the book's title. It is an imaginary history.

Probably the greatest violence done to Ovid in Malouf's portrayal is to change him so radically from a cynical metropolitan poet into a figure who not only pursues transcendence, but turns his back on language. It is largely this radical re-imagining of the past which gives the representation of history in the novel its sceptical veneer. A good deal of this is also related to the incessant rhetorical questioning which peppers Ovid's narrative, and which in turn encourages doubt in the reader. Without this quality the book would be impossibly romantic and overwrought. As it is, one is left wondering just why Malouf felt he had to invoke Ovid so specifically when the direction of the novel is counter to Ovid's reputation as an artist who could, as Peter Pierce points out, have used his exile to produce a "refinement of his satirical

estimation of Augustan Rome" (1982: 529). According to Pierce, Ovid's exile has been the subject of a previous fictional treatment in a novel by Vintila Horia entitled *God Was Born in Exile*. Apparently "Horia's major purpose is coolly to condemn the hubris of Augustus, by having Ovid remember the emperor's rule in the refreshed and chastened spirit that he has achieved in exile" (1982: 529). Instead of pursuing this sort of historically consistent approach, Malouf chose to metamorphose Ovid and dramatise "the forcing upon someone who was an absolutely cynical disbeliever in all the forms of supernatural transformation that he had written about - the forcing upon him, at last, of real belief" (Shapcott 28).

Ovid's cynicism is portrayed as a product of his sophistication. His use of language in particular already creates a breakdown of the relationship between signified and signifier. His use of irony (for which we are meant to assume that Ovid has been banished from Rome) in a sense divorces him from the world which he declines to describe literally. His irony is meant to be perceived, in the words of Avis McDonald, as "the trope that subverts the other tropes, that recognises the arbitrariness of the connection between signifier and signified, between word and object, and denies the intimacy of interior connection asserted by symbolism, by synecdoche" (49). The reasons Ovid might have for adopting irony, such as satirical purpose, are irrelevant to Malouf's representation of him in the novel as a dilettante. Ovid's taste for subversion and aesthetics are to be seen against the background of the grim practicality of Tomis as a form of play that has lost its engagement with the world to which it purports to refer. Even something as basic as the food he eats has been subjected to this distancing and disjunction, evidenced by his inability to match the names of seeds to their object:

There are many seeds; gold, greenish yellow, brown, blue. I guess what some of them may be, but do not recall their names. I know the names of seeds, of course, from having used them for the beauty of the sound itself in poems I have written: coriander, cardamom. But I have no idea what any but the commonest of them look like. (21)

This is not to say that the novel always treats play and the pursuit of beauty negatively in favour of the dour lifestyle of the Getae. Ovid's 'subversive' flower garden is a harbinger of subtle change among the Getae, who initially regard it as a foolish and wasteful activity, but will be influenced nonetheless:

Some day, I know, I shall find one of our women stopping as she crosses the yard with a bag of seed to smell one of my gaudy little blooms. She will, without knowing it, be taking the first step into a new world. (67)

But it is a direction that Ovid will not be following. Throughout the novel his movement is away from elaboration to simplification, from separation to unity, from differentiation to reconciliation, and from cynicism to belief. Amanda Nettelbeck calls the process a Lacanian reversal and it has also been convincingly argued by Andrew Taylor that much of the novel reflects Lacanian notions about the desirability of returning to the comfort of the Imaginary phase. It is, however, worth noting that whilst such a narrative pattern as progress (or regress) is an obvious feature of the novel's structure, it also displays a tendency to mitigate any direction it might suggest in incidents such as the success of Ovid's gardening (which qualifies the novel's apparent valorisation of primitivism) or, most strikingly, in appearing to advocate a state of consciousness beyond language in a poetic register which exemplifies the very process of intense selectivity and metaphoric symbolism that Ovid is moving away from.

In terms of language, Ovid regresses from "the refinements of our Latin tongue" (21) to the less sophisticated Getic and finally to the language of the Child which ceases to define the relationship of the speaking subject to his or her perception. Instead of the consciousness of oneself implicit in the simple phrase "*it thunders*" (96), Ovid realises that he has to abandon the original binary that presages our entrance into the symbolic order, that of self and other, and revert to the Child's imaginary perception that "*I am thundering*" (96). This curious celebration of regression would be fatuous if it were not couched in such a highly structured and deliberately paradoxical narrative. Far from dissolving himself into the universe, Malouf has

presented us with not just a fictional narrator, but, as John Stephens has pointed out, a fictional reader.

As the audience of the novel, we are differentiated from Ovid's postulated reader who sits "in a lighted room whose furnishings I do not recognise, or in the late light of a garden whose blooms I do not know, translating this - with what difficulty? - into your own tongue" (19). We of course have no difficulty in translating his words because it is written in English. What we are being encouraged to do is to make an imaginative leap and assume that someone has done the translating for us. This is not especially complicated, but it does absolutely require exactly the sort of sophisticated linguistic differentiation that Ovid characterises as undesirable. If language is stripped of its capacity to divide and define we are left with, as Taylor says, "just noise, and something which cannot even think of itself as thought" (1992: 283).

There is an element of anti-intellectualism (Bishop) in Ovid's desire to achieve a transcendental death. Presumably we are to see his dignified and harmonious death as a desirable outcome, but, as for the state of unity in which concepts of space and time break down, I doubt that there is any advocacy involved. Naturally, this is an approach to the novel - that it can be reduced to a 'position' on language - that the text resists. It resists it in the most obvious way by being in language and therefore ultimately unable to negate itself, and also in the sense that it is a work which privileges the fictive and the imaginative over the analytic and realistic (Griffiths). This is the sense in which the novel is postmodern; the way in which it is manifestatory rather than symbolic, and reliant for this effect on synecdoche rather than metaphor.

A number of critics touch upon this subtle distinction between metaphor and synecdoche, particularly Andrew Taylor and Avis McDonald. Metaphor lends itself to the symbolic; it uses one thing to represent another by way of analogy whereas synecdoche refers to the whole by way of pointing to a part. McDonald claims that synecdoche is "the trope of belief and unity" (46). Taylor says that "the "true language" that Ovid finally learns is the language of universal synecdoche, where

everything is connected with everything else" (1992: 288). Typically, Malouf has to have "recourse to metaphor in order to privilege and celebrate synecdoche" (Taylor 1992: 289), thus articulating yet again the paradoxical nature of the novel. I would suggest that Malouf's treatment of history in this novel partakes of this form of unresolved tension between ultimately irreconcilable concepts. History can only be expressed by its opposite mode of discourse, the fictional. Related to this is the refusal of the text to foreground history as a theme. The references to history in the novel do not exist to symbolise an opinion about history in the way that a metaphor is deployed to "stand in" for that to which it refers, but are simply there as synecdochic aspects of a whole.

What does emerge clearly from the text is an emphasis on belief. In an early dream Ovid finds himself surrounded by centaurs who seem "to be saying. *Let us cross the river into your empire. Let us into your lives. Believe in us. Believe.*" (24). The poppy scene Ovid is able to create the spring because "All it needs is belief" (32). The essential transformation of Ovid is from someone whose only belief is in himself - "We are free at last to believe in *ourselves*"(26). - to a figure in pursuit of an almost mystical union with the world. The transformation of Ovid is not into a figure who is utterly credulous, but into a character who has abandoned his previous confident self-belief in favour of broadening his understanding. The crucial step he takes in achieving this change is learning Getic. The different language gives him a different perspective and allows him to appreciate his surroundings, both physical and social.

The unexpected result of Ovid's shift away from his Latin self-image is that he is able to recapture his past with a greater experiential clarity. The first time this happens is when he joins the hunting party on their ritual ride among the funerary mounds and finds himself transported back to the death of his older brother. Not only does he perceive the past more acutely in terms of its sensual impact, he understands its emotional undercurrents and is able to reconcile himself with them and not, as it is implied he had done before, attempt to forget them. This type of highly evocative

moment in which the past manifests itself in the present with such impact is something that recurs throughout Malouf's novels and is associated with revelation and insight.

Ovid is initially incapable of revisiting his past in this way. It is only when he begins to teach the child that he is able to overcome his egotistical identity of a sophisticated Roman poet (significantly he decides to teach the Child Getic and not Latin) and become able to fully recall his history:

I fall into some timeless place in myself where the past suddenly reoccurs in all its fullness, or is still in progress. I am there again. I make contact with a self so surprising that I can scarcely believe it is me. I touch again on an experience that I recognise as mine only because its vividness can only be that of a life lived in recall. Imagination could not present to the mind, to the senses, anything so poignantly real. (82-83)

This extraordinary ability not only to remember the past but virtually to re-live it anticipates the ending of the book where concepts of linear time entirely collapse. Ovid here is not really talking about memory, but an impossibly complex recurrence of his life that is more than cinematic in its sensual intensity *and* from which he is able to draw subtle inferences. In the scene which follows the passage which I have quoted above, Ovid recollects evenings in his earliest childhood where he is bathed along with the other children of the estate. He describes the experience as if it were actually happening again; he does not say "I remember", but "I watch again" (85). He observes one of the girls leading his older brother around by the prick "And I realise suddenly, nearly fifty years after the event, that this must be the girl my father is sleeping with" (85).

There is nothing unusual in being able to bring to bear mature perception upon childhood memory, and this example, though unusually sensitive, brilliantly encapsulates the text's resistance to linear time and strict chronicle. In having that perception Ovid could easily be said to be simultaneously six and sixty. He is there in the past, but he is present as a sixty year old intelligence. Malouf is pushing into fictional territory with the acuity of Ovid's perception and the coherence of his 'memories'. What he is not doing is drifting off into pure fantasy. The novel's

structure has a consistent synecdochic element. All of the major subjects with which the novel deals are partly true. Ovid is exiled to Tomis. There apparently are cases of children surviving in the forest naked. We do have memories of astonishing intensity. Granted, this deployment of the part does not so much describe the whole as anchor it or shore it up. But the point is that it operates in a way that is discernibly different from a metaphoric structure. *An Imaginary Life* does not encourage a symbolic reading. Things in the text do not "stand for" something else. This is evident in the critical response to the book which tends to treat it as an explication of linguistic theory or psychological ideas rather than a text which alludes to such things or symbolises them.

Ovid's idealised memories are only partly rooted in possibility. They have a temporal coherence and detail that is unlikely, to say the least. Interestingly, Malouf uses hardly any metaphors in constructing Ovid's descriptions of the bathing scenes, favouring the more literal tropes of simile ("like a goose" [85]) and synecdoche ("the fields behind them a glitter of wings" [84]). The question arises as to why Ovid's childhood memories should be so pure. I think that this almost transcendental memory state is being privileged because it has an obvious intrinsic attraction, but also because it challenges the primacy of objective history in imperialist discourse. I am cautious about imputing this sort of didactic purpose to a novel which counteracts the very notion of purpose in its form and content, but Gareth Griffiths' argument that "a refusal of the privileging of certain categories over others in the establish[ment of] 'evidence' for reality and meaningfulness" (141) constitutes a form of postcolonial critique or consciousness seems to me to be persuasive. A text like *An Imaginary Life* manages to oscillate paradoxically between reality and fantasy and purpose and play in a way that repeats its central paradox of being a novel about the insufficiency of language which is expressed in language.

An Imaginary Life engages with the idea that the postmodern and the postcolonial are aspects of the same philosophical conundrum. It is difficult to declare that the novel is openly either. Broadly speaking, it is much likelier that a postmodern

text appears apolitical in its deployment of literary devices designed to undermine the hegemony of supposedly objective discourses such as science and history than a postcolonial text which ought, almost by definition, to identify such discourses as colonial and in so doing inevitably make a political point. This type of political orientation is hinted at in *An Imaginary Life*, but it does not dominate the text and is brought into the complex pattern of meaning in the text where it is not in competition with apparently contradictory notions, but allowed to remain as another of the novel's unresolved binaries. Ovid's desire for a transcendent world without hierarchy and distinction wherein the framing conceptual apparatus of time and space has collapsed stands in opposition to all concepts including not just postcolonial nationalism, but identity itself.

As readers we cannot possibly fully share Ovid's revelation. We remain conscious of Malouf's patterning of the event and cannot help but notice that Ovid's moment of ecstasy occurs as far away as possible from the metropolitan centre of Rome. The conclusion that the edge is being privileged above the centre in an ironic reversal of the colonial cringe seems an entirely reasonable inference to draw. Typically though, even this conclusion is subject to doubt because Ovid does not experience his moment of total metamorphosis at the colonial edge in Tomis, but beyond the borders of all empire in unmapped territory on the other side of the Ister. This is the territory of dreams, the other side of the river from which the gigantic centaurs appeal for belief at the beginning of the novel. It is also, historically speaking, the last place the real Ovid would want to be.

John C. Thibault, in *The Mystery of Ovid's Exile* says that "we must, at the outset of our investigation, make clear that one goal overshadows all others in Ovid's poems from exile - his desire to win either a full pardon from Augustus or, if the emperor were not disposed to be as magnanimous as that, his permission, then, to live in some place more congenial than outlandish and barbarian Tomis"(2). We can assume that Thibault has not invented this contrary view of Ovid's exile. What it implies about the novel is that standard historical research is being abrogated. Because

the novel is so overwhelmingly involved with the psychology of its narrator, this fictionalising of history seems too peripheral a matter to carry much import. What is most interesting about this discrepancy between the historical Ovid and Malouf's version of him is the lack of critical attention it has received. The reflexes of the realist criticism which used to prevail in Australia had, by the time that *An Imaginary Life* was receiving serious critical appraisal in the eighties, almost completely vanished. That the text is anti-historical has been accepted as not surprising and, since it does not deal with Australian history or any history about which there is any contemporary angst, has not been seen as important. And yet whilst it is not a radical rewrite of history with an overt political orientation, the novel is predicated on historical myth making.

Because it focuses on a more or less obscure corner of Roman history its political or satirical potentialities are limited. Malouf is not making alterations to history as a form of political commentary in the manner of, to take an obvious example, Kate Grenville in *Joan Makes History*, where the protagonist upsets Australia's patriarchal history by being the first person ashore from the first fleet. A reversal of historical truth as considerable as that portrayed in *An Imaginary Life* points to some sort of objection to the conventionally received story. The temptation to see it as devaluing of conventional history is backed up by the text's privileging of the fictional over the 'known', but this is not borne out by the sources that Malouf says he used to research the book. The reason Ovid's exile is a mystery is that the histories of that particular period are missing. All we have to rely on are Ovid's poems and some poems by some of his contemporaries. Malouf is effectively creating his fiction out of a fiction, or something that is more like a fiction than a history. The same applies to the Child. Tales of wolf children are mythic rather than meticulously observed and Malouf freely admits that his portrait of the Child "has no basis in fact" (153) and that his source for such a phenomenon, Itard's account of Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron is not an historical verification of Victor's sojourn in the woods but a careful description of the process of teaching the child and the implications this had for

the views of human nature being explored at the time: "Itard's involvement is that of the teacher, and growing as it does out of the eighteenth century, his interest is chiefly in the problems of innate and learned experience" (154).

The important thing for Malouf is that the novel be regarded as mythic: as a departure from sources rather than an extension of them. Ovid is not the historical Ovid who hankered to return to Rome and who refused to allow his wife to accompany him into exile in the hope that this would mitigate his sentence (Thibault 18). The Ovid we are presented with is a characterisation into which Malouf has projected his particular concerns. He is in this sense another version of Dante. Malouf has said "that *An Imaginary Life* is much more autobiographical than *Johnno* - but autobiographical at a lower level than event" (Shapcott 29). This level, which Malouf in the same interview implies is one that relies on analogy and metaphor and not the part of his mind that is "logical or discursive", is the realm of the imaginative and the personal. In constructing history at this level, the text makes a point about the nature of historical discourse that expands the central idea of theorists such as Hayden White that history is distorted by its characteristic narrative structure into a form of fiction. In *An Imaginary Life* the historical sources are so obviously fictional that White's conceptualisation of history is practically a given. The novel also takes the related notion that history inevitably reflects the subjective biases of the historical observer in a slightly different direction. It is not political bias as such that interests Malouf, but the full gamut of individual perception that is brought to bear on practically any observation.

As Malouf says: "I have always tried to render that sense of immediate being in perception" (Kavanagh 253). The essential nature of the immediate is its uniqueness and its unrepeatability. To combine the past and the immediate again echoes the central paradox of the novel; as the limitations of language can only be delineated by language, the past can only be perceived in a sense of immediacy. In the novel the past is not looked back at but enters into the present moment. The dominant tense of the novel is the present. Ovid is not writing a retrospective history for future

readers, but producing something that is truer to the perception of the moment, an observation of his exile written as if it were in the process of occurring.

His rendering of experience is more like Ryzak's fabulous stories than the distant appraisal of historical discourse:

The old man's stories are fabulous beyond anything I have retold from the Greeks; but savage, a form of extravagant play that explains nothing, but speaks straight out of the nightmare landscape of this place and my dream journeys across it. Our civilized fables that account so elegantly for what we see and know seem feeble beside these elaborate and absurd jokes the old man mutters over. They are like winter here. They fill the world. They make the head buzz, they numb the blood. They seem absolutely true and yet they explain nothing. (58)

The novel reads more like these sorts of stories with their strong sense of engagement than like a letter to the future. The passage describes the way that, during the book, the elements of dreams are incorporated as if they were part of the same sort of consciousness Ovid has when awake. But the most salient feature which Ryzak's stories share with the novel is that they both explain nothing and make no attempt to point a moral.

History in *An Imaginary Life* has been depoliticised as far as is possible. It is not an issue that matters; Ovid's satire is portrayed as a trivial indulgence with some amusingly ironic consequences such as defiant sex being had "in the shadow of a portico dedicated by his sister to her faithful husband ... because in a poem once I made it happen" (27). As the novel progresses Ovid becomes a fatalist who comes to regard his exile as his "true fate" (94). His movement away from political judgement is back into his subjectivity. After recognising the annunciation that his exile "*look[s] at first like disaster, but is really good fortune in disguise*" (94) he declares: "I am entering the dimensions of my self" (95). The social and political dimensions are to be left behind. The respect that Ovid comes to have for the Getae only superficially resembles social criticism. What Malouf is interested in creating is not a type of reverse hierarchy which ranks simple societies more highly than sophisticated and decadent ones, but an understanding that transcends distinction and hierarchy.

Malouf has said: "Our culture is based on distinction and hierarchy. ...But it's a way of seeing that I want ultimately to reject" (Kavanagh 255). He continues:

creation, and therefore art, exists in an area which does not involve power in that way, in which all things can be allowed to be themselves and equal, in which we don't have to make those distinctions. One of the great freedoms of art may be just that. We can step into a world in which a crab on a plate in a painting has exactly the same importance and moral weight as an angel or a weeping woman or Christ on the Cross. (Kavanagh 255)

This is the territory that *An Imaginary Life* seeks to inhabit. The closing scenes of the novel make this increasingly clear. As Ovid becomes less able to differentiate himself from his environment the closer we are meant to conclude he has come to the fullest understanding of his subjectivity. Because subjectivity involves an inevitable split between the self and the other at the moment of accession to language, and the initial process of identity formation is in a sense a necessary fiction, then to truly understand what self and identity is requires an obliteration of identity. Again the novel tends toward paradox. The Ovid who is adrift in the world beyond boundaries and in which time and space have ceased to become meaningful categories is also the Ovid who is no longer able to recognise himself as a self, despite the "I" in his final words. The "I" is in an undifferentiated "there". Malouf cannot go beyond language just as he cannot, in describing the dissolution of self, completely obliterate the "I".

Nor can he, and nor does he want to, obliterate history. His principal interest in *An Imaginary Life* is elsewhere, with language and the way in which it constructs the world and the self. The scepticism about the adequacy of language to represent reality which a number of commentators have identified in the book has implications for the status of historical discourse and contextualises his later, more overt explorations of Australian history. There is an identifiable desire to construct the past in a manner which is in opposition to standard historical discourse and which in some respects anticipates Paul Carter's call for a more experiential "spatial" history nearly a decade later. The novel does not overtly concern itself with the reformulation of national identity, a project with which the reappraisal of historical understanding is often

linked, but with an attempt to make the past more real, which Malouf has said "means for me to make the past *present*" (Kavanagh 247). His desire for this sort of reality is contemplative rather than activist, and concerned with association and analogy rather than explanation and sequential or hierarchical ordering:

What I am interested in is continuity, and that means, if you are going to understand your present at all and see what might be the patterns of your developing life, then you need to experience, re-experience, the past, but the past as it really always was - as something immediate, full of muddle, containing in a very confused way all the things that are to come. So when I re-create a moment in the past, it is to make it as *present* as possible, to establish continuity, to open it up to the future. (Kavanagh 247)

An Imaginary Life privileges this perception of the past as present over all other criteria for understanding it. It seems a curiously asocial and narrow focus to adopt, but, like Ovid's journey beyond language, is more of a rhetorical emphasis than a prescriptive advocacy. Nevertheless, dissolving the historical into the personal and valorising the subjective over the objective constitutes a step away from the possibility of judgement and evaluation. *An Imaginary Life* is not a novel which has any obvious political or moral intention. It does not proffer aestheticism as its guiding principle but something more radical which can incorporate aesthetics: indeterminacy.

SECTION TWO:

STORIES AND HISTORY

CHAPTER ONE

CHANGING STORIES: *BLISS AND HARLAND'S HALF ACRE*

The inevitable observation to be made about *Bliss* is that it concerns itself with stories. The idea that narrative is an essential and inescapable shaper of our perceptions of the world is the text's fundamental starting point. All of the novel's action is explicitly driven by story. The sense that this is a story being told is established in the first sentence by its use of the collective pronoun 'we', which instantly includes the reader in an alliance with the narrator and signals a traditional style of narrative. The readers are not going to be challenged or have to construct a story from fragments; they are in the hands of a benign story-teller who will tell them everything, even things that the narrator cannot possibly know. The revelation at the end of the novel that the book is really a story told by "the children of Honey Barbara and Harry Joy" (296) confounds any attempt to determine precisely whose is the narrative voice. The received formal conventions of story telling carry with them this entrenched confusion, something hinted at in the novel when Honey Barbara tells a story "as seemed the custom, in the first person. Even Harry did this and it was sometimes confusing because he said 'I' when the 'I' in the story was Vance Joy and once even it was Vance Joy's father, but it was always 'I' in Bogota and New York" (239). The third person omniscient narrative is just as prone to inconsistency. It is not so much a strategy, as Anthony Hassall asserts, "to foreground its fictiveness" (1994: 70) by highlighting the gap between what they could know and the detailed story they actually tell, as a deliberate eschewing of narrative originality. In this context, the book is defiantly primitive. The novel resists the modernist project of seeking a new form of story. Instead, its focus is on the resilience of traditional narrative forms and the unpredictability of their reception and influence.

This return to the primitive is even more marked in the film version of the book, directed by Ray Lawrence with whom Carey co-wrote the screenplay. It begins with a cinematically retrogressive voice-over which is, after a few scenes, revealed as Harry Joy telling one of Vance's stories at a family Christmas gathering. The film then proceeds to Harry's death, but does not simply show it. It is narrated in the exaggerated tones of a professional story-teller. What is being stressed here is the unchanging nature of story telling and its essential communality. Stories as things which are *told* rather than written or filmed is the focus of both the film and the novel. *Bliss* is so wedded to the theme of story telling that Carey and Ray Lawrence retain the device of ending the work with the formality of a conventionally spoken conclusion rather than providing an entirely visual climax. It is no accident that it is Christmas when we are introduced to Harry the story-teller. The fact that it is Christmas in the film is a deliberate departure from the novel because the film needs to convey the intensely social function of stories without the explanatory asides of an omniscient narrator. The initial story-telling scene has another function related to this limitation of film, which is to dramatise at the outset the concept so important in the novel, that stories are prone to misinterpretation and are sometimes told at inappropriate moments.

The story that Harry is telling at the table is one which he vaguely imagines is appropriate because of its Christian content. But it actually does not connect with Christmas at all. It comes across in the film as curiously pointless although passionately told. For those who know the novel well, it appears as an example of Harry's inability to faithfully transmit Vance's stories. The story does, however, have a meaning in the novel, where it is told by Vance himself as the story of how he met Harry's mother. But in the film it performs the function of that part of the novel which explains that early on Harry merely repeats Vance's stories without a complete awareness of their tone. A story in "Harry's hands [became] a poor directionless thing, left to bump around by itself and mean what you wanted it to" (32).

The novel returns to this notion of imperfect transmission compounded by equally imperfect reception again and again. Bettina sees New York not as Vance intended, as a paradigm of evil, but as a glorious escape and triumph. Similarly, David acts out his misinterpretations of Harry's purposeless story -telling. The novel is perfectly explicit about this:

Vance Joy's stories had drifted like groundsel seeds and taken root in the most unlikely places. They had rarely grown in the way he would have imagined, in that perfect green landscape of his imagination, intersected with streams and redolent of orange blossom.

In certain climates they became like weeds, uncontrollable, not always beautiful, a blaze of rage or desire from horizon to horizon. (24)

It becomes clearer as the novel progresses that the characters are trapped by stories. The novel's framing device of the dichotomy of heaven and hell, and its simplistic division of behaviour into good and bad, are themselves the outcome of the Christian stories of Harry's youth. Others, most notably Teresa Dovey, have remarked upon the self-reflexivity of the novel's structure. Without an awareness of the novel's foregrounding of its own inevitable lack of originality and indebtedness to broadly mythical perceptions such as the concept of heaven and hell, one is liable, like David Myers in his piece in *Bleeding Battlers from Ironbark: Australian Myths in Fiction and Film*, to remain perplexed as to why Carey's apparently satirical attack on contemporary capitalism and advocacy of "a romantic retreat to a pre-industrial whole earth community" (154) is compromised by a critical stance toward this supposed utopia and an unabashed admiration of well crafted advertising.

Bog Onion Road constitutes an alternative in the novel simply because those people who are attracted to it have chosen a different set of stories and interpretive prejudices. The important point is that they are as driven by narrative as Lucy and Ken. Graham Huggan, in his book *Peter Carey*, cites a number of instances where the world of consumer capitalism is embraced in the form of a continuing attachment to brand-names. If we accept that the novel is narrated by Honey Barbara's children, the emphasis on brand-names such as Peugeot [sic], Cadillac and even the Zen Inn where

Honey Barbara buys her seedlings and organic food are surely ironic details. When Honey Barbara cleans out the kitchen cupboards in Palm Avenue she retains not just a packet of yeast, but "Torula Yeast" (211). Even Daze understands the status of brand-names, searching the trousers he discovers in the wake of Harry's arrival for a mark of approbation. At Bog Onion Road they still speak and understand the language of consumerism.

Huggan argues that the "alternative" community is in fact embedded in the prevailing system of multinational capitalism and that "[w]ithin this nexus, Bettina Joy and Honey Barbara practise a complementary sorcery: the one pinning her faith to the American dream and the myth of material progress, the other to the New Age and its counter-myth of spiritual renaissance" (1996: 27). He goes on to say that: "Both myths are shaped, in turn, by the ideology of consumerism" (27). I think that the novel reverses this proposition and explores how the ideology of consumerism is shaped by these myths. Both Bettina and Honey Barbara base their conflicting ideologies on the same imperial source. Both their dreams are American dreams. This is why Bettina is able to admire Honey Barbara's style, because it derives from a similar perception of America, and American stories, as something to aspire towards. To Bettina it was "a funny, not particularly acceptable sort of style, but it was style (California, 1968)" (185). All of the ideas which underpin Bog Onion Road - the Dream Police, cancer maps, organic food, anti-materialism and even the use of marijuana - are directly "stolen" from American culture or are a conscious reaction to it.

The United States exists in the novel as two paradigmatic myths. For Bettina the myth is reduced to a conception of America as New York which encapsulates the hard attractiveness of ambition and aggression. It is the pinnacle of achievement and greatness. For Honey Barbara it is the source of all evil, the place which produces Big Macs and Silicone. Both of these contradictory versions of America are contained in a Vance Joy story:

'In New York there are towers of glass. It is the most beautiful and terrible city on earth. All good, all evil exist [sic] there.' He could say the word "evil" so

you felt it, a cold sinuous thing that could come in under a locked door and push up into your bowels. 'If you know where to look, you can find the devil. That is where he lives. If you keep your eyes peeled you can see him drive down 42nd Street in a Cadillac with darkened windows. He lives in Park Avenue, surrounded by his servants.' (22)

Vance's story can contain and transmit the contradictions. Consumerism is a given in the novel; no-one can escape the marketplace entirely, but they relate to it according to what aspect of the American dream they have internalised.

This is not to say that the only wellspring of narrative and mythology is America. The whole book is predicated on the reader's instant understanding that heaven and hell are fictional constructs that even the American stories have to incorporate. Later, in *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey concentrates specifically on the influence of Christian stories, but in *Bliss* he explores the relationship of popular narrative to the creation of culture and aspiration. Because he is working with obviously fictional constructs in a novel that often extends into fantasy, the question of belief becomes a sort of irrelevance. Questions about the consistency and depth of the characters' belief in all kinds of conspiracies and elements of mutually exclusive religions are rendered inconsequential by the sheer fact of belief. What is more, all of the beliefs in the novel are based on the profound instability of narrative. Stories are always being re-told with the inevitable consequence that the story itself is subtly altered. The thing that is particularly interesting about *Bliss* in this context is Carey's additional emphasis on the unpredictability of an audience's response. Bettina sees no saints in New York. David Joy perceives the romantic elements of his father's stories as realisable and not rhetorical. Unsurprisingly, he ends up being reduced to a tragically romantic figure who does not stand at the brink of death, but "on the edge of his story" (203). His execution becomes a scene that imitates Marquez, incorporating Vance's butterfly into the legend of "*El Hombre en el Traje Blanco* - the man with the white suit" (202). This happens despite Major Miguel Fernandez's preference for disseminating Stevenson from a bookshop in Medellin.

Returning to the idea that narrative shapes consumerism, it is worth noticing that the principal commodity in the novel is stories, whether they be in the form of advertisements or folk tales. Vance claims to have learnt from the Hopi that all "stories come from the Holy People and you must give something for them" (20). Harry acquires social status and accommodation not on the strength of his ability to dig holes, but because he knows stories. Of course it can be argued that these are all instances of a consumer culture commodifying narrative, but I think that these examples, particularly the suggestion that the pre-capitalist Hopi Indians "bought" stories, indicates at the very least an inextricable interdependence between commerce and narrative. Even the best products, the novel implies, have to *be* sold, and the only means by which it can be done is story. Bettina has to employ Harry the story teller to have her brilliant ads accepted.

Even though Harry Joy, despite his penchant for story telling and involvement in an advertising agency, is not a disguised portrait of Peter Carey, the book does indulge in some self-referentiality. The novel is clearly presented both as a commodity and a reconfiguration of contemporary mythology. Its first edition was packaged in a garish silver cover and at least a tiny part of the stories which go to make up the contemporary mythology by which his characters are constrained is created by Carey himself. The story which Honey Barbara tells to David and so impresses him that he decides to seduce her is an early Carey story which at the time that *Bliss* was first published had appeared only in the *Nation Review*. The story in question is "A Million Dollars Worth of Amphetamines", and it, like *Bliss*, centres around the power of an exaggerated story to inspire reckless action in a timid personality. Julie, a character who resembles Honey Barbara, tells the story about where to find a million dollars worth of amphetamines to her new lover Claude, an older man who is drifting through life in a provincial town as a not particularly ambitious architect. She tells the story to make herself appear more interesting and romantically dangerous than his life of suburban security. He decides to enact the story to win her approval, retrieves the amphetamines and consequently loses a

panicked Julie and, it is implied, probably his life when Carlos gets out of jail. The story, altered by Honey Barbara to locate the drugs in South America rather than Europe, has the same effect on David.

The point of having an already hyperbolic story act as part of the basis of David's legendary status in South America is to show just how unpredictable and complex the process of story telling can become. The fact that it is also a Carey story, albeit at the time of the publication of *Bliss* an obscure one, introduces a couple of complicating factors. One pertains to the inevitability of story; Carey cannot tell a story about stories without using them. Naturally, he is wedded to narrative, but he is also dependent on his own stories. This allusion to himself draws attention to the adaptability of a particular story and to the way in which an initial idea can alter and grow. "A Million Dollars Worth of Amphetamines" contains the germs of *Bliss*. It is an early treatment of the notion that story is a driving force in people's lives. Not only can a story change because its meaning is misunderstood or the teller feels the need to exaggerate, but because its themes can be developed. The sense that this process is in some way an arbitrary or contingent one is reinforced by the novel's suspicion about the valorisation of originality.

Even that incident which has attracted a good deal of critical attention (Hassall, Dovey, Myers), Harry Joy's invention of the story of Little Titch, works against the modernist emphasis on originality as inherently valuable. The most important thing about Harry's sudden burst of originality is that it occurs under duress. The police insist on it, with Box telling Harry that he can tell a story about anything he likes, "But it must be totally original" (76). What is more, the context of Harry's need to tell a spectacular lie is that the authorities refuse to believe the truth. The policemen want originality or a familiar story that is accurately retold in all its details: "Don't come and tell us old elephant stories, and if you do, get the car changed. The car in the story was a Volkswagen" (73).

In form, there is nothing original about the Little Titch story. It sets up a problem and resolves it with a twist. It has a classic shape. It is also transparently

about the situation that Harry finds himself in, bullied and harassed by Hastings and Box. He is released because he lied perfectly, not because he lied. In telling such a satisfactorily suspenseful story, Harry is "glimpsing the true nature of his sin" (76), which is to have told the truth in such a way as to make it unbelievable. Harry's only original story is actually accorded the status in the novel of a confession extracted by torture. It serves no other purpose than to secure Harry's freedom. This is contrasted with the use he makes of his very unoriginal stories in Bog Onion Road.

Despite Honey Barbara's angry insistence that Harry's stories are stolen, the community find them useful:

he gave value to a story so that it was something of worth, as important, in its way, as a strong house or a good dam. He insisted that the story was not his, and not theirs either. You must give something, he told the children, a sapphire or blue bread made from cedar ash. And what began as a game ended as a ritual.

They were the refugees of a broken culture who had only the flotsam of belief to cling to or, sometimes, the looted relics from other people's temples. Harry cut new wood grown on their soil and built something solid they all felt comfortable with. They were hungry for ceremony and story. There was no embarrassment in these new constructions. (291)

The utopian tone of this passage is elsewhere undercut by some satirical remarks such as Dani's defence of Harry's appropriation of Vance's stories: "I thinkthat it's O.K., so long as he *wants* to tell a story" (289). But the social function of story is clearly being stressed at the expense of the notion of the artist as a special being. In fact, the above quotation continues by saying that "He did not become a leader or a strange man with a long white robe, not a shaman, a magician or a priest" (291). Story is explicitly related here to ceremony. A community's understanding of itself, it is implied, has to be ritualised in some way.

Bliss concentrates on the positive implications of the repetitive structure of ritualised story. It is portrayed as cohesive and functional; in short, as the only basis for a new culture. The few critics who have paid any attention to *Bliss* have nearly all made the connection between Harry's role in creating the culture of Bog Onion Road and Carey's in reshaping Australian literature. Carey's offhand remark in an interview

that "Harry Joy is a fool" (Baker 67) does not necessarily invalidate this comparison, but the way that every 'position' in the novel is not so much satirised as portrayed as always carrying around a sort of negative shadow of itself makes this temptingly neat interpretation suspect. Carey is doing nothing original in indulging in the postmodern habit of having his cake *and* eating it with relish, but that is the point. He is helping import into Australian culture the literary strategies of both the imperial United States (Barthelme) and the colonised Latin America (Marquez) without what could be characterised as postcolonial intent. In this context it is absolutely critical that Vance, the source of virtually all of Harry's stories, is an American. The hybrid culture of *Bog Onion Road* is not at all nationalist, but entirely and unashamedly derivative. They use stories from the Hopi Indians and never mention the Aborigines. The novel is in no way an attempt to reconfigure Australia's literary heritage or to create a wholly indigenous style. It is not a political project in that sense, but an observation on the protean nature of story and Australia's actual dependence on American stories, especially (and ironically) on American tales of political oppression.

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Neilsen connects Carey's *Bliss* and Malouf's *Harland's Half Acre* by observing a similarity in the process of story telling as characterised in both novels. He says: "In a process that recalls Peter Carey's *Bliss*, Frank's father's 'stories' (which were *his* art) now pass into Frank's art: 'He set down what he heard the only way he knew. Not as a story'" (1990: 129). It is immediately obvious from the quotation that Neilsen has selected that *Harland's Half Acre* is in fact a departure from the sort of conceptualisation of story that *Bliss* advances. Frank Harland is a dramatically different sort of artist and social figure than Harry Joy. Frank's reconfigurations of his father's stories are of a different order to the concurrence of misunderstanding, ego and prejudice that drives the evolution of stories in Carey's novel. For a start, they are not set down as stories, but as paintings. Furthermore, the implication throughout the

novel is that they are not new versions of Clem's stories or even, as I will later argue, elements of a fresh synthesis that helps lay the foundations for Australian culture. What they are is a distillation of one person's experience. There is no avoiding the fact that Frank is a romantic figure and that his art is meant to be understood as revelatory. It does not matter that his complex abstractions of his experience can only be fully explicable to someone who has an intimate knowledge of his inspiration (such as Phil's partial understanding of Frank's portrait of Edna only being possible because he recognises the subject), because the value of Frank's work lies in its moment of execution and not in its unpredictable influence.

Nonetheless, Frank's romantic status is deflated by the novel ending with Aunt Connie blithely unaware that the party she stumbles across while staying with Aunt Roo is for the famous Frank Harland. The closing scene is an attempt "To set Frank Harland, and Art, and Fame in some sort of perspective" (Baker 252). But the sort of romanticism that Frank represents is never really manifested in fame or high aestheticism. We recognise that Aunt Connie's 'genuine' response to the pretentious gathering at Aunt Roo's is probably the only one that Frank would approve of. In effect, in this scene Malouf is romanticising Aunt Connie. Her honest recollection of Frank as one "of your father's lame ducks" (227) is contrasted with Clem's absurd self-indulgence in weeping whilst watching himself weep on television. For those at the party, Clem is the romantic figure whose stories should be recorded. His oral history, self-serving and distorted as it is, is what contemporary Sydney society deems extraordinary and more worth discussing than Frank Harland's retrospective: "You should hear him talk! I've never heard anything like it - that sort of eloquence, these days. And the old fake Frank used to pretend he was a boy from the sticks! That man is magnificent" (22). In the end, however, Clem is merely a 'fascinator', a character who has to invent a reality to both impress others and reassure himself.

There are shades of *Johnno* in the novel's ambivalent attitude toward the conventionally romantic outcast. The relationship between Phil and Frank echoes the relationship of Johnno and Dante and there is a similar tension between approval and

disapproval in the narration. The portrayal of Phil as 'Frank's man' has another aspect which recalls *Johnno*, the suicide of Gerald. This can be read as a similar sort of betrayal to Johnno's of Dante in that Phil takes Frank's side in the disputed custody of Gerald and is therefore supporting conventional propriety. The part of Frank which Phil supports is the morally conventional, almost prim need to maintain family honour. Phil is almost an embodiment of Frank's old fashioned morality and mundane dreams. He supports Frank's oppressive guardianship of Gerald. He is the one who makes concrete Frank's desire to reacquire Killarney. He is part of the "house of old men" (159) which Gerald so despises.

