

## Chapter 1

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### *Introduction*

Contradiction need not inherently indicate a deficiency on the part of the reasoning subject.<sup>1</sup>

The year 1922 is often seen as a symbolic watershed in literature in English. With the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, elusive literature was irrevocably introduced to twentieth-century readers. It was not that the world had not seen difficult literature before, but English literature up to that time had been, largely speaking, understandable, if the reader was prepared to look for its 'message'. The age of Modernism introduced writing that was not only at times difficult, but increasingly allusive and elusive. Works such as *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* do not, no matter how much hermeneutic elucidation is applied to them, submit to a final, cohesive reading. They are essentially 'open' texts.

This major change in literature, which occurred relatively rapidly in the decades following the First World War, was acknowledged by Australian writers and readers, but did not have as dramatic an effect on the production of local literature as it did in Europe and the Americas. There was not a flowering of Modernist writing in Australian literature, and names of Australian Modernist writers do not spring readily to mind in the way that European and American Modernist writers do. Julian Croft notes that 'responses to European Modernism were quickly seen in the visual arts, but ... reaction against Modernism was deep-seated and long-lasting. The same was true of literary Modernism.'<sup>2</sup> While Modernism had some

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Columbia UP, 1982, p. 9

<sup>2</sup> Julian Croft, 'Responses to Modernism, 1915-1965', *New Literary History of Australian*, ed. Laurie Hergenhan, Penguin, Ringwood, 1988, p. 410. Croft's and my arguments are of course generalisations, and do not deny that there were some 'Modernist' experiments – Furnley Maurice and Kenneth Slessor are ready examples.

impact on Australian poetry amongst groups such as the Angry Penguins, there was no readily discernible avant-garde movement in novel writing. This position has been outlined by Susan Lever.

In 1958 Patrick White famously dismissed the work of most of his Australian predecessors as ‘the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism’ and so announced the beginning of a shift in literary values in Australia—from a concern for the accurate depiction of Australian life to an interest in formal experiment. By the 1960s White had been joined by a younger generation of Australian prose writers ... White may be seen as the bearer of a belated novelistic modernism to Australia ..., by the mid-1960s, the techniques of modernism had been overtaken by the more self-conscious approaches of postmodernism.<sup>3</sup>

When this ‘younger generation of prose writers’, many of whom have gone on to become established novelists, hit their stride in the 1970s, they largely bypassed Modernism and launched Australian writing into the Postmodern period. Writers such as Frank Moorhouse, Michael Wilding and Peter Carey were noted for their experimental works and their avant-garde stance with respect to writing. Their more daring experiments were initially confined to short stories, and the ‘experimental novel’, whether of the Modernist or Postmodernist persuasion, remained a rarity.<sup>4</sup> This is the context in which Brian Castro appeared as a talented new novelist in 1982.

With six novels now to his credit, Brian Castro can claim recognition as one of Australia’s most daring and innovative writers of fiction. His novels are intricately plotted and compact, and the prose is at times infuriatingly dense—even obscure—but never dull. His work has attracted praise from critics, but he has found it difficult to establish a broad readership in a country which has a very limited experience of Modernist writing by its own writers. While on the one hand Castro risks obscurity as a novelist, on the other he has promoted a highly accomplished Postmodernist (or ‘high Modernist’)<sup>5</sup> style of writing to Australia, and, more importantly, perhaps offered this country new ways of seeing and thinking about itself. When

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Lever, ‘Fiction: Innovation and Ideology’, *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, eds. Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 308. Again, this broad generalisation does not deny the work of writers such as Christina Stead and Peter Cowan.

<sup>4</sup> Writers such as Gerald Murnane and David Ireland are exceptions, but are not ‘household names’.

<sup>5</sup> In this thesis I will treat Castro as essentially a ‘Postmodern’ writer. I do not want to make a point of distinguishing rigidly between the two; however, there is discussion of Castro’s position in regard to Modernism and Postmodernism in Chapter 6. See also the interview with Castro in Appendix 8.

Joyce introduced *Ulysses* to the world—in a modest way; the first print run comprised only 500 copies—it provoked strong reactions. It has gone on to achieve the status of a classic, and ultimately a wide readership over successive generations. It is not the purpose of this thesis to speculate on whether Castro's works will ever achieve this sort of success, but the two writers' willingness to experiment with form and function in the novel offers a useful analogy. In a similar way, though to a lesser extent, Castro's novels stand out from other Australian work as Joyce's did in the 1920s—strange apparitions that did not fit the current context.

There are few Australian writers who are as distinctive as Castro in terms of style. David Ireland, Gerald Murnane and David Foster are probably the closest, in terms of their linguistic experimentation and refusal to accommodate their readership. The very eclecticism of Castro's method makes it resistant to categorisation. In rather the same way that the term is applied to Thomas Pynchon in the USA, Castro is very much *sui generis*. It would be silly to claim that any particular aspect of Castro's writing is unique in Australian writing, but few other writers sustain the same intensity and stylistic flourish, and meld them so convincingly. Patrick White is an acknowledged master, but his writing is in many senses conventional in terms of style,<sup>6</sup> at least in terms of what we are familiar with from Modernist writers. There are many Australian masters of the lyrical, the imaginative, the weird (Janette Turner Hospital, David Foster, Murray Bail, Peter Carey, Robert Drewe, Richard Flanagan, to name a few), and there are examples of Australian self-conscious metafiction (Mark Henshaw, even Joseph Furphy). What distinguishes Castro is the persistence of his focus on process, destabilisation, and the dynamic instability of language and texts.

When the Modernist novel moved away from the idea of mediating or interpreting the world in terms of 'realism' and appropriated a more personalised internal space, the novel became more exploratory, and the reader was called on to participate in the process, rather than have things explained to him/her. Castro has taken this approach further than almost

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<sup>6</sup> Broadly speaking, and with due allowance for *The Aunt's Story*, White's early novels, such as *Tree of Man* and *Voss*, are essentially developments of traditional Australian realism, though with a Modernist pre-occupation with the psychology of the protagonists; it is in the later novels such as *The Twyborn Affair* that he moves obviously into a late Modernist mode.

any other Australian novelist to date. He has also concerned himself with another attribute of Modernism, the belief that art should not mask itself but advertise or show off its craftsmanship.<sup>7</sup> His methodology is essentially interrogative. According to Barthes:

The space of writing is to be ranged over; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better now to say writing) by refusing to assign a 'secret' and ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostasis—reason, science and law.<sup>8</sup>

Like Barthes's, Castro's stance can at times be uncompromising, and he risks leaving the reader behind. As Rosemary Sorensen has noted:

If it works, and a reader enjoys his book, then he's pleased, but this transaction is, perhaps, the least of his concerns. He's not interested in guiding his reader on a journey across a treacherous ocean. He's interested, it would seem, in the ocean, and this shift in perspective is what makes him one of a small number of Australian writers making unconventional waves.<sup>9</sup>

Castro has expressed the belief that readers can learn to appreciate complex literature, that readers rise to the challenge of works that extend the envelope.

A work creates its own readers—some very complicated works are best-sellers. People can be educated to appreciate complex works—thus making or creating a massive readership. The mistake is mass appeal; or what is *identifiable*. This is capitalist production—slick *formulas* for success of sales.<sup>10</sup>

Taking Castro's most complex novel, *Drift*, as an example, a first reading does not reveal a clear narrative, although some themes become immediately obvious. The reader must work very hard to engage with the novel and its 'drifts'. This is typical of Castro's novels, and readers may

<sup>7</sup> Barthes: 'J'avance masqué', quoted by Castro in 'Heterotopias', p. 182. Alain Robbe-Grillet: 'larvatus prodeo; I advance masked, but revealing my mask'. (quoted in Daniel, *Liars*, p. 12)

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, Fontana/Collins, 1977, p. 147

<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Yearning for Diversion', *Australian Book Review*, No. 142, July 1992, p. 9

<sup>10</sup> Personal notebook, Mitchell Library. ML 1933/96; Box 1

balk at proceeding further. Why, we must ask, would an author *choose* to be obscure? Castro suggests that

Writing, like ordinary life, is actually a muddle and a feeling of one's way through darkness ...<sup>11</sup>

The novel becomes a deliberately complex challenge, but not a puzzle to be 'worked out'. As in life, the reader will not have 'an answer' at the end.