As the novel progresses, Phil takes on the practical side of Frank's life, leaving Frank an increasingly idealistic figure. Frank is the hermit artist who condenses emotional observation into evocative abstractions. His self-styled exile on an island in the Bay is presented as a fulfilment both of his talent and his communion with the natural world. As Neilsen observes, Frank not only paints the forest around him, but paints *on* the forest in choosing to paint on newspaper and cardboard rather than canvas. He obliterates the mediated world with the immediacy of his creation:

Fresh occasions and immanent, incarnate creatures swam to the surface of the paper as to the surface of his mind, pushing their way through street happenings and accidents, the rhetoric of public men, the columns of chanting students and the closing prices on the exchange, the horse's mouths and the mouths of murderers and their victims in great sweeps and slashes, as his hand obscured the regular smeared newsprint and restored it to colours of earth. (187)

There is not a great gulf between this sort of entirely self-absorbed creation (which, far from seeking fame, avoids and ironises it) and the novel's concluding scene of Aunt Connie's simple pleasure in merely existing in the moment:

She frowned. Then the small duty she had felt pressing, some minor untidiness she had meant to clear up, or rite that had still to be enacted, was forgotten. Her brow cleared. She looked up and laughed.
'Go on and enjoy yourself, you two, I'm happy just sitting.' (230)

Typically, Malouf reduces the complexity of a family saga to what you might call a fully realised moment. Aunt Connie is purely *in* the moment; her happiness derives from her not thinking about what she will do in the future or what has happened in the past. When Frank is in the act of painting, this suspension of ordinary chronology applies again, and the essence that he is trying to capture in his pictures is not so much a description of the essence of a moment as a manifestation of existential insight. His picture of Aunt Ollie is not at all a conventional representation of her but an abstract expression of some quality about her that she is able to recognise but leaves the rest of the family bemused. Frank himself cannot use the paintings as personal *aide-memoire* and has virtually no interest in them once they have been completed:

'My God,' Frank said, looking at the slides. His glasses sat on the end of his nose, his mouth was drawn almost to his chin. 'Did I do that. I ought to've been shot! Some of this stuff I don't even recognise. Y' reckon there could be a Harland *forger?*' (217)

Even though his paintings are of personal historical reference points, Frank no longer knows or cares what they were. He abandons his history "to the professors, let them decide" (217).

Which of course they do. Harland's retrospective is not only arranged chronologically, but some of the paintings have been given new names by the art critics. A series of abstracts painted on the island "for which he had had only numbers" (223) are retitled 'Prospero I' and 'Prospero II', down through the sequence. We are meant to believe that these are the works which Frank has produced at the height of his powers and which are in some way so especially magical and powerful that the critic has felt the need to invoke Prospero. Phil knows the paintings in question well, having been present during much of their creation. Their power to move him almost to tears does not reside in the associations they bring to his mind or as reminders of his intimate knowledge of Frank, but as revelations of lack, distance and mystery:

They were part of another nature, not only his: rock samples or chunks of mineral torn up from the floors of dried-up seas, branches of a hitherto unrecorded flora or skeletons of its fauna, great chipped tablets that told, in an unknown language, of struggles, triumphs, defeats, rites of passage, common loss; the history of a different star. I could have wept. Not only for the power of individual pictures and the joy of seeing again paintings that recalled to me odd moments in Frank's company and the echo, distinctly caught, of his voice; but for the immense distance I felt between the man I had known and the dweller on that star, whose loneliness I had barely touched and had understood only as I translated it into my own terms. The distance was immeasurable. (223-224)

This "history of a different star" is referring to a different sort of conception of history which is outside the gallery's careful sequential arrangement. The novel is not positing this sort of fragmentary apprehension of experience as a serious alternative to what the gallery is offering, but as something else: an insight into the processes of historical construction. It is not an insight that is oppositional in the sense that it is anti-historical, but one that is more related to art's erstwhile anxieties about the limitations of representation than to the practice of history as such. There is no escaping, however, that history is inevitably representation. Phil says of the retrospective:

You could set them side by side and they might stretch all the way back to the house at Killarney. You could follow them and find there the lean, intense youth I had so often imagined from his recollection of those early years. (222)

The paintings *do* work as conventional historical artefacts. They illustrate a period and evoke the painter's youth:

But that would get you no further in the end than any other view of him, since the pictures, however you laid them out and whatever allowance you made for gaps (for many of the pictures were still missing) made a line that could not be followed to any known place of beginning or any known beginner. (222)

The sequence that the gallery has imposed on the paintings is intrinsically artificial and as such can only create an artificial understanding. The line to which Phil refers is taking the viewer to a represented and therefore ultimately irrecoverable

place, or back to a beginner who can no longer be truly known since he no longer exists. Neilsen says in his chapter on *Harland's Half Acre* that: "Malouf's concept of history is compatible with the metafictional proposal that we can be freed from a deterministic view of historical forces" (1990: 147). It is true that Frank is continually working against the sort of influences that shape his brothers and that his whole life is a refusal to let the world at large determine his fate.

But there is no developed sense in the novel that history needs to be rewritten. The retrospective of Harland's paintings cannot possibly tell the whole truth and fully reproduce the life and insights of the man who painted them, but it does provide a useful context and an intimation of at least some aspects of that life. The limitations that Neilsen identifies in Malouf's treatment of history in *Harland's Half Acre* are related to what he sees as metafictional strategies such as the doubling of the narrative, the disruption of normal chronological sequence and the use of real historical identities in a fictional context. None of these things on their own or even in combination constitute a clearly metafictional strategy and if the novel is a metafiction it is a very subtle one (Neilsen is probably aware of this - he calls *Child's Play* "genuinely metafictional" [1990: 151] in the same chapter). The crucial characteristic of a metafiction is the way that it foregrounds an awareness of its own limitations - something which Malouf does in *An Imaginary Life* by highlighting the insufficiency of language. But *Harland's Half Acre* is in no way self-referential. Indeed, the characters who live their life as if it were fiction, Clem and Aunt Roo, could be seen as the successes of the novel in having invented themselves through story, although not in the context of the book's celebration of artistic solitude. This is not to say that the novel does not have a postmodern feel to it in its withholding of judgement, but it tends to observe rather than encourage analysis of the power of story telling and invention. This is another aspect in which it differs from *Bliss* in its attitude toward story-telling.

As regards the novel's use of real historical events and people, I think that Neilsen has a valid point. They are deployed in a way that encourages the reader to

question their presence. For most of the novel Malouf avoids mainstream historical events or relegates them to the status of mere chronological background. War and Depression are incidental. This shift in focus appears very marked when one remembers the overwhelming preoccupation with the impact of war in famous Australian novels of the sixties such as *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* or *My Brother Jack*. Even so, I am not entirely convinced that Malouf's borrowings from the biography of the painter Ian Fairweather or his use of the bizarre enslavement of itinerants (which was apparently based on a real scandal in Brisbane) really amounts to a desire to create "a consciousness in the reader of the constructedness of literature" or highlight "the artificiality of purporting to reproduce history" (147). Neilsen himself quotes Malouf as saying that he "opportunistically made use of " a "ready-made situation" (137) in modelling Frank on Fairweather. In writing a saga Malouf cannot avoid history and does prefer to have it appear in a way that calls into question mainstream assumptions about its objective status and its power as a deterministic force. But even in *Harland's Half Acre* this anti-historicism is not yet a primary concern.

On any reading of interviews with Malouf there is no doubting that history is an abiding interest, and the emphasis in the critical analysis of his treatment of history is on its agreement with broadly postmodern modes of thinking. A close reading of Malouf tends to belie an uncomplicated interpretation of his anti-historicism as theoretically based or politically motivated. The thing that is clear in *Harland's Half Acre* is that subjectivity and individualism are valued over objectivity and collective experience. In the novel it is more a romantic conception than a self-consciously postmodern one. (Andrew Taylor calls Malouf a 'Postmodern Romantic', but not in the context of this novel.)

Frank Harland absorbs the fantasies of his father and uses them in a way that illustrates this novel's crucial divergence from what in some ways is an equally romantic novel, *Bliss*. Stories are the means by which characters construct their lives in both novels, but it is telling that in *Harland's Half Acre* they produce no positive

relationships or indeed anything like an art that speaks for a community. Despite Carey once impatiently having dismissed Harry Joy as a "fool", his storytelling is ultimately socially useful, whereas the inveterate story tellers in *Harland's Half Acre* - Aunt Roo and Clem - use stories to manipulate people and to ingratiate themselves. Frank is "infected" by Clem's stories in a process whereby he adapts aspects of them to suit his psychological needs. They drive his ambition of regaining the legendary Harland empire and underpin his creative urge. Initially, instead of being the means by which he could make enough money to buy back the land his forbears had briefly held, his "pictures were a reminder and inventory. They were also a first act of repossession, which made them charms of a sort and their creating an act of magic" (31). There is no escaping the exaggerated respect that the novel evinces for artistic creation or its association with solitude and withdrawal.

Even though Frank strikes up a friendship with some surfies on his island retreat, there is nothing in the text that mitigates against the impression that Frank's isolated life and self-absorbed work is honourable and desirable. There is also a strong implication that the process of Frank's paintings being co-opted into an art market and shoehorned into a critical context is contrary to their essence as intensely subjective manifestations of transitory perceptions. So irrelevant is the notion of a public reception of his work to Frank that when he is asked by Phil about whether he wants to add anything to an interview he plays back to him, it is only the sound of the birds happily devouring the cake brought by the interviewer that interests him. The interview itself does not matter. Frank has nothing to say about his paintings. Phil is convinced that Frank's paintings are destroyed by their new, public context:

Their gathering now in a clean, well-lighted place made the paintings even harder to read. Carefully arranged by experts to illustrate a line of development, a phase, or the variation over decades of a theme, they falsified the truth by creating a pattern that was too orderly, too whole. Mess, that was what was missing, and it was essential - the mess that was continuous, beyond the edge of cardboard or paper, with a clawlike hand gripping the raw edge; with frayed and grubby cuffs, untidy scrub stripping in tatters or being torn at by beaks or carted off in parcels by ants; with newsprint still wet with events - all that he had sopped up out of tins and out of his own head once the lid was

off, and smeared on with a finger or knife blade or allowed to drip and puddle as he dealt at arm's length with the spurt and flow of things. (224)

This sort of evocation of complex immediacy recurs in most of the novels, although here the sense of continuity with the world is especially marked. The "spurt and flow of things" brings to mind the actual physicality of Frank: his heartbeat rather than any notion of inspiration is the quality that Phil perceives and values. Frank's surroundings are described as if they were inseparable from his life and work. The scurrying of ants and the peeling of bark are regarded as essential and not peripheral. We are back in the conceptual territory of *An Imaginary Life*. Like Ovid, Frank steadily moves away from the social world toward an integration with the natural world. He even moves away from the conceptualisation of the world in language by expressing himself in abstract painting. Language's power to define and divide is not emphasised here, but a deep suspicion about the intellectual process of separating elements, rejecting some as irrelevant and reconstructing the others into a meaningful pattern underlies Phil's criticism of art history. The paradox at the heart of *An Imaginary Life* is echoed in Phil's insistence that the mess of Frank's creative life is what is essential, when in fact essentialism is precisely the mode of thinking to which he has to resort to counter the falsification of the truth by patterns that are "too orderly, too whole".

So, like *An Imaginary Life*, the novel's "position" becomes entirely elusive. The criticisms of historicism that Neilsen identifies *are* embedded in the text, but they are contradicted by the structure of the text itself. Phil's narrative cannot be seen as anything other than orderly artifice. It would be stretching credibility to argue that Phil's version of the past is so obviously artificial as to constitute an ironic comment on the impossibility of recovering the past such as can be found in, for instance, Carey's portrayal of the absurdly unreliable narrator of *Illywhacker*. Phil Vernon's account is moderate, believable and surely reliable. But in ordering his recollections of Frank Harland he is just as guilty of distortion as the authors of the retrospective.

The text does raise this contradiction, but does so because the tension it creates is more intriguing than any sort of pat resolution or unambiguous commitment.

The novel spans a century of Australian history, but only touches on the Depression, wartime Brisbane and the Vietnam War protests. This is not to say, however that the book eschews the classic hierarchical patterning of events that both sustains interest and generates meaning (in the sense of creating significance) in narratives. Ivor Indyk points out that the progress of Frank Harland is marked out "in ritualistic terms: an annunciatory storm, a symbolic rebirth, confrontation with the forces of darkness, communion with the spirits of the dead, a paradisaal twilight" (1993: 96). There are symbolic storms and obviously pivotal moments in Frank's life. No matter how much the novel strives to valorise Frank's drift toward a state without differentiation, it cannot ever abandon it and continue to make sense.

The closest the novel comes to this apparently desirable state of representing experience as an undifferentiated mass is in the chapter which paradoxically calls attention to its significance by being titled "Harland's Half Acre", as if these few pages are the key to the rest of the book. In the chapter there is, among the disembodied voices and fragmentary history, a speculation on the act of possession. It is immediately clear that the sort of possession Frank is concerned with is not the mundane legal possession of land, but the imaginative possession that an individual takes of his or her immediate reality, although with the contradictory sense that it is both portentous and historical:

You don't need words. A tune for instance, knocked up on the fiddle and spoons, or from a squeezebox or comb; and in the moment where you stop to draw breath you hear it: a voice, *I'm a beauty, I am*. Or bees in a kero tin, that sort of music, not yet honey. Or doves going hammer and tongs under the shingles of a weatherboard steeple. Or steps on gravel, then a rough fling of it against a moonlit pane - no, love, not rain not moonlight - that sort of music. We touch something then could be ours forever. That's possession for you, the only sort there is. Only none of it can be passed on. Though it is of course, just the same, you're listening aren't you? (176)

The interesting thing about this passage is that it is more fragmented and enigmatic than is usual. Malouf's novels invariably seek to articulate the complexity of an individual's construction of the world, but they normally achieve this through using carefully selected, elegant language. In this chapter he employs a stream of consciousness technique (albeit a meticulously punctuated and distantly narrated one) that stands out from most of his prose in its staccato switching of scenes and images and in its occasionally peculiar syntax ("We touch something then could be ours forever"). The point is that Frank is not articulate in the way that Ovid is. Despite Gayatri Spivak's assertion that "we operate with no other consciousness but one structured as a language"(77), this novel suggests a state of insight - a communicable insight - that is outside of the boundaries delineated by language and divorced from symbolic representation. While it is true, as Maryanne Dever argues, that Frank's conception of Killarney is irrevocably language based and that "his early efforts [at painting] are represented as attempts to reconstruct the Killarney of those tales" (Dever 1994: 121), it is also the case that Frank attains a state "beyond language" in both his death in the helicopter with its implication of his dying outside of normal boundaries and in his later painting.

As I argued earlier, there are clear parallels between the blurring of the boundaries between Frank's work and its subject and the sort of integration with the world implicit in the Child's lack of separation from his world. Andrew Taylor sees the reintegration of characters with the world at the moment of death as "a powerful motif" that "suggests that the idea of return, rather than development or even change" is "an idea which...has implications for those novels which seem, most obviously, to concern themselves with aspects of Australian history" (1994: 38). The idea of returning to some pre-existing state, whether it be a memory or a particular mood or to some pre-conscious Imaginary state is profoundly contrary to ideas firmly associated with historicism, namely change and development. The novels are not interested in history as a process, but as a language that divorces the individual from an understanding that is, if you like, more actual in that it is without distance, abstraction

or separation. Most of the novels exemplify this to some extent, especially the nostalgia for childhood. The novels evince a consistently romantic attitude toward childhood. There is the Child in *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid's recollections of his childhood in the same novel, Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon*, the precise descriptions of Malouf's own childhood house in *12 Edmondstone Street*, the child-like Jenny in *The Great World*, and numerous other examples of childhood portrayed as a state of perception which is pure and uncluttered.

It is this valorisation of childhood which inevitably colours any notion of history that one might discern in Malouf's work. A critical attitude toward authoritative historical narrative which legitimates and distorts in the interests of creating broad social understanding is embedded in a novel like *Harland's Half Acre*, with its emphasis on story as both distorting and constitutive of people's lives. It returns, as so much of Malouf's work does, to the primacy of individual perception and to the valuing of immediacy and passionate engagement above the dispassionate and the retrospective. There is, as in *Johnno*, a hankering after the anarchic but an inability to abandon order. Phil experiences a transcendent moment when Frank dies in a scene reminiscent of Ovid's death and Jim's in *Fly Away Peter*, but despite the extraordinary dislocation of time and space that this entails ("*This high free feeling is what it is like to float in time, I tell myself; beyond the limits, beyond flesh*" [220]) he does not reject the world of rigorous textuality that would seem to be its antithesis. He helps organise the retrospective exhibition he regards as "too orderly" (224) and tidies up Frank's legal affairs. He attends Aunt Roo's pretentious party. One would expect a revelatory moment such as this to operate as a denouement. In *An Imaginary Life* and *Fly Away Peter* the instances of quasi-mystical integration do perform this function or can be readily interpreted as doing so. *Harland's Half Acre*, however, undercuts the significance of such a moment by ending on a defiantly banal note which valorises the ordinary above all else.

CHAPTER TWO

STORIES FOR SALE

Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* approaches Australian history as irreverently as can be managed. Readers are warned on the first page in an aside reminiscent of Mark Twain's famous notice on the frontispiece of his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted" and that Herbert Badgery's "advice is to not waste your time with your red pen, to try to pull apart the strands of lies and truth, but to relax and enjoy the show" (11). Carey uses as the epigraph to the novel Twain's remark that Australian history "does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies", which is, knowing Twain's predilection for tall stories and unashamed flattery, probably a lie in itself. But, as Huck says at the beginning of his adventures, "I never seen anybody but lied" (Twain 1961: 7). Herbert Badgery opens his narrative with the confession that "I am a terrible liar and I have always been a liar" (11). Helen Daniels, Anthony Hassall and Brian Edwards are all keen to point out that this is the classic liar's paradox which has its origins in Epimenides' legendary Cretan who insists that all Cretans are liars. But only Helen Daniels has paid much attention to Carey's signalling to the reader that this novel is above all a commercial transaction. "*Caveat emptor*" (11) says Herbert. These lies are for sale.

Helen Daniel was vague about quite what a "salesman's sense of history" might be in an early version of her work on *Illywhacker* published in *Southerly*, but in her book *Liars; Australian New Novelists*, she clarifies her ideas thus: "As Herbert sells us second hand history, Carey is outside the showroom, Carey-Escher watching

Herbert Badgery's hands drawing each other. The liar is Carey, the reader is the buyer, and the real business deal is the Lie of fiction. *Caveat emptor.*" (1988: 148). She recognises that the novel emphasises commercial transactions but is too keen to relate it to her theme of novelists as self-conscious liars to notice that it is as much a comment about the actual thoroughly capitalist history of Australia as an ironic device. Herbert is a quintessential Australian figure partly because he lies, but mostly because he sells. Her approach overplays the importance of metafictional devices at the expense of analysing the novel's content. The "real business deal" is not the "Lie of fiction" but the fact of the deal itself.

One of the things that is noticeable about all of Carey's work is his willingness to use brand names and to focus on the detail of commercial enterprises. It is true that the concept of history as artifice plays a considerable role in the novel, but in a sense that creates the space for alternative history of a sort that takes into account some of the disregarded facts of daily life. Brand names, companies, hotels, tearooms, cafes and quack doctors' surgeries are always referred to specifically - their names capitalised and their place in the language of the period openly granted. Carey even went to the length of hiring a researcher - Alison Magney - to list for him likely household effects in Geelong houses circa 1919 and whatever brand names and well known businesses featured in the *Argus*. (UQFL 164 access nos. 860609-1 and 860609-2 Box 7). She received, incidentally, two hundred dollars for her ten hours of work. Whether Carey included this piece of information ironically is a distinct possibility, but its presence among papers deemed fit for scholarly examination simply reinforces what I am saying about the novel's emphasis on the business of buying and selling and advertising.

One of the more obvious points of contrast between Malouf and Carey is that Carey's characters are primarily concerned with making a living. Gloriously unlikely jobs such as cataloguing the birds of your area do not just fall into people's laps. In *Illywhacker* every character, right down to the swaggie who collects the frogs for Herbert's snake, are looking to make money. Even the preciously modernist Phoebe

has to find patronage. Annette Davidson has to teach. So does Izzie. Not only do the characters have to make money, more often than not they have to do things which go against their desires. Puritanical Leah has to do the emu dance and write romances, Les Chaffey has to farm, Hissao has to smuggle wildlife, and Herbert has to sell Fords.

The sense of anxiety about the need to make a living and the inevitability of having to compromise ideals in the process is the kind of banal, day to day history that is being juxtaposed in the novel with the more grandiose generalisations of historicism. The novel does not, *a la* Malouf, display as an alternative an interest in sensual presentness (Leah, with her Marxist analysis, distrusts "skin"). Instead, it foregrounds the truly everyday experience of buying, selling and negotiating. Herbert explains it thus:

There is no doubt about it - I have a salesman's sense of history. I do not mean about the course of it, or the import of it, but rather its scale of time, its pulse, its intervals, its peaks, troughs, crests, waves. I was not born in some Marxist planet out near Saturn where the days last a year and the inevitabilities of history take a century to show. I am from Venus, from Mars, and my days are short and busy and the intervals on my whirling clock are dictated by the time it takes to make a deal, and *that* is the basic unit of my time. And even if I have boasted about how I was a patient man when I sold Fords to cockies, shuffled cards, told a yarn, taught a spinster aunt to drive, I was not talking about anything more than a day or two of my life, and *then* off down the road with the order in my pocket.
I was not some Izzie with a twenty year clock in his daggy pockets. (343)

What we have here is a succinct example of the sort of historicism that this novel is intent on subverting. It is reminiscent of Karl Popper's complaint in *The Poverty of Historicism* that "Although it teaches neither inactivity nor real fatalism, historicism teaches the futility of any attempt to alter impending changes; a peculiar variety of fatalism, a fatalism in regard to the trends of history, as it were" (49). Herbert Badgery is more specifically impatient of Marxist doctrine that subsumes the struggle of an individual with the notion that individual suffering now may ultimately advance the cause of social improvement in the future, but it is nonetheless a doctrine that partakes of historicism as Popper has defined it. Those characters who ally themselves with this doctrine - Leah and Izzie - are portrayed as the most self-deluding. Indeed, Izzie

is so wedded to ideology that he betrays his brother so that he can be readmitted into the Communist Party.

Because the novel is so dependent on the metafictional device of being narrated by a self confessed liar, the book's satiric elements such as this are muted. There is no mistaking the absurdity of the Communist Party's slavish acceptance of directions from Moscow and Izzie's desperate (and ultimately fatal in its consequences) efforts to have himself re-instated. The text also balances these obvious shortcomings with some of the hard realities of Australian life during the Depression which led to communism appearing to be an attractive alternative. Herbert's complaint about the time frame of Marxist historicism follows hard upon his account of his encounter with O'Dowd and the railway police. This is not to say that Herbert is immune to thinking in terms of broad political categories since he says in the chapter immediately preceding the quotation above that:

An unemployed boilermaker from Williamstown, picked up on the road, was not just a witty fellow with a runny nose and a knowledge of horses, he was a symbol of the injustices that threaded all the way from the railway police who had most recently bashed him to Adolf Hitler and Mussolini. (337)

Granted, this sort of analysis has little to do with Marxist fatalism, but it does leaven the satirical impact of what Herbert says in the next chapter. There were good reasons at the time for being a Communist, not the least of which was the collapse of capitalist economies world wide and, on a possibly more influential scale, the sort of low level bullying and harassment meted out to the unemployed by groups like the railway police. Herbert, however, is not an ideologue, and despite his initiating the confrontation with O'Dowd, not even a political activist. The episode costs him his car, which is more than enough to put him off political struggle.

The reason for his sudden championing of the cause of the unemployed is actually rooted in his irritation with Izzie and Leah, the shortcomings of political parties ("I slandered the communists for mindlessness and the Labour Party for racism" [338]), and, curiously, the supposed capitulation of the Australian car industry

to General Motors. Putting aside for the moment the novel's references to the riots at Lambing Flat, Herbert's confrontation with the railway police is the most politically charged part of the book. This makes Carey's use of such an odd motivation intriguing. Why should Herbert insist that his most honourable action, his "busting for a fight" (338), is the result of his profound disaffection with the Australian car industry? Even more confusing, why does he claim that General Motors begins manufacturing in 1934? The merger of Holden's in Adelaide with General Motors occurs on March 28, 1931 (Crowley 62). This piece of information is so arcane that one doubts whether the reader is being presented with an ironically deliberate error on a par with Herbert's claim that Bacchus Marsh is surrounded by sugar cane (438). But because Herbert is consistently obsessed with the idea of a purely nationalist manufacturing base (his meeting with the potential financiers for his aircraft factory descends into farce when he argues with irrational passion for all things Australian, he loses a sale to O'Hagen over his insistence that he should buy Australian and he later fights again with Charles over the idea that the Holden is "Australia's own car") one can also regard this discrepancy as significant.

The problem, of course, is working out just what it signifies. It must be a lie and not a mistake, given that the Australian car industry is so important to Herbert. What is more, it is a lie that Carey must be aware of, given that his parents ran the General Motors dealership in Bacchus Marsh. It tallies with Daniels' idea that the whole novel revolves around the liar's paradox which she broadly interprets as a means of expressing the truth value of fiction similar to the way in which the inherent provisionality of scientific theorising adds to *its* truth value. In other words Herbert's lies are told in the interest of the truth, even if that truth cannot ever be anything but contingent. According to this line of thinking, all of Herbert's lies about the history of Australia are made to emphasise the lies that Australian history has promulgated. The novel certainly makes this point, *and* it makes it in the context of metafictional instability. It is this instability that works against being able to regard the novel as

polemical in the sense that it actively promotes a particular view of Australia's past. For instance, M.V. Anderson is as much a satirical characterisation as Izzie.

As the voice of truth in the novel, he is not so much unreliable as unsaleable. He is like Charles in that he feels obliged to tell the whole truth but is unable to realise that "the truth, told thus, is of no interest to the average punter" (387). The voice of reason exists outside the marketplace. Herbert is introduced to him via a stolen text book which he is assured is "unsuitable for boys" (456). The problem with M.V. Anderson is that he is as much of a liar as Herbert, although in a different way. Herbert claims that Anderson shows him that "a liar might be a patriot" (456), but he could just have easily and, indeed more accurately, have said that Anderson demonstrates that a patriot can only be a liar. In his concern to expose lies M.V. Anderson inevitably creates more of his own:

I imagine the glint in his eye and the pendulous lower lip as it begins to blow up and expand with blood as he tells his reader that Bourke and Wills were not involved in simple exploration but were spies for the colony of Victoria, sent to steal a piece of Western Queensland that had, by error, been omitted from the proper survey. (456)

Even if you know nothing about the expedition itself, this thesis is obviously a geographical impossibility.

This blatant lie is a clear example of what Brian Edwards, in his article "Deceptive Constructions in *Illywhacker*", calls "cartography of a postmodernist turn" (44). He goes on to say that the novel "exemplifies the play in postmodernist construction by featuring the positive possibilities in collusion against totalities" (44). I think that the book refigures past-ness in a manner that is certainly playful and "against totalities" such as the academic historiography that M.V Anderson represents, but does this in a way that is essentially negative. It looks as if the construction of the novel which continually calls attention to its artifice is what Edwards calls a "positive possibility", but this does not recognise that the materials needed to make the structure (history and cultural stereotypes) exist in a negative relationship to an avowedly artificial structure. The discrepancy between what we know to be the case and what

the book playfully declares is so in its world calls attention to inadequacies in conventional understanding. Even though the technique does positively advocate its own structural scepticism as a better means of communicating about the past, it is still for the most part negatively critical.

Edwards is aware of this inability of the text to divorce itself from the sources that it problematises and mocks, and argues that it points toward a new historicism:

Herbert Badgery's alleged appropriations of Leah Goldstein's alleged history resemble Carey's raids upon an Australian cultural inheritance, which is itself a very divided narrative. In either instance, there are points of contact and difference: that which is ordered in its representation of history can be shown to be only seeming whole and unified, an exercise in writerly bricolage that by bearing/baring the stamp of its rhetoricity invites not demolition but more thinking/writing. (50)

But what kind of thinking and writing? If it is along the same lines as *Illywhacker*, then it is not as positive and constructive as Edwards claims. His suggestion that Carey's work "refigures 'the' Australian experience as an open site for further constructions" (53) ignores the way in which constructions in the novel are consistently associated with entrapment. The pet shop is the most obvious example of this, but it in fact applies to all sorts of constructions ranging from the carefully restored suit Sid Goldstein constructs for Wysbraum which locks him into a relationship entirely based on pity, to Les Chaffey's obsessive dismantling of Charles' motorbike which leaves Charles stranded in the mallee. In this novel, becoming an architect is synonymous with collusion, betrayal and deception. Hissao sells Charles' naive idealism and pushes the implications of a purely nationalist pet shop to its logical extreme. Of course, Charles had himself sold out his dream of the best pet shop in the world to Nathan Shick, but the point is that construction is inevitably compromising. Hissao's elaborate renovation of the pet shop is itself based on a building that is compromised in two senses. The pet shop works well as a display case for animals, but the residential fourth floor is cramped and only barely functional. What is more, its very existence is dependent on the morally dubious export of native

animals ("the wallaby will die of influenza in Beverly Hills" [493]) and it plays its part in the creation of a nationalism built on fauna.

The best pet shop in the world may be a glorious folly but its principal function is satiric. There is no advocacy of new historicism evident in the text. Parts of the text are undeniably anti-historicist, but I doubt that the novel is in some way proposing that its ramshackle methodology is a better means of understanding the past or pointing in fresh directions. In so far as the book does take a fresh approach to Australian history, it is less in the modish self-referential anxieties it manifests and more in its realisation that Australian history cannot be divorced from business and advertising. The idea that structure is intrinsically distorting does inform this novel, but its importance has been overstated at the expense of the book's portrayal of Australia and Australian history as product. A good illustration of this is the way that Herbert educates Hissao in architecture. Part of this education is about the deceptive potential of structure: "I was showing him that the pylon was a trick, that while it appeared to hold up the bridge it did no such thing" (547). But a substantial amount of it is about how to sell:

An architect must have the ability to convince people that his schemes are worth it. The better he is the more he needs charm, enthusiasm, variable walks, accents, all the salesman's tools of trade. (546-547)

Probably the reason why the novel's emphasis on the business world has not received as much attention as its appraisal of history as a construct is contained in Herbert's remarks on Hissao's approach to the interview with *Time*:

'We', he told the mirror, 'are going to fix this bastard right up.'
He was referring, of course, to the gentleman employed by Henry Luce and you will note, at once, the slightly unpleasant and combative tone of the salesman but there is also so much glee contained in it, an anticipation of the joys of a difficult battle, that even a person of fine scruples, sensitive to the vulgarity of the salesman type (such as yourself, Professor) need not be offended but rather challenged by the contradiction contained herein, ie. that this crass aggression can coexist with an ability to draw very fine moral distinctions and to see, very objectively, the damage his father's business was doing to the fauna of the country he loved and that, further - like real estate for

instance - it was one of those great Australian enterprises that generate wealth while making nothing new. (561)

While making nothing new. The same could conceivably be said of history. Unfortunately, M.V. Anderson lacks the ability to sell his recycled goods. This ought not to be so difficult, considering Twain's remark that Australia's history is "the chiefest novelty the country has to offer", but the problem with M.V. Anderson is, according to Herbert, his dispassionate intellectuality. In taking on the persona of M.V. Anderson, Herbert no longer becomes angry at the deception of the claim that the Holden is "Australia's Own Car". Instead he sees it as "one more element in an old pattern of self-deception" (505). The carefully cultivated historicist recognition of a pattern in events is characterised here as a pose. And Herbert's imitation of M.V. Anderson is taken on not because he has any interest in the contention that Australian history is founded on a lie, but because there were advantages to be gained from becoming a frail old man in prison.

The idea of imprisonment recurs throughout the novel. Phoebe feels trapped in Geelong. Charles gets stranded at Les Chaffey's. Emma chooses to spend her time in a cage. The novel concludes with the image of Australian types imprisoned in a tourist theme park. Within this sort of metaphoric structure it is reasonable to see Herbert's new intellectual persona as a coping strategy with implications for the novel's vision of Australia as a whole. M.V. Anderson himself is playing a role within the larger prison (it is significant that the bricks Herbert knocks out of the Pet Emporium are convict bricks) that is Australia and for similar reasons. The history that he produces allows him status and security. He recognises the great lie of Australian history: "that the continent, at the time of first settlement, was said to be occupied but not cultivated and by that simple device they were able to give the legal owners short shrift and, when they objected, to use the musket or poison flour, and to do so with a clear conscience" (456). However his recognition is not a call to activism or redress, but a distant observation prefacing a schoolbook that is presumably not missed by its owner.

What is being satirised here is the style of historicism. Even though it does have important truths to impart the suggestion is that it does it so clumsily in a world fascinated by fiction that it becomes an entirely ineffectual revelation. The "dreary Australian history books that were available pre-war" (456) would most likely have mentioned the riots at Lambing Flat, but their impact is down played to such an extent in general histories that the attacks on the Chinese, which must have had a devastating effect on their victims, are practically invisible in the national consciousness.

Carey has used some detail from contemporary accounts of the riots, particularly the shouts of the English miners of "Roll Up Roll up" while they were attacking the Chinese. (Gordon) This attention to detail signals a serious purpose and provides a concrete base of verifiable fact from which Carey creates the novel's unlikeliest story with the magic elements of invisibility and Goon's mutable severed finger. Goon Tse Ying responds to the riots at Lambing Flat in a way that sets up several metaphoric resonances in the novel. He does three things that are all related to the suppression of history. He becomes an Anglicised Chinese and joins Chinese-Australian associations. He is able to become invisible. He becomes a shopkeeper. His assimilation into Australian culture is a form of invisibility and public denial. In Goon's case, assimilation is a means of keeping his true identity and past a secret. When Herbert discovers him as an old man living in Grafton, Goon initially denies having known Herbert at all and claims to know nothing about Lambing Flat.

He has discovered a much less dangerous way of disappearing. The magic elements in the book's depiction of this episode in Australian history clearly owe a lot to Marquez and are meant to make a point about how massacres in Australian history have been chronicled as minor aberrations such that they play no part in the creation of national stereotypes. This contextual invisibility is so pervasive that even Herbert, who is savagely taught the impact of Lambing Flat, can only direct his political passions at the dream of a nationalist manufacturing base instead of against the virulent prejudices of the archetypal bullocky, Jack McGrath. For someone like Jack McGrath, Lambing Flat is completely invisible. The novel also subtly includes the

Aboriginal experience in this metaphor of invisibility. When Goon is teaching Herbert how to become invisible he makes him stand in a pose that is conventionally regarded as characteristic of Aborigines: "I teetered on one leg, with one foot raised and resting on my knee" (218). It is while imitating this stance that Herbert is hit "time and time again" (219) by Goon.

These episodes suggest a postcolonial reappraisal of Australia's past which seeks to replace the triumphalism of colonial histories of pioneering and progress with a more fulsome acknowledgment of the nation's violently racist past. This dimension of the text cannot be denied. The problem is whether a novel such as *Illywhacker* is exclusively an ethically directed fantasy or something more complicated and equivocal. What cannot be avoided in any examination of this text is that the status of stories is being rendered problematic by the book's persistent reiteration of lying as a constant. Even the supposedly dependable Leah lies to Herbert while he is in jail. Characters who habitually tell the truth like Charles and Les Chaffey are portrayed as obsessive and unconnected to the social world. M.V. Anderson is ineffectual. This creates an ambiguity about lies that makes it difficult to define the novel as essentially polemical. Pure history may well be compromised by lies, but lies are, in the context of the novel, not necessarily unethical. Leah lies to cheer Herbert up. She writes fiction to make a living. Herbert has to lie to be able to sell Fords and convince Jack McGrath to accommodate him. Embellishing the tragedy at Lambing Flat with spectacular lies about sorcery is a celebration of the capacity of lying to expose inadequacies in the historical record. The recognition that historical accounts inevitably must lie and distort in the interests of narrative shape or the dictates of doctrine is exposed in episodes like Goon's version of the riots at Lambing Flat or M.V. Anderson's conspiracy theory about the Bourke and Wills expedition. These 'exposés' of history are paradoxically achieved. Herbert displays all the characteristics that are exposed in history as faults which lead to a nation being reducible to the sort of stereotypes Hissao uses to stock his pet shop of Australiana. He generalises, simplifies the chain of cause and effect and most of all lies self interestedly.

So is Brian Edwards right about the novel postulating its own self referential artificiality as a new way of constructing the past? He concludes that: "Carey's texts disassemble the past as a reliable concept; they offer the attractions of new building permits unconstrained by regulations that limit the play of signification to measuring a construction's strength according to the quality of its truth claim" (54). Taken literally, these remarks are a licence to eschew historical research on the grounds that the past is not "a reliable concept". *Illywhacker* draws our attention to the constructedness of history and the limitations of historicism, but this does not mean that the past cannot reliably be conceptualised. Carey's use of research and the dependence of the technique of deliberate historical inaccuracy on the reader's awareness of historical facts are enough to compromise such a conclusion. What is much more contentious, however, is the claim that the novel is offering "new building permits" that are no longer constrained by "the quality of [their] truth claim".

Surely the point of pervading an enormously long novel with lies of all types is to establish the truth claim of self-consciousness? Herbert is effectively a more reliable narrator *because* he admits to his unreliability. The novel is interested in breaking down interpretative limitations, but it does so in the interest of democratising truth claims: of having marginalised figures like Leah play a larger role and acknowledging the importance of vulgar quackery such as Grigson's electric invigorator. Carey has said in an interview with Ray Willbanks that he thinks "the writer has a responsibility to tell the truth" (51). The novel does not elevate bullshit stories to the same level as history simply because they are playfully significant. That, within the world of the novel, would be a dangerous practice akin to making dragons. Making a dragon in the novel is explained by Goon thus:

'A dragon, Little Bottle, was my mother's name for a frightening story. Also it is a name they give to liars in my mother's village. In Hokein, they say 'to sew [sic] dragon seeds' when they mean gossip. My mother also used to call the castor sugar she put on dumplings 'dragon eggs' but I wouldn't have a clue as to why'. (370)

"Making a dragon" is associated with recklessness and has unforeseen consequences. People interpret dragons, like the one Herbert keeps in a bottle, according to their prejudices and preoccupations . Emma sees a goanna foetus which she shows to Charles and which leads to his suicide. This is not an advocacy of an endless play of signification.

I could easily have left out the final sentence in the quotation above, but in fact it is just as important as the rest of what Goon has said. Some things are irrelevant and inconsequential but are just as much a part of the past as anything else. History necessarily has to suppress this sort of detail and the novel deliberately resurrects it, partly to make the point that the past is full of junk, but also to undercut any tone of overblown seriousness.

Earlier I said that Goon does three things that are related to the suppression of history and that one of them was becoming a shopkeeper. The text is deeply ambiguous about the politics of selling. On the one hand it values the ability to sell and emphasises the importance and sheer inevitability of commercial transactions. On the other it appears to be satirising those values by having Hissao take them to their logical extreme in making everything, including Leah, a product. By the end of the novel we are back in the territory of the short stories - a rampant capitalist future under vague threat by the excluded "enemies of the emporium" (599). The difficulty with the vision at the end of the novel is determining whether it is satiric or merely hyperbolic. Hissao, after all, is only doing precisely what Carey has done in the entire novel: displaying 'historical' Australian types trapped by circumstance. Both are offering their fabulous creations for sale.

Herbert, who claims at the end of the novel to have become "a kind man" (600), is the one who is sustaining Hissao and his fantasy: "With my swollen blue-veined breast I give my offspring succour - the milk of dragons from my witch's tit" (600). The milk of dragons are the lies and stories that have created the types which are held to be peculiarly Australian, "these lifesavers, inventors, manufacturers, bushmen, aboriginals" (599). That they have become commodities attests to the

success of the lies that have gone into their construction. They can only fully exist as product, but it is not clear whether this is necessarily a bad thing. There is an exclusive ruthlessness in the pet shop's rejection of aged surf lifesavers and those who cannot afford the entrance money which is indicative of at least some satiric intent. But there is an ambivalence about the world of business so deeply embedded in the text that the concluding vision can just as easily be read as an exaggerated teasing out of the implications of an inevitable given.

Buying and selling, display and advertising are as unavoidable and as flawed a part of urban society as the telling of history. The fantastic pet shop is the culmination of the idea that everything in Australia is for sale. The idea is taken one step further in that it is self referential; Hissao is selling "Melbourne Jews", shearers, artists and writers, but so is the person who has constructed Hissao: that is, Carey. Just to complicate matters, Hissao, Herbert tells us, is "a lie, ...no more substantial than this splendid four-storey mirage" (600). This sort of additional complication is reminiscent of the short stories in that it deliberately forestalls closure and acts to remind the reader that there are no straightforward interpretations possible in a novel which purports to deal seriously with the manner of its own making and the culture within which it speaks.

The constructedness of history and the exploitative nature of capitalism are displayed by the text, but so is the process of constructing the text itself. The book is not divorced from the cultural systems it is implicitly critical of. It cannot take a position on its major themes because it is never separate from them. Again this strikes me as another form of what has become a keynote paradox in the Australian fiction I am looking at, the clearest expression of which is Malouf's deployment of language to despair of the inadequacy of language in *An Imaginary Life*. The difference in a novel like *Illywhacker* is that in addition to drawing attention to its own artifice and recognising the complicity of the reader in producing an alternate interpretation, it in a sense colludes in the processes it appears to be satirising. The novel's approach to history recognises that accounts of the past are unavoidably susceptible to dissembling

and hegemonic prejudice, but pointedly refuses to tell the unvarnished truth on its own account.

The two poles of political understanding of the marketplace also appear to be held up for critical scrutiny within a sensibility that partakes of both. The novel is sympathetic to the left and yet it is also unabashed in its fascination with business. Even more than *Bliss*, this novel expresses the tension of Carey's supposedly divided loyalties between working in advertising and writing serious fiction. A remark that Carey made in an interview captures the tone of *Illywhacker's* treatment of this issue. In answer to a question about his education in advertising agencies, Carey says: "The first advertising agency I worked for was quite extraordinary. Like many of the agencies I've worked with, it was run by a member of the Communist Party of Australia, which is one of those lovely contradictions: communism, capitalism, and advertising" (Willbanks 45).

Illywhacker is actually less concerned with Twain's beautiful lies and more enamoured of "lovely contradictions". Probably the most intense of these is the novel's attitude toward nationalism. On the surface it appears to be fiercely nationalist, largely because Herbert continually performs the role of chauvinist advocate for all things Australian. He is particularly obsessed with the notion that Australia should be entirely self sufficient in manufacturing. But at the investors' meeting at Jack McGrath's, he takes his nationalism to an extreme, demonstrating his point that Australians should not be servile by threatening Oswald-Smith and Cocky Abbot with his brown snake: "'This', I said, as I walked back into the dining room, ' is a true Australian.'" (139). Uncompromising nationalism is shown in this episode to be absurd and dangerous; not only does Herbert menace his potential investors with his snake, he argues that "We're going to have our own animals" (134).

In a sense that is how the novel ends. The Best Pet Shop in the World is the logical conclusion of Herbert's chauvinism. Everything on offer is locally produced and even its antecedent, Charles' emporium, only stocks native animals. The fact that it is dependent on the Americans and then the Japanese is more an observation about

Australia's economic history than a nationalist criticism of it. According to Carey, one of the lies that "Australians tell themselves that comes true is that they are a cowardly, unimaginative people" (Willbanks 53). One of the consequences of this is "the failure of the manufacturing industry in Australia" which has to do with "making do with what's available, rather than creating something new" (53). Carey goes on to say: "Ours is a failure of confidence" (53). This is a failure, more specifically, of commercial confidence. The pet shop, like tourism, makes nothing, and the problem under scrutiny in the closing scenes of the book is not capitalism or international finance or neo-colonialism but the failure of Australian enterprise.

The "secrets" of Australian history turn out in the end to be *The Book of Dragons*. There are lies and distortions, but the essence is that Australia is best summed up by Goon's book. Australians are shopkeepers and salesmen. When confronted with the obvious, Herbert thinks it is "a code I could not decipher" (374). It is though, as valid a history as any and full of good advice: "Always serve your customers with courtesy and patience. Show patiently as many samples as you can" (374).

CHAPTER THREE

REALITY AND MYTH:

CHILD'S PLAY AND FLY AWAY PETER

Apart from *An Imaginary Life*, which is by no means radically unconventional or overly fantastic, Malouf tends to write conventionally structured novels that rarely deviate from the naturalistic. *Child's Play* is the exception. Its purported subject - Italian terrorism - is clearly not the book's focus but only its metaphorical starting point. Interviewing David Malouf, Julie Copeland relentlessly seeks clarification on what the novella might have to say about terrorism. As a consequence Malouf is obliged at times to talk about it as if it were essentially a disquisition on the peculiarly enigmatic nature of terrorism. The problem with this approach to the book is summed up by Malouf's insistence that "I didn't really want to get into an argument about political motivation ... any more than I wanted, in this case, to get into psychological discussion either" (Copeland 431). The futility of using the book to enlarge one's understanding of terrorism is exacerbated by the obvious resistance of the text to this type of analysis. The specifics of motivation and organisation that would normally constitute the bulk of any such analysis (fictional or otherwise) are practically absent. Malouf dismisses them as belonging "to the journalistic side of the thing" (Copeland 431) which strikes me as being a little ironic since most of what Malouf knows about Italian terrorists and provided his inspiration were "accounts in Italian papers and magazines which purported to be first hand accounts of how terrorists live" (Copeland

429). The book actually deals with a concept of terrorism divorced from its *sine qua non* of political activism and eccentrically allied with the act of writing because both writers and terrorists supposedly need to be isolated. In a later interview with Candida Baker, Malouf admits that "basically the book doesn't tell you anything much about terrorism" (244).

Child's Play, unlike *Fly Away Peter* and *An Imaginary Life* was not written very quickly. In fact Malouf abandoned *Child's Play* and wrote *Fly Away Peter* before completing the novel he began first (Baker 242). This may account for the fact that *Child's Play* is overburdened with contradictory insights and a defiant refusal to allow the reader virtually any sort of interpretative closure. This is not unusual in Malouf, but the balance that his work tends to achieve by way of carefully poised paradoxes is overly complicated in *Child's Play* by the text's hermeneutic openness. So many categories of ordinary interpretation are open to doubt in the text: personal motivation, politics and realism, for example. The terrorist doesn't trust photographs, but he uses them to attain an end which he refuses to define. The central paradox around which this particular work appears to be structured is that the terrorist is driven to use the corrupting misrepresentations of the media to undermine the sort of society that is capable of producing just that sort of sensationalist reporting. Instead of working as an intriguing paradox, this looks to the literal-minded reader as if the terrorist is pursuing a decidedly lost cause in a manner that is merely stupidly hypocritical.

Despite the book being marred by this sort of ludicrous solemnity and despite its deliberate avoidance of logical narrative (having a first person narrator die is always awkward, but neglecting to mention precisely when it happens really confuses the plot), it raises a number of issues germane to my discussion. The most obvious is the anxiety expressed about the discrepancy between the real world and constructed images of it. The uneasiness about the slippage between sign and signified recurs as a motif throughout the book. The clearest expression of this occurs in the disparity the terrorist is acutely aware of in obsessively examining the photographs of the Piazza

Sant' Agostino. He is troubled by the discrepancies between the frozen and fragmented reality depicted in the pictures and the dynamic three dimensional world which is the actuality they fail to fully represent. The text is quite explicit about the shortcomings of such evidence and "knowledge that has been arrived at by induction" (29) in at least two areas. The photographs themselves are inadequate because they leave actual physical gaps: "when the two photographs are laid side by side a space of one fifth of a centimetre on the scale of the photographs (nearly half a metre in reality) is missing" (36). And even the most careful recording of the scene in the piazza is at odds with the activity it incidentally records. The activity in the piazza will not stay conveniently frozen. This causes the time frame of the photographer, who has taken the pictures from a fixed point in steady succession, to be out of synchrony with the football game that happens to be in progress around him or her. The terrorist notes that "some of the players, one guesses, never appear at all, though they were clearly present all the time the square was being photographed" (30). For him, "here too is a gap" (31).

The other area in which there are gaps is in the perceiver himself. After complaining of the impossibility of fully reconstructing the piazza whilst sitting at his desk examining the photographs, the terrorist adds *his* inevitable inadequacy to this series of unavoidable misrepresentations: "The gaps, I mean, are in myself" (29). The terrorist personifies an anxiety played out again and again in Malouf's novels: how to reconcile the failure of human perception to fully encompass experience with the overwhelming desire to know everything. Additionally, the knowledge characteristically desired in Malouf's novels is one which transcends the divisive categories of language and the sense of separation inherent in the concept of an individual "knowing". The terrorist is presumably working in the interests of bringing about some improved state of perception (he certainly never mentions any sort of political program) of which the killing of the great writer is symbolic.

It is tempting to see the great writer as a figure representative of the positiveness of enlightenment thinking combined with the confidence of literary

modernism. The terrorist in this schema represents structuralist doubt and anti-authoritarian resistance. Because Malouf's novels are so consciously structured around just these sorts of oppositions, the text at first glance is susceptible to this sort of analysis. But no sooner does the reader begin to think the book might be allegorical than some opinion of the terrorist's contradicts this convenient interpretation. We are, for instance, explicitly warned off attaching any Oedipal motivation to the terrorist, yet it is impossible to read a text in which the narrator is not just unreliable, but supposedly sociopathic, and take him at his word. We cannot avoid seeing the assassination of the great writer as some form of patricide, especially when the terrorist interrupts a fantasy conversation with his father directly after having received his instructions to execute the plan to kill the great writer. He realises, "with a little shock, that it isn't my father I am addressing but *him*" (126).

Why are we invited to make this connection between the terrorist's father and the great writer? Malouf and the narrator warn us against making a psychological interpretation. Despite this, Tony Thwaites contends that "Oedipality haunts the text, but as illustration rather than explanation" (31). This is an illustration, one assumes, of the journalistic conventionality against which the text determinedly sets itself. The moment at which the terrorist has the realisation I have cited above is telling. It follows hard upon the terrorist's expressing the surprisingly socially conventional wish that "*I do mean to marry. Yes, grandchildren. Your grandchildren. Mine*" (126). What we have here is an intense ambivalence about issues which are utterly central. The terrorist has just received his instructions to embark immediately on the assassination of the great writer. At this precise point he mentally addresses his father in the manner outlined above and only *then* realises that he is really talking to the great writer. The terrorist both wants the respectability that this father figure represents, but is also completely committed to destroying it.

The figure of the terrorist is another version of the Ovid character in that they both have similar profound doubts about the way that they have come to know the world through language. The intuition that a gap will always exist in their grasp of

reality (both past and present) leads them to different responses to what is, in effect, the same problem. Ovid overcomes his epistemological dilemma by dying and thus obliterating his consciousness of separation and gap, but the terrorist is determined to kill the writer whose crime appears to be that he is an "Essayist, philosopher, author of a dozen monuments to the art of narrative, [who] has created so much of our world that we scarcely know where history ends and his version of it begins" (40). This is, of course, the kind of reading that the book encourages, even if it is a reading that seems so wildly at odds with the career of the author. This is because the terrorist has been given no clear motivation for killing such a venerable figure apart from the amount of publicity it would generate. And yet the publicity that it will create is much more distorting than the careful discriminations of the great writer:

The true location of its happening in the real world is not the Piazza Sant' Agostino at P. but the mind of some million readers, and its true form not flesh, blood, bullets, but words: *assassination, brutal murder, infamous crime, mindless violence, anarchy*. (91)

As far as any reader can make out, it is this highly abstract and entirely linguistic space that the terrorist and his organisation are actively seeking to create. The problem is that as an aim it appears to be completely at odds with the content of the terrorist's speculations. The meticulous study of the great writer's life and works looks absurd in this context. Paul Sharrad asks "Can we really imagine the Red Brigades or a Baader-Meinhof group setting the study of the works of, say, a Moravia or a Mann...?" (55). John Tittensor complains that "Nor is it readily comprehensible that the assassin must, at the behest of his undefined political masters, spend weeks studying the writings of the man he is to kill" (62). But it is possible to read this contradiction as a metafictional signpost indicating that the novel is essentially interested in the complexities of fictional construction and, as Stephen Woods points out, "provides a vehicle in which questions about texts and authors can be rendered dramatically" (322).

According to Woods, the novel is best approached as a dramatisation of Barthes' famous essay announcing the death of the author. The emphasis in the book is on readers; the terrorist spends his time doing little else than struggling with problems of interpretation that continually yield inconsistent solutions. He tries to incorporate both the work in progress and all of the great writer's previous work into some integrated and definitive understanding. Naturally, this proves impossible because the terrorist inevitably projects his own preoccupations onto his study, imagining for instance that the great writer has anticipated his designs on his life by writing a prescient story about it. Worse, at the end of the process: "It occurs to me that I will only make sense of all this by going back to the works themselves and reading them through again from first to last. Somewhere in the slow unfolding of his life in time is the pattern this new piece of evidence may reveal to me" (122).

We are not told precisely what this new piece of evidence is; we are forced into re-reading to discover just what it is in the terrorist's opaque comments about suspecting that *he* is going to write the ending of the great writer's life that constitutes "new evidence". The text is in this sense about us as well our expectations of a fictional text. We tend to want it to be consistent, with the reassuring narrative pattern of beginning, middle and end. Characters should have a history that explains their behaviour and motivation. The plot should follow a strict pattern of cause and effect and suppress irrelevant and incidental events. Malouf in this book is additionally playing with the contradictory, sophisticated expectation that serious fiction should challenge all of the above. In exploring ideas about who it is that creates a text, Malouf has thwarted all of these expectations and allowed no sort of closure whatsoever. In terms of plot it is impossible to establish exactly what happens. Allegorical patterns are always incomplete, and the construction of character emphasises changeability above consistency. The terrorist's colleagues do not have stable identities; the dark Adriana is also the fair Carla, and Antonella at times becomes Graziella. They have no personal history to provide clues as to the formation of their characters; they are simply there as indecipherable reality. They cannot be

conveniently fitted into mainstream discourse: "We are workers, technologists; young people of good health, clear of spirit, and with no grudges, no phobias, no sense of personal injustice or injury, none of those psychological or physical defects that are so dear to the hearts of journalists and so comforting to their readers" (17-18).

It is in this lack of motivation that critics such as Amanda Nettelbeck have identified an implicit critique of historical discourse: "in denying any motivation from his own actions, the terrorist denies history itself as a pattern of logical causality" (1991: 55). The text itself is not especially explicit about the terrorist's attitude toward history. On the one hand the terrorist is wanting to kill the great writer who "has created so much of our world that we scarcely know where history ends and his version of it begins" (40). He talks of the Piazza Sant' Agostino as "a stage-set awaiting events ... in the light of 'history'" (29). On the other hand, the terrorist is committed to participating in an event that because of its shocking nature will (and is intended to) become part of the hierarchical discourse he appears to be complaining about. He perceives his own life as curiously ahistorical, an Arcadian existence outside of his one event worth recording. But despite these lapses into historicism, the way his opinions are balanced in the book encourages the view in the reader that the highly structured discourse of history is being challenged in some way.

Certainly Stephen Woods and Amanda Nettelbeck think so. Responding to the common criticism of the book that motivation is absent, both critics have seen in this absence a refusal to enter into a discursive practice which legitimates its own existence. It is worth quoting Stephen Woods at some length because he outlines so clearly what Malouf's anti-historicism consists of:

Character, like history, traditionally rests upon concepts of cause and effect, of motivation. A 'credible' character acts according to and as a result of some particular motivation. If the motive is plausible, so is the character. In history, motivation serves to *legitimate* the present in terms of past events. In character, past, present and future actions are legitimated in the character's motivation, and that motivation is seen to cause the events. The expectation of rational causality in 'realist' fiction stems from its having to be like history. ...The complex systems of self-reinforcement and legitimation which make realist fiction 'realistic' - exemplified by its emphasis on character as the cause and 'explanation' of event - are absent from *Child's Play*. The realist novel was

realistic because it was - like history - consistent, and without contradiction. (323-324)

Because the novel is so obviously anti-realist, it is assumed that it is equally anti-historicist. This is, of course, an entirely valid reading and one that I largely concur with, but it raises what I regard as a peculiarity of the criticism that has been levelled at history as a practice in Australian letters in the last twenty years. That is the notion that history legitimates. Paul Carter elaborates on this at some length in his influential book, *The Road to Botany Bay*, from which Amanda Nettelbeck quotes in introducing her chapter on *Child's Play*. Woods' article would seem to pre-date Carter's work and establishes that the idea has had considerable currency. What Woods' remarks do is to help clarify just what it is that history is understood to be doing when it 'legitimates'. It is not simply that history is associated with authority and tends to support the dominant discourse. Its perceived close relationship to the suspect conventions of realist fiction have caused it to be cast as an inherently unreliable and self-perpetuating discursive practice.

Consistency and lack of contradiction are identified by Woods as the hallmarks both of realist fiction (which, because it relies on these impositions on chaotic reality is not a true reflection of reality) and of history. History is a highly structured representation which, like realist fiction, is more concerned to eliminate anomalies and ascribe motivation than to acknowledge the gap that exists between its patterned narrative and the impossibly complex flux it purports to describe. Because this sort of structure generates meaning, historical narrative, it is implied, *creates* understanding. It does this in the interest of the present and as such makes prevailing concerns appear legitimate. This line of argument does not take into account the capacity history has to challenge conventional beliefs or its openness to argument and theoretical provisionality. The gap about which a text such as *Child's Play* agonises is in fact only tiny. Furthermore, the legitimation which papers over the gap can, paradoxically, only be understood from a point of view which has incorporated historical understanding.

We are in much the same situation as the one I described in *An Imaginary Life*, which recognises the insufficiency of language by using words. The terrorist is caught in a similar dilemma. The stone that the terrorist is unable to relinquish symbolises the irreducible core function of all discourse. As child he keeps the pebble in his mouth.

Now somehow that notion appeals to me again: a stone worn smooth by speech, every syllable, true or false, making its small change in the shape of the thing. Of course I am too old for such nonsense, but I think perhaps, if taken in and questioned, it might comfort me to have the old stone in the corner of my jaw, to taste its no-taste as of space, and to recognise the power of distortion its presence would create and the odd light it might throw on my 'story' - a lurid glow.

I finger it as I write. Does it add its lurid glow even to this? (64)

The answer is, of course, yes. It is significant that a whole chapter is dedicated to this pebble that the terrorist cannot abandon. We cannot help but attach some figurative meaning to it. It is fundamental and solid. It is only very slightly affected by the words the terrorist shapes around it. "It is grey, it looks undistinguished" (62). But all manner of fantastic colours and vistas and even sound can be derived from it or projected on to it. Like language in *An Imaginary Life*, it may be thought of "as a source of strength, but it might, I suppose, be my last weakness. A comforter" (63).

So the stone is a basis laid down in childhood that both distorts and comforts, but cannot be relinquished. The existence of history is as inescapable and enduring as the Etruscan inscriptions on the stone doorstep that the terrorist fingers as a child in the hope that they will "reveal their meaning" (2). The terrorist cannot turn away from history however much he might want to alter it or escape from it. It is implacably there even if it is indecipherable. Considering all of this, it is not surprising that the curved lane down which the terrorist had hoped to escape from his event leads not to the ordinary life he had envisaged, but, like Ovid's excursion beyond the boundary of the prosaic, to death.

The book draws attention to its own reliance on the modes of which it simultaneously encourages critical scrutiny. Even its blatant anti-realism has to partake of the conventions it wants to eschew. This is partly what makes its glaring

inconsistencies and tenuous relationship to the real world so frustrating; a terrorist is almost by definition fanatically committed, whereas this terrorist is uncertain about the most fundamental things. Further to the book's relationship to the problems of realism, Tony Thwaites has noticed a surprisingly flagrant defiance of fictional convention in the terrorist's descriptions of the piazza. When describing the photographs, the terrorist says that the unfrequented cafe and the "Arcaded shopfronts [are] to the east" (28) of the palace. Yet when he comes to visit the piazza, he walks "along the western edge of the piazza, past the unfrequented cafe and the shop that sells dress materials and cushions" (139). No comment is made nor any explanation offered by the terrorist for this radical deviation from his carefully formed expectations. It is possible that he has confused east and west in his initial examination of the panorama and so there is a discrepancy between what he can determine from the photographs and the reality he finally encounters. This would tally with the text's leaning toward the idea that evidentiary traces do not necessarily provide a full explanation or an utterly reliable map.

But the inconsistencies are not simply between what the terrorist constructs for himself and what he actually encounters. There are impossibilities in the descriptions of the photographs themselves. This is the terrorist's initial description of the piazza:

On the *western* side of the piazza, the church of Sant' Agostino that gives its name to the square: early fourteenth century, with one unfinished tower. To the north, across a busy cross street, the public gardens. Arcaded shopfronts to the east, below a nineteenth-century mock-renaissance facade. Then a second cross street, without traffic, and closing the square at the southern end, a fortified gothic palace. (28, my italics)

The very first photograph depicting the church of Sant' Agostino is at odds with this description in important details. The sun is said to be "slanting in from the north west", exaggerating "the effect of roughness" of the brickwork by "casting heavy shadows" (30). And again the church is obviously located in the east when the same sun in the same photograph casts "the shadows of a dozen pigeons across the facade" (31). This is further compounded by the impossibility of the sun in Autumn or Spring

(or, indeed, at any time) in Italy ever being in the north west. (Perhaps the terrorist is really an Australian novelist with a poor sense of direction.) The direction of the sun is not just incidental; it is mentioned twice more in the detailed examination of the first photograph. We have to conclude that the angle of the sun must be considerably toward the north because the picture apparently does not capture the soccer ball in flight, but makes it possible to confirm its existence because "You can see its shadow on the wall" (30). In the following somewhat unclear sentence, I think we are meant to visualise the dark shadows cast by the raised platform onto the church steps: "the same elongated shadows fall (I almost said flow, since they have the consistency of slow tar or lava) from the steps that lead down into the piazza from a platform that runs the whole length of the facade" (30).

The first explanation which comes to mind is that the terrorist has mistaken the time of day and that the sun is in fact slanting in from the north east. But even assuming that Malouf has made a mistake and inadvertently placed the church on the western side of the square in the first summarised description does not explain the impossibility of the photographer taking the pictures while "moving in a continuous circle from right to left" (31) and photographing first the east and then the south. It is, I suppose, possible that the terrorist looks at the pictures in reverse order, but there is nothing in the text to support this. Returning to the possibility that the pictures are taken in the morning and the sun is really coming from the north east, it is worth considering Thwaites' attempt to imagine a map following the terrorist's precise instructions. If the church *is* located on the western side, the terrorist's description breaks down catastrophically at the third photo. This is the terrorist's introduction to the third photograph : "We move on past the palace to the intersection. Traffic approaches at right angles here and turns west" (33). This, as Thwaites points out, "can mean only that the traffic is diverted in front of the palace, along that road which we have just seen to be deserted" (19). Oddly enough, this difficulty does not arise if it is assumed that the church is in the east and that the corner being described in the third photo is not the south-east, but the south-west.

What all of this amounts to is an intriguing problem. How can it be determined in an anti-realist text whether the author has made a mistake or is being deliberately inaccurate? My view on this particular matter is that it is most likely that Malouf has made a couple of errors but has seen no reason, given the metafictional nature of the book, to thoroughly check his facts. Getting his hemispheres back to front and not checking that south is not to the left of east are the sort of minor mistakes that are only picked up under intense scrutiny. I am assuming here, of course, that Malouf has constructed his map of the piazza with the church on the eastern side. This is in itself yet another mistake because, as I have already pointed out, the terrorist says unequivocally that the church is on the western side of the piazza. All of this matters because the whole of chapter five is dedicated to supposedly meticulous description interspersed with speculations about accuracy. That is, we are given the impression that the terrorist's examination of the photographs is as accurate as can be. His despair is not over matters like this which can be known, but over being unable to perceive extraneous, experiential things such as sounds and smells and temporal continuity.

Having established that the terrorist's construction of the piazza is erroneous, we are left with three obvious interpretative strategies. The first is to dismiss the errors as poor authorship and sloppy editing. The second is to treat them as indications of the narrator's unreliability. The third, favoured by Tony Thwaites, is to regard them as extensions of the book's themes of linguistic, historical and fictional insufficiency:

There are anomalies in the photographs of the piazza, not because it is badly photographed, but simply because it *is* photographed: scattered and ghosting opacities, where the camera mutely calls attention to its presence and necessity. And in the text's description of the photographs, I find, with what I only now realise need not have been surprise, similar anomalies, gaps where the "I" (whether inhabited by narrator or critic) slips away, becomes invisible, anonymous. Like the killer, I am forced to guess: to fill in the blanks in the only way possible - by occupying them. (20).

This is not a particularly convincing defence. How do you occupy the space of a mistake, unless you are doing so by recognising it? The critical process that has been set in train here by the book is undeniably occurring outside any residual notion of

authorial intention. This process is validated by the way in which the book's resistance to intentionality is firmly signalled in the shifting interpretations that the terrorist has of the great writer's work and in its critically elusive qualities which cause the "commentators [to] fly amusingly in both directions" (49). There is, obviously, no one direction to be extracted from *Child's Play*. The author is, in the Barthesian sense, dead. Any errata can be incorporated into the text's pattern of meaning. Thwaites asserts that the mistakes in mapping he uncovered "are not easily explained away, either in terms of the narrator's confusion or Malouf's carelessness" (19), but, "In that they *work* quite pointedly in the novel, they are not mistakes" (19). This brings to mind Salman Rushdie's defence of one of his own mistakes (rather than the deliberate ones of his notoriously unreliable narrator's) in *Midnight's Children*, by declaring that "its wrongness feels *right*" (1991: 23). His argument is especially relevant because the explicit subject of *Midnight's Children* is "the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool" (24).

But the sorts of mistakes that Rushdie makes in the course of that novel are ones to do with historical and mythical detail which have the effect of on the one hand underscoring the ease with which historical error is made and on the other emphasising the unreliability of Saleem. The mistakes in *Child's Play* are in a different category. Thwaites is quite right to say that they are not easily explained away in terms of the narrator's confusion because for him to be confused about the most fundamental things in his preparation for the "event" does not resonate with any other part of the novel. The narrator is unreliable, but he is surely not also incompetent. Part of the point I want to make in raising Thwaites' argument is to illustrate that the unreliability of historical discourse had become such a critical focus during the nineteen eighties and beyond that its presence has been read into *any* departure from conventional history, including the writer's mistakes. If accuracy is an impossible aim, then any inaccuracy can be deemed an ironic comment on it.

Rushdie, in *Midnight's Children*, was explicitly popularising the notion that memory is inherently unreliable and that our idea of reality is built on misconceptions

and ignorance. His own mistakes of memory - claiming that the troops involved in the Amritsar massacre were white, for instance - help to illustrate this and were consequently not edited out. Even the reliable narrator can have memory lapses. By his own admission, Rushdie "went to some trouble to get things wrong. Originally error-free passages had the taint of inaccuracy introduced. Unintentional mistakes were, on being discovered, not expunged from the text but, rather, emphasized, given more prominence in the story" (1991: 23).

So we can see that there is an influential contemporary precedent for Malouf to pepper his most consciously metafictional novel with errata. But the problem with using deliberate inaccuracy as an ironic technique goes beyond the possibility that a writer may get away with sloppy research and begins to approach hypocrisy. The overt purpose in Rushdie's case is to expose the limitations of colonial historiography in the hopelessly complex flux of the Indian subcontinent. The clumsy mapping of Malouf's narrator is much less overt and not constructed to illustrate an obvious political point. Nevertheless it must be indicative of something, even if that something is just the possibility that Malouf so distrusts mapping that he can see no point in getting right a form of representation that is held to be inherently distorting. The problem with this sort of critical posturing is the familiar difficulty of criticising a tool that one has to use. This is what I mean by saying that an ironic technique tends to hypocrisy. Mapping is not an incidental interest in Malouf's work. All of the novels address it in some form or other, most often as a metaphor for the limitations of the concept of boundaries. So its confused manifestation in *Child's Play* is more likely to be a deeply ironic treatment (compounded by what it reveals about the terrorist) emphasising the inability of maps ever satisfactorily to mimic reality, rather than a case of Malouf so despairing of maps that he has not bothered to check that his prose descriptions of the piazza are literally unmappable.

Child's Play is a good example of postmodern scepticism about conventional discourse becoming overblown and absurdly self referential. Ostensibly writing a novel about terrorism and ignoring politics tends to obscure its metaphorical

resonances. Since the book is entirely dependent on them, this appears to be as large a mistake as the description of the piazza. The critical justification for it remains the same. It could easily be argued that the blatantly fictional nature of a work whose central metaphor is absurdly abstracted from its referent is being deployed ironically so as to draw attention to the constructedness of literary fiction and the considerable slippage between metaphor and reality. In this sense the novella is like the great writer's "anti-works". The anarchy of imagination and the lack of clear meaning - the world of dreams - is the great writer's source.

The terrorist distrusts this world: "I am unwilling at times to lie down, turn off the light and expose myself to the vagaries, sometimes savage, sometimes I suspect merely ridiculous, of my own imagination" (106). Revelations like these undercut the suggestions in the book that the filial vengeance which the terrorist is pursuing is a kind of literary terrorism. The great writer is a figure to be both revered and destroyed. The narrator feels obliged to supersede the great writer in some way. This explains the narrator's obsessive need to fully understand the great writer's achievement before he can shoot him. In a literal sense this is absurd, but it does work as a metaphor for the process of literary one-upmanship. But if the terrorist is a postmodernist bent on destroying respectable modernism, why should he be so reluctant to embrace the "anti-works"?

The answer is that Malouf is simply not interested in writing anything so schematic. The metaphor of the literary terrorist has the sort of resonance that I have outlined, but is not meant to be definitive. The point is that metaphoric understanding can never be definitive. This applies equally to critical understanding. The book anticipates critical positions. The terrorist is actually more of a critic than a writer. He spends "many hours poring over all he has ever said and done, over photographs, newspaper cuttings, scholarly articles, and all the rich outpourings of his imagination" (87). The terrorist has arrived at the postmodern condition of critical uncertainty; he knows that a reductive interpretation of a writer's life and work can only be inaccurate and yet is committed to an intense scholarly examination which can never be

satisfactory. Furthermore, this intensive study is pursued in the interest of destruction. The idea that the critic destroys or wants to destroy the object of his attentions is again suggested, but not given a clear allegorical form. Instead, it exists in contradiction to details of the text which not so much invalidate it as confuse it.

In a sense, the terrorist is writing the same book as the great writer. It has virtually the same title, save for a lower case "p". As readers we inevitably feel obliged to attach some sort of meaning to such an obvious indicator of significance. The idea that writing is a sort of play is implicit, referring equally to the sort of serious writing produced by the great writer and the disengagement between Malouf's text and actual Italian terrorism. Even the great writer, it seems, can produce a book that is full of contradictions and impossibilities. So playful is 'The Work in Progress', this book which has the same title as Malouf's own, that its hero, a "formula-one racing driver and ex-mercenary" prepares "with a touch of colour on his cheeks and a spot of it at the corner of his eyes, to become the mistress - yes, the mistress! - of a Venezuelan oil-magnate" (89). Here again is another coincidence between the terrorist and one of the great writer's characters which seems to promise some significance, but which confuses rather than elucidates the book's meaning.

Is it a coded reference to Malouf's sexuality? Why does the terrorist have a night out at a gay night club and also wander off from time to time to watch what appear to be heterosexual porn films? Perhaps the point is that sexuality, like language itself, is endlessly provisional. But I think it is also there to disrupt the reader's desire to create patterns. The text is defiantly resistant to any reductive evaluation, despite Ivor Indyk's confident assertion that "the novel's design is more conventional, and more defensive, than one would expect in a work committed to deconstruction. By taking the assassin's perspective, Malouf places the very notion of the author under scrutiny, not in order to preside over his 'death', but, on the contrary, to extol those qualities of imagination and vision he sees as the proper possession of the author" (1993: 32). It is true that Malouf evinces no desire to join his terrorist and kill the author, but the text itself simply doesn't provide any firm evidence to support the view

that it is really a celebration of "imagination and vision". It is more an anxious examination of this sort of positive humanism than an advocacy of it.

Indyk is aware of this when he complains that "the presentation is at times so prosaic, so detached, so devoid of the imaginative charge which it extols in the Author's writing, that it threatens to devalue by example what it sets out to defend" (1993: 34). I do not think that the book can be said to defend anything; this is what makes it Malouf's most clearly metafictional work. He is, after all, scrutinising his own profession and aspirations. It is not for nothing that both his and the great writer's books are called *Child's Play*. The great writer's career is not inspired by direct experience, but by a quasi-mystical premonition about his brother's death that comes to him while he is dreaming in his favourite hiding place in the branches of a tree. We are meant to notice the discrepancy between the person who records and effectively creates the mythology of a nation and the extent of his actual involvement in the events that constitute that mythology. He may be able to "create out of children's games and boyish fantasies the whole horror of a generation's induction into the realities of war; a piece of local mythology transformed and expanded, a private vision shot through with the glare of history" (46), but this ability is not necessarily being extolled.

The critical speculations which follow this revelation about the great writer's power certainly emanate from an unreliable narrator, but they are so much of a piece with the doubts about the status of writers previously expressed in *An Imaginary Life* that they make Indyk's conclusion unlikely. Ovid comes to feel that his career of enormously imaginative writing is trivial as he enters the simpler culture in Tomis. The terrorist points to the deception inherent in the construction of an autobiography by someone whose first instinct is to fictionalise: "Genius is sly as well as candid" (47). But the doubt cast on the status of serious historical fiction does not come from the terrorist. The terrorist quotes the great writer to demonstrate "his duty to remember and bear witness" (46), yet the reader is able to detect the irony that the terrorist has missed: "Whenever I have been tempted as a writer to the merely brilliant and superficial, it is the shadow of his life, and the lives of so many in that generation,

that falls across the page and recalls me to my solemn task. I began as a ghost writer. Perhaps I have remained one" (46-47). This is a deft means of signalling that the great writer's essential interest is not in the "solemn task" of recording the tribulations of his generation, but in the quality of his ironic ambiguities. A ghost writer is either constructing a palpable fantasy or writing on somebody else's behalf. Ghost writing also carries with it the connotation of deviousness. Naturally, other interpretations are possible, but my point remains intact; the great writer is exposed in this quote as being more concerned with the language games of fiction than the bland realities of merely bearing witness.

This is not to say that the great writer is being condemned. Malouf is observing rather than evaluating. It is surely germane that Malouf was working on *Fly Away Peter* at the same time as he was writing *Child's Play*. Even though *Fly Away Peter* is more of an interrogation of national mythology than a creation of it, he is still clearly committed to the writing of historical fiction. The aspect of historical fiction which pervades *Child's Play* is the one identified by Amanda Nettelbeck - discursive conflict. Discourse, it is implied, simply is never consistent. We want this to be the case, but, as the continual disruption of our attempts to impose a pattern of meaning on *Child's Play* implies, it is a desire that is impossible to fulfil. We are always in the position of the terrorist who wants to reread all of the great writer's works to accommodate and confirm some new insight. As the terrorist says: "These are observations that may point to none of the conclusions I draw from them" (20).

One conclusion that it is difficult to avoid is that the text never deviates from a romantic, almost Wordsworthian conception of childhood:

It is after all *words* that I need. I feel so utterly alone, so vulnerable to things: to the little waterdrops that will be hanging on the bare twigs of trees in the street below, little swellings of early light where next month there will be blossom; to the children with their pale cries that I stood and watched playing tag in the square, who will be deep now in the sleep of early childhood or making those fabulous excursions out of themselves that are children's dreams. (127)

This strikes me as encapsulating precisely what it is that the terrorist fears about words. Without them he feels alone and vulnerable to unmediated experience. Along with "those fabulous excursions out of themselves that are children's dreams" (127), he lists the minutia of city life: objects such as grains of soot and processes such as the drying up of a puddle. It seems to me that Malouf wants language to do the opposite and collapse the signified into its signifier but can do no more than lament the impossibility of this desire. This is why childhood and, in certain characters, childishness, is conflated with a linguistic innocence, with the notion that children have a more pure apprehension of experience. They are closer to an idealised Imaginary phase. In this particular text there is even the suggestion that the terrorist's death and return to his childhood home is also prelapsarian. In his case the act of eating the apple is no longer an induction into the world of knowledge because in death he has presumably moved beyond a world in which division and discrimination are necessary to an integrated state like that achieved by Ovid. He is "safe at last" (145), having reconciled the extreme opposites of childhood and death.

* * * * *

This romantic conception of childhood is not always at the core of Malouf's work. In *Fly Away Peter* it does not feature at all. In that novel it is supplanted by an equally romantic vision of the natural world. Considering that in Malouf's work conventional oppositions tend to be deployed to expose their complexity rather than to operate as allegory, the juxtaposition of the brutality of trench warfare with a benign and predictable natural world is surprising. The migratory birds that so fascinate Jim are able to integrate both the present and the past, and say

There I was so many darknesses ago and now I am here, and will stay a time, and then go back; seeing clearly the space between the two points, and

knowing the distance, however great, could quite certainly be covered a second time in the opposite direction because the further side was still visible, either there in its head or in the long memory of its kind. (20)

What is more, it is implied that the birds can easily and naturally reconcile the macro vision they have of the world which spans continents with the microcosm of the world in which they have to feed and nest. This strikes Jim as miraculous because he "moved always on these two levels, through these two worlds" (20), but without being able to unify them in this 'natural' way.