One of the characteristics of Modernism was the shift away from the absolute. This was accompanied by a move towards acknowledging the process of writing. Realist novelists concealed their art (*'ars est celare artem'*) to present the illusion that the novel revealed 'reality' unmediated. Modernism repudiated this as delusory, and it increasingly drew attention to the process of the art, the writing itself.

Brian Castro has taken up this Modernist interest in the process of art being part of the art itself. He writes with a concern for how the language sounds and uses this to create effects rather than 'explaining' things to the reader. But this leads at times to accusations of indulgence or mere showiness without substance. Like many reactions to Modernist and Postmodernist art, the reaction to Castro's novels has been spirited and polarised. Castro's novels have not been universally lauded and even skilled readers express reservations about his style. For example, the comments below greeted the appearance of *Drift*. Two themes emerge from the comments of reviewers: they are struck by the novel's complexity and multi-level structure, and they comment on the writing style *as style*.

He is a writer's writer. 'I am trying to write entirely differently,' he admits. 'I don't tell stories in a linear fashion.' ...

There is absolute clarity in Castro's writing, something clean in his way of thinking. He has found, and held, a tone in *Drift* that must have put him in a strange headspace while he was writing.<sup>12</sup>

Susan Chenery

It is often difficult to know 'what is going on' in one of Brian Castro's books, though in the best of them that hardly seems to matter. He is not interested in linear narratives, in clearly defined characters or, indeed, in

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<sup>11</sup> 'Heterotopias: Writing and Location' *Australian Literary Studies*; 1995; vol. 17 no. 2, October, p. 181

<sup>12</sup> Susan Chenery, 'On the inside of an outsider', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July 1994; p. 9a

any of the usual trappings of conventional fiction. *Drift* raises such tendencies to an unprecedented level of elaboration ...

There is much to admire here. *Drift* represents an important step in Castro's career, confirming him as one of the boldest and perhaps most imaginative of a generation of writers who have come into prominence in the past 10 years.<sup>13</sup>

Andrew Riemer

Castro, on the strength of *Drift*, has to be classed as one of our most interesting stylists. This is a novel of daring, of enormous originality of ideas, of our history seen through a kaleidoscopic imagination dizzying in its range. It is a demanding story, but at the same time tense with surprise.<sup>14</sup>

Matthew Condon

Even a reviewer who is dissatisfied with the novel acknowledges the brilliance of the writing.

Wily and inventive as Brian Castro's new novel is, it is mostly windy air, which is not to say that it isn't successful in doing what it sets out to do. Indeed, *Drift* seems to be saying that windy air is all there is; how it forms and reforms into clouds of the imagination is what must interest the writer. The reader is, then, offered a ride on a cloud.

The sentences whisk along, buffeting and exhilarating ... the reader's position is precarious.

... I must say I find *Drift* stylish, often fun, occasionally surprising—but I think it's puffery.<sup>15</sup>

Rosemary Sorensen

These comments suggest two central areas of investigation. The first is the need to establish what Brian Castro is attempting in his novels, and the second is to investigate how he employs his writing style (as opposed to his narrative ability) to achieve his ends. In passing it is worth noting that what has been said about *Drift* applies to his other novels, although *Drift* takes his technique to its furthest extreme to date. (Castro's most recent novel, *Stepper*, is, compared with *Drift*, less convoluted.)

The Australian writer David Malouf, who is both a poet and a novelist, has made a very interesting comment on the direction of contemporary prose writing and poetry:

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Riemer, 'Brian's life of Byron, or should that be Bryan?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July 1994; p. 9a

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Condon, 'Set adrift in the life Bryan', *The Australian*, Weekend Review, 16-17 July 1994; p. 6

<sup>15</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Story upon a story is mainly sleight of hand', *The Sunday Age*, Agenda, 24 July 1994; p.8

If one wanted to make the simplest distinction between the language of prose and the language of poetry, one would say the language of poetry is always more intense, and dense. But to some extent over the last sixty years, prose has moved in that direction. Think of Joyce. I can't imagine a use of language more dense or aware of words as such, and of objects as words, than in *Ulysses*. At the same time, a lot of poetry has developed a lightweight language, a throwaway attitude to subject or situation, which is going in the opposite direction. You feel that more difficult things are being done in prose, with a denser language, than are being done in most of the poetry being written.<sup>16</sup>

This perception seems relevant to the novels of several Australian writers (as well as overseas authors). A description that immediately springs to mind of the writing technique of novels like Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, Drewe's *Our Sunshine*, Hospital's *Borderline* and *The Last Magician* is that it is 'poetic'. I will return to this notion in Chapter 3, where I will suggest that Castro's writing relies on an intensity of language and a heightened awareness of language that corresponds with this notion of 'poetic' prose.

Approaching the same topic from another perspective, Peter Craven has suggested that Australian novels, for all their advances in subject matter, have been essentially conventional in their use of language.

For whatever reason, Australian novelists, however good they are, tend not to be innovators. It would not be hard to demonstrate that Helen Garner, say, tends to write prose that verges on the flawless but, in her case, fiction is very much a matter of *what prose can do rather than of what can be done with prose in any wilful or iconoclastic sense*.

Oddly enough, that remains true of more abstract prose fiction-makers, such as Gerald Murnane, as well: his prose is intensely rhythmical, but it is *not in any overt way inventing a new music*.

And, at the other end of the scale, a novelist such as Peter Carey, who in ... *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, is re-creating Australian idioms, nevertheless keeps to comparatively conventional grids in terms of the shaping of his sentences.<sup>17</sup> That may be partly the different apprehension of literary possibilities under postmodernism, but it remains true that *there would not be very many of our better fiction writers who would engage in anything like the overtly avant-garde procedures of, say, Brian Castro in Drift, a formidable performance*.

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<sup>16</sup> David Malouf, 'With breath just condensing on it', *Conversations: Interviews with Australian Writers*, ed. Paul Kavanagh and Peter Kuch, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1991; pp. 183-184

<sup>17</sup> The more recent *Jack Maggs* is even more 'conventional', looking back to English modes of novel writing.

To a fair extent, this has always tended to be the case. Neither Patrick White nor Christina Stead were innovative writers, though they were not writers who were opposed to modernist innovation.

It's interesting in this respect that Australian poetry has told a somewhat different story in the past couple of decades. Les Murray, particularly in the past 15 years or so, has been *an extraordinary 'original', a dislocator of language and a maker of word magic*.<sup>18</sup>

Craven's assessment must be seen in its publishing context.<sup>19</sup> It was a column piece, in which he was airing his views in the manner of a fireside chat, and perhaps over-polarising the argument for the sake of journalistic impact. I would not suggest that he believes *overall* that 'neither Patrick White nor Christina Stead were innovative writers', but it is interesting to make the connection between what I have said above about the lack of Modernist Australian literature which emphasises linguistic display. For the purposes of this thesis it is interesting that he singles Castro out for his experimentalism and use of language.

The linguistic bravura that Castro employs to shape his novels and the decidedly bold experiments in terms of subject matter (from challenging the basis of Freud's work to 'writing' B.S. Johnson's unfinished novels as a means of examining the position of Aborigines) are singular. Castro's impulse is always towards singularity and away from the mainstream.

### **Towards a 'minor literature'**

Castro writes of what he calls a '*minor literature*', which both exists within the major literature (by which he means the broader social discourses of the day, including literature) and at the same time concentrates on crossing boundaries and breaking new ground. It is to some extent 'avant-garde', but in a more transgressive way than the 'fashionable' sense that this term often implies. 'Avant-garde' is usually seen to imply 'at the cutting edge of trends', and Castro's 'minor literature' is more *anti-trend* and introverted than this usage of the phrase implies.