As Neilsen points out, *Fly Away Peter* is the novel in which Malouf is most transparently interested in reconciling apparent opposites. It has the most clearly resolved ending of any of his books and consequently it reads like an antidote to the tentative speculation of *Child's Play*. The central opposition which structures this novel's tight pattern of meaning is the familiar one between the natural and the mechanical. The novel's final image of a surfer brings together and literally balances the tension between technology and nature. Not only that, it also resolves the other persistent opposition in the book between the consciousness of presence and the knowledge that time is passing. Catching a wave is a perfect illustration of being in the moment, especially since it follows so closely upon Imogen Harcourt's reverie about how waves are "difficult to catch at their one moment" (131) and how her grief for Jim is intensified by "her vision of him, his own being that was just then so very like the birds, alert, unique, utterly present" (132).

It is this tension that is at the heart of Malouf's treatment of history. Occasionally there are moments such as the one Imogen Harcourt experiences on the beach when a consciousness of the past and present co-exist. But even a reconciliation like this, which also encompasses the future in the iconic Australian figure of the surfer, contains within it a poignant sense of doubt about its own status, given that it is a moment as fleeting and irrecoverable as any other:

It was new. So many things were new. Everything changed. The past would not hold and could not be held. One day soon, she might make a photograph of

this new thing. To catch its moment, its brilliant balance up there, of movement and stillness, of tense energy and ease - that would be something. (133 - 134)

Something, but not everything. Photography is portrayed positively in *Fly Away Peter*, but it is still an inadequate means of capturing a moment in time. The photograph of the sandpiper which Jim so admires for its having caught the bird in a characteristic pose in fact hides the moment that it records. The moment at which the picture is taken coincides with the meeting of Jim's and Imogen's interests; both have the bird in their sights at precisely the same time. The photograph does not reveal this, just as an isolated photograph of the surfer would not convey the metaphorical meaning with which Imogen has invested the image. If the picture is considered in the context of Malouf's portrayal of photography in his other early novels, it becomes likely that this balanced portrait is only an equivocal expression of a desire that is by its nature unattainable.

Furthermore, the photographs are an extension of "The Book" in which Jim records in his best copperplate the details of the birds he observes on Ashley's property. Even though the idea that language can never adequately represent reality is much less overt in this novel, the capitalisation of Jim's record of the sanctuary can only be an ironic gesture in this direction. Other examples of the essentially provisional nature of naming occur later in the novel with parts of Armentiers being re-named by the soldiers and in Ashley's consciousness that the "'troops' who were about to be 'thrown in', 'men' in some general's larger plan, ...were also Spud, Snow, Skeeter, Blue, Tommo" (112). Typically, this characteristic subversion of self-legitimising imperial discourse cannot be made to settle down into anything like a consistent "attack" on the terms in which the official myth of Australia's entry into what has been perceived as the fully historical has been constructed. Jim is as guilty of colluding in the process of essentialising language in his creation of what the reader is invited to regard as a bible for the sanctuary as Ashley is in his capacity as an officer.

If we are to consider the book in some sense as an expression of Derridean ideas about the restrictive arrogance implicit in Western logocentrism as Nettelbeck does (Nettelbeck 1990), then Jim is clearly culpable in so ardently pursuing the reductionist objectivity that his bookkeeping represents. He innocently believes that "Making a place for them there was giving them existence in another form, recognising their place in the landscape, or his stretch of it: providing 'sanctuary'" (44). It is hard to see at the outset what is wrong with Jim's ritualised description of the birds, apart from the strong sense that they are constructed in a spirit of obeisance to Ashley and the imperial class he represents. If the novel is read in isolation from the rest of Malouf's work, it is quite possible to interpret it as a celebration of an essentialising doctrine which *is* able faithfully and accurately to represent the past through photography and Jim's meticulous annals. This reading is supported by the relief Jim feels when he comes across the unifying phenomenon of a recently excavated mammoth fossil

seeing it as it was intended to be seen, a proof that even here among the horrors of battle a spirit of scientific enquiry could be pursued, its interests standing over and above the particular circumstances of war, speaking for a civilization that contained them all, British and German alike, and to which they would return when the fighting was done. (99)

I do not believe *Fly Away Peter* is either for or against any of the obvious political positions that tend to colour Australian accounts of the First World War. As Neilsen and Nettelbeck have noted, Malouf avoids any anti-British bias by totally ignoring any questions about the competence of command and creating favourable portraits of two central characters (Miss Harcourt and Ashley) who are English or practically anglophile. Similarly, the text resists any interpretation which would characterise it as subversive or supportive of a structure which presupposes a centre of meaning. The tradition and mythology that has been derived from Australia's involvement in the First World War is such a structure and is certainly reconfigured in this particular novel. However, whether the book is actually antipathetic to the very

linguistic and philosophical underpinnings of it is not convincingly supported by the whole text. The novel never dismisses the importance the war has on national consciousness and only alters what we might call the Anzac convention with only very slight shifts in emphasis. Not all that much can be read into the novel's use of the Western Front rather than Gallipoli except that the experience of trench warfare in France and Belgium was a more typical experience of Australian troops than the initial catastrophe in the Dardenelles. Neilsen goes so far as to say, contrary to Nettelbeck's suggestion that the novel is an endorsement of decentralising postcolonial scepticism, that "The central elements of the traditional myth... - the loss of innocence and the legitimising of war and history - remain in Malouf's version, the latter being strongly endorsed" (1990: 91).

An example which demonstrates the novel's balance of contraries and yet which also gives rise to the temptation to see the book as hostile to the legitimising discourse of history is contained in the idea of innocence and its loss. It is not possible to see Jim Saddler as anything other than an innocent. He might reject the defeatism of his father who can see no way forward for "the likes of us" (7), but he still naively accepts that he cannot eat with Ashley's guests even after he has demonstrated his superior knowledge in guiding them through the sanctuary. He undertakes to go to the war to acquire experience and avoid contempt; political or jingoistic motivation is absent. In fact it is made quite clear that the passionate urging of the girl in the saddlers where Jim goes to buy his boots is the first reason he has for signing up.

'I reckon you'll be joining up.' 'Why?' he asked in a last moment of innocence. (36)

His final reason is entirely about sharing the nation's experience:

If he didn't go, he had decided, he would never understand, when it was over, why his life and everything he had known were so changed, and nobody would be able to tell him. He would spend his whole life wondering what had happened to him and looking into the eyes of others to find out. (55)

Jim is not inspired as his father is by Gallipoli (when he does join up it is Ashley he tells and not his father) and is unmoved by the bravado and patriotic marches he encounters in Brisbane when the war is declared. But the war is undoubtedly the point at which Jim begins to lose his innocence. In avoiding the brash crowds celebrating the announcement of war in the front bars, he ventures into the ladies' lounge and meets a woman who takes him back to her place for his first sexual experience. The moments before he enters her room reveal something significant about this woman and, judging by his sensitive reaction, Jim as well:

There was some sort of gathering. Suddenly, before the girl could turn her key in the lock, the stillness was broken by a vicious burst of sound, a woman shrieking, then the curses of more than one man.
'Oh,' she said, surprised that he should have stopped and turned, 'abos!' Then repeated it as if he hadn't understood. "Abos!" (39)

Nettelbeck sees this episode as pointing "to the way in which the settler culture's violence against an earlier culture became 'naturalised' and therefore invisible" (1995: 15). This scene quite clearly encourages the reader to conflate the casual racism of the woman with the other behaviour that Jim experiences on that day such as the edge of violence in the pubs and the sense of anarchy in the patriotic march which follows. Australia is not innocent. Jim, however, even though he does not intervene, remains a figure of innocence. It is worth remembering that he is initially described in terms which almost make him out to be indigenous. His claim to Ashley's land is said to be "ancient and deep" (7) and "lay in Jim's knowledge of every blade of grass and drop of water in the swamp, of every bird's foot that was set down there" (7).

But because he is part of the scene with the Aborigines, and especially since he is on the brink of losing his sexual innocence, it is tempting to regard Jim as a kind of false innocent, a mythical figure whose blood sacrifice somehow obliterates his collusion in colonial subjugation. The problem with this interpretation is that it is too dependent on the political expectations of the critic. Once it is determined that the novel is an examination of the Anzac myth, one tends to look for revisionist deviations from it, particularly those which suggest a more searching analysis of the obviously

legendary aspects of the myth such as recruits being country larrikins. But the text does not really respond to these expectations. We get a practically undiluted version of the classic digger in Clancy Parkett, who "knew some of the best stories Jim had ever heard, ran a poker school, and could down ten pints at a single session" (58).

Neilsen argues that this is a "useful example of Malouf's adaptation of the traditional myth" (1990: 103). Even though he recognises that Clancy's "archetypal credentials even extend to his sharing his Christian name with one of the most famous literary bushman-figures, Clancy of the Overflow" (103), Neilsen cannot establish just how this is a useful example of Malouf's adaptation beyond pointing out that "in one important aspect he corrects the legend, by making Clancy an electrician rather than a shearer" (103). The text is only very obliquely critical of the Anzac myth. A much stronger case can be made that it actually promulgates it rather than modifies it, especially if we consider the extraordinarily romantic scene which has the diggers living up to their name and digging their way back to Australia. This a scene brings together the Maloufian preoccupation with reintegration with the soil and the ideas that the men are digging their own graves and symbolically burying themselves in the national consciousness.

I am obliged to discuss critical expectation because I am convinced that the novel does not really operate as what might be called a post-historical novel. It gestures in this direction by emphasising naming and mapping and avoiding any engagement with the issues normally brought up by depictions of Australia's involvement in the war such as the role of British command and their competence or even the political antecedents or consequences of the conflict. It is these gestures which have been picked up by critics such as Nettelbeck and Neilsen and expanded upon, most strikingly in Nettelbeck's thesis which concludes that "the text maintains its commitment to a balance between paradoxical tensions which, in its refusal to relax, is truly counter-discursive" (1991: 50). Most of her chapter on *Fly Away Peter* is an attempt to detect within the text expressions of the Derridean idea that the "concept of centred structure ... is contradictorily coherent" (Derrida 1978: 279). In other words,

she is searching for signs of anti-essentialism. The problem here is twofold. One is that she has to pursue an essentialising mode of thought to detect what she wants and is then unable to avoid arguing paradoxically that it is at the centre of the novel. The other is related to what I have previously argued about the nature of mistakes in *Child's Play*. How, if the notion of a coherent structure is being held to be eschewed by the novel, do we determine which contradictory elements are significant and which merely incidental?

In *Fly Away Peter*, the supposedly contradictory elements do not seriously undermine the mythical dimensions of Australia's understanding of the First World War. The most that they do is indicate that Malouf is conscious that what he is writing about is more myth than history, hence the use of the legendary name Clancy rather than Bruce. My point is that the most resonant mythic construction - that which has characterised Australia's involvement in the war as above all a loss of innocence - remains intact in this book. Clancy and Jim are killed. Bob Cleese is gassed. The orphan Eric is left crippled. The novel presents us first and foremost with a series of ordinary, good men tragically killed. It closes with Imogen Harcourt's grief for Jim. The novel is inescapably a memorialisation that is essentially not at odds with observances like Anzac Day. Malouf has said that "What influenced me most, in the end, was not what I had seen or read about but what I had heard as a child. It was out of that that the feeling of the book emerged" (Malouf 1985: 268).

What also emerges from the statement Malouf made about writing *Fly Away Peter* is that he sees it as a document that is unambiguously historicist. He talks about the First World War in terms of its broad historical effect "on the one hand in the development of the welfare state, on the other in the totalitarian state" (Malouf 1985: 268). Granted, he is interested in making some alterations to the accounts of the war with which he grew up, but they are not changes that go to the heart of the conflict's mythic status in Australia. In the same statement, Malouf speaks of the way in which the war marks Australia's entry into the twentieth century that in terms of national consciousness was much more important than Federation. He clearly sees himself as

writing about Australia's acquisition of experience in its most influential encounter with industrial modernity and internationalism. Significantly, this encounter completely obliterates the bush hero Clancy. Malouf makes this historical point in a graphically realistic manner by covering Jim with "what had been scattered when Clancy was turned inside out" (*Fly Away Peter* 84). This horrific incident functions at three levels. There is the emblematic level of Clancy's extinction as a type - both as an actual possibility and as a relevant literary figure. There is another level of needing to redress Australia's reticence about facing the details of physical brutality absent from the stories of bravado and mateship that had glossed over these details. The third level involves again that characteristic desire for presence and banal sensuality that recurs throughout Malouf's work. The moment at which Jim is showered with Clancy's remains follows hard upon one of intense self-absorption: "Jim dipped his knife in the tin and dreamily spread jam, enjoying the way it went over the butter, almost transparent, and the promise of thick, golden-green sweetness" (82). While it is true that the abrupt change from the anticipation of such a commonplace treat as a bit of melon and lemon jam to bloody chaos also works to heighten the drama of the moment, it is nonetheless still yet one more striking example of the desire for presence in Malouf's work.

Malouf is quite explicit about this in the statement he made about *Fly Away Peter*, its antecedents and his research. He says how his visit to Northern France in 1967 impressed on him "how present the war still was" (Malouf 1985: 268). He says that he is not interested in the war as such, but how the war exists in our present consciousness. Instead of, in a way, reconstituting the war, Malouf sees *Fly Away Peter* as "dealing essentially with the present" and being "a work of restitution" (267). What he means by this, considering the context in which he says it, is that he sees his novel as reinvesting the Anzac myth with its suppressed emotional content, both for the participants and the people who were left behind to deal with the loss. A critical element of this lost emotional content is the immediacy of grief. It is important that Imogen Harcourt is not just in this state at the end of the novel, but is conscious of the

transience of it in her "eager turning, for a moment, to the future" (134). This is not a contradiction but an integral part of presence; the novel portrays emotional impact as a process rather than as a falsifying static moment. The suggestion would seem to be that the official mourning of Anzac commemoration has ritualised grief in a way that has not emptied it of all emotional content, but has lost one of its essentials, the confused minutiae of actual experience. The novel does not specifically mention this sort of official memorialisation, but it is always implicitly present in accounts of Australia's involvement in the First World War. In choosing Imogen Harcourt as the character who feels Jim's death most keenly, Malouf is signalling that he has deliberately transferred the paralysing grief away from those who have a 'right' to feel it, such as Jim's father, or Ashley Crowther, to someone who falls outside of the conventional categories of the principal mourner. She is single, middle aged and English. Jim's father uses an accusing tone on the only occasion he ever speaks to her, to tell her that he has lost his boy. She is distanced from the whole notion of national consciousness. She observes the harbinger of change, the surfer, but cannot join in. She may record it, but she cannot be it. Anzac Day is not for her.

In this the novel avoids being directly critical of the way Australia has ritualised its involvement in the war. The novel illustrates Barthes' contention that "A more attentive reading of the myth will in no way increase its power or its ineffectiveness: a myth is at the same time imperfectible and unquestionable; time or knowledge will not make it better or worse" (1972: 130). In spite of the insistence of Nettelbeck and Taylor that one of the key components of the myth, loss of innocence, is subverted by the conjunction of Jim's sexual initiation and Aboriginal marginalisation, Jim and his fellow diggers do manage to retain this mythic quality. Even Wizzer is reduced to a sobbing victim in no man's land and the figure of Eric Sawney - an underage orphan with a sweet tooth - hardly adds to any impression of colonial guilt.

This brings me back to my assertion at the beginning of this chapter that *Fly Away Peter*, unlike Malouf's previous novels, does not feature the romantic conception

of childhood, or, as Taylor says of the novels, "a kind of return, in their closing stages, to a postulated condition of comprehensive simplicity, a childhood condition" (1994: 38). We actually do get a death that features the Arcadian reintegration of the other novels. Jim's final communion with the soil and the childish notion that he is digging his way through to Australia brings to mind Ovid's death and even the terrorist's. It fits in with Taylor's idea that "return, rather than development or even change, is a powerful motif in Malouf's fiction" (38). Taylor is reluctant to firmly link Jim's death with these others because he has argued that *Fly Away Peter* creates a context in which 'childhood' has been compromised to the extent that "it would be misleading to call [it] innocence" (38). But the novel creates no such context. There is no doubt that it gestures toward colonial guilt, but Jim is never the guilty party unless the mere fact of his losing his virginity is given excessive and curiously puritanical symbolic weight. And, after all, he is the one being initiated.

The return to a romanticised child-like state is a part of this novel. One of its oddities is that Jim, although self-possessed, never acquires maturity. He has a few moments of despair, especially when he comes to believe that violence and cruelty are part of human nature, but he never seriously questions the war or even notices the irony of Ashley playing Wagner. He steadfastly maintains his interest in bird watching which, if we look at it in the context of Malouf's other novels, is naive in its faith in lists and predictable migratory patterns. Imogen grieves for him as if he were her child rather than a friend. The novel's emotional impact depends on the aura of innocence that surrounds Jim. A good deal of this is due to the novel completely avoiding the issue of the legendary quality of Australian troops. Jim never even considers firing a shot in anger. He is portrayed as passive cannon fodder.

Historical realism is very clearly not the aim of this book. Malouf's research is applied later to the novel in the interest of providing a basic structural accuracy ("to make precise what I had already written" [Malouf 1985: 268]). Details of battles, or even their strategic outcomes, were not considered relevant. Indeed, Malouf "discovered [that he was] constitutionally incapable of following a real war history"

(268). The historical myth is his starting point and also his aim. The novel is not about the deconstruction of myth *per se*, but sets out to reconstruct it according to contemporary emphases. It is true that it does this self-consciously, but it is too romantic a book to suggest a radical reappraisal of what is regarded as the pivotal event in Australian history.

The changes that are made to the Anzac myth are ones that underplay "all the traditional male values of boldness, adventure, comradeship, loyalty, endurance, and the acting out of an 'instinctive' aggressiveness" (266). These are the values that Malouf encountered as a child in the talk of men who had experienced "the Great War as it was still called then" (266). Despite Ivor Indyk's confidence that some sort of homo-erotic relationship is being alluded to in the relationship of Jim and Ashley ("the two men are also, in a covert sense, lovers" [1993: 38]), intense relationships forged under the stress of battle - the mateship myth - are not radically reconfigured. Malouf modifies the stridently masculine emphases of mateship by having Clancy confess to Jim that because a woman called Margaret had knocked him back he felt obliged to join up. For Clancy this is an embarrassing revelation and something we are to take as a significant moment which belies Clancy's machismo and at the same time establishes a relationship between them that is more than mere comradeship. After Clancy's death Jim cries "for the first time since he was a kid" (*Fly Away Peter* 87). Whether he is weeping over the loss of a mate or about the realisation of his own powerlessness is left open. He only cries after he visits Eric and is unable to answer Eric's desperate question as to who will look after him back in Australia. What the text actually suggests here (as opposed to Indyk's bizarre idea that Jim being splattered with Clancy's remains is "a nightmarish ejaculation [which] suggests an intimate relationship between the two" [1993: 43]) is that Jim is despairing of his own helplessness. Clancy "knew his rights, he knew the ropes" (*Fly Away Peter* 86), and this is what Jim misses: not Clancy the man and certainly not the whining Eric.

The novel raises, modifies and then equivocates about mateship. The major relationship that falls into this category is the one between Jim and Clancy and, while

it does touch on some traditional aspects of mateship such as shared adventure ("the time I raced the train up to Ballieul with Clancy Parkett" [67]) or giving help in a crisis (Clancy intervenes in the fight between Wizzer and Jim), it is by no means the only sort of relationship that Jim has. The novel also portrays deep enmity among the troops. Clancy is not intervening to save Jim in no man's land; he is saving him from one of his own, and in an odd sense, from Jim himself. Jim becomes so murderously angry in confronting Wizzer that Clancy's intervention prevents a truly serious encounter in which Jim is "ready even to kill" (64).

There are two scenes which look at men being thrown together under extreme duress, and it is significant that they follow hard upon one another and represent an antithesis and a thesis. In the first scene Jim initially retreats in terror into a shell hole which he has to share with Wizzer Green. This particular episode represents the novel's greatest departure from the Anzac myth of heroism and self sacrifice in that we have the archetypal digger Jim cowering away from the action with the cowardly deserter, Wizzer. The historical truth is that desertion rates among Australian troops were relatively high, but this does not, of course, constitute part of the myth. Interestingly, the way that Malouf develops this scene works to reinforce the myth over the reality. Wizzer Green is so obviously a bully and a coward that the reader scarcely identifies him as an Australian. In fact, Jim has to fight with him again in the shell hole as if he were the enemy. And when Jim leaves the shell hole, encouraging Wizzer to come with him, Wizzer watches him "with his head lifted up like an animal" (92).

The second half of this chapter shifts back to conventional mateship and courage. Jim ends up in another shell hole with Bobby Cleese who provides the support that Jim needs to endure being "stranded there all night and all the next day as well, not twenty feet from the German lines" (95). They get on so well, trading stories of fishing and identifying the birds, that "it was almost idyllic that long afternoon in the sun and the whispered talk" (95). The friendship formed here tallies with the essentials of mateship, but, while it does not attack this mythic quality, it revises it in

subtle ways. Their relationship is less about the shared experience of war and more about their mutual fondness for the natural world; it is fairly arbitrary (they do not keep together under fire but "found themselves in the same shell-hole" [95]), and portrayed as soothing and gentle. Their conversations are all whispered and lull each other to sleep. This is not a departure from the idea of mateship, but it does de-emphasise the conventionally masculine connotations of it.

The same impulse is behind ending the novel with Imogen. This appears to be the most major revision the novel makes of the Anzac myth. What troubles Neilsen and also strikes me as uncharacteristic is the way that Malouf's portrayal of the natural world operates to normalise human activity. There is barely any ambivalence about it - even the rats in the trenches are seen as a creation of the war rather than nature. Nature is predictable and regular. It is conflated in this novel with Jim's meticulous annals (the only disturbance in his recording of the migrations is the arrival of the 'refugee' dunlin, harbinger of the unnatural war in Europe) and with other symbol systems that seek to describe precisely: "She sat on the beach now and watched the waves, one after another, as they rose, gathered themselves, stood poised for a moment holding the sun at their crests, then toppled. There was a rhythm to it. Mathematics" (131).

Neilsen sees this as offering "the reader a position from which the war can be confronted and incorporated into a larger, and ultimately optimistic, natural pattern" (1990: 130). The expectation, of course, is that the novel should be pessimistic and distrustful of history, particularly mythic history. Because of this expectation Neilsen goes on to claim that the tendency of the novel to 'naturalise' the war and human violence, to make it appear inevitable and unavoidable, "is partly contradicted by Malouf himself, to the extent that the social analysis carried by the novel resists such incorporation, integration and naturalization" (130). The novel simply does not back up this claim. The social analysis that Neilsen refers to - ideas about Australia as a class bound and not at all the egalitarian society from which the legendary digger

springs - *are* incorporated into this process of naturalisation. In this instance the novel is accepting of Ashley and his realisation that:

Nothing after this would ever be the same. War was being developed as a branch of industry. Later, what had been learned on the battlefield would travel back, and industry from now on, maybe all life, would be organised like war. The coming battle would not be the end, even if it was decisive; it was another stage in the process. (112)

Neither Ashley nor the ridiculously young looking junior officer who is shot in the battle featuring Wizzer and Bobby Cleese are analysed in any way that makes their actions appear unnatural or even foolish. The junior officer is a product of his upbringing, "playing his part of the junior officer as he had learned from the stories in *Chums*" (94), yet neither his position nor his naivety are analysed or condemned; they are observed in a sympathetic manner that notes his class and his ideals in a more sophisticated register, but with the same underlying purpose as Jim's entries in "The Book":

The boy was immediately hit, punched in the belly by an invisible fist and propelled abruptly backward. He looked surprised. 'Unfair!' his blue eyes protested. 'I wasn't ready. Unfair!' (95)

The sophistication here consists largely in investing observation with emotional content. The point is that it is naturalised in the sense that Barthes uses the term because it speaks directly to the mythic understanding we have of the war, in this case the needless death of enthusiastic and naive young officers. There is no doubt that this is a part of the facts of the conflict, but it is naturalised by appearing to us as an unsurprising inevitability of the same order as the migration of birds.

So the novel is post-historical in the sense that it foregrounds an awareness of the mythic status of history. The unusual thing about *Fly Away Peter* is that the myth is conflated with nature and that neither is seriously challenged. There is a moment when Jim perceives the innateness of human cruelty in his memories of the kestrel to which someone had attached a sardine tin, but although this recollection tempers Jim's innocence ("That was how it was, even in sunlight. Even there." [104]), it does not

extend this perception to the novel's romantic depiction of nature. Despite the kestrel's being unable to "distinguish between kindness and more cruelty" (104), there is no suggestion that the natural world is itself cruel and that the kestrel's survival depended on its ability to kill small animals. The same applies to the closing scene and its metronomic waves; the ocean's destructive potential is ignored in favour of its metaphoric usefulness. Again nature is benign and soothing; it is sanctuary rather than raw reality. This is not to say that the novel neatly divides into a convenient opposition of nature and humanity. The contrasts are made - the book opens with the intrusive and clumsy aeroplane among Jim's birds - but they are not sustained and are, in effect, naturalised.

For instance, Jim incorporates the plane into his view of the world when he is taken up for a spin because it confirms for him the way he had visualised the sanctuary: "what came to him most clearly was how the map in his own head, which he had tested and found accurate, might be related to the one the birds carried in theirs" (54). Instead of being portrayed as if in opposition to nature, the aeroplane is normalised. It is then as much a part of the scene as the surfer with which the book ends. This tendency toward reconciliation of oppositions occurs in the earlier novels, but the difference in *Fly Away Peter* is the lack of complicating ambiguity that marked his previous work. There is hardly anything within the text that compromises the initial tropes of innocence and sanctuary. There is cruelty and violent death in Jim's domain, but his sensitive reaction to it effectively naturalises it into the powerful mythic portrayal of the defining historical event in Australia's history.

The myth is that a young, egalitarian and largely rural country created a unifying nationalism by way of its violent conflict with European sophistication. *Fly Away Peter* does not set out to demolish this myth but to consciously re-mythologise it. In this particular novel, the process of doing this is virtually indistinguishable from appearing to subscribe to the myth, which gives rise to equivocation about its contribution toward the establishment of post-historicism as a literary convention. Other critics have been less uncertain and effectively have helped to create the

perception that history is being problematised in the book. By focussing on the novel's idealisation of innocence, we can see that all of these tensions about the novel's political meaning are raised but never resolved. Things that might compromise Jim's innocence are simply not reinforced by subsequent events. Jim's passing encounter with Aboriginal dispossession at the moment of his attaining maturity, or Wizzer's cowardice, do not seriously impinge upon the novel's more insistent celebration of the diggers' status as innocent victims.

Another reason why the novel retains a sense of innocence is its almost unrelievedly romantic portrayal of the natural world. The rats may feed on corpses and be as big as cats, but for Jim "they were familiars of death, creatures of the underworld, as birds were of life and the air" (81). They are separated out from the consistently expressed idea in the novel that the natural world and its processes are Edenic. Ashley's sanctuary is a strangely false representation of Australia as a natural paradise and refuge that completely ignores issues of indigenous occupation and much more characteristically exploitative land use practices. Again we can see that the novel is more interested in exploring myth than debunking it. The aspect of myth that it keeps returning to is the quality that it shares with the concept of naturalness: inevitability.

The migratory patterns of the birds are not just predictable, they are an inescapable feature of life wherever Jim is. They are as inexorable as the march of history in which Jim is hopelessly involved. At the same time they have no responsibility for their actions nor the ability to break out of their pattern. Their lives are instinctual. Jim's death is conflated with these notions in an interesting way which signals his mythical status. The moments before Jim is fatally wounded are described in a passage which is intensely reductive of what Jim's experience of life actually amounts to:

He saw it all, and himself a distant, slow-moving figure within it: the long view of all their lives, including his own - all those who were running, half-crouched, towards the guns, and the men who were firing them; his own life neither more nor less important than the rest, even in his own vision of the

thing, but unique because it was his head that contained it and in his view that all these balanced lives for a moment existed: the men going about their strange business of killing and being killed, but also the rats, the woodlice under logs, a snail that might be climbing up a stalk, quite deaf to the sounds of battle, an odd bird or two, like the couple of wheatears he had seen once in a field much like this, the male with his grey back and crown, the female brownish, who had spent a whole morning darting about on the open ground while he lay with a pair of borrowed field-glasses screwed into his head and lost himself in their little lives, in their ordinary domestic arrangements, as now, stumbling forward, he was, in a different way, lost in his own. (117)

For Jim life has lost significance and become reduced to meaningless observation. Whether this is the vision that Malouf wants his readers to share about history is far from certain, although the passage above is so characteristically concerned with immediacy that it could easily be regarded as typical. Like the scene which has the dead diggers reconciling themselves with nature, however, it is simply too romantic to take seriously, especially as the book invites us to equivocate about this scene's implications by providing us with a different perception of the war and its consequences in Ashley.

Ashley listens to music rather than birdsong. His understanding of the world contrasts with Jim's in that it is cultural rather than natural. On one occasion Jim does not notice the faint sound of band music even though his "ears were keen enough to catch any birdcall" (122). Ashley, on the other hand, can instantly recognise Von Suppe in "the odd wavering sounds" (122). Although Jim makes the observations that go to making up the Book, the systematisation of phenomena is really Ashley's idea and the organisation of the data is for him. Jim's perceptions are experiential whereas Ashley's are much more reflective and analytical. This contrast, in which Ashley's world view is in no way denied, has implications for how we are to determine the novel's contribution to the post-historicist emphasis in recent Australian literature. The contribution is there in Jim's pantheistic reintegration with the earth which recurs throughout so much of Malouf's work and is in an important sense opposed to the sort of generalisation that is at the heart of historicism.

Nettelbeck points out that "each understanding or map of history can only ever be partly accurate and will always hold within itself the possibility of alternative

perspective." (1995: 10). Ashley is portrayed as being troubled by the way that official language can misrepresent the full complexity of an individual's experience, but at the same time he is complicit in the semiotics about which he complains:

Ashley, whose mind was of the generalizing sort, had seen quite clearly from the beginning that what was in process here was the emergence of a new set of conditions. Nothing after this would ever be the same. War was being developed as a branch of industry. Later, what had been learned on the battlefield would travel back, and industry from now on, maybe all life, would be organised like war. The coming battle would not be the end, even if it was decisive; it was another stage in the process. It seemed more important than ever now to hang on to the names, the nicknames, including his own, and if his luck held, to go back. And having learned at last what the terms were - and in expiation of the blood that was on his hands - to resist. (*Fly Away Peter* 112)

The question is, to resist what? Surely not his own historicist thinking which is so apparent in this passage. Presumably Ashley has decided to resist the hegemony of the coming military industrial complex, but it is not at all clear how he intends to do this. He prefers nicknames to formal names (including his own which is never revealed to us), but this does not constitute a radical departure from ordinary historical understanding or even the kind of naive faith in language to reflect reality that Jim displays in his compiling of the Book. Ashley appears to be resisting the broad view which resulted in such a catastrophe as the war, but the terms of his resistance are constructed in precisely the same generalising manner as the thinking behind the increasingly industrial society he wishes to resist. He is, unsurprisingly, trapped in the same paradox as Ovid.

It is in this postmodern focus on paradox that the novel's sense of resistance to historicism can be located. Because it must partake of the methods of a discipline it effects to re-evaluate, the novel's portrayal of history per se is endlessly equivocal. This allows for the text to be open to arguments that it defies conventional history, but the book never eschews the generalisations of historicism. The tension of the paradox that a hugely influential historical event is inevitably perceived as such despite the text evincing the desire to escape such categorisation is what we are finally left with, expressed metaphorically in the precarious balance of the surfer at the novel's

conclusion. The same tension, expressed as balance, occurs in the image of Gemmy poised on the fence in *Remembering Babylon*. In *Fly Away Peter*, this sort of metaphoric gesture looks like a departure from the conventional depictions of Australia's involvement in the First World War (especially as the moment is perceived by an English woman), but it also is firmly historicist in its implications of cause and effect and progress. It is difficult not to see the surfer as symbolic of Australia's future in which the main physical challenge for its young men is no longer the battlefield but the surf. The surfer is the modernity that results from brutal conflict and Imogen guiltily looks to him to assuage her grief. It is even possible to interpret the image of the surfer as a legitimation of the war because of its optimistic cast and position in the text. Again, however, this is an unavoidable consequence of examining a disastrous past from a relatively secure present. What *Fly Away Peter* demonstrates is that history cannot be examined without recourse to history, just as language cannot be described in anything other than words.

CHAPTER FOUR

HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

OSCAR AND LUCINDA

Oscar and Lucinda is the most lauded of Carey's novels. Published during the frenzy of historical re-evaluation that gripped Australia during the bicentenary of 1988, it won numerous awards¹, including the prestigious Booker prize. Its influence on how the Australian literary world perceives history has been considerable. Its approach to history is not especially novel, but it crystallised, for a readership interested in Australian literature, an approach to historical fiction which was becoming commonplace. This approach typically combined a challenge to "the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation" (Hutcheon 1988: 92) with self-referential doubts about the efficacy of their own narrative strategies. This combination of anti-realism and anti-historicism was a widespread phenomenon throughout the nineteen eighties in particular. Those novels which employed this approach were categorised by Linda Hutcheon as "historiographic metafiction" (1988). A number of famous novels of the period, notably Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* fall into this category. What these novels do is to emphasise the artificiality of fiction - in Rushdie's case by employing the magical as a trope and in Barnes' by continually drawing the reader's attention to the textuality of the work by constantly changing his narrative strategy to underscore the essentially fictional nature of historical discourse.

The crucial part of Hutcheon's definition of these novels as being historiographical metafiction is that they are *metafiction*s. That is, they are not conventional fictions in that they implicitly or explicitly invite their readers to be conscious of the artificiality of their construction. They may require from their readers some suspension of disbelief, but they do not invite scepticism about their representational inadequacies. In this sense, metafiction can almost be defined as anti-fiction. Metafiction is shot through with implicit doubts about their own narrative strategies. Furthermore, they do not encapsulate a core of certainty about the function of fiction. They resist being reduced to an underlying purpose. A political, moral, or even an aesthetic grounding is avoided in favour of radical uncertainty. In short, they are not even art for art's sake.

The historiographic metafiction characteristically extends this anti-reductionism and privileging of doubt to its treatment of history. Some of the strategies deployed to express this fundamental challenge to what is perceived to be official narrative history include merging historical fact and the fantastic, stressing the trivial over the monumental, and disclosing the distortions of colonial metanarratives by offering alternative perspectives. Both *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Illywhacker* deploy all sorts of familiar strategies to achieve this such as stressing the trivial over the monumental, merging history and the fantastic, as well as drawing attention to their own dubious status as fictional constructs. They are novels which emphasise both the essential fictionality of historical discourse and the inevitable self-referentiality of fiction. *Illywhacker*, with its outright lying and forays into the magical is more obviously in the postmodern realm of magical realism. Its treatment of history in some respects resembles *Midnight's Children*. Deliberate lies about factual detail such as Herbert Badgery's claim that sugar cane grows around Bacchus Marsh or Saleem's that an elaborate land reclamation scheme occurred in Bombay are combined with real historical events and magical impossibilities such as Saleem never blinking as a baby or Herbert Badgery's ability to vanish. *Oscar and Lucinda*, however, is as bereft of

magic, in the fantastically impossible sense (fingers that turn into goannas or children with a psychic bond), as Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*.

The method that Carey adopts to highlight doubts about history in *Oscar and Lucinda* appears quite different from the tactic of challenging history's claim to legitimacy by openly privileging elements of fable such as magic and affecting a blithe unconcern with geographical realities. Yet it is still related to what has been loosely described as magical realism because it continues with the same basic project of implicitly criticising history's confidence in its rhetorical strategies by ironically structuring the novel in an elaborately artificial fashion. What Carey does is employ, like Barnes, a central image (not a symbol - the meanings generated are not consistent enough to allow for a neat generalisation of what the image symbolises) that reverberates with associative meaning and acts as the novel's structuring metaphor. In Barnes' case, the novel is structured around the search for the actual stuffed parrot that Flaubert used as his working model for Loulou, the parrot who features in his story, *A Simple Heart*. Barnes explores every possible aspect of the parrot - its figurative meaning in various contexts, its place in Flaubert's work and as an ironically self-referential description of his narrator (and by implication, himself) - to create ironic historical contexts. In *Flaubert's Parrot* history is portrayed not just as a discourse that is prone to errors because of prejudice and narrowness of focus, but as a language based discipline subject to the chaotic and uncertain world of substitution, both in terms of language inevitably "standing for" something it isn't and at the level of historical artefacts that may or may not be what they are declared to be. This method is closely allied to the heavily ironic ploy of telling deliberate lies in order to parody historical distortion. It has the same metafictional intent - self-conscious doubt about the efficacy of *any* symbolic representation - but operates more subtly.

In *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey uses glass to provide this structure. By "structure", I mean that its placement in the text provides an associative pattern that invites the reader to bring together a number of apparently disparate things. For instance, Theophilus Hopkins and Lucinda Leplastrier would be literally worlds apart

in terms of conventional narrative history, but are drawn into the novel's pattern of meaning by their association with glass. The inventor of the aquarium is linked with the owner of a glass factory. Carey is quite explicit about this connection in having Lucinda's glass church become Theophilus' aquarium, with Oscar on display within it: "He dreamed he was somehow inside his father's aquarium." (464). But more than merely forging links between characters, the book's motif operates as a shifting metaphorical expression of the novel's ambivalent treatment of the themes of industrial emancipation and exploitation, discovery and destruction, and empire and empiricism. The novel ends with the Victorian world view symbolised in the glass church which is both an industrial triumph and an impractical folly, both a persuasive missionary tool and a harbinger of cultural and military dominance, an emblem of high imperial confidence in its resemblance to the crystal palace, and, finally, a metaphor for the intrinsically destructive nature of empirical observation:

Through the bursting gloom he saw a vision of his father's wise and smiling face, peering in at him. He could see, dimly, the outside world, the chair and benches of his father's study. Shining fragments of aquarium glass fell like snow around him. (510)

It is as if the careful empirical observation that Theophilus applied to the specimens in his aquarium has been applied to Oscar's life and found to be similarly deathly. The idea that Theophilus kills what he examines and names is left implicit in the text, but this passage surely invites this interpretation. It is reminiscent of the part of Gosse's *Father and Son* where Gosse laments the result of his father's success at popularising the exquisitely undisturbed variety of life to be found in the littoral rock pools of England led to their destruction by collectors (Gosse 99). These associations appear arbitrary, but the novel's continual reference to and emphasis on glass invites us to make connections between characters and to relate much of the book's themes back to the figurative senses of glass. Glass is used because of its paradoxical properties; it is transparent and solid, but also really a liquid. In the form of the Prince Rupert's drop it is both fantastically strong and enduring, and, if snipped in the right place, weak and

ephemeral. Carey clearly relishes "the lovely contradictory nature of glass" (135). Ambiguity and contradiction are the desirable effects, and the symbolic centre of the novel operates in this sense as anti-symbolic in that it won't settle down to a consistent cluster of significance.

The use of glass in the novel has other ironic dimensions. Even though it helps to structure the narrative, it is implied that the structure itself, like narrative, distorts the reality it is meant to represent. This means of framing a historical novel brings to mind Hayden White's argument that history cannot avoid intrinsically distorting narrative strategies even in something as simply structured as a chronicle (White 1987). Narrative of some form, even a rudimentary chronology, is an unavoidable way of representing the past. The real chaotic world of events doesn't necessarily conform to a narrative pattern and so conventional narrative history subtly alters raw experience in the interest of clarity and to make it assimilable. It is a paradoxical process in the sense that our most effective means of understanding history also interferes with a complete knowledge of it. Glass is a brilliant metaphor for this problem. We can see through it, but it is also a barrier, as the insects on the Bellinger River discover:

They flew against the glass in panic. They had the wrong intelligence to grasp the nature of glass. They bashed against 'nothing' as if they were created only to demonstrate to Oscar Hopkins the limitations of his own understanding, his ignorance of God, and that the walls of hell might be made of something like this, unimaginable, contradictory, impossible. (494)

Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* is an exemplar of this type of ironic formalism and a good example of the consolidation of scepticism about the truth value of historical methodology, particularly narrative history and the fetishisation of text in the form of primary documentary evidence. Novels have been dealing with these issues for some time, so that a well known historian could contend in 1970 that novelists "have manifested an intense hostility to historical thought" (Fischer 307). Novels of the sixties and seventies such as *Slaughterhouse Five*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *The Tin Drum* all manifest historical scepticism, but by the eighties

these concerns had become commonplace and can be found in a wide range of writers including Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, D.M Thomas, Salman Rushdie and Graham Swift. But a novel like Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* represents an intensification of this phenomenon that critics have termed the problematisation of history. The focus of these novelists shifted away from using narrative technique to highlight the inadequacies of previous novelists to a self-conscious scepticism about the very nature of narrative. Unusual narrative strategies in *Flaubert's Parrot* such as examination papers and lists of metaphors are not being deployed in the novel to interrogate ideas about how fiction can attain more veracity, but to ironise those very attempts by eschewing pretence and showing that all narrative strategies are intrinsically artificial. Barnes, like Carey, is engaged in the postmodern project of writing a novel which highlights its inadequacies without implicitly regarding the process as a progressive innovation. Their focus is instead on demonstrating that the shortcomings of representation and language are inevitable structural limitations that need to be foregrounded in a literary text that takes seriously the themes of meaning, identity, literariness, and, of course, history.

Kirsten Holst Petersen recognises the similarities between *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Flaubert's Parrot*. She points out, however, that Carey diverges from Barnes in "holding a firm point of view" (109) which puts "the book more into the category of post-colonial literature, in which post-modern features serve to emphasise the mainly political or ideological points the writer wants to make" (110). Petersen acknowledges the contradictory nature of glass, but does not see it as a postmodern device designed to accentuate doubt. She reads the novel as being revisionist, but nonetheless forming a historical judgement. For her, the novel is decidedly anti-imperial and "the glass church combines in its construction and purpose the two driving forces behind the Empire: Christianity and the Manufacturing Industry, one providing the moral excuse, the other the superior technology and wealth to conquer the world" (111). To emphasise what she sees as the discrepancy between Barnes' metropolitan postmodernism and Carey's postcolonial revaluation of history, Petersen extends the

ironic metaphor of Flaubert's parrot to Carey and declares that "Major Mitchell's parrot is a lot more real than Flaubert's" (116).

Whether Petersen's persuasive reading is correct or not, what is relevant in her essay to my contention that *Oscar and Lucinda* is anti-historicist is the fact that she feels the need to argue strongly against the suggestion that Carey's problematising of history might have wider ranging implications than a desire to emphasise the shortcomings only of his particular colonial history. No doubt Carey would concur with Petersen's insistence that the novel condemns the colonising process in Australia (his distaste for the bicentenary, among other things, would tend to confirm this), but the reduction of this complex novel to a "firm social purpose - one could almost use the discredited word 'message'" (Petersen 116) - ignores a number of ambiguities in the text that I shall consider later. The significant aspect of Petersen's argument is the notion that Carey's use of postmodern devices is a kind of fashionable window dressing. The assumption is that the fully postmodern is necessarily apolitical and that any identifiable political position makes the novel firmly postcolonial. It is true that Carey's politics are not entirely subsumed by his fascination with ambiguity and doubt, but to claim that this leaves one with a readily decipherable 'message' is akin to declaring that the novel's obvious commitment to historical research makes it an historical novel with some playful, but ultimately irrelevant interrogations of its own means of construction.

Carey could have ended *Oscar and Lucinda* much more ambiguously than he does. His American editor, Ted Solotaroff, felt that the penultimate chapter, "Songs about Thistles" was the most appropriate ending, presumably because it would have tidied the chronology of the end of the novel. He recommended this along with a suggestion for a chapter inserted before either of the two final chapters dealing with Lucinda's new life:

It occurred to me that the most expeditious and perhaps satisfying way that the novel could leave the reader with a clearer understanding of "the great satisfaction of her life" that is prophesied for Lucinda on page 181, along with her term in the pickle factory, is to have her write a brief letter to Dennis

Hasset at some point forward in time. The letter could be part of their ongoing correspondence, a probability which is already securely rooted in the text, and simply provide a brief slice of Lucinda's present life that would both clue the reader in to what happened to her and also provide an emotionally satisfying last look at her in the midst of her new life.

I hope this suggestion jogs your writing elbow. It has the advantage of economy and if done in two or three pages could fit nicely between the penultimate and final chapters. Or it might encourage you to reconsider ending the book with the chapter on thistles. (UQFL 164 Accession 880700-1 Box 13)

The point of citing this long extract is twofold. One thing it demonstrates is that Carey very clearly declines the opportunity to have his novel convey a traditionally novelistic moral ending with Lucinda succeeding on stage. Lucinda is featured in one of the final chapters ("A Cheque Amidst her Petticoats"), but I think that Carey declines the opportunity to celebrate her subsequent working life lest her success contrast too sharply with Oscar's death. It would be entirely consistent with all of Carey's work that he would avoid the neat formulation (feminist unionism versus missionary imperialism) implicit in a contented Lucinda and a dead Oscar presented in contiguous concluding chapters. Another interesting point revealed by Solotaroff's advice is the strong suggestion that Carey had originally thought of ending the novel with "Songs About Thistles". This would tend to indicate that Carey at least for a time favoured ending the novel with the uncommitted and ambiguous comment that there "are no stories to tell about thistles" (508).

The Victoriana of *Oscar and Lucinda* is superficially reminiscent of Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but its purpose in delving into the minutiae of the last century is quite different. Fowles' characters are clearly precursors of modernity; Charles is a Darwinist and Sarah is a proto-feminist. In *Oscar and Lucinda*, however, the protagonists are misfits and could even be considered philosophically retrograde. Oscar could never be a character in *The French lieutenant's Woman* and Lucinda is far too much of a George Eliot heroine: that is, too tough minded to fit into Fowles' idea of Victorian femininity. Besides, Fowles is confident that the Victorian era can be reconstructed. Footnotes abound, not with sardonic postmodern intent, but as

examples of the realism that Fowles' fiction is striving for. History in this novel is a given, an inviolable authority that novelists should measure themselves against.

Even though Carey claims that he had not read Fowles, the usefulness of comparing *Oscar and Lucinda* with *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not diminished. After all, several critics, as well as one of the editors of *Oscar and Lucinda*, Ted Solotaroff, have compared the two novels.² Tom Wilhelmus, championing what he sees as the greater qualities of Fowles' work, says dismissively: "*Oscar and Lucinda* is a love story masquerading as an investigation into the Victorian past." One could easily counter that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is an investigation into the Victorian past masquerading as a love story, but it is worth considering Wilhelmus' contention that Carey's treatment of history is inferior to Fowles'. Wilhelmus castigates *Oscar and Lucinda* because "there is practically no history we learn that cannot be inferred from the most generalized impressions of the age". He goes on to assert that: "Nothing in this novel approximates the complex dialogue between Victorian and Modern that permeates Fowles's book" (Wilhelmus 552).

The first charge is that there is no "new" history to be learnt from *Oscar and Lucinda*, presumably something such as the statistics Fowles gleaned from *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age*. It is quite true that Carey does not accompany, say, his chapters on Oscar's gambling with some arcane information about how many undergraduates were sent down from Oxford for frequenting the race track. But this is only because Carey's technique is different, and different for a very good reason. Fowles uses history as a starting point for his fiction. It is used to stress the discrepancies between reality and fiction, or to anchor his self-conscious fiction to a more trustworthy set of documents. For instance, in the preamble to the scene where Charles visits the Victorian equivalent of a strip club, Fowles intrudes into the omniscient narration to relate an anecdote about his discovering a wonderful (though not contemporaneous) account of a visit to a bawdy house in a second hand book shop, an extract of which he then presents to the reader (Fowles 293). This is history as a

grounding for fiction; the veracity of the document, or even its relevance (given that it is some 118 years out of date) is not questioned. What Fowles presents as being problematic is the fantasy that he creates out of it. Carey does not do anything like this because he implicitly distrusts the documents of the age. Carey is actually more radical in his approach to history. For him the struggle to attain realism in fiction is very much subsidiary to the more fundamental question of how the past is transmitted. Carey declines to give us a history lesson because he has doubts about his sources.

Wilhelmus' other complaint is that Carey has not fully explored the complexities of the "dialogue between Victorian and Modern". It is undeniable that Fowles' exploration of the height of the Victorian era is thorough and balanced and bristling with insight, but even so it rests on a presumption about history that Carey seeks to undermine. What is being stressed about the heroes of Fowles' novel is their modernity. By focussing on such 'progressive' characters, Fowles reveals his tendency to a view of history which examines the past for those elements which explain the present. Even though Fowles finds much to admire in the 1860s, the 'dialogue' is patronising. For Fowles, history leads to him, and is a progression. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the past is examined to uncover the antecedents of the modern literary intelligentsia and someone like Philip Gosse is portrayed as an irrelevance, an historical dead end, whose work "is now forgotten" (158). In *Oscar and Lucinda*, creationists and fundamentalists are not peripheral and assumed to be irrelevant. Fowles' version of the Victorian past is constructed not to interrogate notions of history as such, but questions of literary realism and the process reveals him to be firmly historicist. Even given the complexity of Fowles' preoccupation with imaginative processes, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* displays a belief in progress and a faith in historical documents. *Oscar and Lucinda* concerns itself with characters who might in comparison be considered the losers of history.

This is a divergence in the portrayal of history in novels separated by twenty years which we would expect, but that is not immediately obvious. After all, doubt pervades Fowles' reconstructed 1860s, and inflexible faith the world of *Oscar and*

Lucinda. Fowles apes Hardy's style of pessimistic scepticism, but Carey uses as his model of Victorian literature and belief the work of Edmund Gosse, particularly *Father and Son*. Superficially, Fowles' concerns seem more modern, which is, of course, precisely what they are, as opposed to Carey's postmodern sensibility.

Carey's approach to the historical background of his novel is more radical. He is, after all, writing after scepticism about fiction had gone beyond anxieties about the limits of mimesis to deeper poststructural doubts about the relationship of symbol and referent. *And* he is writing after the doubts raised by figures such as Hayden White and Foucault about the inherent distortions of historical narrative have permeated the culture. It is significant, and illustrative of the difference between these two novels, that it is not a novel which provides Carey with the starting point for *Oscar and Lucinda*, but an autobiography. Carey is simply not interested in the formal limitations of the Victorian novel in the way that Fowles is. Victorian realism is not an issue that Carey addresses: that his narrator could not possibly have been privy to all the details of Oscar and Lucinda's life and emotions is not a pressing issue. If anything it is an ironic touch of postmodern self-referentiality that has more to do with the impossibility of creating accurate history than with anxiety about realism. It is an unavoidable technical device, which entails the inevitable suspension of disbelief required of any reader of novels employing omniscient third person narration.³

In contrast to Tom Wilhelmus, Rod Edmond sees Carey's treatment of the past as superior: "Carey's 'Victorian novel' makes Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for example, seem clichéd and pedestrian" (89). Edmond argues that what gives *Oscar and Lucinda* another dimension is not just its historical scepticism, but its alternative perspective on a critically important aspect of the Victorian enterprise, namely colonial expansion: "From his post-colonial vantage point Carey can examine what the Victorians *really* did not talk about - not, as Fowles would have it, sex, which is there in abundance - but settlement and expropriation, the founding of nations and the creation of Empire" (95). Edmond is exactly right; *Oscar and Lucinda* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are only superficially similar and have quite different

foundations. Fowles bases his novel on his own literary heritage, a canonical heritage whose imperialist implications he ignores. As an Australian, Carey's appropriation of English literature has a political dimension allied to his broader ranging and more critical exploration of history.

This marked difference in emphasis is apparent in Carey's approach to writing. He has said in interviews that he rarely reads fiction whilst he is writing, preferring to look at histories such as Owen Chadwick's *History of the Victorian Church* and parts of Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*, as he did during the composition of *Oscar and Lucinda*.⁴ And despite the numerous critics who have noted a debt to Dickens, Carey admits to having read only 20 pages of *Bleak House*.⁵ This isn't to say that literary influence and allusion is not important in *Oscar and Lucinda* - very obviously it is, given the heavy reliance on incidents from *Father and Son* and the appearance of George Eliot as a character - but to suggest that Carey does not invoke his literary sources for conventionally literary reasons. Fowles alludes to Hardy⁶ because he is "progressive" and one of the most technically and socially advanced of the Victorian social realists, whereas Carey opts deliberately for the unfashionable Edmund Gosse because he was interested to find a different perspective of the past that was both quirky and anti-progressive. Significantly, Carey chooses as his starting point a personal history - a history which claims to reconstruct the facts dispassionately. This of course begs the question of just why Carey selects as his starting point this particular private history, and why he alters some of its details. David Callahan, arguing that the book engages in the postcolonial subversion of the imperial 'other' (albeit ironically), postulates the intriguing idea that Edmund Gosse is being used as a flawed English father figure, given his reputation as a fallen icon of "high British imperial confidence" (22). Oscar diverges from Edmund Gosse in too many important respects to really sustain this view, but he does share what might be called his 'innocent imperialism'. Although Gosse was an authoritative and prescriptive critic of literature whose enthusiasm was missionary, and Oscar is an actual (though not particularly successful) Anglican missionary, Edmund obviously doesn't share Oscar's

desire to spread the Gospel in the colonies: "I determined that whatever happened, I would not, not, *not*, go out to preach the Gospel among horrid, tropical niggers" (Gosse 102). The careers of Oscar and Edmund are similar in that both reject the fundamental certainties of their fathers, and they also pursue occupations that are not totally divergent from their fathers'. Literary criticism is not such a radical break from theology and Oscar's defection to Anglicanism is hardly the irredeemable apostasy of Darwinism.

I would argue that the really significant figure is not Edmund but Philip Gosse, the man who, as Carey acknowledges and Callahan notes, had never read Shakespeare. Thinking that Philip Gosse's rejection of Shakespeare must either relate to the postcolonial subversion of the English literary tradition ("the throwing of baby Shakespeare out with the English bath water" [24]) or the subversion of this subversion, Callahan is surprised to find that it barely features in the novel. Although its "significance seems to lie in its relation to the whole question of authority and literary power, ... it is not Oscar who makes this act of defiance but the authority figure himself, Oscar's father" (24). Shakespeare is interesting in the context of the novel not because he is *the* canonical figure of English literature, whom Carey, as a postcolonial writer, might wish to subvert, but because Philip Gosse has no use for fiction and fantasy, even at its most exalted level. One of the most striking things about Edmund's upbringing, as he describes it in *Father and Son*, is his mother's insistence, backed up by his father, that Edmund not be exposed to any fanciful stories. Theology, natural history and the Bible are all he is allowed. "No fiction of any kind, religious or secular, was admitted into the house" (Gosse 18). For Carey, a novelist unusually preoccupied with the power of story (notably in *Bliss*), this aspect of Gosse's childhood must have been intriguing and an influence on his depiction of Oscar's childhood.

Philip Gosse is a carefully chosen model for Theophilus. He has all the attributes that postmodernism eschews. He records only what he can observe and believes that it is possible to represent the world accurately, carefully drawing every tentacle and whisker of an anemone. Theophilus is profoundly literal. The Bible is for

him "a report compiled by a conscientious naturalist" (8). He adheres to rigid central values. He has certainty. In this sense it is possible to regard Theophilus as a positivist imperial figure, but such a clear allegorical interpretation is undermined and complicated by the fact that Philip Gosse's inflexible fundamentalism is actually at odds with the growing confidence of scientific empiricism in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Philip Gosse is an historical figure who should be obscure, but his son's brilliant account and the sheer audacious absurdity of his attempted refutation of Darwin in *Omphalos* have given him a curious status as an emblem of dogged Victorian certitude. Given that he symbolises a world view diametrically opposed to contemporary ideas of contingency and uncertainty, *he* is the Victorian father figure whose fall from authority is the catalyst for all the ensuing action. The incident which disillusiones Oscar is an episode straight from *Father and Son*. Granted, Carey alters several details of Gosse's extreme reaction to Christmas pudding, making the son fifteen instead of eight, introducing an element of violence and having Oscar relish the taste of the sweet, but these changes are all made in the interest of enhancing the scene's emotional impact. What Carey does with this incident is to massively increase its meaning and consequence beyond its merely being a trauma in Oscar's life to *the* crucial episode of the novel:

There would have been no church at Gleniffer if it had not been for a Christmas pudding. There would have been no daguerreotype of Oscar Hopkins on the banks of the Bellinger. I would not have been born. There would be no story to tell. (7)

Theophilus is not portrayed as an obvious fool. He is both right and wrong. As the novel's narrator, Bob⁷, says, there is nothing mad about believing that the great Christian festivals are not Christian at all. He is in possession of some truth about the past, but he has arrived at it according to a dogmatic viewpoint. For Theophilus the past has to conform to the Bible. The link between Theophilus and Philip Gosse is relatively uncomplicated: Theophilus is practically a portrait of Gosse. As such,

Gosse's famous attempt to refute Darwin assumes some relevance, especially as it is such a startling case of imposing a belief system on the past. Often vulgarised as a ridiculous attempt to maintain that fossils were implanted by God in the earth's crust to test our faith, Gosse's argument is in fact much more elegant and logically consistent than that. (Fowles dismisses it in a footnote in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* thus: "Gosse's ingenious argument being that on the day God created Adam he also created all fossil and extinct forms of life along with him - which must surely rank as the most incomprehensible cover-up operation ever attributed to divinity by man" [158].) The intriguing thing about *Omphalos* is that it is not a "cover-up", but a genuine, albeit extremely odd effort to reconcile meticulous empirical observation with religious dogmatism. The book's argument is for "creation with the appearance of preexistence"⁸. Gosse's central premise, drawn from observation of the natural world rather than the Bible, is that all life inevitably displays the evidence of the ceaseless circle of birth, death, and regeneration. Even in the case of creation God cannot create life that is "outside" this cycle and therefore Adam must have been created with a navel, that is, with evidence of his preexistence. Gosse extends this argument to cover the whole world. He doesn't deny the existence of fossils or even whether they provide evidence of life before the Biblical creation. He contends that, like Adam's navel, they don't exist in real historical time and are an artefact of the necessity God must obey of "inserting" creation into a consistent system of organic being which "is whirling in a ceaseless circle, to which one knows not how to assign any commencement"(Gould 102).

Oscar and Lucinda does employ the tone of *Father and Son* which is neatly summed up by Callahan:

instead of pillorying and attacking his father head on, and aggressively denying him, Gosse deals lovingly and tenderly with his father through the narrative fiction of the gradually unfolding consciousness of the child, full of trust and filial belief, ironically carried by the knowing voice of the adult narrator. (25)

Whether the novel's sympathetic portrayal of Gosse senior is derived from his son's account or is of a piece with most of Carey's characterisation, it is nonetheless a clear example of the ambiguity and deliberate evasion of stark moral judgement that typifies Carey's approach to characters and issues that most readers would expect to be subject to satire or condemnation. Theophilus's religious passion is conflated with his overwhelming desire for order and predictability in such a way as to engage our sympathy rather than our contempt. We are allowed to know that he regrets hitting his son but is unable to articulate an apology. Even so, there is no doubt that he does go too far in his ranting about a sweet being the "fruit of Satan" (12).

From this one moment stems Oscar's distrust of his father, his conversion to Anglicanism and the idea that faith is a gamble and everything is predicated on chance. It is possible to read this moment of generational conflict as one of several instances of an implicit subversion of the reductive distortion of progressive historicism. An historicist novel which sought to fictionalise the patterns of British Imperialism would be much more likely to dramatise a Hegelian thesis/antithesis model of generational conflict which would probably have Oscar become a Darwinist. The novel resists the suppression of complexity that that form of historicist selectivity entails.

In this context it is worth noting that the calm certainty of Theophilus doesn't become extinct. Bob's mother is serenely positive that God intervened to repair the fuse in "The Advent Wreath". The praying she insists on after the father blasphemes and curses Oscar's church mirrors Theophilus bearing witness with the same total conviction. The church may well eventually be towed away because "It was not of any use" (508), but Carey is shrewd enough to remind us that the "cruel and lofty ideas" (508), the certainties that Oscar brought from England, are not entirely swept away.

Theophilus's fundamentalism is relativised rather than satirised by the text in that it is represented as one of many competing strategies for understanding the world. This is ironic in itself because for Theophilus there is only one biblical narrative into which the world is to fit. For him a close examination of the past can only reveal God's purpose, a distorting imposition that is at odds with the novel's depiction of the

past which is, as one dismissive English reviewer put it , "a story which takes pride in its limitless powers of incidental accumulation" (Dyer 28).

Incidental accumulation is precisely the effect which calls into question the truth claims of traditional historiography. The view of history that the novel expresses by adding incident to incident is profoundly opposed to the idea that history is made up of significant moments or that it is somehow possible to anticipate these moments. History is seen to be dependent on selective hindsight that arbitrarily constructs peaks of significance in a retrospect entirely driven by the needs of the present. From the point of view of the novel's narrator, a child's feelings of enthusiastic exuberance at celebrating Palm Sunday in a country that actually has palms is a critical moment in his history. Without it, Lucinda's father's horse would not have shied at the sight of a girl waving a palm frond, he wouldn't have died so young and Lucinda wouldn't have been a wealthy eighteen year old orphan and so on and so on. The book focuses on this particular moment because it is entirely lacking in intent and seems completely trivial in character. That's what history is. Lucinda's mother's lament that all would have been well if Abel hadn't been so foolish as to buy a flighty horse could just as easily be directed at the climate of a country that allowed palm trees to thrive. The point of focusing on so minor and capricious an action is to underline the infinite regress of regret. Anything that happens in the past can be seen as conspiring to create the future, even, indeed, especially something as innocent and ridiculous as a young girl reverently waving a palm frond and crying out absurdly "'Hosanna in the highest'" (76).

Another strategy employed by the novel is to tease out all of the implications of glass to show how a narrative can be held together by coincidental association. Language is fundamentally associative. The inevitable difference between symbol and referent is such that we construct meaning not from our direct experience of the world, but out of the relations between abstractions, constantly having to fall back onto simile and metaphor as a means of explanation, especially when we wish to transmit our understanding of the past, since for the most part it is only accessible through

language. *Oscar and Lucinda*, like Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, problematises history by generating chains of associative meaning in exploring the resonances of trivial things. What is attractive, ironic and functional about the parrot and the glass church is the metaphoric structure they give to otherwise disparate and amorphous occurrences.

This is particularly marked in *Oscar and Lucinda*. Glass, metaphorically, is what we are invited to see the past through. It clarifies and orders. It makes a curiously satisfactory sense that Philip Gosse is credited with inventing glass aquariums and that Oscar's church is so reminiscent of that enduring feature of Victorian colonial confidence and technical extravagance, the cast iron and glass conservatory. Glass, too, was often, as Carey knew, the forerunner of contact in indigenous Australia; glass made its way as a harbinger to tribes who had yet to encounter the invasion. But glass is also a process, a slowly melting liquid that distorts the view.

This kind of metaphoric structure allows us to connect ideas laterally according to their relationship with the central image, in this case, glass. It is an abstraction which creates a maddeningly complex series of approximations which almost, but not quite, settle down into meaning. It is a narrative contrivance which is not logical and emphatically not empirical. These approaches are implicitly rejected by the novel. History appears in the novel as it does to Hayden White - as rhetoric. We are warned right at the outset that this is history as fiction, at least partly because this impossibly detailed account is second hand hagiography, but also because of its source as a romantic story:

My mother told the story of the church in a way that always embarrassed me. There was an excess of emotion in her style. There was something false. (2)

The clear implication is that that "something false" is a consequence of an irrational, emotional style. Taken together with the narrator's mother's religious zeal and needlessly reverent attachment to Oscar's folly, it is possible to conflate the mythic

story of Oscar (told, one might add, to bishops and passing clergymen) with the biblical stories to which the book persistently alludes. So the "oral legend and family iconography" (Strauss 97) could be seen as being as suspect in the contemporary world as the florid language and contentious meaning of the King James Bible.

It is not just glass that structures the pattern of meaning in the novel. It is the church as well. Carey's initial inspiration for the novel was the notion that the Christian stories of his youth were being towed away in the form of a picturesque little church he used to admire in the Bellingen Valley (Willbanks 53). Consequently, in the novel the history of Australia is inextricably bound up with the influence of biblical parables. This is most obviously expressed in the use of 'church time' to locate the novel's action: Christmas, Palm Sunday, Ascension Day and Whitsunday. These allusions, typically, only provide a tantalising suggestion of significance, but are significant nonetheless. Mr Ahearne's obsession with the Parable of the Talents invites us to read it as a sort of template to which Australian history has conformed, especially as Lucinda's reaction to being lectured by Mr Ahearne on this parable is to interpret it thus: "My fortune is unearned. It is the fruit of your clever subdivision, and it was bought by the labour of my mother and my father and the blood of the blacks of the Dharuk "(427). In this context we are surely being asked to consider the influence of these lines:

For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. (Matthew 25: 29-30)

Characters in the novel take the archaic style of the Bible, along with its inconsistencies, conflicting versions of events, parables and bizarre revelation as absolute truth and seem strange to us for doing so. But the faith placed in mythic accounts of the past, especially a family history preserved by a descendant who regards the hero of this history as a sort of pioneering paragon, could equally be seen as peculiar and unreasonable. Carey's work characteristically tends toward this sort of relativism. Avowedly not a Christian ⁹, he declines to satirise or even appear to be

overly critical of fundamentalism as thoroughgoing as that pursued by the Plymouth Brethren. Indeed, if anything, Carey's tolerance of the dogmatically held moral values of a sect like the Brethren exemplifies the relativist paradox that Carey endlessly explores. Postmodern sensibility eschews central values and purportedly embraces all moral positions as relative. Its paradox - one that, typically, postmodernism revels in - is that this position can itself be characterised as a firmly held principle and extended to embrace philosophies like Christian fundamentalism which are inimical to it. Inimical, but fascinating. Carey wants to deconstruct history, and he is as keen as any other Australian writer to pay his dues to revisionist history, redress the balance of Australia's erstwhile masculinist history and even create for Lucinda the curiously honourable fate of becoming "famous, or famous at least amongst students of the Australian labour movement" (506).

But is his attack on history, if it really can be called that, an attack on a straw man? Jennifer Strauss, talking about *Oscar and Lucinda* in a seminar delivered in 1990 said:

One might justly contend that the "history" set up by some critics as oppositional to post-modern fiction is a straw-man adversary, since many of the qualities seen as characterising such fiction overlap, if in different ways, with the principles of much contemporary history, both mainstream and revisionist: for example, a determination to draw on multiple sources (not one tale but many); the avoiding of imposition of the historian's moral values and cultural assumptions on the subject matter (the author is dead: long live the text), a self-conscious awareness that this task is impossible (the text is not value free). (Strauss 104)

Manning-Clark is dead, Blainey's reputation is damaged and his work revised to include an Aboriginal perspective, school curricula have changed radically and historians such as Paul Carter and Greg Denning command considerable attention. "Official" history is rapidly losing its credibility among Australia's educated population, and even the idea that history is merely the account of the victors has become increasingly clichéd. This is a useful insight as far as it goes: that critics have tended to construct history as an ogre that novelists vanquish with elaborate expression of doubt. But in the case of Carey, whose work is shot through with ambivalence, it is

difficult to sustain the idea that he is creating such an ogre. There is no doubt that novels like Carey's are very much part of the reforming process occurring in the way Australians view the past. Despite this, the version of Australia's history which is implicitly criticised in *Oscar and Lucinda* - the imperial celebration of pioneering, settlement and exploration - is still something deeply embedded in Australian culture.

The understanding of the past that Carey is keen to discredit is the story of spreading civilisation that Paul Carter, among others, defines as imperial. Kirsten Holst Petersen argues, that "the narrator sets out...to unmake or relativise the European master narrative of history" (p110). She points out that Bob's (she is one of the critics who miss his name) version of *Oscar and Lucinda* is an amalgam of what he has learnt from his mother and the differing perspective of his father (leaving aside for the moment the narrator's impossible omniscience). Of these perspectives, the mother's is shown to be flawed and prejudiced on crucial points. What matters for Bob's mother is constructing a sufficiently romantic past for Oscar because he is a pioneering missionary. Not knowing anything about his passage from England and only possessing a piece of celluloid marked with a grid as a clue to the voyage, she invents a suitable fantasy so that her children grow up "imagining Oscar travelling out on steerage, on a clipper ship, crowded in amongst poor immigrants" (p191). All of this misinformation is delivered as a "holy-toned recitation", that is, as a sermon.

It is this, and her unbending dogmatism, which link her to Theophilus. No doubt Carey is critical of the sort of romantic settler history that Bob's mother constructs, but it is interesting to note that his personification of rigid adherence to belief (in the case of Theophilus to the Bible, and in Bob's mother's case, both to the Bible and the notion of Oscar's justness of purpose) is really quite sympathetic - even diplomatic. Whilst I admit that Carey is not entirely averse to creating villains, as his portrait of the monomaniacal Jeffris demonstrates, he sets out in creating his "straw-men" not so much to condemn as to relativise. The crucial opening episodes, featuring Bob's mother and Theophilus, are about inflexibility of belief. They are dramatisations of what postmodernist sensibility finds most repugnant. The

differences - that Theophilus regrets hurting his son and that the mother is triumphant about what she sees as divine intervention to mend the fuse - are not critical. What matters is the similarity. Both are wrong, and their error damages them in the eyes of their children. Significantly, the book opens with two stories about parental delusion.

Callahan, in his paper "*Oscar and Lucinda* and the Subversion of Subversion" is convinced beyond all textual evidence that Edmund Gosse, personified by Oscar, represents some sort of imperial father figure. But Oscar does no parenting and imparts no values. If there is any father figure representing England, it would, as I have already argued, *have* to be Theophilus. It is, after all, the dogged certainty of fundamentalists like him that provided the sine qua non of much of the missionary work which is now generally recognised as an essentially colonising activity. That said, Callahan does touch upon the importance of Carey's portrayal of Theophilus in his comparison of the tone of *Father and Son* with *Oscar and Lucinda*. The core of his argument is that Carey's reluctance to "subvert" English authority figures operates as a "subversion of subversion" similar to Edmund Gosse's reluctance to pillory his father in *Father and Son*. This non-judgemental tone is particularly applied to the character of Theophilus: as Callahan says, Carey "deals with the authority figure of Gosse's text with the good humour and genial familiarity with which the Son treats the Father" (1990: 25). Gosse could have attacked head on and aggressively denied him, just as Carey could have vigorously rejected Australia's English antecedents by personifying British imperialism with a buffoon. The problem with this analysis is the premise that either writer has the vaguest obligation or intention to harshly criticise or so crassly simplify the past.

Both Gosse and Carey want to *understand* their histories whether they are public or private, and know very well that railing against errors made by authority is a limited and not particularly constructive means of arriving at understanding. Callahan wants the past judged. Carey wants to humanise it. Callahan's analysis is based on an essentialist premise that novels are either subversive or supportive. Carey has never been a classic satirist. The attraction of *Father and Son* is the charming humanity of

its approach, rather than its schematic or satirical possibilities. It still has to be conceded, however, that the notion of filialness *is* part of Carey's treatment of the past. Theophilus and Philip Gosse *are* mistaken. And they are not condemned because their portrayal is imbued with affection, familial affection.

Just how much *Oscar and Lucinda* relativises the sins of the past is the issue here. It is a novel that does moralise about the past. The selection of events is such that it is impossible to regard the novel as a celebration of Australian history and it explicitly invites us to judge our mythic history of exploration not as a heroic struggle, but as a brutal invasion. So is the past judged, "subverted", as Callahan would have it? The creation of the monstrous Jeffris alone is probably sufficient grounds for us to conclude that Carey wants the whole business of exploration and pioneering re-evaluated in largely negative terms. However we have to remember that Oscar (hardly an anti-hero) is implicated in the whole sordid project, as is its financier, Lucinda. She may have moments when she wants to rid herself of her fortune on the grounds that the "land was stolen from the blacks"(126), but she still funds Jeffris' quasi-military expedition. Carey's narrator is in a classic postcolonial bind: he does not approve of the history that has created his place in the world, but if his place in the world has advantages created by that sordid past, he finds it difficult to reject completely.

In a figurative sense to reject his past would be akin to rejecting his mother. This, in a way, is what the narrator does. He describes his mother as a "bully", and the glimpses he allows us of her are mostly negative. She is so in thrall to the myths of the church that she uses fuse wire and mesh from the rabbit hutch to construct an advent wreath, oblivious to the consequences of blown fuses and piddling rabbits with nowhere to live. She is even more rigidly certain of her creed than Theophilus: "we had none of the doubts of the 1860s" (75) says Bob. Bob's mother lies about the past, inventing some spurious nonsense about longitude and latitude to account for the piece of celluloid that Oscar had marked with squares in a strange attempt to conquer his fear of water by having the sight of it soothingly sequestered. She owns the past:

When my father spoke of the scientific history of celluloid (which, having a diploma in industrial chemistry, he was entitled to do) she felt that he was contesting her ownership of its original use, its meaning, its history. ... The celluloid was hers. The meaning of it was hers. (190)

We are invited to see her as territorial about the past. The narrator's father, his tongue loosened by a couple of beers, tells him apropos of Oscar's church "that [his] mother walked around the perimeter of St. John's like a dog pissing around a fence" (3). None of this adds up to a very flattering portrait and yet Carey's tone is such that we don't rush to condemn. For one thing, despite being given a dogged eccentricity and a blithe ignorance, she is not malicious. And importantly, she is his mother; he can't rail against her because she is family, part of his character and system of belief.

If it is possible to characterise Theophilus or Oscar as father figures representing British imperialism, then Bob's mother could equally be seen as a mother figure representing Australian colonialism. She is the one telling the stories and constructing the myths of pioneering piety. Hers is the romantic version of Australia's history, inextricably bound up with the missionary certainty of Christianity, silent about Aborigines and more concerned with rhetoric than reality. Bob's mother personifies the received history of Australian colonialism in a way that is related to the way in which Theophilus represents an insistence on Christian stories. Not only do they share similar faiths, they are important agents of the Christian stories whose passing Carey has repeatedly said provided the inspiration for the novel (Baker). Carey saw these Christian stories as being literally removed along with a weatherboard church at Bellingen and revealed in an interview on Canadian radio the ambivalence which shaped his approach to the culture which supplanted the stories of the Aborigines:

I was curious about my feelings - why should I, an atheist, care what happened to a Christian church? The answer, of course, is that although I was no longer a Christian, the image of the church evoked a great deal of my own cultural and spiritual history. (Wachtel 103)

This attitude is shared by the narrator and is not simply nostalgia because it also encompasses the realisation that this Christianity "had destroyed 40,000 years of Aboriginal culture to establish itself" (Wachtel 103). This aspect of the narrator's attitude is reminiscent of Derek Walcott's speculation on "The Muse of History" wherein he eschews simple condemnation of a barbarous past for a curiously apolitical gratitude for his own existence:

You were when you acted your roles, your given, historical roles of slave seller and slave buyer, men acting as men, and also you, father in the filth-ridden gut of the slave ship, to you they were also men, with the cruelty of men your fellow man and tribesman not moved or hovering with hesitation about your common race any longer than my other bastard ancestor hovered with his whip, but to you inwardly forgiven grandfathers, I, like the more honest of my race, give a strange thanks. I give the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your other Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift. (Walcott 374)

This is a startlingly clear expression of a sense of gratitude that cannot be ignored and refuses to be suppressed no matter how immoral the circumstances leading to one's existence might be. Again and again the narrator makes the point that if it hadn't been for a certain Christmas pudding he wouldn't exist, and if Oscar hadn't sat in a particular spot he would not have met Lucinda and the present could not be as it now is. The immutability of the past renders polemical judgement pointless, and in the case of Bob, he, like Walcott, cannot (to borrow an aphorism of Satre's) argue with history because it leads to him.

I am not arguing that the narrator's view of history is merely a bland acceptance of the events leading up to his birth. What I am looking to emphasise is the lack of passionate regret or bitter denunciation that you might expect to find in a postcolonial novel. There are traces of bitterness (the narrator does have his "bitter juice"), but they certainly do not dominate the tone of the novel. We need to remember that *Oscar and Lucinda* is a novel and not a political tract. The fact that the novel does not foreground the "great lie" of Australian history in effect mimics, ironically, the way Australian historians have tended to deal with it. The impact of

Elizabeth Leplastrier's offhand, delirious recollection that her husband had murdered an Aborigine is all the more effective for being lost among the other things that race through her fevered mind: "Leplastrier had made this bed. Such a fussily made bed. How could a man who could kill a black man with his rifle make such a stupid, romantic bed? A knowingly rustic bed made with saplings and greenhide" (92).