The term 'minor literature' comes from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 1986 book *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. Castro has used their term as a

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Craven, 'Measured Words in a Maelstrom', *The Australian*, Higher Education, 1 May 1996; p. 39. (Italics added)

<sup>19</sup> As well as being an 'opinion piece', it must be pointed out that only a year or so later Craven wrote a very scathing review of Castro's *Stepper*.



metaphor for his approach to literature. The following quotation is rather long, but it neatly encapsulates in his own words Castro's overall approach to literature.

It is with this in mind that I would like to touch upon the notion of a *minor literature*. I first came across this idea in a book by Deleuze and Guattari. The philosopher and the psychoanalyst have, amongst other things, opened a discussion on the way culture is mostly perceived as a fixity, a monument, as linear and evolutionary, but seldom is it regarded as lateral, as a flow, as lines of flight away from the law of the Father.

Briefly then, Deleuze and Guattari identify the kind of language a minority constructs within a major language. The process is at least as old as nomadism and as modern as Kafka, who as a Jew living in Prague, wrote in German. Triply alienated [culture, country, language], he made use of a language and transformed it, in the same way as Joyce and Beckett, self-exiles from Ireland, set the language of literature on to a different course. It is because one is outside the communally received notions of spirituality and outside the master-narratives of great traditions that one necessarily illuminates a different sensibility and consciousness.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the deliberately incorrect usage of grammar. It is through the abuses of it that new expression is brought about. As the authors say: Language stops being representative in order to now move towards its extremities or its limits. In other words, to stop becoming an official or state literature suitable for export, but to become minor and nonreferential, nonreductionist. It is, in a sense, to recover expression, to salvage its uniqueness from what is common or communal. It is a minor literature not only in the relationship of big to small, but in terms of music, as a minor key relates to a major key. Instinctively sad, it is also diabolically subversive of martial and linear expectations. While major literatures may concentrate on alienation—within the family for example—minor literatures flow beyond those boundaries into social, national and linguistic dissociations and disconnections. It is because this expression unsettles one, startles one with the residues of bilingualism and trilingualism, that the traditional mind wants to suppress it, to prevent the rhapsodic and avoid change, to conserve vital energy, to restore the everlasting monument to sovereign power. Consequently, minor literatures are always regarded in some quarters as devious, cunning, full of hidden agendas.

Classification also plays a role in the gradual elimination of an inner life. Under the benign auspices of reductive categories, it tries to reconcile writing to formulary absolutes. This Procrustean<sup>20</sup> externalisation is of course a type of repression and we don't even have to venture abroad for it. It tries to control what is not representative, namely the excess that works produce in order to rid themselves of their vehicular necessities. There are other things besides content and form.

... What is erased in this exercise, as pointed out by Walter Benjamin, are the sorts of margins wherein one can experience

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<sup>20</sup> *Macquarie Dictionary*: 'tending to produce conformity by violent or arbitrary means' From Procrustes, a brigand in Greek legend, who stretched or mutilated his victims to make them conform to the length of his bed.

extremities rather than limits. It is precisely by classifying that we demolish nuances, tones and flows ... the very dynamics of being.

... Such reductions are seldom helpful. They lead to arbitrary equations of fact and truth, and to literal, rather than literary judgments. Light years from the suspension of disbelief, from immersion and flow, interpretation limited by such cultural blinkers is brutal and brutalising.<sup>21</sup>

The first point to make about Castro's conception of 'minor literature'—aside from the fairly obvious remark that it is a *marginal* literature, separated in some way from the 'mainstream'—is that it is language-based. Castro invokes his mentors—Kafka, Joyce, Beckett—as writers who used language in a different way. Kafka's style is on the surface comparatively conservative in terms of syntax, grammar, vocabulary, but his writing always has an eerie, unnerving quality. This is not just an artefact of it having been translated from German (that was written by a Czech), but it relates to Kafka's 'strange' narrative mode. Kafka's tone is compulsively flat and affectless; his narrators refuse to explain or pass comment on the weird story that is being spun, and often react very weakly to their position. It is difficult to explain Kafka's style—which is perhaps why he is considered such an original writer—except to say that it is distinctive. To some extent the fact that Kafka writes of powerful emotional situations with such a flat and controlled manner heightens the reader's sense of uncanniness, and, ironically, therefore of emotion. Kafka's style is certainly successful at making the world strange to us (see Chapter 11).

Joyce, on the other hand, writes in a very luxurious style, inventing words and syntax, and even accepting some of the typographical mistakes made by the French typesetters of *Ulysses*.<sup>22</sup> Joyce's non-conventionality is taken to even further extremes in *Finnegan's Wake* (which Castro refers to affectionately in *Pomeroy*). Joyce represents the chaotic, aleatory and over-rich style that attracts Castro.

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<sup>21</sup> 'The Private and the Public: A Meditation on Noise', *Island*, no. 47, 1991, pp. 17-18

<sup>22</sup> The recent controversies about producing a 'definitive' edition of *Ulysses* point out how impossible such a task would be for an unstable text like *Ulysses*, whose author was happy to continue to modify the text, and who delighted in the little jokes and puzzles planted in the text, and (presumably) those 'found' there by over-imaginative readers. See for instance Robin Bates, 'The Corrections Officer', *Australian*, 17 December 1997, Higher Education, p. 38-40. This details the competing claims of rival editors (Kidd, Gabler, Rose) and publishers in the lead-up to Joyce's work coming out of copyright on 31 December 1997.

Beckett, the third writer directly mentioned above as an influence, writes in a very dislocated style, where seemingly affectless prose is often punctuated by long silences and complex syntactical forms and obscure and difficult vocabulary. Where Kafka invokes a mundane world of ordinary people, gone awry, Beckett's characters are more philosophical and possess powerful vocabularies at odds with their impoverished situations.<sup>23</sup>

Castro is impressed by the way these authors 'made use of a language and transformed it'. He is not just referring to linguistic display—neologisms, argot, complex syntax, and so on—but the queerness of tone such writers achieved. He specifically quotes (above) Deleuze and Guattari's assessment that 'Language stops being representative in order to now move towards its extremities or its limits.'<sup>24</sup> This is a characteristic that Castro has taken into his own writing style: in various ways he is pushing the language beyond the limits of semantic stability.

The second point to be made about Castro's idea of a 'minor literature' is that it is necessary not just to be 'new', but somehow transgressive. Castro is often referred to as avant-garde, but a better description might well be 'reactionary'. He does not want to be 'at the leading edge' of what everyone else is doing, but running against the tide, breaking down whatever conventions are established, and working outside whatever the current 'tradition' or 'style' is. He enjoys the position of being the 'exile', the 'outsider', the 'alien', the 'strange'. He wants to be by definition an iconoclast.

While there are some hints that he includes a political element in this iconoclasm<sup>25</sup>—for instance his remarks about not wanting to be part of 'an official or state literature suitable for export'—his stance is related to

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<sup>23</sup> Although not mentioned in this passage, two others of Castro's favourite writers share similarities with these three. Thomas Bernhard fits into the Kafka/Beckett mould of flattened emotional landscape, which is nonetheless strange and paranoid. Vladimir Nabokov is in the Joycean mould of linguistic surfeit.

<sup>24</sup> Castro is quoting from *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, p. 23

<sup>25</sup> For example he likes Bernhard's adversarial stance: 'I enjoy the Austrian Thomas Bernhard. Such contempt! He doesn't care about saying anything about how terrible Austria is. We are lacking in this sort of writer these days. There is a certain amount of correctness. Maybe it's time to explode that.' Michael Shmith, 'Castro's Lament', *The Age Saturday Extra*, 20 August 1994, p. 8

concerns of literary style and of writerly identity. Castro is only rarely concerned directly with political themes in the social sense (for example, *After China*), and he does not consider his writing to be deliberately didactic. He does, though, consider that writing should engage its readership, and perhaps in this regard he may be considered 'political' in the sense used by writers about Postmodernism.<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, there is an undercurrent of failure, melancholia, and destruction associated with this stance. In the above passage Castro refers to his literature as being in a 'minor key': that is, essentially sad, incomplete, on edge, imperfect. A minor key in music is related directly to a major key, but somehow never quite achieves completeness or fulfilment. It often produces sad or melancholic effects. Musicians often move out of a section in minor key back to the related major key in order to 'resolve' the passage of music and produce a sense of completeness.<sup>27</sup> What Castro, however, is suggesting is that he prefers to remain in this minor key mode, where the 'music' of his writing retains its lack of resolution or completeness. One does not want to push the analogy too far, but just as a minor key is (mathematically) related to its major, and can, poetically speaking, be described as an incomplete version of it, perhaps even a travesty or parody of it, Castro's literature is a travestied version of the major, mainstream literature. The word travesty is quite useful here: it means 'a grotesque or debased likeness or imitation' (*Macquarie Dictionary*), and its etymological roots come from the notion of 'cross-dressing' (*trans + vestire*). It implies a positive or creative aspect to being 'minor'.