Elizabeth then drifts off into irritable thoughts about Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "a reactionary fool", and is more annoyed about her husband's admiration for him manifested in the romantic bed he had made than about his crime. I think there is some significance in the use of Rossetti in this context. The paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites are almost invariably focussed on tragedy and despair and executed in a style of ludicrously heightened sentimentality. They represent a false, romantic view of the world quite deliberately juxtaposed against the sordid, real and unmentioned tragedy of colonial aggression. It is not a coincidence that the next reference to the conflict with the Aboriginal people involves a Mr Tomasetti, an artist more interested in aesthetics and spirituality than morality. He prefers to speak authoritatively about the landscape, confidently declaring it not to be Christian, while a cow trapped in the mud bellows pitifully. His attitude toward Mrs Burrows, the embittered widow who advocates the use of "'bye-bye damper'" (160) is especially illuminating. He is not in the least disturbed by her extreme hatred of the Aborigines and, far from being troubled by Captain Burrows' journal entries concerning "raids against the blacks", tells her "that her husband had no talent with the pen" (170). Tomasetti actually finds brutality stimulating. Unlike Jeffris, who, surprisingly, finds Captain Burrows' set of cards depicting 'Rape by Cossacks' frightening, Tomasetti is sexually excited by them. The suggestion seems to be that the Pre-Raphaelites, with their insistence on a lurid realism, were creating a sort of pornography of tragedy. *Oscar and Lucinda* declines to do the same thing and aestheticise tragedy in the way that Mrs Burrows does at the end of "Personal Effects". She is metaphorically impressed by her husband's set of cards and Tomasetti's excited reaction to them:

He looked at her and smiled, an unsugary expression, not weak, as austere as whisky with no water. She pressed herself against him, shivering, as once, in the potteries of Stafford, she had pressed wet clay against a plaster mould. She would be a plate, God save her. Let the aproned decorators paint dancing Cossacks around her rim, or dead blacks like spokes around a poisoned water-hole. (173)

The conquest of the Aborigines is not the overtly central theme of the book. If it were, we would expect more fully realised characters than Kumbaingiri Billy and probably some of the actual content of the ancient stories that he alludes to. At least one reviewer, Gerald Windsor, found the late and seemingly peripheral references to conflict with Aborigines "one of the weakest things in the novel" which read "like a special insert for the bicentennial edition" (70). In other words, Windsor is critical of Carey's inclusion of "An Aboriginal episode" because he sees it as being *merely* political and at odds with the qualities he most admires in Carey: "the large, zany, arresting images."

But considering that a local history of the area well known to Carey did not even bother to mention the name of the local tribe, *Oscar and Lucinda* is a decisive step forward. A history of Grafton to which Carey contributed¹⁰ contains just two references to the local indigenes. One is that the Clarence Valley Special School was formerly known as Caringa, "aboriginal for 'Happy Home'" (27). The other is a passing comment that the local showground was once "the site of the large aboriginal encampment" (14). Even the fact that this publication was printed as far back as 1981 does not dull its relevance. It is reminiscent of the much quoted spurious etymology of Darkwood:

Darkwood, for instance, they will tell you at the Historical Society, is called Darkwood because of the darkness of the foliage, but it was not so long ago you could hear people call it Darkies' Point, and not so long before that when Horace Clarke's grandfather went up there with his mates - all the old families should record this when they are arguing about who controls the shire - and pushed an entire tribe of aboriginal men and women and children off the edge. (*Oscar and Lucinda* 2)

As Bob says, he "learned long ago to distrust local history"(2). Naturally Carey is determined not to reproduce these sorts of omissions. On one level Windsor's

complaint about contrivance in the portrayal of the massacre of Aboriginals is not entirely mistaken. The only chapter that is not in Bob's voice ("Glass Cuts") does stand out from the rest of the novel. But this doesn't make it what Windsor implies, an addendum clumsily created to satisfy the ideology of critics.

Its obvious contrivance is not necessarily a flaw. Windsor, no doubt reviewing on the run, has not taken into account the metafictional qualities of this novel. Noticing that the book lacks the magical impossibilities of Carey's previous work, Windsor has decided that Carey is writing a realist novel, albeit "of a hyperbolic kind". Sue Gillet's more considered view in her essay "*Oscar and Lucinda*: Shattering History's Self-Reflection", takes the opposite approach and argues that the novel is profoundly anti-realist in structure and intent. She cites Howard Jacobson's complaint about Bob's ability to "vouch for characters who flourished over 100 years before in the language of intimacy" (196) as a typically wrong-headed quibble. Her point is that Jacobson, like Windsor, is evaluating the book in his review as a historical realist novel. But, as Gillet observes, the very obvious impossibility of the narration immediately signals that Carey is undermining the very idea of authorial omniscience that this genre presupposes. Contrivance is not concealed discretely but rather is flaunted. This is most clearly signalled in the novel's blatantly self-conscious twist, when we discover right at the end of this enormously long narrative that our assumption that Bob is the descendant of Oscar and Lucinda has been deliberately sustained just to create the surprise of his marriage to Miriam Chadwick. Some reviewers perceived this as an outrageous flouting of the reader's expectations. Despite being charmed by the equally unlikely glass church, these reviewers attack the novel for departing from Victorian novelistic conventions. C. K. Stead, in a long review in *Scraps*, exemplifies this approach in complaining that, like the separation of Oscar and Lucinda, the capricious circumstances that leave Wardley-Fish unable to meet Oscar after travelling half way round the world "strains that credulity which the underlying realism of the whole seems to require" (8).

Stead's expectations are all realist ones, or at least formalist ones. Despite knowing full well that the book "is not so much history as fable, not so much psychology as symbolism; not so much a novel as a bicentennial national epic; not so much fiction as meta-fiction" (4), he persists in evaluating the novel "by essentially the same criteria as apply in the case of the great nineteenth century novelists" (4). Not surprisingly, he finds Carey wanting. The novel's persistent drift toward relativism resists such a positivist approach. The book *is* implicitly critical of Victorian conventions, both social and literary, but it also displays a marked fascination and amusement with them. The predominate tone of *Oscar and Lucinda* is, as I have argued, the peculiarly filial one of *Father and Son*, which balances criticism with affection.

A critic such as Stead seeks the clarity of obvious oppositions. The novel should either attack Victorian historical realism or it should support and celebrate it. It should have a view about the past (mistaken or otherwise) that is consistent and verifiable. It should either blatantly foreground its contrivance or assiduously conceal it. This approach to the novel is so wedded to an essentialist doctrine predicated on a series of either/or propositions that it cannot perceive the aspects of the book which are inimical to such a doctrine. Stead's objection, like Windsor's, is based on what is perceived to be Carey's political viewpoint. Stead says, rather churlishly, that "Carey is dutiful about (what else in 1988?) racism and sexism. Women and blacks are victims" (4). The truth is that Lucinda is not portrayed as a victim, and nor are other women in the novel, but Stead objects to that too, complaining that Lucinda and her mother "are modern women of the 1980s put into the costume of the 1850s" (5). Stead's thesis is that Carey has a biased and narrow view of the past (he concludes his review with the opinion that Carey "seems to have grown up under a stone" [8]) that is being dramatised in an essentially realist novel.

The political views that Stead wants to ascribe to the novel are not unequivocally supported by the text. There is ample evidence that Carey is "soft left" in his political orientation, but I don't think that his novels are merely an expression of

his political leanings. They pointedly lack dogmatism. It could be argued that the sort of radical uncertainty and relativism that pervade Carey's work is in itself hard evidence of a political position, but the sort of programmatic "political correctness" that Stead implies is being foisted on to the past in *Oscar and Lucinda* is not sustained by the novel's content. Lucinda's feminist career happens off stage. Carey does not make the Aboriginal experience entirely central. Beside which, the book's hero has prejudices and religious beliefs opposed to those of its author.

The character of Oscar best illustrates the novel's deliberate blurring of the subjective and the objective that makes it impossible to reduce Carey's work to a set of precepts. Oscar's suffering and charm is such that we sympathise with the absurdity of his views, which are naively missionary. From an objective, historicist viewpoint Oscar is an arch colonist, certain of his truth and dismissive and ignorant of the country he is in. He gives an Aboriginal woman what we are told is "a damn silly name for a Kumbaingiri" (488), Mary Magdalene. His faith in the congruence of symbol and referent is as literal and absolute as his father's, dramatised by the peculiar game he plays with his own private symbol system that determines his fate, and in his other entirely arbitrary and exclusively personal code, his history of the racetrack. But subjectively he is appealing and surprisingly accurate in the meaning he derives from the world according to his rigid belief in the "Word". After all, given the circumstances in which he found her and her conversion to Christianity, calling Kumbaingiri Billy's aunty Mary is not so ridiculous. The view that it is "damn silly" is, in any case, expressed by Kumbaingiri Billy and not an omniscient Carey. Even though Oscar's history of the racetrack is only comprehensible to him, it is still a sufficiently reliable representation of the past to allow Oscar the ability to predict the future (according to Karl Popper, the principal argument in support of historicism) accurately enough to make a living from his gambling. Stead calls him "a holy fool", and Jacobson finds in him an innocent hero. But Oscar can also be read as profoundly ignorant. His is hardly a hero's fate. The lack of a satisfactory union, even in death, in

Oscar's lonely drowning is a parodic echo of the arch realist George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, wherein the brother and sister, Tom and Maggie are united in death.

The very character of Oscar is only tentatively heroic and continually ironised. He is emphatically not the hero of a realist novel. The appearance of the prominent Victorian figures George Eliot and Philip Gosse (albeit disguised as Theophilus) and the connections they have with Oscar and Lucinda are not deployed to provide the verisimilitude of authentic historical detail, but to subvert notions of realism. By realism, what I mean here is the naive belief that a symbol system which is by its very nature arbitrary can represent reality. I concur with Gillet's argument that the novel highlights this notion in showing Oscar and Lucinda to be victims of this belief in the innocence of representation: "They are victims in as much as they trust too much in the transparent reflectiveness of the symbolic world of signs. They believe in the one-to-one correspondence between signs and meanings" (199). Eliot and Gosse feature as mentors to Oscar and Lucinda in this crucial sense. Even though both of them reject aspects of these authority figures - Oscar abandons his father's version of fundamentalism and Lucinda is disillusioned by Mary Ann Evans' snobbery - they retain their inflexible belief in the congruence of sign and signified.

Both Oscar and Lucinda are sure that they know what the glass church means. It's the symbol of their unspoken love and a combination of their vocations. A glass church: what clearer symbolic construction can there be of the union of a glass manufacturer and a clergyman? But the meaning I just ascribed to the church is not publicly acknowledged by either Oscar or Lucinda. The reader is led to believe that this is what Oscar desires it to mean, but Oscar is so narrowly committed to a peculiarly Christian notion of denial that he convinces himself that the church is a gift of love from Lucinda to Dennis Hasset. By dragging the structure through unexplored territory in a spirit of abnegation, Oscar, it is implied, hopes to win Lucinda. He creates a story of the world predicated on a misunderstanding borne of his enculturation as a Victorian Christian, ignorant of sexuality and seeing virtue in suffering.

Despite the fact that he colludes with the processes of colonisation by managing to do some missionary work in a laudanum haze while on Jeffris' murderous expedition, Oscar remains innocent. This ambivalence is partly created by the filial affection of the narrator's tone, but also by the novel's foregrounding of doubts about the arbitrary nature of all historical representation. *Oscar and Lucinda* is an exploration of history which is concerned, as Carey says "not so much [with] saving history as inventing it, re-shaping it,[and] creating ways of looking at it" (Wachtel 104). The book cannot be defined as a attack on British colonialism in Australia because it radically calls into question the very processes of thinking and representation that make such a formulation possible.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ESSENTIAL THREAD:

THE GREAT WORLD

The Great World, one would expect, should continue to express the anti-historicism that critics have detected in Malouf's earlier work. With its emphasis on that "other" history of ordinary imagination and yearning the novel does appear to be a typically postmodernist, anti-essentialist treatment. But, as Andrew Taylor points out: "In that old debate between Nature and Nurture, Essentialism and Construction, it seems ... that *The Great World* is on the side of the former" (1994: 44). The way in which the character of Vic is reducible to an essential child and his existence in time to a continuous thread is at odds with the postmodernism's characteristic avoidance of such a reductive and centralising notion. To the contrary, of course, it could be argued that Vic is a portrait of a character who has misunderstood his place in the great world and that the paradigm sensibility is Digger's.

But even if that is the most persuasive reading, it remains the case that Digger is unquestionably driven by an essentialising impulse. The novel continually emphasises Digger's impossible desire to contain the whole world within his head, including every detail of the past "down to the last razor blade and button of a baby's bootee" (179). Digger's awareness that his desire is unfulfillable is the key to his self-possession and his perception that "his perplexity about life, which did not prevent him from living it, was essential to him" (296). His openness to the variousness of experience is contrasted with Vic's desire for linear organisation. This is how Digger perceives the past:

Even the least event had lines, all tangled, going back into the past, and beyond that into the *unknown* past, and other lines leading out, also tangled, into the future. Every moment was dense with causes, possibilities, consequences; too many, even in the simplest case, to grasp. Every moment was dense too with lives, all crossing and interconnecting or exerting pressure on one another, and not just human lives either; the narrowest patch of earth at the Crossing, as he had known since he was two years old, was crowded with little centres of activity, visible or invisible, that made up a web so intricate that your mind, if you went into it, was immediately struck - fierce cannibalistic occasions without number, each one of which could deafen you if you had ears to hear what was going on there. And beyond that there were what you could not even call lives or existences: they were mere processes - the slow burning of gases for instance in the veins of leaves - that were invisibly and forever changing the state of things; heat, sunlight, electric charges to which everything alive enough responded and held itself erect, hairs and fibres that were very nearly invisible but subtly vibrating, nerve ends touched and stroked. (296)

Life is too hopelessly tangled and too much of an intricate web for Digger to fully perceive his own thread through it. Vic, on the other hand, can only sustain himself by hanging on to this metaphorical thread. He is so committed to the straightforward idea of cause and effect that he is never able to feel at ease with his position within the Warrender family. When he sees the unemployed men that Meggsie feeds in the back yard he "felt then that he was on the wrong side of things, that he had got out of some shame and humiliation that had been meant for him too" (143). As he understands his past of deprivation, it must lead to him continuing his life of suffering and humiliation. This is the correct sequence of events, the correct line. While working on the railway he denies himself "the luxury of the past" (143), but this living exclusively in the present is a limitation of his perceptions entered into in the interests of coping. Thinking about the past for Vic implies thinking about the future precisely because he sees his life as following a continuous line. As a prisoner of war his future looks so bleak that he has to suppress anything which leads him to it.

In this he is unlike the majority of his comrades who use their memories as a "magic formula for keeping yourself in the world or for wiping yourself, temporarily, out of it" (148). They (Digger is the doyen of them) reconstruct the past in great detail, listing all the girls they ever "done it with" (148) or the names of all the cattle they had ever owned or "the words of all the songs in the *Boomerang Songbook* for

March 1941" (149). What appears to be soothing about this process is that the memories are ordered and structured into lists. It is the order and structure which matter rather than the memories themselves. Later in the novel *Digger* comforts himself at Vic's funeral by reciting to himself the names of all of his fellow prisoners. Clearly, this very tightly ordered mantra of the past is a coping mechanism and therefore in a certain sense unreliable (its use is to take you out of the world rather than to a better understanding of it). What the novel does not seem in the least bit interested in is the distortion inherent in such rote history. That this sort of memorisation is reductive is well known to *Digger*, but the emotional equilibrium it provides in the novel gives it a positive value.

The application of limitations and boundaries can, however, be destructive. Marge Keen's futile attempt to reduce the entire of her family's life to a perfect, static tableau in which she has gathered all of the items she sees as representing fulfilment in the place that bears their name is abandoned by her in the end because such a desire cannot cope with anything outside of it. Marge controls the world outside by, for instance, measuring the groceries she sells with careful precision and obdurately continuing to run the shop after the Crossing becomes a dead end. But she realises, even before she climbs the hill and sees Sydney in the distance, that her dream has been foolish and enclosing:

Everything, every stick of furniture, every inch of the curtains she had ordered and sewn and hung in their three rooms, every teaspoon, and the wedding picture of her husband's parents on the sideboard, and the bags of sugar, rice, salt, and the scale in the back room on which for thirty three years she had weighed them out in pound and half pound packets - all that, and her kitchen chairs and saucepans, and the bucket and mop behind the door, and Jenny flopping on the counter, and all the ghosts of the others, squeezed into a corner by the stove and sucking a rusk or pushing ashes into their mouths, Leslie and James and May and Billy - all that and more, weighted on her heart and crushed her. She could have set a match to the lot of it in this high wind and watched it blaze up in a roar of smuts. (244)

This final desire to abandon her life's ambition is in stark contrast to *Digger's* continuing desire to retain not just "the immense pile of debris that any one life might make" (179), but all of this "multiplied by millions" (179). He wants, as I have cited

above, "to take it all back again, down to the last razor blade and button off a baby's bootee, and see it restored" (179). It is in the difference between Marge's domestic fantasy and Digger's cosmopolitan aspiration that the novel's advocacy of a certain kind of historical understanding can be detected.

Amanda Nettelbeck argues persuasively that "Digger senses inevitable lack - the gaps in one's knowledge of things, the spaces between definable boundaries - as a source of creative potential, as space in which to move" (1992: 47). She contrasts this with Vic's "inability to invent his own life's sustaining narratives" (47). According to her Digger is enacting a form of what Paul Carter has called "spatial history". Malouf's interest in this elusive concept is well documented (he read a copy of *The Road to Botany Bay* before it was published in 1988 and recorded a conversation with Carter on some of the issues the book raises), but, while I agree that Digger's understanding of the past is being favourably contrasted with his mother's and Vic's, I do not think that Digger's dogged memorisation of detail and sense that his head "really was the world" (28) points to a fresh understanding of history based on his consciousness of the gap between perception and reality.

Nettelbeck argues for "Digger's capacity for imaginative invention" (49) as his "enabling strength" which "both caters to the changes that the great world can throw up and recognizes the lines between things that can be used to invent a notion of history, of continuity within the processes of difference" (49). The problem with this is that Digger simply does not "invent a notion of history" and is hardly a character notable for his imaginative inventiveness. Pa Warrender is the character who gives voice to that "other history". Digger is merely able to remember his poems. And his fascination with the fact that Keen's Crossing bears his name seems to me to be evidence of an attachment to the capacity of language to delineate space rather than attesting to Digger's overriding interest in the act of naming.

Despite Digger's speculations about just what Keen's crossing had been before the arrival of his grandfather ("Did it have any name at all? And, without one, how had anyone known what it was or that it was here at all?" [198]), the novel's focus on

the naming of Keen's Crossing is not merely an advocacy of Carter's spatial history. Carter's influence is very probably here, but the novel does not use Carter's ideas as a template over which it has written Digger's musings. Digger's sense of connection to the Crossing (which is only marginally different from Marge's in this case) is at odds with Carter in being a sustaining legitimation. The novel is quite specific about it:

Years later, in some of their worst times in Thailand, this connection would sustain Digger and help keep him sane, keep him attached to the earth; to that brief stretch of it that was continuous with his name and, through that, with his image of himself. (199)

Compare this to Carter's opening remarks about what spatial history might be:

Before the name: what was the place like before it was named? How did Cook see it? Barring catatonic seizure, his landing there was assured: but where to land, where to look, how to proceed? Where was the place as yet? Ahead, it was dense, cloudy; the report of small waves behind. The sound of voices calling to each other out of sight, displaying the invisible space, making it answer. Birds with human voices. The legend of giants. What we see is what the firstcomers did not see: a place, not a historical space. A place, a historical fact, detached from its travellers; static, at anchor, as if it was always there, bland, visible. Standing at this well-known point, the spatial event is replaced by a historical stage. (Carter 1987: xiii-xiv)

What Digger is doing in thinking about his connection to Keen's Crossing is engaging in the supposedly "imperial" act of seeing a linear narrative unfold on his own private historical stage. Carter, on the other hand, wants to perceive the past as a process disengaged from the interests of the present. Digger's recognition of historical complexities is not the same thing. He is much too practical a character to allow himself to be lost in some sort of creative and poetic maelstrom. He anchors himself firmly to his lists. His only concession to anti-essentialist scepticism is, ironically, to essentialise it:

Digger was dizzied by the world. He could never, he felt, see it steady enough or at a sufficient distance to comprehend what it was, let alone to act on it. This was a disadvantage; but he had long since come to the conclusion that his perplexity about life, which did not prevent him from living it, was essential to him. (296)

Vic is the character that Nettelbeck would have us see as deficient, largely because, instead of accumulating memories, "Vic hangs on to what is tangible" and is in this respect "a follower of Marge Keen's 'religion of *getting*'" (48). Yet it is Vic's death, accompanied by a cluster of resonant metaphors, that occupies the novel's final chapter. Vic's acquisitiveness does not automatically mark him out as a species of villain, although I concede that his involvement in the unproductive corporate takeover culture of the late eighties is meant to be seen as morally culpable. But Vic is no Christopher Skase. Like so much else in Malouf's fiction, there is an ambivalence about the world of business. The portrayal of Vic is reminiscent of the conclusion of *Johnno* in which Dante is unable to discard his father's bible of business success, *Young Man with an Oil-Can*. Vic is a success, but not a grotesque one.

Taylor sees Vic as representing "unchangingness within change" (1994: 42). What is essential in Vic - and this tallies with the preoccupation with childhood in the other novels - is the child that he was. Given Malouf's romantic vision of childhood as a state most nearly approaching an undifferentiated integration with the world, ending the novel with Vic as a child encourages a sympathetic reading of Vic's world view. The novel explicitly suggests a relationship between Vic's death and other deaths in Malouf's work by making the child to which Vic reverts six years old, the same age used in Ovid's death scene. Vic's death is, however, only superficially like those in *An Imaginary Life*, *Harland's Half Acre* and *Fly Away Peter*. Instead of returning to the earth or to some idealised state of pantheistic communion, Vic suffers a banal death alongside one of the enemies of Jenny's domestic wars: a cat. It is quite possible that Vic's death represents a departure by Malouf from a commitment to amorphous mystification to neat closure.

The final lines of the novel promise that the child to which Vic has reverted will succeed in threading the needle. According to most readings of *The Great World*, the thread which the child is attempting to pass through the needle symbolises Vic's linear perception of his own history and identity. The act is a difficult one - space and time do not, as Nettelbeck observes, remain coherent, but the point the novel makes is

not that the process of creating lines of meaning is an impossible or artificial one. In *The Great World* the process is a successful one. The novel switches between Vic's past and future selves, indicating that progressive change (Vic watches himself learn to ride a bike) is an integral part of the novel's final conceit and showing that Vic's particular thread of cause and effect *can* be perceived. Furthermore, Vic's understanding of his life and its imminent closure, reduced to the metaphor of the child struggling to thread a needle, is physical as well as cerebral: "He concentrates and holds his hands just so and draws his whole body together" (330). This reduction to such a narrow focus is antithetical to the craving for an undifferentiated pre-Imaginary state manifest in *An Imaginary Life*.

Vic will die as the needle is threaded. As Nettelbeck puts it, this "story passes a thread of meaning through an open space" (1995: 54). Categories of space and time are not collapsed at the end of the novel in the same fashion as in *An Imaginary Life*, but are neatly telescoped: Vic's passage through the great world is sequential and completed. Vic's ability to see both the whole sky or the neighbour's house through the needle's eye does not have to be read as a comment upon the way we define space in terms of limits and boundaries, but can also be read as a resigned observation. The thread of meaning to which Vic's life has been reduced can only make sense to him if it passes through a closed space, a space which excludes the irrelevant. Metaphorically speaking, this limited space can frame several perspectives (house, sky, truck and girls swinging on their gate), but it simply cannot encompass everything at once.

Curiously enough, Digger, despite his desire to contain all of time and space in his head, can be seen as being even more reductive than Vic. It is true that Digger is conscious that he distorts the great world by fitting it into his lists, but this capacity for memorisation and emotional equilibrium it creates for Digger provides the novel's final image of him. The novel leaves us with Digger reciting the list of his comrades to himself. Vic's last name, Curran, has different meanings in different contexts, but

Digger finally settles on placing him in the official historical context of the list of his comrades:

Digger stood and looked at it spelled out there, the six letters. It meant one thing on the newsboard and another thing altogether where its two syllables were tucked away, among so many, in his head. Another thing again as he had actually known the man. He took up the list again where he had left off. *Doig, Dooley, Doone, Durani, Dwyer...*It was a long way yet to the end. (328)

The poignancy of this passage is in its implication that the construct in which Digger places Vic is a reductive limitation that cannot be avoided. It is lamentable, but inevitable. The passage does not seriously question the constructedness of such recall and belies Nettelbeck's insistence that in *The Great World* "there is no verifiable history but rather a web of competing narratives which each write a different story" (1995:54). The idea that the narratives of Vic's life are in competition is imposed on the text. These narratives are different but they can just as easily be said to be complementary and accurate.

The only inaccurate history that the novel touches upon are the rumours about the outside world that sweep the camp. Significantly, this "phantom war" (166) has a real emotional impact and consequences:

It was an odd thing to have lived and died a little in a history that had never actually occurred; to have survived, as some of them had, on the bit of hope they had been given by the fall of Yokohama at Christmas 1943, or succumbed, as others did, in the gloom that descended when a few weeks later Churchill died and New Zealand surrendered, both on the same day. (166)

This passage indicates that the novel's concern is not so much with the validity or legitimacy of historical discourse as such, but with the way historical consciousness is used to create identity and mediates our relationship with the bare facts of the world. This phantom history is immediately understood by the reader as a falsity which does not challenge the facts about Churchill or New Zealand. Vic and Digger are less representatives of different forms of historical understanding than different personalities acted upon not by historical discourse but by historical experience. The

ontological status of their time in Changi and on the Burma railway is not the issue. What is the issue is what such an experience reveals about their identities.

Andrew Taylor argues that in the novel "Identity as essence rather than as construction is being located unmistakably within the Natural" (1994: 44). He demonstrates this by referring specifically to the incident in which Vic takes Digger down to a nearby river so that the fish will eat away the rotting flesh of his leg and clean the wound. His point is that Nature restores Digger to his essential self, that "what is figured here is the purgation of something invading from outside the self, and a restoration to the self of its own purity, its own essential inner consistency" (44). I agree with Taylor that this novel has an essentialising impulse, something which is at odds with the notion that the book is a fictional endorsement of Carter's spatial history.

Spatial history foregrounds the uncertainties inherent in narrative history and its supposedly "theatrical assumption that, in reality, historical individuals are actors, fulfilling a higher destiny" (Carter 1987: xvii). Carter is firmly set against empiricism and the nineteenth century historians he dismisses as "parquet positivists". He is suspicious of hierarchies and the reductionism implicit in any essentialising philosophy. This is why it is so difficult to define spatial history - it deliberately eschews having an essential set of precepts to which it can be reduced. Some of the things he calls for, such as "returning metaphor to its ontological role" (201), have an obvious attraction to a novelist such as Malouf who depends heavily on metaphoric resonances for aesthetic effect and as generators of ambivalent meaning. His two novels which deal with events of considerable historic moment, the First and Second World Wars, end with elaborate and relatively open conceits, implying that the most effective way to deal with the past is not with linear narrative or political melodrama, but with metaphor.

But in the case of *The Great World*, the poetic ending presents us with an almost Wordsworthian epitome. Vic does not, like other Maloufian protagonists, transcend his circumstances with the sort of death that breaks down the binary oppositions that fundamentally separate him from the world. Instead he reverts to his

basic identity which is that of an ambitious child. Even in death Vic looks back at his childhood self learning to ride a bike.

The idea that Malouf is in some way asking for "an unravelling of the colonial myth of imperial centrality and even the socially broad myth of historical realism" (Nettelbeck 1992: 52) is not backed up by the text. The experience of Australian prisoners of war described in the novel is entirely dependent on historical realism. The "colonial myth of imperial centrality" is a peripheral concern in the book and only manifests itself in the realisation of the soldiers that imperial power can change abruptly and with it their status. This is not to completely deny the influence of the concept of spatial history on this novel, but the seriousness of its subject matter mitigates against an overtly theoretical interpretation of its treatment of history.

CHAPTER SIX

POISED BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:

REMEMBERING BABYLON

Germaine Greer launched a scathing attack on David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* which asserted, among other things, that the novel has "no commitment to historical truth" (11). At the same time she also accused Malouf of having invented "the limping, speechless black white man, Gemmy Farley" who is "The only black who is allowed to speakand he is not allowed to say much beyond (unbelievably) 'Don't shoot. I'm a British object.'" (11). Gemmy Fairley is certainly an invention of Malouf's, but the unlikely words he utters are just as certainly historically true. Gemmy is, as Malouf points out in his end note to the novel, based on a brief account of the life of James Morrill or Murrells (not "Morril or Morell", as Malouf claims) by Edmund Gregory. The words James Morrill shouts from the fence ("(the seed of this fiction)"[202]) are reported by Edmund Gregory thus:

Presently I took courage and got on the fence to prevent the dogs from biting me, and called out so that they might hear me, "what cheer, shipmates." There were, it afterwards appeared, three living in the hut, but there were only two at home then. They heard me, and knowing it to be a strange voice, one of them came out and saw me there - neither black nor white - naked, and looked surprised; he went half in the hut again and spoke to his mate. I understood him to say, come out, Bill, here is a red or yellow man standing on the rails, naked, he is not a black man - bring the gun. But being dreadfully afraid they would use the gun, I said "do not shoot me, I am a British object - a shipwrecked sailor." Of course I meant "subject", but in the excitement of the moment I did not know what I said. (Gregory 15)

This passage raises a number of questions about *Remembering Babylon*, most of which have to do with the political implications of Malouf's treatment of historical material. Greer is not the only commentator to have taken issue with the novel, with Suvendrini Perera and Peter Otto also expressing doubts about the book's vision of

colonialism. However, the curious fact is that Malouf's "white black man" did actually exist and re-enter colonial society with that unlikely Saussurean slip of the tongue.

My main difficulty with the book is that the historical Gemmy is transformed into an impossible character who at thirteen has a vocabulary of "the few hundred words that were immediately needful to him" (26) *and* the ability at that late age to learn a number of Aboriginal languages. The novel continually emphasises the variousness and crucial importance of language, but fudges the detail of our present understanding of linguistics. A boy who has spent thirteen years in London and at sea would have to be a simpleton to have such a pathetic vocabulary. Given that he is so slow, how does he pick up an entirely new tongue at an age which is not the most ideal for absorbing language? Greer would probably not hesitate to say that it reveals Malouf's regard for Aboriginal languages, but I think that it is just one of the most jarring of a number of theoretically driven distortions which mar the text. They mar the book because they set up inconsistencies, particularly within the characterisation of Gemmy. On the one hand he is simple and oppressed and on the other he is magically able to read the most extraordinarily minute nuances of body language as well as having what amounts to a psychic understanding of the local Aborigines. He is said to be able to determine what is in a person's head by

the small signs that made them trackable: the ball of gristle in the corner of a man's cheek, which you could actually hear the soft click of if you listened for it; the swelling of the wormlike vein in a man's temple just below the hairline, the tightening of the crow's feet round his eyes, the almost imperceptible flicker of pinkish, naked lids; a deepening of the hollow above a man's collarbone as his throat muscles tensed, and some word he was holding back because it was unspeakable, went up and down there, a lump of something he could neither swallow or cough up. (64)

Gemmy's meeting with a couple of Aborigines becomes

a conversation of another kind; and the space between them, three feet of baked earth where ants in their other life scurried about carrying bits of bark and other broken stuff in the excited scent of a new and foreign presence, expanded and became the tract of land up there under the flight of air and the stars of the night sky, that was the tribe's home territory, with its pools and creeks and underground sources of water, its rock ridges and scrub, its edible fruits and

berries and flocks of birds and other creatures, all alive in their names and the stories that contained their spirit, for a man to walk into and print with the spirit of his feet and the invisible impact of his breath. (117)

This particular flight of fancy is meant to demonstrate that Gemmy, although unable to nail a plank straight, is in tune with a form of communication which transcends language and has several dimensions. Not only is Gemmy able to enter another environment and perceive its elements by simply sitting with members of its tribe, he is simultaneously conscious "of the names and the stories that contained their spirit". I suspect that this owes more to Paul Carter's romantic conception of a "poetic history" than to a special insight into Aboriginal culture. If nothing else, Malouf is in this passage fulfilling Carter's requirement that the history of the Aborigines exists in a different conceptual realm, there being in Carter's view "no grounds for presuming that aboriginal history can be treated as a subset of white history" (1987: 325). This is what I mean by saying that the incongruities and insensitivities noticed by Greer and Otto and Perera are theoretically driven. Aboriginal history is not simply marginalised in this novel, it is removed from the European world of cause and effect because to do so would be "to suppose that the Aborigines moved in the same historical space as the Europeans - a space constituted culturally, according to social, economic and, above all, intellectual criteria" (325).

Gemmy is made to regard Mr Fraser's act of writing the history of his life as magical, despite the fact that he "knew what writing was"(Malouf RB: 20). He understands the process as ceremonial and perceives his life to be contained on the sheets of paper in a way that is sensual rather than intellectual: "As he handled the sheets and turned them this way and that, and caught the peculiar smell they gave off, his whole life was in his throat" (20). He leaves the novel when he destroys what he imagines is the same history but is in fact crude exercises in writing by George Abbot's pupils. In erasing the clumsy written words Gemmy re-enters the world of Aboriginal perceptions. Significantly, he enters a burning world which is then washed with rain - a very indigenous symbol of renewal. This return of Gemmy's to his previous life and

language is reminiscent of Ovid's acceptance of Getic in *An Imaginary Life*. Just as Ovid abandons the rarefied distinctions of Latin for a simpler tongue, Gemmy walks away from the distorting prison of the written word which holds the horrors of his past into a linguistic universe of existential immediacy. In Gemmy's world "all the names of things, as he met them, even in their ashen form, shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives about him, succulent green, soft paw and eyeball, muscle tense under fur" (181).

This vision is made to contrast sharply with the view of the Governor, Sir George Bowen, who "sees himself as a kind of imperial demiurge, out of the mere rocks and aircreating [sic] spaces where history may now occur - at once the Hesiod of the place, its Solon, and its antipodean Pericles" (168). Sir George overlays everything with his preoccupation with the classics. His ability to see Australia as analogous to classical Greece is so extreme that even its language is foisted upon the new landscape: "'Runs (the colonial term for a wide-ranging pasture)' he informs one of his lordships, 'seems a literal translation of δροῖμος ἐβρέες of Homer, where the shepherd kings feed their cattle in a similar climate to that of Arcadia'" (169). All Sir George can do is apply his education; he is unable to learn anything from his new country. In this sense he is the novel's villain, presiding over colonial atrocities and creating the space in which conventional "stage" history might happen. He is the antithesis of Gemmy whose sense of history is focussed on the process of naming his world and bringing it into being. Sir George wants a classical empire and classical history and consequently his names are merely names on a map that bear little relationship to reality. In this context Mr Frazer's careful work of precisely naming the plants of the Bowen region is wasted because Sir George cannot perceive such detail but only the broad sweep of a grand historical perspective:

He takes the long view, the long *high* view, and from there, since his mind has the same capacity to leap centuries into the future as back into the past, the whole of time being its sphere, the vision Mr Fraser has outlined in his report of orchards, not of exotic (that is, European) but of native fruit, stretching in all directions to the skyline, had long since passed the arguing and planning stage,

the clearing and grafting and seed-and-sapling stage, and is, in Sir George's mind, accomplished. (171)

History as a grand narrative is something that is subverted in this novel. Malouf's characterisation of Sir George has obvious satiric elements and he does not hesitate to have George Abbot make some minor alteration of fact in the story being dictated to him by Mr Frazer so that "In this way he appropriated a little of the occasion to himself, stepped in and concealed himself, a sceptical shade, at this and that point of the minister's Colonial fairytale" (19). It is this fundamental distrust of the claims of historical discourse to objective accuracy which are the novel's strongest defence against accusations that it translates "matters of history and politics into questions of creativity and aesthetics" (Otto 545-546) and in so doing downplays what some critics regard as the most important features of Australia's colonial history. Greer bluntly says that "The story that Malouf does not want to tell is how the white man tried to exploit the blacks as labour" (11). More subtly, Perera sees the novel as supportive of a colonial mind-set because "Instead of refiguring the opposition between 'savagism and civilisation', between settler and indigene, coloniser and colonised, Malouf's text reinscribes these oppositions even as it appears to develop a redemptive narrative of hybridity" (21). Otto ironically titles his article on *Remembering Babylon* "Forgetting Colonialism".

What all of the arguments of these critics are based on is a conventionally historicist understanding of the past. For all of them the salient feature of nineteenth century Australia is the dispossession of the Aborigines. Greer is the most obviously committed to this position, castigating Malouf for ignoring historical detail and displaying "no interest in, and probably very little idea of, what the Scottish settlers thought they were doing on small holdings 20 kilometres from Bowen" (11). She characteristically concedes nothing in her attack and claims that the novel displays "not simply a reticence where Aborigines are concerned, a tact that avoids commandeering their alien reality, but a genuine ignorance by incuriosity" (11). In

other words, Malouf, if he is to write about the Queensland frontier, *should* focus on the Aboriginal experience and explore the colony's economic minutiae. Germaine Greer reveals herself to be attached to a hierarchical notion of how the past should be transmitted. Naturally enough, her hierarchy reflects her politics and she is largely correct in pointing out that they are not manifested in Malouf's novel. Whether they should be is another matter. What she assumes is that the novel must answer to a set of historicist criteria because its content is so obviously historical.

But as critics such as Pierce and Spinks have noticed, *Remembering Babylon* is a novel that problematises history. Almost from the outset it evinces doubts about the veracity of its source material, choosing to highlight the cultural prejudice that went into writing the second hand account of Gemmy's life (and, by implication, James Morrill's life) instead of what such a document might reveal about the Aborigines of the time. Mr Fraser is well meaning but unreliable and it is reasonable to assume that Malouf regards the source document of Edmund Gregory - *Sketch of the Residence of James Morrill Among the Aboriginal of North Queensland for Seventeen Years* - as just as suspect. The source document purports to be in Morrill's voice and is a second edition because Gregory has deemed it "necessary to re-write it" (Gregory 2). Worse, from Malouf's point of view, "The most notable correction is in his own name" (Gregory 2). James Morrill turns out, after Gregory has researched the parish records, to be James Murrells. A man who is not sure of his own surname is probably not an entirely reliable interviewee, although Gregory's work is not as compromised as Frazer's considering that the original of Gemmy is not nearly as inarticulate as Malouf's character. Gregory's work strikes me as careful and likely to be close to the truth, but it appears to have reminded Malouf of the limitations of textual history rather than provided him with facts.

My point is that the novel shows little interest in replicating the sort of historical understanding which motivated Edmund Gregory to record James Murrell's life. Gregory is gently ironised and transmuted in the novel into Mr Frazer, a punctilious but unobservant man who carefully records what he is told but is unable to

notice the presence of the Aborigines (most likely the Bindal), and his activities apparently have little relevance for them:

All they would see of Mr Frazer was what the land itself saw: a shape, thin, featureless, that interposed itself a moment, like a mist or cloud, before the land blazed out in its full strength again and the shadow was gone, as if, in the long history of the place, it was too slight to endure, or had never been. (68)

This passage reveals that Malouf does express what he imagines to be the point of view of the Aborigines, but in doing this he has distorted them just as he has distorted the Gemmy character. Again this is done for theoretical purposes. The main point to be taken from the above passage is not that the Aborigines have some profound relationship with the land such that they see "what the land itself saw", but that Mr Frazer's efforts are insignificant in the face of the Aborigines' supposed spatial rather than temporal understanding. The passage exposes the dreary shortcomings of scientific empiricism as represented by the plodding Mr Frazer. If there is such a thing as Carter's "history of intentions" and "travelling logic", then the Aborigines are its natural practitioners. Their understanding of "the long history of the place" is clearly being privileged in this passage, although what exactly this understanding might be is left vague. (Perera compares Malouf's version of Aboriginal culture to Burnam Burnam's satirical announcement in 1988 that 'WE WILL TEACH YOU HOW TO HAVE A SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EARTH AND SHOW YOU HOW TO GET BUSH TUCKER'.) The meaning here is oppositional; the inadequacy of Frazer's notes and observations in the face of what I have to call in this context a natural understanding is what matters. It is anti-historicism at its purest.

Remembering Babylon produces a similar contradictory tension to *An Imaginary Life* in its use of history to cast doubt on the process of the construction of history. Like the use of language in an *Imaginary Life*, history is deployed in the interest of demonstrating limitations instead of revealing the past and encouraging some judgement about it. Historical accounts, and especially historical novels, are so strongly associated with political judgement that a critic such as Perera is able to read

the book as an optimistic expression of what she calls "the discourse of happy hybridisation" (17). She further identifies the novel as part of "the incorporation of Australian colonial history into a particular privileged discourse of 'postcolonial' criticism" (17). Perera's use of the term 'hybridity' refers "to the new identities assumed by settler/migrant populations in the colonised country" (19). She says that: "Through the stories of both Janet and Gemmy *Remembering Babylon* participates in current explorations of 'the hybrid' as a viable identity for post-Dominion settler societies like Australia and Canada" (19). In other words, the novel creates characters who represent Australia's national identity because of their ability to hybridise with their new environment and efface the differences between them and the indigenous other.

So eager is Perera to establish this concept of hybridity as the novel's theme that she misreads the novel in such a way as to claim that the failure of the bees to sting Janet when she is covered by a swarm is "possibly because of the intermixture of "little stingless native bees"(Malouf RB 139) among them" (Perera 19). Lyn McCredden also falls into this error in referring to "a mixed swarm of both native and imported bees" (12). These bees are different species and do not combine in swarms either in nature or in Malouf's novel, which only refers to the native bees as Gemmy's contribution to Mrs Hutchence's collection of hives. This is the sentence from which Perera quotes:

They had come to Mrs Hutchence through Gemmy, who had been called to make hives for her, and since he knew about these things, had once or twice gone into the bush and found swarms of the little stingless native bees she kept along with her imported ones." (139)

Tellingly, Perera disapproves of hybridity as a strategy which remains "trapped within an essentialising, oppositional economy" (20). Because Perera wishes to attack the novel on ideological grounds, she is obliged to characterise the novel as reducible to a series of essentialist positions. In this she is much like Greer, except that Greer does not bother with niceties like the postmodern anxiety about essentialism. Despite

Malouf's penchant for the sublime, epiphanic moment, he has a deserved reputation for anti-essentialism which is evident in this novel. Despite this, Perera essentialises the novel according to her own ideological position, and, by insisting that Gemmy and Janet are examples of a celebratory hybridity, helps to clarify what Gemmy and Janet might actually represent.

The striking thing about Janet (or Sister Monica) and Gemmy is how unrepresentative in terms of cultural stereotypes they are. Are we really meant to see a shunned Catholic nun and a murdered simpleton as harbingers of a new national identity? Several critics would say yes, with the hostile Peter Otto announcing that "thanks to the mysteries of the imagination, it becomes possible to build an authentic Australian identity" (546). Part of the title of Elaine Lindsay and John Murray's essay in *Southerly* is "National Self-Discovery in *Remembering Babylon*." I would argue that it is precisely because the principal characters in the novel are so unrepresentative and rejected by their society that they have been placed in a narrative which appears to confer such a status on them. They are, so to speak, anti-representatives. Lachlan and Janet do not share a denouement of happy hybridity in looking back at their memory of Gemmy poised on the fence rail. The novel's ending - the site of essential closure - is thoroughgoing in its inconclusiveness. We are presented with a series of images of a world poised in tense balance, both imaginatively and actually. Like the surfer who is watched by Imogen Harcourt at the close of *Fly Away Peter*, the final scenes of *Remembering Babylon* hone in on the blurred boundary of the tidal coast as the emblematic expression of the novel's paradoxical commitment to ambivalence and flux. *Remembering Babylon* takes this further by conveying these familiar insights through the prayers of Sister Monica. The novel ends with the point of view of an aged Janet who is no longer Janet :

Out beyond the flatlands the line of light pulses and swells. The sea, in sight now, ruffles, accelerates. Quickly now it is rising towards us, it approaches. As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another. (200)

It is noticeable that the novel refuses stasis as it concludes; even Janet's moment of revelation when she apprehends the "single mind of the hive" (199) is something "her own mind approaches and draws back from" (199). The only "stilled moment" of her reverie, Gemmy on the fence rail, is an image that *denies* stillness in its teetering tension and consciousness of change and an inevitable fall. Surely the point is that hers is not a national consciousness, but that paradoxically more representative thing, an individual mind in the midst of her own purely spatial apprehension of her experience. It is crucially important that she does not think of the moment when she encounters Gemmy as a moment with consequences or as moment which has taken place, but as a moment which, as Malouf says when defining spatial history in an interview with Paul Carter, is perceived as something which is "*going to take place*" (Carter 1989: 174). She replays her approach to things in her mind and not her conclusions about them. She has not decided on her place in the world or in Australia at the close of the novel because she is still involved in the endlessly shifting process of determining what that place is.

Peter Pierce sees this "as if Malouf is radically questioning what had seemed to be a tenet of his historical fiction" (1994: 194). He sees the novel as a departure from Digger's perception in *The Great World* that "Every moment was dense with causes, possibilities, consequences; too many, even in the simplest case, to grasp" (Malouf GW: 296). He claims that "Malouf is arguing instead for the tenuousness of those lines, for the fragility of the prop to selfhood that memory can afford" (195). It is true that Malouf has moved further away from any analytical approach to history in *Remembering Babylon* and has increasingly romanticised his characters' perception of the past, but he has not moved away from the notion that the past is critical to one's sense of self. Lachlan Beattie feels compelled to find out what happened to Gemmy and Janet's revisiting of her past, whilst being minimalist in the face of Digger's desire to understand all causation all at once, is absolutely integral to her selfhood. Gemmy himself has to come to an understanding about his past to return to the tribe. It does not matter that the understanding he finds is not the frightening one contained in the

pages Mr Frazer extracted from him. His curiously pantheistic reintegration with the natural world is proffered as a connection with a more profound understanding of a much longer past than can be encompassed by the "colonial fairytale" dictated to George Abbot.

Pierce does, however, see that the novel looks to go beyond conventional history and "escape from history's burdens into a deathless world outside time" (196). It is reasonable to assume that what Pierce means by "history's burdens" are the unpleasant facts about nineteenth century Australia which critics have complained are swept under the carpet in the book. The massacres of Aborigines in Queensland and the exploitation of Torres Strait Islanders for labour are not completely absent from this novel. Unsurprisingly, they are subsumed by the novel's concern to expose the inadequacy of such history to really influence, to use Pierce's phrase again, the characters' sense of self. A great deal of the novel is taken up with how the characters develop their self image in response to their immediate surroundings, social interactions and their peculiarly individual memories. For the most part these memories are beyond the purview of any kind of historical discourse, but are nonetheless the core of peoples' motivations. The historical mystery which Carter and Malouf want to illuminate is this world of intentionality, a world caught by a series of languages which refuse to stay still. The book's desire to explore this aspect of history is such that Aboriginal massacres are only peripherally touched upon, and then only by way of Lachlan Beattie's point of view when he is trying to resolve for himself what had happened to Gemmy.

Even his discovery of what might have happened is riven with doubt. The 'dispersal' in which Gemmy is killed is "too slight an affair to be called a massacre, and no newspaper had got hold of it" (196). Gemmy disappears into a realm which has no narrative shape, no conclusive ending:

The story already had elements in common with others he had heard up here, which when he tried to track them down had proved elusive. Perhaps they were all one story. Whether this one had happened, as the woman claimed, six years ago in her own lifetime, or in her mother's, or last year, it had been

gathered now into the dreamtime of the land itself, a shadowy realm where the bones of facts had already drawn around them the skin of rocks, of beasts, of air. (196)

The fact of the massacre is not as important in the context of this novel as the sense of sublime connectedness and comprehensive understanding which Janet claims in conversation with Lachlan to derive from that initial moment of seeing him:

' I sometimes think that that was all I ever knew of him: what struck me in that moment before I knew him at all.....I have never seen anyone clearer in all my life. All that he was. All.' (194)

It is interesting that Malouf, in the process of fictionalising the past in order to produce a more revelatory and poetic history, has down-played and occasionally ignored prosaic facts. The awkward truth about James Morrill is that he was not shunned by the pioneer society he re-entered. Subscriptions for him were taken in Bowen and Rockhampton and "He afterwards visited Government-house several times" (Gregory 17). Presumably to emphasise how out of touch Sir Bowen was with the colony, Malouf retains the odd detail that "the executive gave him an appointment in the Custom House Department at Bowen, as a bonded warehouse keeper" (Gregory 17). But inconvenient details about the original Gemmy's participation in explorations of the coast north of Bowen because "he was useful in that he could easily converse with the natives" (Gregory 17) are suppressed. Even though "it was very troublesome at times for him to make himself understood" (Gregory 17), Morrill marries and has a child. What's more, when he dies at the age of 41, his public funeral is attended by the police. Of course, Malouf is not obliged to use these details, but they do reveal that his Gemmy is very much a creature of imagination. In light of the novel's continual casting of doubt on the efficacy of textual history, it is ironic that the man upon whom Malouf bases his fiction effectively worked as a double agent (whose loyalties ultimately resided with the settlers) in the frontier skirmishes in north Queensland.

This is not to say, as Greer does, that "Malouf represents the tension between European and Aborigine as a matter of fear and fantasy" as opposed to "a bitter

struggle for survival in which there were no winners" (11) The violence of the time and place do take place off stage as it were, but this does not mean that the book ignores the issue. Malouf feels that it is necessary to locate Sister Monica's convent in the elaborate house of "a local shipping magnate, whose fortune, before Federation put an end to that sort of thing, had been based on blackbirding for the sugar interests up north." (RB 184) Both this mention of Queensland's unofficial slave trade and the remark that the murder of eight people during a 'dispersal' was "too slight an affair" to reach the newspapers is enough to indicate a sensitive awareness of the plight of Queensland's Aborigines and also to hint that the novel's concerns are elsewhere. In taking on the point of view of the settlers, the novel inevitably has to concern itself with their fears and fantasies, although Greer's complaint that these exist on the same plane as the goblins in her second grade reader is not supported by the genuine fears touched upon in the novel: "the rumour lately had had a name and a number to it; Comet River , nineteen souls." (42)

None of these asides really add up to a novel that is encouraging a moral or political judgement. The novel depends upon a series of sublime moments to establish its pattern of meaning and none of these moments coincide with what in political terms can be regarded as historically significant. For Peter Otto this amounts to a denial of the political, an "erasure" combined with "the use of the sublime to orchestrate his remembering of colonialism" (546). Otto suggests that the "masculine self can be consolidated" (550) and reassured of its phallic power. He conflates the colonial and the masculine and sees in the novel an affirmation of a romanticised colonial experience of encountering the 'Unknown' in the insistently liminal space of a moment recollected from half a century ago 'Half way up the coast' of Queensland in the 'middle of the nineteenth century'. In *Remembering Babylon* the continual stress on boundaries is clearly important, but it is the indeterminate and provisional nature of boundaries which

in the dark hours, when you no longer stood there as a living marker with all the glow of the white man's authority about you, reverted to being a creek bed

or ridge of granite like any other, and gave no indication that six hundred miles away, in the Lands Office in Brisbane, this bit of country had a name set against it on a numbered document, and a line drawn that was empowered with all the authority of the Law. (9)

The sort of boundary that fully engages Malouf in this book is the one which is fleeting such as Gemmy's balancing act, or the final image of the novel, in which the shifting ocean briefly defines "in a line of running fire all the outline of the vast continent" (200).

As for "re-membering colonialism", Otto has taken an odd view of a book which is full of powerful female characters and ends with the reverie of a Catholic nun. Lachlan Beattie and the blackbirding "old cut-throat" Duncan McGregor are surely impotent at the end of the book, with Lachlan about to be deposed from office and McGregor's reprobate image "glaring down in regret, perhaps, of the children and grandchildren he had expected to fill the house" (184) which instead has become a convent. Like Perera and Greer, Otto can only interpret the novel according to the idea that it must in some way express Australia's national identity. To quote Otto again: "If we return to the moment of contact between settlers and indigenous people, we will find, not Babylon, but the redemptive source of national identity in the imagination" (Otto 556). Because Malouf's characters are colonial, Otto assumes that this reflects the novel's vision. It would be just as reasonable to assert that Malouf has embraced Catholic mysticism since he gives us this perspective in the novel's last pages.

The final chapter of the book carefully establishes Lachlan, Gemmy and Janet as characters who are irrevocably lost to the history of national identity. Far from Perera's claim that the nun's orchard is "represented as a place of grace and sufficiency" (19), the place in the convent garden which Janet and Lachlan favour for their meetings is "much decayed" (RB 186) and their most intimate moment is the symbolic sharing of an apple signifying their lost innocence, lost Eden and the death of Lachlan's grandson. The text is completely open as to whether they have any descendants; Janet is a nun, Lachlan's wife is dead and Meg's fate is left unresolved.

They are very deliberately placed outside of Australia's mythic history of coming of age during the First World War as victims of the new jingoistic passions. What, one might ask, did these people do during the war? They are briefly thought to be spies and are then left alone with their memory of a man whose life story they can never know.

The novel cries out to be read in terms of the personal or subjective in the same way that Janet's letter to her brother asking to continue her correspondence with a German priest about bees does. Her assumptions about a world beyond the "business of nations" (187) look suspicious to a politicised public: "Re-reading it in cold print, she did find it odd. Its tone was provocative, no doubt of that, and seen in a public rather than a personal light, rather puzzling; even she had to admit that"(189). What the letter does is what in a large measure the novel does - it places the natural world above the political. Jock McIvor's moment of communion with the insects and birds (107) is one of the more striking examples of this and bears out to an extent Greer's dismissive remark that "Malouf has no interest in, and probably very little idea of, what the Scots settlers thought they were doing on small-holdings" (11). It is not that Malouf has *no* interest in what his fictional pioneers were doing but that he wants his readers to consider the more personal dimension of their lives; the minutiae of their social interactions and the immediacy of their actual experience:

But what his stilled blood saw was the bird's beak drawing long silver threads out of the heart of the water, which was all a tangle of threads, bunched or running; and his boots had no weight, neither did his hand with the half bitten lump of bread in it, nor his heart, and he was filled with the most intense and easy pleasure: in the way the air stirred the leaves overhead and each leaf had attached itself to a twig, and whirled yet kept hold; and in the layered feathers which made up the grey of the bird's head; and at how long the threads of water must be to run so easily from where they had come to wherever it was, unimaginably out of sight, that they were going - tangling, untangling, running free. And this time too the intense pleasure he felt had a disturbing side. The things he had begun to be aware of, however fresh and innocent, lay outside what was common, or so he thought; certainly, since he could have found no form in which to communicate them, outside words. (RB 107-8)

This rather long passage is only about a quarter of what Malouf has to say about Jock's sublime moment and I have cited it at such length to show how much more important

the irretrievable particulars of an individual's perceptions are in the book than the workaday detail of earning a living. As in the rest of Malouf's work, it is this aspect of history - the hidden moods, the sensual moment of reflection, the texture of the time which depends entirely on its being lived and perceived - which engages his attention.

This is made more complicated by the enduring paradox of being unable to express this insight fully in words; instead Malouf relies on continually redeploying images of teetering balance and the recurrent approach to a revelation which is inherently elusive and has as part of its aesthetic the frustration of its unattainability. Again in the passage above there is the notion that this central concern is incommunicable, "outside words". This is why Gemmy is inarticulate in the novel. For him there is no differentiation between dreams and reality. His past revisits him in dreams with an authentic force which the magic of Mr Frazer's account cannot capture.

The novel is also resistant to the essentialising notion that any one character is 'central'. This is why it does not end with Gemmy but with one of the more minor characters of the opening chapters, Janet. She does, however, feature in what is clearly meant to be one of the novel's epiphanies, an episode that has attracted several derisory comments. This is the moment when Janet is covered by the swarm of bees, an event which Greer memorably says is concocted by Malouf to "frig his imagination" (11) and which Otto declares a "barely disguised rape scene" (552). The scene is characterised as a wedding but, given Janet's later career as a Catholic nun, this serves more as a metaphor for communion than sexual union. She is told by "her new and separate mind" that "You are our bride" (RB 142), probably indicating that Janet has in an idiosyncratic prolepsis already become a bride of Christ. The episode reads as an initiation and reaching of maturity with more symbolic import than "the more ordinary and alarming one" (127) that had come earlier because it 'makes flesh' the full impact of her vision of the bees' "single vibrant word" which allows a simultaneous understanding of "*what* they were ..[and]*why* they were" (141). The reason for having Janet menstruating when she is also becoming the bees' "unbodied" mind is to accentuate the collapse of differentiation that this state involves. It is a replay of the

final collapse of time and the undifferentiated integration into the universe of Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*: "But it made no difference, now, the distance, three feet or a thousand years, no difference at all; or whether she was a girl (a woman), or a tree" (142).

The scene only makes sense in these terms of a liberating breakdown of the insistent divisiveness of category and language. A prosaic cause and effect explanation cannot be applied to a mystical swarm of bees who are not hungry and yet are attracted to blood which they think is honey. The scene is best read as an exquisite moment when everything becomes everything else: "They have smelled the sticky blood-flow. They think it is honey. It is" (142). The key words are simply "it is". Immediacy is shown to prevail over anxiety and explanation. I am well aware that this sort of argument smacks of special pleading since the prose of these passages is so open that their meaning, let alone the impossible grail of the author's intention, cannot be decisively pinned down. Nonetheless, it is a characteristic of Malouf's work that significance is to be found anywhere but in the events (both psychological and historical) which are conventionally held to be fraught with it. Coming of age is less important in *Remembering Babylon* than Janet's sense of being "drawn into the process and mystery of things" (143). This doesn't mean that coming of age is not important, but that its conventional significance has been redeployed to underline the 'real' significance of a moment of realisation.

Another reason for the conflation of Janet's menarche with her personal apocalypse is that the book resists exclusively cerebral ways of understanding the world. Thought and physical sensation are not separated in the book. Janet doesn't come to understand herself through navel gazing but by picking at a scab. Similarly Willie's death in the First World War is understood by Janet tasting an apple cut with his penknife which allows her to empathise with his final sensation, "his last taste of the world" (193). The merely intellectual is associated with Mr Frazer's entries in his field notebook which "give no indication of the conditions under which they were made" (128).¹¹ What happens when Frazer makes his meticulous drawings and his

"almost pedantic notes" (129) is that the hidden detail which a writer like Malouf craves is lost. The novel laments the absence of "the excitement of new discovery" (128) and its physical context:

Their clear copperplate, the lines as straight and orderly as a row of cabbages in a Berkshire field, and the details of the drawings that accompany them, do not suggest that what is being recorded belongs still to the untamed wilderness or that the man who is at work on them - a large man in a collarless shirt, the wide-awake hat laid aside for the moment but leaving a red line across his brow under the sweaty scalp - has for the past hour been plunging uphill over rough ground and is now settled on a log in a tropical clearing to set down, in all the excitement of new discovery, what he has just been shown. (128)

Writing is portrayed in this novel as unreliable or escapist. Apart from Mr Frazer's letting himself "loose in the realm of speculation" (129), writing tends to prevent characters from fully appreciating the world in which they find themselves. In the case of George Abbot, writing is a way out of the banal physicality which the novel insistently privileges:

the words his soul danced to, *sensibilite, coeur, paradis*, relieved him of his bear-like heaviness and rough colonial boots, and all around, the scrub, as the as the word *paysage* lit it, assumed new but familiar colours. (81)

The critic who is most concerned to analyse writing and history in *Remembering Babylon* is Lee Spinks. He introduces his essay on the novel - "Allegory, Space, Colonialism: *Remembering Babylon* and the Production of Colonial History" - with a quotation from Claude Levi-Strauss which reveals a great deal about what sympathetic critics value in Malouf's work. Spinks sees the novel as an exploration of the implications of Levi-Strauss's contention "that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery" (cited by Spinks 166). The paradoxical hostility toward written language which permeates the text applies equally to history and leads Spinks to claim that the argument mounted by Michel de Certeau that history is one of the means by which "a culture validates its own norms and regulating assumptions" (167) is particularly pertinent to the novel, along with de Certeau's notion that the "effacement of difference" transforms "the 'uncertainties of

history' into 'readable spaces'" (167). Spinks says that Gemmy's life story "divided as it is between 'savagery' and 'civilisation' resolutely resists such discursive enclosure" (167). It is not so much the 'divisions' of Gemmy's story which resist the limiting categorisation of a satisfactory resolution and clear allegorical purpose as the contradictions, although I suspect this is what Spinks means. On the one hand, Gemmy is white, and on the other he is black; he is both articulate and inarticulate, knowledgeable and ignorant. When Gemmy is washed up onto the beach he is described as "lying half in salt and the warm wash of it, half in air that blistered" (22). Andrew Taylor points out that "Covered in tiny crabs that are feeding on his flesh, he is both sea creature and land creature, both human and animal, both alive and dead" (1999 :11) Malouf deliberately leaves him outside of verifiable history and leaves us with the image of him poised between two worlds in a moment divorced from its chronological context.

The difficulty this novel runs into is that in straining to reach 'beyond history' and disputing the coherence of such a discursive system, it undermines its own politics by denying the basis from which they are derived. Consequently, this novel has been read as a 'whitewash' which culpably fails to tell the story of nineteenth century Australia, which, it is held, should underpin a renewed Australian identity. In problematising the history of this era, Malouf has entered a site of moral significance similar to the other side of the Holocaust which Helen Darville chose to explore. An historical novel about Queensland which shows more interest in the emotional life of a few settlers than the bitter conflict between them and the Aborigines appears on the surface to be a kind of neo-colonialism or at best merely insensitive. In an important sense a novel like *Remembering Babylon* creates the space for a book like *The Hand that Signed the Paper* by appearing to regard history as an essentially textual affair which lacks sufficient authority to have a genuine moral force.

Of course, Malouf's novel cannot be so conveniently reduced to such a stark proposition. The doubt about history is qualified by a radical caution about that doubt which extends to a lingering anxiety about the capacity of language to capture

experience. In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf could only express his despair at the incapacity of language to be experience in words, and in *Remembering Babylon* he can only create his idealised history of mood, sensation and intention of individual consciousnesses by using an historical context. Even so, it is possible to go beyond narrative history in a way that one cannot go beyond language into the world of fantasy and symbolic imagery which is where much of the text is located. Images such as the one which Janet claims to have of herself perceived through Gemmy's astonished eyes as "a charred stump, all crusted black and bubbling" (144) typifies the novel's strategy for dealing with the vexed question of how to portray the past. Interpretative openness is the desired effect, and what meaning can be attached to an image like the former (to which our attention is drawn by its oddness and the portentous style of the prose which contains it with its italics and dramatic dashes) is deliberately elusive and provisional. A charred stump is both destruction and the promise of renewal; ambiguity and undecidability prevail over the decisiveness of pointing to a moral or the closure of leaving any important character or their descendants to represent a possible future. Mr Frazer is as much a dead end as Mrs Hutchence and her partner Leona. Finally, what *Remembering Babylon* rates as more important than political posturing is the aesthetics of possibility inherent in the image of Gemmy balancing on the fence and his confusion over whether he is subject or object. More than one critic has seen Malouf as a fence sitter and he is a writer who in this novel is more interested in the sensations attendant on the process of making up one's mind than in political posturing.

CAPTER SEVEN

COMPLAINT AS CONVENTION:

TRUE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG

In an interview with Phillip Adams on ABC radio (Adams) Peter Carey said that he was so impressed by Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter in the early sixties that he typed it out and frequently carried a copy with him. This was not because he had a particularly strong interest in this corner of Australian history or an overwhelming fascination with the infamous bushranger, but because its similarity to the anarchic prose of Joyce and Beckett appealed to him and demonstrated the possibility that Australia could produce similarly powerful and disturbing writing. Kelly's unabashed Irishness formed part of this impression. Now that Carey has finally completed the novel inspired by Ned Kelly, we find that he has eschewed the subversive approach in both form and content. As Carey admits to Adams, "My younger self would have thought this a very conservative thing to have done."

In his most recent novel Carey's taste for radicalism has faded to a series of essentially structural gestures. His "true history" of the Kelly gang takes the form of a letter by Ned Kelly to a daughter he never had being introduced by spuriously 'official' chapter headings describing the physical state of the documents. These chapter headings remain as the only indication of the sort of anti-historicism evident in *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Illywhacker*. One doubts that Carey has deployed them in the interests of realism, but their irony is merely gestural. To write Kelly's autobiography Carey needed to invent this fictitious framework and to a reader unfamiliar with Carey's work the detail provided about the size and condition of the paper on which

the account is written could easily appear as a device to add authenticity. That these short introductions *are* ironic is indicated by their faintly pompous absurdity and their stark contrast to Kelly's voice and the emotional life he reveals. Despite this, the novel does not readily fall into Linda Hutcheon's definition of an historiographic metafiction. Tellingly, when being interviewed on ABC Television, Carey's remark that history is "a mixture of fact and imaginative speculation" (7.30 Report 14/10/00) was made as a hurried aside outlining the obvious. Anxieties about the nature of history's construction are no longer the core concern of his most purely historical novel.

The most striking thing about *True History of the Kelly Gang* is its careful imitation of the tone and rhythm of Ned Kelly's prose style. Portions of Kelly's Jerilderie letter are paraphrased with several of Kelly's curiously Carey-like similes retained. Unquestionably, the novel remains faithful to the documented cadences of Kelly's voice. What Carey has to say about the language he uses is quite revealing: "The language that I use in the book isn't a manufactured language, it's a language that I can reach out and touch from my childhood in the schoolyard in Bacchus Marsh. So it isn't an invented language, it's something I'm always confident about" (Adams). In his other nineteenth century novels, *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Jack Maggs*, Carey 'approximates' the language of the era instead of meticulously reproducing it. In this novel, however, the language is, because of Carey's avowed familiarity with it, closer to the language of the time and place, but without it being hamstrung by excessive pedantry. One revealing aspect of Carey's remarks is that in an important sense he does not regard the language as "manufactured" or "invented". That is to say that he does not regard it as entirely fictional. He is well aware that he is 'making it up', but his comment strongly signals his desire that the language he uses should be faithful to its historical origins. Carey has said that he feels comfortable with Kelly's language (Adams) because for him it is practically local and not all that distant in time. His grandfather knew and admired Curnow (the man who prevented the disastrous derailment of the police train) and Carey's home town is in a part of Victoria not far

from what is now called "Kelly country". Unlike his work in *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey in *True History of the Kelly Gang* is not having to resurrect history that is very far removed from his own milieu. The novel is practically an inside version of a local legend.

In looking for any indication that the book seriously casts doubts on the possibility of fruitfully re-imagining one man's view of colonial Australia one inevitably focuses on those parts of the book which diverge from what are generally held to be the facts of Ned Kelly's life. I will argue that these divergences are also structural rather than thematic or theoretically driven. They do not operate in the book to substantially alter or challenge the Kelly legend. Even Kelly's mythic status is not being examined using any of the techniques which have come to be associated with postmodernism. Eccentric details which first appear to be characteristically whimsical are actually derived from research. Joe Byrne was in fact an opium addict and Ned did indeed receive and wear at his last stand a bright green sash awarded for childhood heroism. The major discrepancies between the novel and accepted historical accounts are not driven by a desire to problematise those accounts, but work instead to shore up the novel's fictional framework as a series of documents addressed to his daughter. The novel's obvious departure from the historical Kelly who was a single man with no children puts the book decidedly in the realm of the fictional, but this does not make it a fiction which is at odds with the historical. On the contrary, it seeks to complement history in precisely the way traditional historical fiction has always done, by "fleshing out" known detail with credible emotional content.

The use of Kelly's voice (grammatical warts and all) combined with the air of authenticity lent by the faux-scholarly chapter headings superficially appears to be a return to realism, something which for Carey would represent an extremely radical change of style. One thing that has changed about Carey's approach to fiction in this novel and in *Jack Maggs* is the conventional quality of his subject matter. Magwitch and Ned Kelly are effectively literary standards and consequently one of the features of *True History of the Kelly Gang* is the way it is obliged to deal with notions of

originality in both the historic and artistic senses. Not only does a novel written from Ned Kelly's point of view already exist, it is only ten years old, and had, ironically, been reviewed by Carey. I refer, of course, to Robert Drewe's *Our Sunshine*, a novel with many similarities to *True History of the Kelly Gang*, among them being its essentially conventional treatment of history. Robert Drewe said of *Our Sunshine* that

Although it concerns some people who did exist and touches on actual events, it is a chronicle of the imagination [which] owes more to folklore and the emotional impact of some photography and paintings like the famous Victorian photographer John William Lindt's *Joe Byrne's Body on Display at Benalla* and Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly* series than to the bristly contradictions of historians and biographers. (183)

There is a nod to anti-historicism in Drewe's remarks about the "bristly contradictions of historians", but the book is by no means metafictional and reads much more as "a chronicle of the imagination" than as a reaction to the perceived shortcomings of historical discourse. I will return to aspects of Drewe's treatment of history later, but his novel's very existence raises the question of why Carey has revisited the same historical myth, given that the territory it visits has already been thoroughly mapped and many of the same paths followed. Reviewers such as Cath Kenneally have pointed out that "Peter Carey is the latest Australian fiction writer to have been gripped by the legend, following, among others, Douglas Stewart, Jean Bedford and Robert Drewe" (11) As a novelist, Carey has always been regarded as original in both form and content, so it is surprising to find him effectively joining a tradition instead of attempting to create one. In comparison, his other novels are imbued with a postmodern sensibility as well as displaying a marked taste for the surreal, a tendency especially evident in the short stories and novels such as *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. That level of characteristic quirkiness is barely detectable in this book. Peculiarities such as Joe Byrne's opium addiction and Steve Hart's habit of cross dressing turn out not to be the author's fanciful touches, but colourful details based on research and working as allusion. His source for Byrne's drug habit was Ian Jones's *Ned Kelly: A Short Life*, and the odd business of wearing dresses indulged in during

the novel by Hart and Red Kelly was inspired by Sidney Nolan's painting of Hart in feminine attire and backed up by information about this phenomenon in the history of Irish rebellion provided by Roy Foster (Adams). The interesting thing about the use of allusion in this case is the way in which it joins the novel to a *tradition* of depicting Ned Kelly.

There is a tendency for the metafictional to react to convention and tradition instead of embracing them and pursuing, as this book does, a sense of continuity and cumulative perspective. Carey has moved away from his use of allusion in *Jack Maggs* which engages in a more critical and subversively ludic relationship to Dickens than the oblique nod of approbation to Sidney Nolan's Kelly series which occurs in this novel and is, conventionally, its usual function. The book's reference to Nolan signals the book's position in the same artistic tradition to which Robert Drewe was referring in the passage cited above. The erstwhile postmodernist emphasis on supplanting the pretensions of history and realist fiction by exposing their intrinsic artificiality is not foregrounded by the novel's content or by the way in which it draws attention to its textual heritage. It positions itself as part of the textual world of Kelly histories and their artistic counterparts. Cath Keneally notes "that Carey chooses the title: *True History of the Kelly Gang* - probably a nod to J.J. Kenneally's highly partisan 1929 *Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and Their Pursuers*" (11). It could also be argued that the title is also a reference to Chomley's *True Story of the Kelly Gang* .

One reason for this apparent abandonment of the techniques of metafiction is that they have become exhausted and ultimately just as conventional as the style of literature to which they were a reaction. One of the clearest illustrations of this drift toward cliché is the form of self referentiality used by John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Fowles simply announced to his readers in a chapter that the novel was his invention and the characters in it creatures of his imagination. This particular technique cannot be used again and again because its effect is entirely dependent on its surprising break with convention. Ironic self referentiality has since

taken many guises, but the exercise in itself had eventually either to exhaust the range of possibilities or become as conformist as the naturalism to which it was originally responding.

This is the problem that a novelist like Peter Carey has had to confront. He cannot react to history in similar ways to which he has in *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Illywhacker* without becoming hackneyed. My use of the term anti-historicism rather than neo-historicism has been made to emphasise a strong sense of opposition to previous models of historical and even fictional discourse and a defining habit of exposing flaws in these previous models. This destructiveness was, considering the limitations of history exposed by, among others, Hayden White and Paul Carter, justifiable and largely deployed in Australian fiction in the interests of clearing the space for a fictional form of neo-historicism which more speculative local historians such as Greg Denning were beginning to construct in books such as *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*. The serious difficulty with this is that there is no easily definable "new" way of writing history or historical fiction. Historians have always speculated and skewed their accounts to accommodate their ideological position, but argument about such distortion has also for many years been an integral part of the discipline of history. No one has unequivocally proposed that subjectivity should be substituted for an unrealisable objectivity because so many subjective accounts of the past are demonstrably incorrect. The title *True History of the Kelly Gang* is, as Barry Oakley says "both ironical and warranted" (2000:5), but it also indicates a desire to occupy a place between the purely subjective and an impossibly definitive objective. The lack of the definite article "the" deliberately places it outside of objective certainties and also avoids the sense of narrow isolation implicit in the use of "A" *True History of the Kelly Gang*.

Carey's point of departure from his predecessors is his exclusive use of Kelly's voice and many would agree with Cath Keneally that "Everything depends on whether Carey's attempt at Ned's voice takes" (11). In other words the voice must appear to be genuine to justify the book's fictional content. *True History of the Kelly Gang* invites

the commonplace critical response of whether it is "true to life". Or, more to the point, true to what is known: in this case the Jerilderie letter and Ned Kelly's letter to Sergeant Babington complaining of his treatment after being thought to have betrayed Harry Power. In the latter case, Carey precisely echoes Ned's words that "everyone looks on me like a black snake" and consistently uses the same sort of localised animal similes throughout the book. Because this issue of authenticity is so insistent, it is just not possible to regard this novel as one of many competing subjectivities revolving around the same set of events and in that sense constituting some form of anti-objective neo-historicism. It is first and foremost a reconstruction of a past that is known - even if only at the rudimentary level of instant recognition - by most Australians. The question of its veracity is the first one asked. Relying entirely on Kelly's voice may be one of the few original approaches left to anyone who wants to write about the Kelly gang, but its intense partiality does not in itself make this a new sort of historical novel.

The novel supposes a quite detailed knowledge of the Kelly outbreak for its unique perspective on the events of the time to be appreciated. The most important variance with Kelly's account of what occurred, as outlined in his Jerilderie letter, concerns the pivotal event during which Constable Fitzpatrick is shot in the wrist. All accounts of the Kelly outbreak have different versions of the incident which outlawed Kelly, with some denying that Fitzpatrick was shot at all and claiming that "he cut his wrist on the door-latch".(Rienits 1226). Ned Kelly himself denied even being at Eleven Mile Creek, his mother's selection, while more dramatic versions have him shooting Fitzpatrick because he was sexually assaulting his sister Kate. Carey deviates from Kelly's insistence that "I heard nothing of this transaction until very close on the trial I being then over 400 miles from Greta" (29-30) by placing him at the centre of the action and, interestingly, reconstructing the event according to factual details which make his speculation consistent with the opinion of historians and less so with artists who have generally been unable to resist the idea that Ned was defending his sister's honour.

Ned does not mention Kate in the Jerilderie letter or in his letter to parliamentarian Donald Cameron. In both letters Ned invokes himself as an agent of wrath (in absentia) because Fitzpatrick threatens his mother: "The trooper pulled out his revolver and said he would blow her brains out if she interfered in the arrest she told him it was a good job for him Ned was not there or he would ram his revolver down his throat" (Keesing 28) and "Mrs Kelly said that if Ned was there he would ram the revolver down his throat (Jones 112). Carey declines to use this detail, preferring instead to have Ellen Kelly turn on Fitzpatrick, although not when Fitzpatrick roughly pulls Kate onto his knee, but after Ned reveals to Ellen that "He's engaged to one tart he's got another pregnant in Frankston" (256). In Carey's version Mrs Kelly is convinced that Fitzpatrick intends to marry Kate and is unfussed by Fitzpatrick's treatment of Kate to the extent that "she ignored the outrage opening her oven door and withdrawing 2 loaves of crusty bread on a long handled shovel" (256). In this way the book manages to retain the irresistible drama of Fitzpatrick's desire for the fourteen year old Kate and integrate it into the curiously ambivalent relationship Ned has with his mother. To this end, the novel emphasises Ned's Oedipal jealousy by inventing a sexual relationship between Harry Power and Ned's mother and having Ned shoot Bill Frost. Having Ned's mother tacitly consent to a policeman's exploitation of his sister adds one more element to the sexual resentment which pervades much of what Kelly writes about (46, 60).

Thus what is usually regarded as the pivotal scene in the Kelly legend hints strongly at a psychological interpretation while at the same time being careful not to be inconsistent with the historical record. It turns out that Constable Fitzpatrick did indeed already have one child and a pregnant fiancé (Jones 107). Armed with this sort of detail Carey is able convincingly to break with Ned's public utterances on the matter. What Ned officially says lack weight because his utterances were made in the context of defending his arrested mother. Ian Jones and other historians are confident that Ned was present during the fracas at Eleven Mile Creek with the partisan Kenneally, author of *Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and Their Pursuers*,

going as far as to ignore Ned's version and delete it from the text of the Cameron letter published in his book (Jones 113).

Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* keeps to tradition in a way that Robert Drewe's on the same subject does not. This is what Drewe's Ned had to say on the matter:

Molesting their sisters, raiding homes, frightening children. Your man Fitzpatrick managed all of this. And topped it off by whining that I shot him (In the hand! And made him faint!) I wasn't even home. (Drewe 37)

Compare this to *True History of the Kelly Gang*:

My mother never hesitated she raised her shovel and clouted Fitzpatrick across the head his helmet fell he stumbled drawing out his .45. I fired the .31 hitting him in the wrist his revolver clattered to the floor." (256)

The contrast in style between these passages is almost as great a difference as their contrast in content. There is a brashness about Drewe's version of Kelly which is not as obvious in Carey's. Part of this is due to the sense of childish naivety conveyed by the run on sentences which permeate the novel. This raises one of the fundamental problems of historical discourse: the uneasy relationship between linguistic structure and actuality. Kelly's words in the Jerilderie letter and elsewhere not only may mask the truth about his whereabouts during the shooting of Fitzpatrick, they may also conceal aspects of his emotional state and create a less reliable guide to his character than accounts by other people.