Castro identifies with this third point, the sense of failure, and sees himself as melancholic. It is one of the reasons he admires Walter Benjamin.<sup>28</sup> While there is a degree of sadness in this, the term is not altogether negative. It is really an acknowledgement of a philosophical position that one does not believe everything in the world is wonderful, and under the

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<sup>26</sup> For example, Linda Hutcheon: '... postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political.' (*The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 1)

<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere Castro has spoken about his love of music, and his admiration of its ability to speak directly to the listener: 'Music has that potential to bring you into another realm with a more direct emotional response.' Michael Shmith, 'Castro's Lament', *Age Saturday Extra*, 20 August 1994, p. 8

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin 'was one person who said—and it agrees with me so much—[that] he was a melancholic. That was the first thing. Immediately I snapped onto that. *I'm a melancholic.*' Interview MD, 29 November 1997 (See Appendix 8)

guidance of a benign Other. It is the acknowledgement that ‘shit happens’, and that the world is governed by chaotic principles, which at times produce random and inexplicable events, but at other times can produce great beauty and what seems like order (as mathematics is now demonstrating that ‘chaos’ has its beauty and hidden ‘order’). There are similarities here with Thomas Hardy, who felt a ‘sadness’ for his age, but who denied that he was a pessimist, preferring the sobriquet ‘meliorist’, that is, one who believes that humans can make their lives better by efforts of will.

Within this ‘minor literature’ Castro is attempting to create something different. It is well described in John Barth’s words (he was writing about Jorge Luis Borges):

His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work. If this corresponds to what mystics do—‘every moment leaping into the infinite’, Kierkegaard says, ‘and every moment falling surely back into the finite’—it’s only one more aspect of that old analogy.<sup>29</sup>

Castro rejects the nihilistic aspects of Postmodernism and Existentialism, and prefers the idea of making Kierkegaardian leaps, knowing that any transcendence is limited, and that we all fall back to earth. But we must keep leaping.

This obsession with ‘newness’, of ‘leaping into the infinite’, means that the artist is always on the move forward: whatever he creates is immediately the subject of its own gravitational pull into (a new) genre. Nothing can be written that remains ‘new’ and ‘fresh’. Castro tries to counter this by writing books that are readable at many levels, so that each re-reading brings new insights, reactions and feelings.

There is at times a transcendental element in his writing, probably best demonstrated in *After China*. In this novel Castro uses the idea of storytelling as a way of transcending reality, and of allowing his characters a qualified escape from the laws of everyday life. (This is discussed further in Chapter 8.)

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<sup>29</sup> John Barth, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’, in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1984, p. 71. (Originally published in *Atlantic* in 1967)

However this transcendence is neither powerful nor assured; *After China* is still melancholy in many respects, though not ultimately despairing. Castro's other novels are more closely concerned with notions of failure. It is difficult to decide when this amounts to negativity and when it is more a recognition of the 'way things are'. In other words, failure can be either a despairing, or it can be an acceptance of life; we must accept failure as a part of our existence, and learn how to cope with failure without despairing.

Castro claims that his books are not didactic, and this is true in the ordinary sense. Whether readers choose to 'learn' from them is a different matter. Castro is more interested in novels as 'myths' or metaphors for life, that do not provide a literal truth, but can provide a way of rising out of the tedium of existence. This notion is not unique to Castro.

The bishop [of Edinburgh] argues that, since language can never be identified with what it signifies, it is folly to think that God's will is waiting to be found in scripture.

The bishop's solution to this problem—which goes back to nineteenth-century thinkers such as Matthew Arnold—is to think of the Bible as poetry, rather than dogma: as it cannot give you literal access to the divine, it is only as metaphor that it can satisfy human longing for the transcendental.<sup>30</sup>

For Castro, the novel is the 'solution' for the vagaries and angst of life, a great experimental device in which to attempt to rise above our situation.

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<sup>30</sup> Anon., 'Canons of conflict underline the poetry of scripture', *Australian*, Higher Education, p. 38, 14 October 1998.

## Chapter 2

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# Brian Castro as Writer: Philosophy and Art/Life Relationships

A method involving apparent obscurity is surely justified when it is the clearest, the simplest, *the only method possible* of saying in full what the writer has to say.

Richard Hughes, Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*<sup>1</sup>

In his thought-provoking essay 'Heterotopias' Brian Castro states his approach in the form of a motto:

To write therefore is to be unsettling.<sup>2</sup>

The writer must unsettle his readers, not entertain them, or tell them what they already know. The novel should get the reader thinking, and the way to do this is to disturb the status quo in the reader's mind. Umberto Eco says similar things about the novel, which he calls 'a machine for generating interpretations', and in 'explaining' the significance of his titles has said: 'A title must muddle the reader's ideas, not regiment them.'<sup>3</sup>

In order to do this the writer must stand aside so that he can see things from a different perspective. Moreover, he must keep changing his viewing position so that he does not become enmeshed in the mechanism of society himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hughes, editor's Introduction to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Picador, London, 1989, p. vii, (my italics)

<sup>2</sup> 'Heterotopias', p. 179. This is a deliberate echo of Descartes's primary philosophical premise, '*Cogito ergo sum*' Castro repeatedly invokes this formula, often parodying it ('Corgi a tergo zum' in *Double-Wolf*; 'I am dumb, therefore I love' *After China* p. 119; 'I give therefore you love.' Letter to MD, 19 June 1997)

*I want to be someone else, somewhere else, in order to see myself.*

We seldom have this sentence in our literatures. Its shifting nuances, its dynamism, its projections, threaten the establishment of a simple connection between place and identity. This polarisation which makes one either an insider or an outsider is what I have called in the past, the unfortunate bifurcation of the cultural mind. Challenging that, it seems to me, is the crux of writing as a vocation.<sup>4</sup>

Harold Stewart said much the same thing about being an ‘outsider’ in Japan.

So the expatriate lives in a kind of social vacuum, which worries many Westerners who want to belong, who feel they must be integrated with society. But it suits me fine, I like to float free. I’m no more a member of Japanese society than I am of Australian society. I’m an onlooker from the sidelines, but ‘the observer sees most of the game’.<sup>5</sup>

Castro’s view is interesting because it not only defines the core of his thinking, but so neatly encapsulates many of his ideas and emblems, his own myths if you like. If life/society is understood to function by means of change, then it follows almost syllogistically the *duty* of the writer is ‘to be unsettling’. The writer’s role, as poet-as-foreseer (Shelley’s notion of the poet as *vates*, a ‘prophet’ or ‘foreseer’) is to disrupt any stagnant visions of existence, and to reveal the new and the fresh.

To write therefore is to be unsettling. In it [writing], the idea of a cosy and clannish home is backward-looking and defensive. In it, totalising myths are discarded. Contemporary writing seems to be creating a defamiliarisation with the world, and with one’s place in it. For a writer alongside many other Australian writers, the place wherein one lives becomes a very strange one indeed. It is a paradoxical procedure, this attempt to name what is constantly slipping away. Words and things have drifted apart. It is nevertheless a procedure as old as the novel itself, wherein languages, ideas and styles have always formed an unsettled mixture. The old novel however, to use what may sound suspiciously like an oxymoron, had defined boundaries within which information was traded for the reader’s loyalty to a common and national agenda. The new novel places the boundaries themselves under question.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Umberto Eco, *Postscript to ‘The Name of the Rose’*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984, pp. 2 and 3

<sup>4</sup> ‘Heterotopias’, p. 179

<sup>5</sup> ‘Harold Stewart—An Interview with Richard Kelly Tipping’, *Westerly Looks to Asia: A Selection from Westerly 1956-1992*, eds. Bruce Bennett, Peter Cowan, Dennis Haskell and Susan Miller, Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies in association with The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, UWA, 1993, p. 198. [Originally in *Westerly*, no. 3 1981]

<sup>6</sup> ‘Heterotopias’, p. 179



What Castro calls the ‘new novel’ echoes Helen Daniel’s analysis in *Liars: Australian New Novelists*, which is discussed in some detail in Chapter 11.

### Philosophical influences and motivations

Brian Castro considers the novel to be a tool to explore our own existence.

Through its gaps and multiple perspectives, its inter-relatedness, breakdowns and impurities, the novel is the manifestation of that lesion in our selfhood formed by the wound of existence. The novel is that which asks the most profound question: what is that emptiness we have inherited in simply *being*?<sup>7</sup>

Broadly speaking, Castro is sympathetic to Existentialism, as expressed by thinkers such as Heidegger, Camus and Sartre.

Heidegger’s chief concern is with the problem of defining ‘Being’. He considers Being to be a primary or irreducible quality that precedes anything else that we may know about ourselves—in Sartre’s formulation ‘Existence precedes essence’. As Tillich explains this:

‘Existence precedes essence.’ The meaning of this sentence is that man is a being of whom no essence can be affirmed [no immutable principles], for such an essence would introduce a permanent element, contradictory to man’s power of transforming himself indefinitely ... Man’s particular nature is to create himself.<sup>8</sup>

For Castro (and many other novelists) the process of writing is a means whereby we can not only explore our world but ‘create’ it in the ontological sense, by giving ‘meaning’ to it. To continue with Heidegger’s theorisation of existence:

And when we return to the factual world, we find that we can constitute, and therefore explain, meanings, but we cannot constitute, and therefore cannot explain, the real; we are up against an irreducible existence which we must accept and can describe but cannot constitute, although we can constitute its meanings. Existence is an inexhaustible reservoir of meanings, since our approach to things is always and necessarily from a point of view and is therefore drastically selective.

... *Dasein* (the word, although used ambiguously by Heidegger, is generally accepted as an untranslatable technical term of his philosophy,

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Lesions’ *Meanjin*; Vol. 54, No. 1, 1995, p. 68

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, quoted by Rollo May, *Existential Psychology*, 2nd edition, Random House, New York, 1969, p. 13

meaning the mode of existence of the human being) is not to be conceived on the analogy of a thing as a substance with properties. 'The essence of *Dasein* is in its existence.' This simply means that human reality cannot be identified because it is not something given, it is in question. A man is possibility, he has the power to be. His existence is in his choice of the possibilities which are open to him, and since the choice is never final, once for all, his existence is indeterminate because not terminated.<sup>9</sup>

All of Castro's writing can be subsumed under this general quest to discover and create 'meaning' for our lives—characters are concerned with their identity, their Being, and they are never in a position to settle, but must always make choices. The Heideggerian line is even more pertinent when we come to what he had to say on death, one of Castro's central preoccupations.

*Death, then, is the clue to authentic living, the eventual and omni-present possibility which binds together and stabilizes my existence. I am projected in advance of myself becoming what I will be, whether I will to be or not, but I can anticipate here and now what I will be, not waiting for the end, and this is the only way in which I can command and possess my existence and give it unity and authenticity. I anticipate death not by suicide but by living in the presence of death as always immediately possible and as undermining everything.*<sup>10</sup>

This is the basis of the view of life expressed in Castro's novels. Human existence is inexplicable; there is an apparently absurd element in that it is able to be terminated at any minute, cutting off any 'achievement' we might make in life. This absurdity is ever-present in the thinking person's consciousness, so that we are taunted all the time by the paradox of our existence, what Castro calls 'the ludic seriousness of being'.<sup>11</sup> The thinking person lives in 'fear and trembling' (to borrow Kierkegaard's phrase), and must constantly find reasons why it is not more appropriate to suicide than to keep on living. Of course these reasons can be found, but the choice is one that we and Castro's characters must continually make, and it is a choice that is never *entirely* convincing.

As a philosophical *explanation* of the world, Existentialism is unable to provide answers. From the late nineteenth century and on through

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<sup>9</sup> H.J. Blackham, *Six Existential Thinkers*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961, p. 88

<sup>10</sup> *Six Existential Thinkers*, p. 96; emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> 'Heterotopias', p. 180. Elsewhere: 'The ludic is not an escape. I think it's the ultimate awareness of erasure.' 'Outside the Prison of Logic', p. 22

Modernist thinking, as science and philosophy increasingly demonstrated the futility of seeking absolutes, philosophically-minded writers have accepted the unstable but constructive position provided by Existentialistic thinking, and their writing has reflected this belief. Castro, like other writers, has adopted the principle of instability as a foundation for his writing.

As part of our confrontation with our existence, we are compelled by two primary drives, death and sex. Death is the paradox of life, the undeniable fact that our existence is limited in time and must be confronted, and sex is the drive we have to defeat death by reproducing ourselves. Castro is fascinated by these drives—though in a sense they are merely the obverse of the existence coin, another way of considering ‘life’—and they permeate his writing as themes.

Castro has indicated that, looking back on his six published novels, he is really dealing with one overriding theme, the inevitability of death.

I think six novels down the track ... I suddenly realize that ... all I've been doing has been working around the one idea ... the transitoriness of life. I mean it's a very simple idea really, that we are the only creatures on earth that know that we are going to die. That is a reminder that the novel itself is a *memento mori*, and I think every single one of my novels deals with ... how ironic our ideas of ourself are and also how quick death is, how inevitable it is.<sup>12</sup>

At this point two observations are worth making. Although Castro's way of dealing with the theme of death fits in neatly with what I have just outlined about the Existentialist approach, in his text he shows little interest in sex as the means to immortality (via procreation). Rather, sex is viewed as way of confronting the paradox of death, by transcending our physical limitations, albeit briefly.

Secondly, Castro is fascinated by Freud's attempts to produce a scientific psychology of cause and effect, one which is powered by the great primal drives, sex and death. So much of Castro's writing introduces Freudian concepts or overtones, though he is unsympathetic towards psychoanalysis as a psychological method. (*Double-Wolf* is essentially a repudiation of Freudian method.)

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<sup>12</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997

One final comment about Existentialism. The instability of existence that makes us feel self-conscious about our thinking *about* our own thinking produces a feeling of absurdity or strangeness. This is described by different thinkers using varying terms, such as 'strange', 'uncanny', 'unheimlich'. This concept of 'strangeness' also pervades Castro's writing, and will be dealt with in some detail in Chapter 11.

### **Critical and theoretical viewpoints**

Castro refers at times to many late twentieth-century literary critics, such as Foucault, Barthes and Derrida, among others. But Castro will not be pinned down to any acceptance or rejection of various literary theories. He eschews wholesale identification with any theory, but it is undeniable that a very wide range of ideas have influenced him and found admission to the novels. These theorists are often acknowledged (for example, in the reference lists of his essays), but more often than not in terms of specific ideas, rather than broad influences. In fact Castro acknowledges so many theorists that this suggests *ipso facto* that he is not influenced by any one theorist in particular. Theory as system is inimical to his view that absolutes or grand narratives do not exist.

What do I write 'against'? I write against theory. *Pace* Susan Sontag. Theory is like psychoanalysis. It is well and good to use a little of it to illustrate an idea (e.g. 'potlatch' in *Drift* applied to hierarchical prejudice and the dealings of the ignorant with indigenous peoples ... *I give therefore you love*). But on the whole theory normalises, in the same way psychoanalysis normalises, and nothing strange is left.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding this, two literary thinkers do seem to have provided Castro with a broad approach to writing, and are particularly useful in explicating Castro's work.