Because of this, in some respects the Kelly inhabiting the pages of Drewe's novel is a more convincing portrait of Kelly than the one we derive from *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Both novels are carefully researched and make use of some of Kelly's more memorable phrasing such as this part of his Jerilderie letter in which Drewe has only altered the tense: "the horse jumps forward and my fist comes into collision with McCormack's nose and causes him to lose his equilibrium" (Drewe 31). The same laughable attempt at self-justification betrayed rather than hidden by its pompous language is also used in Carey's novel: "the horse jumped forward and as I

were holding the rein it caused my fist to come into collision with McCormick's nose and he lost his equilibrium and fell prostrate" (183). We can be confident that what has attracted both writers is the wonderful absurdity of this passage and the opportunity it presents to add a layer of interpretative complication to the notion of historical authenticity. What Kelly says is documented; the words 'equilibrium' and 'prostrate' look suspiciously as if they are derived from his experience of court and are therefore, if we are to believe his accounts of corruption, not to be taken all that seriously. The complexity lies in just what Kelly's awareness of this is. Does he think that by using the language of the court he is more convincing? It is this lack of sophistication which most decisively separates Drewe's Kelly from Carey's. The possibility of irony is allowed for in *Our Sunshine*, but the single voice employed in Carey's novel does not permit that sort of distancing.

Barry Oakley describes the single voice as "This self-denying literary ordinance" (2000: 5), but argues that it is positive in that it narrows both the writer's and reader's focus and is reminiscent of key influences such as Joyce and Faulkner and because "the filament, the narrative line, glows all the more" (5). Oakley's review reveals a number of things about the novel's reception that marks not only Carey's drift away from postmodernism, but a similar change in the way his work is being evaluated. It's true that Oakley is an old style reviewer and not an academic critic, but he singles out for praise three elements of *True History of the Kelly Gang* which are manifest in the text and which contradict what has generally been characterised as Carey's postcolonial, anti-realist and anti-historicist leanings. It is telling that Oakley regards *True History of the Kelly Gang* as having a voice "We've heard ... before, at the end of a long Dublin day in 1904" (5). The evidence for the allusion to Molly Bloom is thin - Oakley merely says vaguely that it has the same "tone" as Joyce's *Ulysses* - but he is on firmer ground when he invokes another figure of high literary modernism, William Faulkner. *True History of the Kelly Gang* carries an epigraph by Faulkner ("The past is not dead. It is not even past.") and Carey has acknowledged his debt to Faulkner in interviews (Munroe) in the past. What appears to be retrogressive

about this comparison is that the use of ungrammatical stream of consciousness in a novel like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* did not so much question the desire for social realism in fiction as express the technical limits of its assumptions. As I said earlier, Carey has joined a tradition rather than seeking to undermine one.

The second return to the past which Oakley highlights is the use in the novel of Shakespeare's most famously jingoistic piece of writing: Henry V's speech to his soldiers before the Battle of Agincourt. In my chapter on *Oscar and Lucinda* I took issue with David Callahan's contention that *Oscar and Lucinda* subverted Australia's relationship with canonical English literature by "inflecting one's writing with precisely the tones and tactics of the imperial other which the notion of subversion would rather have deflected" (1990: 23). In this novel Callahan would probably point to this speech as an example of the "subversion of subversion", something which strikes me as a tortuous way of arguing that the postcolonial tendency to subvert the centre has been abandoned. There is no question that we are to regard Ned Kelly as an archetypal Australian. He is also very much a politicised figure - clearly a republican with little time for the British. He says himself "that Fitzpatrick will be the cause of greater slaughter to the Union Jack than Saint Patrick was to the snakes and toads in Ireland" (Keesing 28) and speaks of "the pressure and tyrannism of the English yoke" (Keesing 33). Yet Carey has him moved by a recitation of Shakespeare which celebrates a famous English victory. Not only is Carey's Kelly moved, he says of Curnow that "When he recited he were reveal'd to be pure currency" (388). Pure currency in this context means fully Australian ('currency' was slang for native born), a judgement about Curnow which contains all sorts of ironic possibilities. Curnow's recitation could be read as a subterfuge which not only allows him to betray Kelly, but also, more subtly, to cause Kelly by means of grand rhetoric to betray his own beliefs.

The problem with this argument is that this particular incident is effectively the only one from which such an interpretation could be derived; it is too isolated really to alter the novel's strong theme of historical nationalism. In my view, the quote actually works to link the siege of Glenrowan with a tradition of battles fought against

insurmountable odds. There is no postcolonial sense of writing back to the empire; Kelly's last stand becomes part of the wider literature of lost causes. Peter Carey is writing Ned Kelly into imaginative history in a way that is complementary and no longer combative.

The implications of Curnow's choice of song (Curnow, like the rest of the Gang's captives, is expected to sing a song) are understood by Curnow and Kelly in different ways. Curnow appeals, as Cath Keneally points out to "Ned's passion for language and romantic notion of his battle against injustice"(11), but Curnow sees these qualities as weaknesses and exploits them. The complexity is that Curnow is as driven by notions of heroism as Ned. The fame which Kelly ultimately gains is something which Curnow believes will be his in acting to prevent the derailment of the special train. But, as Carey has said in interviews, Curnow has been largely forgotten whereas Ned has acquired such status in popular memory he has been portrayed in Olympic opening ceremonies. In this particular fictional world, Curnow goes one step further than inadvertently saving Kelly's reputation by stopping a potentially horrendous train smash. He becomes the means of keeping Ned's manuscript safe, despite his intention to "*damn him ... to hell*" (390):

He had danced with the devil himself and he had flattered him and out-witted him as successfully as the hero of any fairy tale, and now he carried the proof, the trophy, the rank untidy nest of paper beneath his arm. These stained "manuscripts" were disgusting to his touch and his very skin shrank from their conceit and ignorance and yet he was a man already triumphant. He had ripped out the creature's bloody heart and he would damn him now to hell.
(390)

The third feature of the novel remarked upon by Barry Oakley is its unabashed nationalism. He claims for the novel "an artesian Australianness" which places Carey in a canon of nationalist fiction of uniquely Australian heroes such as "Henry Lawson ... with Joe Wilson, Joseph Furphy with Tom Collins, George Johnston with Jack, Patrick White with Stan Parker and Albert Facey with himself". Oakley calls *True History of the Kelly Gang* one of "the tales of the tribe" (5) National identity and the

hoary old concept of the great Australian novel ("It's the book every Australian writer has wanted to write.[5]) are precisely the sort of limiting generalisations which contemporary Australian writers had supposedly abandoned and, in Carey's case, even parodied in *Illywhacker*. That said, it should be pointed out that not all commentators regard Ned Kelly as an appropriate national symbol with Frank Devine opining that "Kelly would have become the Pol Pot of north-east Victoria" (Devine 11). Notwithstanding this kind of dissent (Carey's revival of the Kelly controversy has also resulted in letters to the editor from descendants of the men killed at Stringybark Creek bemoaning Kelly's heroic stature), it is difficult to avoid evaluating this novel as straightforwardly nationalistic in its choice of subject matter. The Kelly story has always been closely associated with republicanism in Australia and Carey has admitted that this is an undercurrent in the book (7.30 Report). More interestingly, however, in the same television interview Carey talked about how the Kelly legend encapsulates what he regards as national characteristics. He likened the absurdity of Kelly's last stand, especially its defiance of overwhelming odds to the support received by a spectacularly unsuccessful swimmer at the Sydney Olympics who was dubbed "Eric the Eel". Carey thought that the crowd's support of this man who could hardly swim in comparison to the athletes around him revealed something about Australia's support for the underdog and he equated the phenomena with Australia's continued fascination with a defeated figure like Kelly. (Carey's choice of analogy was unfortunate as "Eric the Eel" was named after "Eddie the Eagle", an amateur bespectacled English ski jumper who drew huge television audiences in the United States with his brave performances at the Calgary Winter Olympics thus demonstrating that any ordinary incompetence in the context of exceptional performances has trans-national appeal, an observation further supported by the rapturous reception accorded "Eric the Eel" in England.)

So Carey's choice of Kelly as a subject is meant at least on some level to construct generalisations about Australia and Australians. To an extent, *True History of the Kelly Gang* is an archetypal story, the sort of archetypal story which critics of

history such as Paul Carter would find limiting and self serving. The novel does appear to be a move away from the impetus to internationalism which imbued Carey's early work. It is true that relying almost exclusively on one voice leaves the author little room for techniques which emphasise the provisionality and contingency of historical discourse, but to make that voice Ned Kelly's inevitably raises issues of republican nationalism and the question of whether Kelly's story really has any particular national significance. Peter Coleman in *The Adelaide Review* claims, rather extravagantly, that "The great conversion of Kelly from vicious thug into tragic hero began in the nationalistic 1940s among the artists" (10). This conveniently ignores one of Australia's (and the world's) first feature films and books like J.J Kenneally's famously partisan 1929 *Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and Their Pursuers*, but Coleman's article is useful in that it demonstrates the ongoing division of views about Ned Kelly's stature.

Differing views about Kelly tend to hinge on whether the killings at Stringybark Creek were murder or self defence. Carey is careful to stick to the facts as outlined by Ian Jones in portraying the killings and is of the opinion that Kelly shot Sergeant Kennedy as an act of compassion (Adams and 7.30 Report) and that the police fully intended to kill Ned and his associates. The advantage of restricting the novel's point of view to Kelly alone is that readers are able to make their own judgement about Ned's moral culpability. A commentator such as Peter Coleman who starts from the belief, supported by "the great Tory historian M.H. Ellis" that Kelly was "one of the most cold-blooded and utterly self-centred criminals who ever decorated the end of a rope in an Australian gaol" (cited by Coleman 10), is able to find his opinion vindicated by the novel : "For my part I still regard it as a vicious murder, and believe that that is how it comes out in the novel" (10). The restricted narrative voice does on occasion allow for the sort of objective neutrality historical accounts ideally strive for.

Ned Kelly's disingenuousness about aspects of the killings are not entirely preserved in *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Even though Kelly consistently admits

to having mistakenly shot Kennedy as he was raising his hand in surrender, Carey does alter a detail of Kelly's version of this particular incident. This is Kelly's account, cited by Ian Jones:

When I shot him... he must have dropped his revolver and the blood running down his arm formed a clot in his hand which I took for his revolver knowing he had one shot left. (Jones 137)

This is how Carey subtly changes this passage in the novel:

As he fell I ran to where he lay wide eyed & crumpled then taking possession of his gun I discovered nothing more lethal in his hand than a mass of clotted blood. (277)

Carey retains the gory detail but loses the absurd self-justification of Kelly mistaking a blood clot for a gun. Then again, it might be argued that Ned is really referring to Kennedy's hand and not to the blood clot, given that his syntax is so consistently confused. This is a generous interpretation but one which would have been quite possible to make in the context of the novel. That Carey chose to clarify the remark in this way indicates an unsurprising partiality. Although it does slightly tilt the reader toward a favourable judgement (always a danger inherent in first person narration as demonstrated by Nabokov's *Lolita* and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*), the book keeps as close as possible to the facts of the killing of Kennedy. The truth is that Ned Kelly does shoot Kennedy in cold blood immediately after the grievously wounded policeman has begged for his life. Ian Jones quotes a widely published story told to sympathiser Henry Perkins:

The Sergeant then appeared to be suffering very much and in great agony. I could not look upon him so, and did not wish to leave him alone to linger out in such pain, so I suddenly, without letting him see what I intended, I put the muzzle of my gun to within a few inches of Kennedy's breast...When he saw that I was going to shoot him he begged of me to leave him alive, saying, "Let me alone to live, if I can, for the sake of my poor wife and family. You surely have shed blood enough." I fired, and he died instantly, without a groan. (138)

This is how the scene is played out in *True History of the Kelly Gang*:

Not wanting him to linger alone in such agony I quietly reloaded my gun.
He wished to talk about his little boy again weeping frankly at how he missed
him every minute of every day.
I then said soon he would be with him.
Sgt Kennedy looked up at me sharply. You have shed blood enough said he.
I fired and he died instantly without a groan. (278)

In both versions there is a bias towards Kelly's justification for killing Kennedy against his express wishes; in both he dies "instantly without a groan", mercifully put out of his misery. It is, however, clearly possible to read this as murder despite the manifest belief of the narrator that it is a mercy killing. This type of interpretative openness in the novel obliges readers to construct their own history according to their moral or political principles. It does not abandon or ever very seriously question the historicist principle of objective neutrality. This is not to say that Carey's bias toward Ned is not evident in the text, but to point out that Carey's partiality is tempered by the need to work within the accepted modes of historical discourse. Ned still kills Kennedy in cold blood, but the novel's version has been softened rather than altered. In the book Kennedy does not notice the gun as in the narrative favoured by Jones and, most revealingly, neglects to have Kennedy explicitly say "Let me alone to live, if I can". In the novel the implication is that Kennedy is being released from his physical agony *and* the pain of separation from his son. What is more, Kelly is later plagued by guilty dreams: "All night I had bad dreams very confused I saw Kennedy raising his hand to surrender and me shooting him again and again" (279).

Of course, the novel's real focus is not the factual events but the inner life of Ned Kelly. Highly speculative as this area must be, it is still possible, indeed unavoidable, to judge whether the Ned Kelly of the novel tallies with what is actually known about the man. It is here that there is a crucial difference in the way in which Drewe and Carey conceive of Kelly's psyche. In Carey's novel Kelly comes across at times as sentimental and naive. He also reads as being dispassionate about violence. For example, the extraordinary idea of causing a massive rail disaster at Glenrowan is

flatly reported in *True History of the Kelly Gang* soon after Kelly has admitted that Joe Byrne had murdered Aaron Sherritt. Ned rouses

the plate layers James Reardon & Dennis Sullivan from their tents beside the line.

I informed them that through abuse & tyranny the police had forfeited the right to the land also therefore the rails upon it. We escorted them along the track and through the Gap and where the rail curved we ordered them to remove 2 lengths of rail which they done with great reluctance. The rails was thrown down the steep embankment with 9 red gum sleepers still attached. (382 - 383)

From what we know of Ned in his writings, this passage is too flat and distant even if we take into account Ned's limitations as a writer. In the Jerilderie Letter he talks passionately about how he "would have scattered their blood and brains like rain I would manure the Eleven Mile with their bloated carcasses" (Keesing 30). Or, "I will not exactly show them what cold blooded murder is but wholesale and retail slaughter something different to shooting three troopers in self defence and robbing a bank" (Keesing 30). Furthermore, Ned displays a vicious streak in fantasising about what he would do to Police and traitors: "pegged on an ant-bed with their bellies opened their fat taken out rendered and poured down their throat boiling hot will be cool to what pleasure I will give some of them" (Keesing 34).

Neither Drewe's nor Carey's Kelly show quite this sort of relish for violence, but Drewe is careful to locate Kelly in a milieu of casual violence and continual brutality. In *Our Sunshine*, when Ned visits the Sherritt house Aaron's father casually shoots a dog (Drewe 100), the bank manager's wife at Euroa collects skulls (113), Sergeant Devine of Jerilderie traps birds and stuffs them (130), Kelly watches a caterpillar consumed by ants (143), and whilst in Melbourne before being outlawed Ned is afforded this extreme series of images:

He's seen the sea as gaoler, molester, killer - and graveyard, too, for countless bloated cats and dogs, two drunkenly shotgunned sea lions, one pig and three people, one a street-girl still in her stays but minus her head. He's jumped aside as four spooked Clydesdales bolted a dray of pitch and bluestone foundations off the end of Gellibrand pier like it was a cartload of feathers. And seen them every day for a fortnight after, in frozen frenzied gallop down

below, still in harness, crabs and toadfish politely diminishing them from the lips and nostrils backwards. Until a pack of tiger sharks with a taste for everything but the stone and iron wheel rims cancelled the tableau in twenty minutes. (Drewe 58)

Passages such as these are deployed to explain and contextualise Kelly's violence. Brutality is the norm in Kelly's world as envisaged by Drewe and his Kelly even thinks nothing of telling the woman with whom he is involved that he admires the Indian torture alluded to in the Jerilderie Letter. Carey also uses this sort of explanatory invention in hinting to the reader that sexual insecurity motivates some of Kelly's loathing of the police (especially the curious idea of having Fitzpatrick engineer his first sexual encounter [229-230]), but the novel only focuses on the bloodier aspects of the Kelly Outbreak when necessary. When it does it highlights details much less than in Drewe's novel which forces the reader to confront the visceral reality of violence and deprivation by such things as referring to "brain juice" and having the fugitives drink horses' blood to survive (72). A perfect example of this difference in emphasis is the way the writers both use the historical fact that Dan "Mad Dog" Morgan's head does pass through Avenel when Ned is 10 years old (Jones 24). In *Our Sunshine* Ned actually witnesses the head: "And more, yes, he remembers Dan Morgan's severed head passing slowly through the town when he was ten" (Drewe 10). On the other hand, Carey chooses to have his Ned being awarded his famous sash for saving the life of young Dicky Shelton whilst the head passes through town: "At the very hour I stood before the scholars in my sash the decapitated head of the bushranger Morgan were being carried down the public highway - Benalla - Violet Town - Euroa - Avenel - perhaps it would be better had I known the true cruel nature of the world but I would not give up my ignorance even if I could" (33-34).

Drewe's Kelly is more knowing than this and in this respect matches the tone of the Jerilderie Letter more closely than the narrator of *True History of the Kelly Gang*. The way in which both of these novelists have embellished the Kelly story runs deliberately counter to the perceived establishment line that Kelly was merely a vicious horse thief and both seek to humanise him as much as possible. To do this

they have had to fill in the spaces which the historical record leaves blank. Kelly's sexuality is the most obvious missing element in the Kelly story and it is not surprising that both Drewe and Carey feel compelled to invent a lover for Ned. This makes him more accessible, and less Victorian (I don't mean the parochial sense of the word). Carey has made it clear that Ned's emotional life is his abiding interest in writing this novel. All the major changes to the known facts of Kelly's life pertain either to the novel's structure or to underline aspects of Ned's psychology such as having his jealousy of Bill Frost taken to the extreme of Ned shooting him and encountering him with a prostitute. Distorting narrative structures are acknowledged as a largely unexamined given in the book; they exist, but their exposure is peripheral and almost cursory.

True History of the Kelly Gang gestures in this direction in the chapter entitled "PARCEL 10 : *The history is commenced.*" The introductory notes announce that "*This parcel also contains two annotated pages from The Melbourne Argus in which that newspaper's account of the Euroa Bank robbery is quibbled with*" (293). This is one of the few points at which the novel sets up a dialogue of competing voices and foregrounds doubt about documentary accuracy. The striking thing about this chapter is that the historian's notes are an entirely fair description of the material. The irony that does exist is very gentle indeed. Mary Hearn's annotations to the newspaper account of the bank robbery *are* quibbles. She remarks about how handsome Ned is, what he wore, and how the bank manager's wife flirted with him, thus revealing herself to be more partial than the author of the account. In terms of clarifying what happened at Euroa, Mary's remarks hint at a collusion between the hawker Gloster and the gang: "(On time to the minute)" and "(A strange coincidence indeed)" (333-334). What is happening here is that the novel is leading us to the likeliest story without necessarily condemning history for obscuring it. Gloster's involvement in the robbery has been speculated on before by historians and these speculations are the basis for the novel's insinuation.

The chapter heading declares that the history is commenced, an announcement which can be read as ironic considering that nearly three hundred pages have already been expended on Kelly's story of his life and deeds. Exactly what history is commenced? What begins here is Kelly's public history. The textual world into which Kelly is thrust is a maelstrom of propaganda and sensationalist distortion. Kelly is harboured by an unnamed family and says:

In this little hut it were usually hard to find sufficient paper to wipe yourself but now it were a rats nest of ENSIGN and ADVERTISER and ARGUS there were no smell of cooking only of the cold black ink." (298)

This "cold black ink" is, however, a two edged sword. The newspapers demonise him, but they also offer hope and inspiration. The same ink can be used in his defence and Ned is inspired to write to parliamentarian Donald Cameron to expose police corruption. The chapter is also said to be "*Of particular interest for the dual motives for the history's construction*" (293). These are to set the record straight and to communicate with his unborn child. The written word has power. It can convince Mary and their child of his innocence. It can possibly save his life. It can certainly capture some of his life for posterity, obviously a profound concern of a man facing imminent death.

Any anxieties about the capacity of language to reflect historical reality are not readily apparent in this novel. The chapter headings are a touch ironic and Mary catches a reporter out on a minor detail about the exact amount of money Ned initially stole from the bank at Euroa. Even my own argument that the book begins the public history of Ned in "PARCEL 10" is strained since the history which actually commences in this chapter is presumably the one which we read in the novel. The novel's awareness of history and its implicit respect for it are manifest on every page. This is not just because the novel relies heavily on one voice. The novel concludes with two documents describing the siege of Glenrowan and the hanging of Ned Kelly. The first of these, supposedly printed in 1955 and authored by a mysterious "S.C" is an impressionistic account of the siege written from the point of view of an omniscient

narrator. It does not keep religiously to the facts of the siege as described by Ian Jones, but its deviations from Jones's reconstruction have no particular resonance. Joe's death is not as dramatic and other details are omitted or added, but the bulk of the narrative from the wounding of Superintendent Hare to the shooting of Ned's legs keeps to the bare facts. Sieges are complex situations which encompass dozens of confused viewpoints so it comes as no surprise that Carey has offered yet another version. Some report a Constable Kelly as the man who shot Ned's legs out from under him (Reinits 1229) whereas Jones identifies the culprit as Sergeant Steele. Similarly the source cited above claims that Joe Byrne died from a bullet to the brain and Jones says he was "fatally shot through the groin" (256).

That history throws up problems of this sort is something that is relished in this novel rather than despaired of. It concludes with a newspaper report of Ned's execution. Parts of this are lifted verbatim from J. Middleton's description for the *Herald* and the only detail which arguably contradicts the truth is that Kelly may not have said as he stepped on to the drop "Such is life" (though he did say this when told the hour of his death) but something like 'Ah well, I suppose' (Jones 322). This detail is unimportant to Carey: when asked about it by Phillip Adams he simply said he supposed it were true. So the novel ends with a nod to historical sources and the closure of a hanging. The foregrounding of ambiguity, doubt and open-endedness which are the hallmarks of postmodernity have diminished to minor gestures. Replacing these elements of doubt which appear antithetical toward history is a new confidence in the capacity of fiction to complement history and re-imagine a past which is acknowledged as intrinsically irretrievable. In this context perhaps it does not really matter that the Jerilderie letter is in Joe Byrne's handwriting.

CONCLUSION

Andrew Taylor, in his essay entitled "Origin, Identity and the Body in Malouf's Fiction", sees something new in David Malouf's most recent novel, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. In a couple of key episodes in this novel of, Taylor identifies the usual collapse of distinction and difference and an intimation of wholeness. However he detects a change in that "that wholeness is now the realisation and totalisation of identity, not its other" (1999: 13) This is no longer located in death, as in *An Imaginary Life*, but in "the living human body which incorporates, if only momentarily, the warring diversity of the universe in a brief escape from the temporal, in a triumphant evasion of history" (1999: 13). *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is a novel which does place an extraordinary emphasis on physical sensation, more so even than its predecessor, *Remembering Babylon*, and it does place this emphasis to 'evade' history. Like Peter Carey, Malouf in his most recent work no longer feels obliged to highlight the insufficiencies of history, but has forged ahead to produce his own idiosyncratic vision of the past. *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is a novel with a much clearer relationship to Malouf's previous work than Carey's *Jack Maggs* bears towards, say, *Oscar and Lucinda*. Malouf and Carey are, of course, very different novelists with different ambitions and directions. What they share is the arbitrary fact of their being Australian, highly regarded and concerned to create historical novels which express something new about our collective past. Both have been influenced by the fashion for neo-historicism which sought to replace the perceived dullness and culpable inaccuracies of the story of Australia's past with which they had grown up. Both have now largely abandoned attacks on the straw man of conventional history in their novels and begun to practise unselfconsciously the kind of fabulation their early novels can be seen to advocate. It is not surprising that their visions of the past and their strategies for expressing them are so different, but a healthy variousness in approaches to history is what both writers have always advocated.

To return to *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, Malouf's 'evasion' of history in favour of an intense identification with the endlessly shifting complexity of people's interactions and perceptions is finally a way of seeing at odds with the carefully researched and politically charged fiction of Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Nevertheless the novels share a less self-conscious confidence in their approach to the past. History for both novelists is no longer such ardently contested ground, but in a sense a hard-won territory to be exploited. For Malouf this means that history has become a setting in which he can explore the process of memory from the point of view of his characters without his novels continuing to be burdened by anxieties about the reliability of historical research. As in Carey's later work, there continues to be residual irony about the limitations of historical discourse. This is most obviously illustrated in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* by the way the story of Adair and his execution of Carney becomes the legend of the rebellious O'Dare who disappears with his rescued convict to the mythical inland sea. But the reality is that Malouf's latest novel is as much a fantasy about the past as this legend is. Carney's quite bizarre memory of being hired to be 'touched up' by a wealthy blind girl for no clearly specified reason is a good example of Malouf using an historical setting only to reiterate his view. That is: the peculiar, the sensual and the inconsequential are normally missing from our reconstructions of the past because they advance no cause and illuminate nothing but the unmediated immediacy of experience. Unlike *Remembering Babylon*, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is not rooted in any specific historical event and remains vague as to when exactly the action is taking place beyond allowing us to guess that it must be the 1820s. In most of Malouf's work his characters tend not to be archetypal figures. Ovid is not typically classical, Jim Saddler is not a bronzed Anzac, and I have already argued that no character in *Remembering Babylon* typifies the period. But in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, this antipathy toward historical generalisation has been relaxed. Adair and Virgilia can be read as the paired embodiment of the conflicting intellectual consequences of the enlightenment: namely measured classicism and wilful romanticism. This reading

is complicated as the novel develops, but Eamon Fitzgibbon, who conducts the education of Adair and Virgilia, is undoubtedly a representative Enlightenment figure. He was "Educated in France" and "had gone back at the time of the Revolution, and it was Robespierre he spoke of with the warmest admiration and regret" (74). The Park is carefully described as an Enlightenment project which combines a passion for engineering and an obsession with clockwork with "the owner's love of fantasy and play" (72). All of this profoundly affects Adair who attempts to live an enlightened and honourable life. Despite his appearing punctilious to other characters in the book and despite his own efforts to live a balanced life, Adair in his inner life is ultimately not able to be quite the law abiding servant of the state which part of his nature wants him to be. So even though historical generalisation is a part of the novel's pattern of meaning (a step away from the radical particularising of earlier works), the novel does not go so far as to make its central character a purely allegorical figure.

In the end it is Adair and not Virgilia who becomes the truly romantic figure of Australian folklore. The lie of O'Dare which sweeps the colony is as much an expression of Adair's unrealistic desire to release Carney (the assonance with carnal is probably deliberate) as Virgilia's childhood lies about exotic acrobats expressed her need for excitement and novelty. Her status as a representative romantic figure is compromised by the novel leaving her with her father in his library painstakingly deciphering his words letter by letter. The important thing about this novel in terms of its treatment of history is, however, this sense that, as Malouf later wrote in a review of two histories of the period, "that the place we live in was brought into the known world by Enlightenment intellectual adventure, and founded, 20 years later, on Enlightenment values" (Malouf 1999: 23).

What happens in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is the imaginative creation of the sort of consciousness which may have been the legacy of the Enlightenment. In previous novels Malouf has personalised history and sought out those banal moments which were held not to be worth recording but which are essential to an understanding of the full texture and complexity of an overwhelming

mass of past experience that is lost in our prejudicial need to categorise and impose hierarchies of significance. It is no surprise that he does much the same thing in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* by having Adair remain "lumpishly untransformed" by Enlightenment wisdom because "More insistent than his love of justice or his will to achieve it, was the need to relieve himself savagely of the vision of that girl's thighs, whose light was so much more dazzling than the light off any page" (132). What is surprising is that this sort of understanding should be predicated on precisely the sort of categorical distortion of a continua that its conclusion mitigates against.

What I mean by 'categorical distortion' is the more or less arbitrary division of history into periods which are clearly not neutral and were established by partisans of particular view points for definite purposes. These purposes are usually to demonstrate that our own age is best by using pejorative names to characterise epochs which are unlike ours such as the 'Dark Ages' and terms of approbation such as 'Enlightenment' for the period which presages modernity. In most of Malouf's work, the emphasis on sensuality and the process of perception is made to demonstrate that in people's actual experience, minor moments of revelation or simple happiness are more important than the large historical background against which they are pointedly juxtaposed. The change in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is that instead of representing historical background as undeniable events such as world wars or settlement or the Depression, Malouf examines the abstract (and historicist) notion of Enlightenment. One can read *The Great World*, *Fly Away Peter*, and *Remembering Babylon* as novels which advocate a particular sort of aestheticised and romantic view of history as a preferable alternative to the generalised abstractions of historicism or nationalist myth-making. The privileging of Imogen Harcourt's vision or Vic's need to contain the world subvert that kind of historicist thinking and cast doubt on the value of hierarchies of significance being imposed on events which were subject to virtually infinitely variable perspectives. In the context of these novels such privileging can and has been read as antithetical to generalised abstractions about history. Because the notion of the Enlightenment is embedded in the text of *The Conversations at Curlow*

Creek, the novel's characteristic final scene of exquisite ordinariness can be read as a complementary complication of an historicist view instead of a subversive one.

Adair appears to his contemporaries and even in his letters to Virgilia to be a man of the Enlightenment. Those things which complicate his Enlightenment world view are invisible both to the people around him and posterity because they are part of his hidden inner life. His common humanity and his ordinary desires are what the novel leaves us with. Its final scene has Adair resolved to propose to Virgilia on his return and chewing on a loaf of fresh bread "refreshing his mouth like common speech" (214). The fact is that Malouf has laid aside the complications of historiographic metafiction to pursue the aim of the traditional historical novelist - to discover how an historical character would have thought and felt.

David Malouf has in recent times ceased to define history as inherently problematic. In reviewing Daniel Roche's *France in the Enlightenment* he admires its being "dense with example" and finds no fault with there being "no anecdotes, no individuals except as their lives or experience offer some piece of recorded evidence that is unavailable elsewhere" (1999:20). That historians have absorbed the implications of the criticism levelled at their discipline simply cannot be avoided, with Malouf feeling compelled to quote in the same review Roche's self-conscious approach:

'How can we understand change," he asks, "without being influenced by what happened and what we now know about the future of a world that was necessarily ignorant of it? We must not write the history of an age in the light of what came after it'. (20)

One might have expected novelists who were held to continually problematise history to have shifted their attentions to the contemporary world of Australia. If history is, as their books implied, impossibly partial and inadequate, then how can it continue to form the substance of their work? There were two broad options available to them - to abandon the historical or, as actually happened, to embrace it. After two long novels deeply preoccupied with history (*Oscar and Lucinda* and *Illywhacker*),

Carey did attempt to take the first option with *The Tax Inspector*, with the interesting result of receiving cool reviews and a dearth of critical articles. His return to an allegorical mode based on historical analogy in *The Unusual life of Tristan Smith* was more successful, although its fantastic elements were at times merely peculiar. In *Jack Maggs*, Carey returned to the historical and created a world which is an eclectic mixture of biography and canonical literature. History in this novel is entirely textual and literary, but instead of this appearing to be a problem, or a way of expressing the idea that narrative distorts reality, it hints in its closing scene that story is a better means of knowing the world than objective description:

The Mitchell's librarian has noted on each index card the 'v. rough excision' of that page which reads:

Affectionately Inscribed
to
PERCIVAL CLARENCE BUCKLE
A Man of Letters, a Patron of the Arts (392)

Of course, we know why Mercy has torn these pages out and why Oates was obliged to include them, but without the context of this story, the 'v. rough excision' is only an observation. Although on the surface this looks to be ironising the inadequacies of history, it is actually an ending which is ambivalent about it. The librarian may not know the import of the missing pages, but the notation fits so perfectly into our understanding as readers that we are able to visualise Mercy angrily ripping out the offending dedications. Sometimes the understatement of historical data is full of implication.

It is an implication which is waiting to be revealed. Most of our past is lost, our memories are unreliable and documentation liable to suppression or falsification. What novelists have always shared with historians is the need to retrieve and speculate about our collective past and how it creates our contemporary consciousness. This urge is so important to Carey and Malouf that their work is suffused with a desire to have all of the past in all its complex variousness, a desire so acute that the failure of history to fulfil it led them to lament its insufficiencies as a means of getting closer to

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this intrinsically unrealisable goal. But the lament can only be repeated a limited number of times because the problem with history as outlined by various theorists is intractable. It may well be, as the narrator of one of the stories from Malouf's *Antipodes* says, that "There is no story, no set of events that leads anywhere or proves anything - no middle, no end " (160). But without narrative the past exists as a series of unassimilable and unrelated events. Having signalled their awareness that history, like actual experience, cannot fully be transferred onto the page, Malouf and Carey can ultimately only work within a tradition which was always conscious of its limitations. Their fiction, and the writing of history in contemporary Australia, have become increasingly complementary. Malouf delivered a series of unabashed historical lectures in 1998 for the ABC and Carey most recently has delved into the inner life of Ned Kelly. The title of Malouf's Boyer lectures is a fair summation of what both writers look to derive from history: "The Making of Australian Consciousness".

END NOTES

1. Booker Prize (1988), Talking Book of the Year Award (1988), Foundation for Australian Literary Studies Award (1989), Miles Franklin Award (1989), NBC Banjo Award (1989), Adelaide Festival Award (1990).

2. Wilhelmus 552, Edmond 89, Gillet 199, Sage 363, Hassall 123, Rolfe 69, Harris 110, Willbanks 50, Woodcock 10. Woodcock even draws a comparison between *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Illywhacker* (57). Ted Solotaroff says in a letter to Carey: "I can't remember having as much pleasure and respect for a historical novel since I read *The French Lieutenant's Woman* fifteen years ago. I hope you won't find this comparison invidious. What prompts it is the extraordinary way you've managed to maintain the verisimilitude of your treatment of the 19th century - not only the physical and social details but also the intellectual, moral, and spiritual sensibility (a much harder feat) - and at the same time carried it along with [sic] a 20th century sensibility. (John Fowles, look to your laurels.) The result is a wonderful sense of a recaptured and reconstituted history - 19th century English and Australian life as it was complete with the wind of the future blowing in the seeds of change" (UQFL 164 Accession 880700-1 Box 13). The claim the Carey "had not and has not read Fowles' novel" (Rolfe 69) is reported by Patricia Rolfe in the February *Bulletin* of 1988.

3. This aspect of *Oscar and Lucinda* has attracted a surprising amount of comment, with hostile reviewers seeing it as an obvious flaw and others, such as Sue Gillet, citing it as an example of Carey's self-referential irony designed to underline the unavoidable artificiality of historical discourse. In an interview with Thomas Tausky, Carey had this to say on the issue: "I felt [third person narration] was the only way to approach *Oscar and Lucinda*. I probably fooled around with first person; no, I don't think I ever did. I had a lot more of the narrator's life originally, but I just pared it back and pared it back until there was almost nothing there. Originally, the narrator was an actual character, rather than just a voice. The bigger view of history and the church - I had to look at it from the present" (Tausky 34).

4. See interview in *Writers in Action: The Writer's Choice Evenings* edited by Gerry Turcotte. Also mentioned in research materials on *Oscar and Lucinda* UQFL 164 Accession 880509 Box 4. In an interview with Ray Willbanks Carey says: "I knew I wanted the novel to sound like the nineteenth century. I obviously did a lot of reading around the subject, but I didn't read too much fiction" (Willbanks 55). Carey also read *Pioneering in the Bellingham Valley*.

5. Carey says in an interview with Antoni Jach that : "Lucinda, I hope, did better with *Bleak House* than I did because I didn't get past the first twenty pages. A lot of people have remarked on a supposed resemblance to Dickens but I've never read a novel by Dickens" (Jach 28). He also responds to a similar question in his interview with Ray Willbanks thus: "No. I haven't really read Dickens" (Willbanks 55).

6. Margaret Harris says apropos *Oscar and Lucinda*: "In the play of fate and chance, the fictions of Thomas Hardy, that great unbeliever, have a textual presence" (Harris 110). Kirsten Holst Petersen also mentions Hardy as a model for Carey's use of "Coincidences, misunderstandings and accidents which propel the story forward"

(Petersen 113). This linking of chance and fate as peculiarly Hardy-esque is also noted by Bruce Woodcock (87). Perhaps, but the allusion is very indirect.

7. The single occurrence of Bob's name was pointed out to me by my supervisor, Sue Hosking. It appears on page 488 when Bob is reporting what Kumbaingiri Billy had to say about Oscar christening his father's sister Mary: "...if you want my opinion, Bob, it was ignorant to talk to us Kooris in that way" (488). Not surprisingly, several critics have missed this and it is conceivable, given that Carey never mentions his name in interviews, that as part of his 'paring back' of the narrator's role this reference was assumed to be edited out. Bruce Woodcock also notices that the narrator's name and, curiously, his gender, are only revealed at this very late stage of the novel.

8. See Stephen Jay Gould's excellent essay on this topic entitled "Adams Navel" in *The Flamingo's Smile* for a succinct appraisal of Gosse's logic.

9. Carey has asserted this in several interviews and has called himself both an agnostic and an atheist. Bron Sibree, writing in *The Canberra Times*, says that "Carey describes himself as a practising agnostic" (C7). He said to Jo-anne Harding concerning his disappointment at the removal of a pretty church near where he lived in the Bellinger Valley: "I thought, why is this 40-year-old man who sees himself as an agnostic getting upset?" (6). But speaking to Eleanor Wachtel on the same topic, he said: "why should I, an atheist, care what happened to a Christian church?" (103). In 1985 he told Giulia Giuffre in *The Weekend Australian* that he did not believe in God.

10. Exactly what Carey contributed is a bit of a mystery, as the publication carries no acknowledgments. The book was published in 1981 and entitled *The City of Grafton*. It was put together by the Clarence River Historical Society. See UQFL Box 12 Accession nos. 880510 & 880700-1.

11. The actual descriptions of plants used in the novel by Malouf are quoted by Edmund Gregory from a piece in *The Rockhampton Bulletin* by a Monsieur Thozet - an even more distancing process than the one Malouf creates.

ERRATA

- p.15** 4th last line: 'last of the acid drops'
- p.25** 2nd last line: 'filled' for 'filed'
- p.39** Quotation marks before "Report on the Shadow Industry"
- p.47** line 14: 'In the poppy scene'
- p.69** line 6: 'the joy'
- p.98** line 16: 'as well as'
- p.134** line 21: 'laments that'
- p.155** line 24: 'Sartre'
- p.172** line 12: 'militates' for 'mitigates' (ditto **p.217**)
- p.193** line 1: '**CHAPTER**'
- p.204** line 20: 'the trophy' for 'thetrophy'
- p.214** line 4: 'in this novel of, Taylor...' omit 'of'
- p.217** line 8: 'continuum' for 'continua'

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