### **Walter Benjamin**

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<sup>13</sup> Letter to MD, 19 June 1997

In terms of personal philosophy, the strongest influence on Castro appears to be the writing of Walter Benjamin.<sup>14</sup> Benjamin was a critic and philosopher of criticism (not a formal philosopher), many of whose preoccupations Castro shares. Benjamin's influences on Castro's novels range from broad sympathies such as the marginality of his position and his interest in strangeness, to direct allusions to Kafka's life and works.

Benjamin strived for what has been called 'a redemptive criticism', an aesthetic and philosophic process that is not easy to summarise, but which aims to restore positive purpose within an overall sceptical and melancholic view of life. In attempting to assess Benjamin's position, Richard Wolin has written:

I have attempted to refrain from violating the fundamentally a-systematic character of Benjamin's work by refusing to confer on it an external, artificially contrived unity for the sake of narrative consistency. Where tensions or irreconcilable contradictions crop up in his development, I have made no attempt to resolve them in intellectually pleasing but spurious entities. Instead, I have taken the position that the tensions and oppositions within his theoretical orientation often represent those tendencies which are most vital and enduring in his thought as a whole—in accordance with the Hegelian maxim that contradiction need not inherently indicate a deficiency on the part of the reasoning subject, but may at times more accurately reflect the inner tensions of the object itself.<sup>15</sup>

A similar view is suggested for Castro's work. It is not possible to systematise it, because it relies so much on paradox. However, it is this daring to look beyond simplistic resolutions that, like Benjamin's, gives Castro's work its strength.

Castro rarely makes direct references to Benjamin's ideas (his notion of history being a collection of ruins, is an exception, being invoked in the ending of *Pomeroy*), but he seems to be the one writer who provides an overall 'comfort' to Castro.

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<sup>14</sup> 'The Benjamin I am most [interested in] is *Illuminations* and *One-Way Street*, however [it is] his view of history and art, which ... I am particularly interested in. I am not interested at all in his social theory and ideological writings.' Letter to MD, 2 February 1998

<sup>15</sup> Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Columbia University Press, 1992, p. xii

Benjamin developed over a series of interconnected but disparate essays a complex metaphysics that never builds into a *consistent* position, and which at times seems to contradict itself.<sup>16</sup> Among the many interests of this eclectic thinker are the following:

- a metaphysical view of the world that saw it as in need of ‘ontological salvation’. Concomitant with this, he rejected reductionism and mechanistic philosophy.
- a view of history as a shambolic series of events that would be violently disrupted by either the coming of the Messiah *or* the revolution of the proletariat (Benjamin managed to juggle Judaic religion with Marxist politics).
- a view of memory as ‘the capability of endlessly interpolating’. He writes of memory as an ‘unfolding, dredging up’ (cf. Castro in *Drift*, itself recalling B.S. Johnson’s *Trawl*), and a creative process: ‘We are, as readers, involved in a Proustian exercise in creating a past by using the finest snares of consciousness’.<sup>17</sup> Castro’s *Stepper* is just such an exercise, by Isaku, in recreating the past of Stepper.
- a view of language as inhering in everything—‘There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language’<sup>18</sup>—and having a metaphysical ‘meaning’ that rebuts mere semiotic signification.
- a belief in threshold experiences as the means of transcendence.
- a complex ‘theory’ of translation:

[Man alone] responds to the silent language of things by ‘translating’ their speechless communication. Thus ‘translation’, in a complex meaning, acquires a central ontological importance because the

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin lived a short (1892-1940) and often fraught life—he suicided in 1940 to escape the Nazis—and his work was not collected until the 1950s. Some essays were not polished for publication, and Benjamin was not averse to making major changes in the direction of his thinking. Richard Wolin has written a detailed examination of Benjamin in *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, and more concise treatments can be found in the introductions to Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, by Hannah Arendt, and *Reflections*, by Peter Delmetz.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Delmetz, introduction to Benjamin’s *Reflections*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1978, p. xvii.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Delmetz, introduction to Benjamin’s *Reflections*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1978, p. xxii.

communication of the lower strata of creation has to be translated (that is, elevated and made pellucid) to the higher orders.<sup>19</sup>

While Castro responds sympathetically to many of the above concerns, the overall influence of Benjamin as a complex and iconoclastic thinker, and a disarmingly dense writer, is probably more important to Castro's sense of the writer/thinker as enigma.

### George Steiner

Castro acknowledges the work of George Steiner in several of his essays, and many of Steiner's ideas inform Castro's writing style. Steiner argues for primary engagement in art and disdains secondary levels of discourse—artists, or critics, talking *about* art.

Among Steiner's polymathic interests are linguistics, interpretation, translation and meaning. They intersect with Castro's at several points. (Castro's interest in translation is dealt with in more depth in relation to *Birds of Passage*; see Chapter 5).

In his essay 'Auto/biography' Castro quotes from Steiner's critical essay *Real Presences*, which has as its subtitle 'Is there anything in what we say'? Steiner is primarily concerned with the problem of whether there is any stable meaning in what humans say and write. Steiner's answer, in brief, is a positive one that rebuts the notion that all utterances deconstruct to the point where all meaning vanishes. He refutes the argument of theorists who suggest that we hollow out the 'meaning' of our words until there is nothing but an empty shell, which implodes to leave nothing.

In its simple formulation Steiner's view sounds somewhat mystical, calling for what seems to be in religious parlance a 'leap of faith'. Here is one formulation of Steiner's view:

This study [*Real Presences*] will contend that the wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential of insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the text and work of art or music, which is to say when we encounter the *other* in its condition of freedom, is a wager on transcendence.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Delmetz, introduction to Benjamin's *Reflections*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1978, p. xxiii.

<sup>20</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 4

The word 'wager' implies a guess or an act of faith; 'transcendence' implies something mystical and intangible: but what Steiner is saying at heart is that meaning resides somewhere in there between the words/lines, and that it is exactly that part of an utterance (or any work of art) that cannot be identified physically or scientifically in the text. It is, nevertheless, that which is intelligible to us, as readers/hearers/viewers, whether or not we can mechanically point to how it inheres in the utterance. To extend a formulation attributed to Robert Frost, 'meaning' or 'poetry' is 'what is lost in translation'.

Steiner argues that it is possible, and in fact necessary, to look for what he calls 'answerable' meaning, even though 'stable' meaning is not achievable. He sees the process as an active one, not a passive one.

Hermeneutics is normally defined as signifying the systematic methods and practices of explication, of the interpretative exposition of texts ... Throughout this essay, I shall try to elucidate hermeneutics as defining the enactment of answerable understanding, of active apprehension.

The three principal senses of 'interpretation' give us vital guidance.

An Interpreter is a decipherer and communicator of meanings. He is a translator between languages, between cultures and between performative conventions. He is, in essence, an executant, one who 'acts out' the material before him so as to give it intelligible life. Hence the third major sense of 'interpretation'. An actor interprets Agamemnon or Ophelia. A dancer interprets Balanchine's choreography. A violinist a Bach partita. In each of these instances, interpretation is understanding in action; it is the immediacy of translation.<sup>21</sup>

This is the first point of comparison I would like to make with Castro's work. Steiner sees the role of the interpreter as active or performative—an 'executant'. Castro has taken this up in his writing, committing himself to providing an active 'performance' for his readers as he writes, and requiring an active interpretative involvement from his readers as they 'translate' his work to themselves.

In short, Castro writes in a way that allows, or in fact *compels*, his readers to *experience* his text. It is his idea of what 'experimental writing' is. In 'Heterotopias' he bemoans the lack of 'experimentation' in contemporary writing, where experimentation has for him this specialised meaning.

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<sup>21</sup> *Real Presences*, p. 8



In the cultural sphere, this word has, in relatively recent times, been devastatingly corrupted. ‘Experiment’ originally meant *to have experience of, to experience, to feel, to suffer*.<sup>22</sup>

Castro sets out to counter this corruption.

But to be an ‘experimental’ writer in the late quarter of this century is to have had one’s humanistic force as a dissident stolen, to have had one’s passion for vulnerability removed, so that even the charm of the individual quest for distraction and exploration, as old as the novel form itself, is remade into the populist distrust of it as a kind of writing in which ‘anything goes’. And indeed any number of bad works have been shunted into this category. Experimentation for the sake of experimentation in all phases of artistic production falls into that black hole of finally saying nothing beyond the agenda of the self. Yet there is an element of experimentation; which cannot be thrown out with the bath water. And *that* is that there is in experimentation a re-reading of the real as the effect of textual canons. Literary discrimination and sceptical re-evaluation can explode the mythologies embedded in the tradition of the real.<sup>23</sup>

Castro sets out to restore the ‘humanistic force’ of the writer, to restore the idea of a novel providing its readers with a felt experience, and in doing so having something to say about the world around us, and indeed about ‘reality’, whatever that expression might mean to us. Despite Castro’s admission that it is impossible to divorce the absurd from life— ‘To have to articulate the meaning beneath experience is always self-contradictory. It cannot be accomplished without absurdity.’<sup>24</sup> —he engages himself with what he calls the ‘ludic seriousness of being’.<sup>25</sup>

This leads to a way of looking at his work *in toto*. This thesis will argue that what Castro is doing in his novels, inter alia, is re-interpreting the myths and paradigms that we use in everyday life by rewriting them in new and relevant ways. He does so by re-imagining them, so that as we read and co-imagine his artistic creations we see things anew, in a different, and therefore critical, light. In *Real Presences* Steiner argues that the purpose of art is to critique the world around us, and that successive works of art critique their predecessors by reworking the same materials, refining and redefining them.

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Heterotopias’, p. 181

<sup>23</sup> ‘Heterotopias’, p. 181

<sup>24</sup> ‘Heterotopias’, p. 180

<sup>25</sup> ‘Heterotopias’, p. 180

Steiner suggests that effective literature, as does any effective art, engages with the problems of the world and offers ways of seeing and experiencing them. Successive generations of novelists do not face any essentially new problems of existence (at root, it is the old problem of death, as Castro acknowledges) so in a sense they are re-examining the same problems as their forebears, and therefore reworking existing novels (and other works of art). Steiner explains his argument with the following example. Virgil's *Aeneid* is a reworking of Homer's *Iliad/Odyssey*, and these in turn are reworked by Joyce in his *Ulysses*. The first reworking is quite obvious—to drastically oversimplify, Virgil recasts the story given in Homer's Greek into contemporary Latin. (Of course he does much more than this.) In the case of Joyce, the *Odyssey* can be seen as a metaphor that Joyce uses for his 'contemporary' work. Steiner argues that each successive work 'criticises'—in a very active and positive way—the previous.

Some of Castro's novels are obviously intertextual, but overall he can be viewed as a reader and re-interpreter of the world, providing his readers with new myths or metaphors to explain existence in meaningful ways. He has described the process as being in the tradition of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*: 'Stories within stories; not trying to create the world but trying to create another world.'<sup>26</sup>

### **Influences on Castro's writing**

Castro sees himself as interacting with other writers and being formed by them. Castro acknowledges great influences but tries to match or supersede them. As a way of describing Milton's position as one-who-comes-after the unmatched Shakespeare (and other great masters such as Spenser and the authors of the King James Bible), Harold Bloom has said:

poetry was what [Milton] sublimely wrote, in loving but fierce competition with the Bible, Virgil, Dante, Spenser and Shakespeare.<sup>27</sup>

It is a compelling description, and one that I think can also be applied to Castro. He sees himself in 'loving but fierce competition' with his models. He adds the qualification that is not authors per se that he looks towards, but their discrete works: 'As for influences in general, I think this varies

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Shmith, 'Castro's Lament', *Age Saturday Extra*, 1994, 20 August p. 8

<sup>27</sup> Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present*, Harvard University Press, Boston, 1991; p. 91

from book to book. I can't say an *author* influences me so much as an individual work.'<sup>28</sup>

Without being exhaustive, some of the writers for whom Castro has expressed admiration include Norman Mailer (on whom he wrote his MA thesis in 1976), Ernest Hemingway:

early Beckett (before he went minimal),<sup>29</sup> Iain Sinclair, Jonathan Meades, almost all of Faulkner, Nabokov's 'smug' phase (*Lolita*, *Despair*, *Transparent Things*, *Speak Memory*, *Pnin*), almost all of Anthony Burgess in small doses (before he gets annoying), Joyce, Bellow, White, Pynchon. These are what I call the 'language' people. They add a dimension to the English language. Their prose is dense, thoughtful, surprising.<sup>30</sup>

Others he mentions include: Don DeLillo, Franz Kafka, Elias Canetti, Peter Handke, Milan Kundera, Juan Goytisolo, Thomas Bernhard, 'the latter being my one and only favourite author I can say I categorically enjoy (as distinct from having to work through), who, except for a translator or two, never puts a word out of place', Proust, Flaubert, J.M. Coetzee, Jose Donosco, Vargas Llosa and early Ondaatje.

Apart from White, and perhaps Thea Astley, I am not enthused by Australian writers ... I read Mudrooroo. Probably the best young writer around is Tom Flood, whose *Oceana Fine* remains the one Australian book of the last five years I return regularly to. Again, sheer power of the prose

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David Foster is pretty good too.<sup>31</sup>

For 'exotic' influence he reads Japanese novelists: 'I devour every Japanese novel, namely, Endo, Kawabata, Tanizaki.'<sup>32</sup>

There are too many influences to suggest that any one writer is the prime influence. But the broad interest in other writers helps explain Castro's intertextuality: Castro is writing *with* his fellow writers and constantly draws them into his own work via overt and concealed allusions.

### **Brian Castro as writer: putting the philosophy to work**

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to MD 19 June 1997.

<sup>29</sup> In 1994 he named the Beckett trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* as his 'favourite book'. Diane Dempsey, *Sunday Age* (Agenda), 26 June 1994, p.10

<sup>30</sup> Letter to MD 19 June 1997.

<sup>31</sup> Letter to MD 19 June 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to MD 19 June 1997.

For Brian Castro writing is a *vocation*: a calling that he could not ignore. He was originally steered towards law as a career, but did not follow that path. At university he became increasingly interested in writing, and his first published short story appeared in Sydney University's *Union Recorder*.<sup>33</sup> Castro took up language teaching as means of earning a living, and during his twenties continued to publish short stories, but since 1990 he has been a professional writer.<sup>34</sup>

Writing is a *compulsion* for him. In a 1993 interview he explained to Peter Craven:

It all comes out of a need to do some writing every day of my life. I just don't feel good if I don't. And there is that feeling of elation which comes if you write a good sentence or paragraph. I have the routine of coming to my desk from 7.30 to 12.30 every day. Whether I write a page or whether I write nothing.<sup>35</sup>

For the last decade Castro has lived from his writing: from book royalties, paid articles, talks, writer-in-residence schemes and Australia Council Literature Board grants.<sup>36</sup> Though his economic situation has been difficult at times, he has avoided taking other jobs because of the interference it would cause to his writing. (As early as October 1974 he applied for a Literature Board grant, without success, though more recently he has received support.) Castro applies himself to a severe writing regimen, a 'regular schedule of work. [Saturday] is the only day of the week I don't try to write anything',<sup>37</sup> and he 'do[es] not answer the phone during the day (it breaks the concentration)'.<sup>38</sup> But he also needs to be in the right psychological frame of mind to write. What was once called 'being visited

<sup>33</sup> 'Estrellita', *The Union Recorder*, (Sydney University), Vol. 53, No. 22, 1973, p. 316. This story won first prize (out of 212 submissions) in the Union's short story competition. The letter announcing the award is dated 14 September 1973. Even this early piece shows him to be an experimenter (he was 23 at the time of publication).

<sup>34</sup> In an early essay published shortly after the publication of *Birds of Passage* he writes 'I cannot, with any clear conscience, call myself a writer. Like philosophy, my Chinese psyche says it isn't something you take on as a career, for writing is, simply, becoming a person.' 'Memoirs of a Displaced Person', *National Times*, 6-12 January 1984, p. 13

<sup>35</sup> Peter Craven, 'Double Delights', *The Sunday Age* (Agenda), 12 September 1993, p. 8

<sup>36</sup> Castro was literary editor for *Asiaweek* in the mid-eighties, and has written ad hoc columns for *Australian Book Review* (as well as literary essays and work-in-progress extracts for several literary journals). He has had writing fellowships at Canberra and Hong Kong (see Biographical Outline, Appendix 1). He gives few talks, and generally avoids literary festivals.

<sup>37</sup> Letter to MD, 10 September 1997

<sup>38</sup> Letter to MD, 20 February 1997

by the Muse' he describes in terms of being psychically attuned.<sup>39</sup> When the mood is broken by the 'noise' of everyday life it may take a long time to get back to that state necessary for him to write.

Surrounded by this noise, I am immediately afflicted with paralysis. Sometimes it is days before I can write again. Days before the inner rhythms return. Days before I can drink at the stream of exhilaration.<sup>40</sup>

Another writer conscious of the need for isolation and concentration, the American novelist Don DeLillo, describes the creative process as follows:

But the work itself, you know—sentence by sentence, page by page—it's much too intimate, much too private, to come from anywhere but deep within the writer himself. It comes from all the time a writer wastes. We stand around, look out the window, walk down the hall, come back to the page, and, in those intervals, something subterranean is forming, a literal dream that comes out of daydreaming. It's too deep to be attributed to clear sources.<sup>41</sup>

Castro argues repeatedly that writers must struggle with their conscience and devote themselves to perfecting their work, regardless of the reaction of critics. They must also ignore the commercial success (or lack thereof) their work achieves. In a column lamenting the paucity of good reviewers, he says:

On their part writers are forgetting that the struggle is always with the work and not with other people. Writers who are not critics of themselves suffer the ignominy of being driven by the wish rather than the work. Reputation matters little if you can't square it with your conscience ...<sup>42</sup>

In a personal journal now held by the Mitchell Library there are examples of notes Castro writes to keep his mind concentrated. On one occasion when depressed at the difficulties of writing something worthwhile, he wrote:

2 May 1983. It's been days since I've taken up this pen. Sickness ... [has] prevented writing all this time. When I return to it the rhythm seems

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<sup>39</sup> Another writer who has written of the need to attain a heightened state is Russell Hoban, who likes to attune his mind so that it becomes a kind of 'receiver'. For him, '... everything speaks; everything is significant. "To me it seems ... everything that happens is language, everything that goes on is saying something." ' Christine Wilkie, *Through the Narrow Gate: The Mythological Consciousness of Russell Hoban*, Fairley Dickinson University Press, 1989; p. 15

<sup>40</sup> 'The Private and the Public: A Meditation on Noise', *Island*, no. 47, 1991, p. 16

<sup>41</sup> David Remnick, 'Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld', *The New Yorker*, 15 September 1997, p. 48

<sup>42</sup> 'The Role of the Critic', *Australian Book Review*, No. 196, November 1997; p. 35

gone, the aims diminished. I hate it when people ask me what I hope to *achieve* with writing—I hope only to achieve good writing—to achieve a book artistically—nothing more, nothing less.

... Life is cloying today but I intend to press on. I will probably achieve very little ...

Well I tried and was entirely unsuccessful. Not a line written today. I refuse to write rubbish ... the words have to be the very best and not strive for cheap effects that are sensational.<sup>43</sup>

While Castro acknowledges that this choice of writing philosophy may result in him 'suffer[ing] from being unknown and unread', he argues that it would be 'equally a misfortune to become the sport of one's reputation or the mouthpiece of others'.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, Don DeLillo claims that he does not pay much attention to the public reception to his work. In an interview in *The New Yorker* at the time of the release of *Underworld* the interviewer drew these conclusions from his conversation with DeLillo.

DeLillo has no idea how *Underworld* will be absorbed into the culture, if at all. He seems not to worry about it. In fact, he doesn't think that the increasingly marginal status of the serious novelist is necessarily awful. By being marginal, he may end up being more significant, more respected, sharper in his observations.<sup>45</sup>

Castro's essays<sup>46</sup> reveal consistent concerns with writing. In 'Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom' Castro speaks of the writer's need to maintain his writerly persona and protect it from his social persona, and indeed from the influences of society. This requires intense discipline.

Writing, ideally, should be something private, a discipline, perhaps even an experience of grief. If we burn our frogskins [i.e. lose our identity as a writer] we lose our way back to the source.<sup>47</sup>

This dedication may well result in seclusion from society. He says that for many years he declined invitations to speak at literary functions.

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<sup>43</sup> Mitchell Library ML 1933/96. From a diary in Box 1, re-used as a notebook (with some dated 'diary' entries).

<sup>44</sup> 'Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom', p. 4

<sup>45</sup> David Remnick, 'Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld', *The New Yorker*, 15 September 1997, p. 47

<sup>46</sup> The principal are: 'Heterotopias: Writing and Location', 'Writing Asia', 'Auto/biography', 'The Private and the Public: A Meditation on Noise' and 'Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom'. ('Lesions' is a reworking of 'Heterotopias'.)

<sup>47</sup> 'Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom', p. 3

This was not because I hankered after some kind of notoriety as a reclusive writer, but because of a feeling of being marginal, and a feeling that this marginality gave me the impetus to write.<sup>48</sup>

Castro, like DeLillo, values his marginality and uses it to advantage. This at times makes for a distant relationship with his readers, for whom he rarely makes concessions. The writing is a rhapsodic exercise for the author, and the reader must be prepared to become involved in this 'experiencing' of the text. Castro rarely reaches out to the reader; and his occasional 'Dear reader' interpolations are usually done simply to parody literary convention. They cannot but be taken ironically.

Castro expresses a desire to write challenging work; work that gives him artistic fulfilment. He eschews the vigorous pursuit of popularity.

But then popular approval has never been the criterion. I've attracted some fire for these attitudes, but then I don't mull over reviews. No review can grapple with a work that demands at least equal time in the creation as the study.<sup>49</sup>

This last comment is very revealing. Even allowing for some hyperbole for rhetorical purposes, it is obvious that Castro expects from his readers a level of commitment similar to his own. Castro acknowledges this—'I presume a tremendously active reader'—and Maryanne Dever has spelled it out in detail:

You [Brian] don't make connections *for* the reader, the reader has to make those connections and the reader has to take quite a lot on trust for quite a long time. In many fictions they have to put up with not really knowing what they've just read. They trust that it will become apparent later on.<sup>50</sup>

Of course all writers require some degree of sympathy from the reader if communication is to be achieved. Coleridge spoke of the 'willing suspension of disbelief for the moment'<sup>51</sup> that the reader agrees to when reading. Perhaps closer to the point, Keats's 'negative capability' suggests that a reader can be comfortable with a certain degree of paradox or loose ends, and that the effect created by creative writing overcomes any

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<sup>48</sup> 'Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom', p. 3

<sup>49</sup> Letter to MD, 19 June 1997. I read the last sentence as an inversion, meaning 'equal time in the study as the creation'.

<sup>50</sup> Interview MD, 27 November 1997: Castro's partner, Maryanne Dever was also present.

<sup>51</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson, J.M. Dent, London, 1975, p. 14

criticisms that everything is not 'worked out neatly' in the writing. Castro is happy when he achieves wonderful effects in his writing, and is unconcerned with the complexities he generates in doing so.

The positive corollary to having an active reader is that the work is more open-ended, allowing readers to feel that they have participated in the novel. Rejecting a suggestion I made that his novels communicate directly with the reader, Castro explained his idea of how his novels work.

I'm not sure I agree with you about the novel speaking directly to the reader. I think the novel is saying this is a performance in which some rather interesting things can be found if the reader looks hard enough.<sup>52</sup>

Castro's uncompromising position means that he is writing only for a restricted, educated, aware readership who have a wide range of literary reference to draw on, and it is fair to say that some people find this approach alienating. Defending himself against accusations of being elitist (a charge routinely levelled at Modernist writers), Castro says that this is the only type of writing he can do.

Castro [has] suggested that good writing should be in dialogue with other, already existing literature ... This playfulness, this toying with texts, is what he does best, albeit at the cost of a large readership.

'I don't write for great proportions of the population ... I create my own audience' ... That of the university educated reader. 'The mass market is something else entirely ... Perhaps I haven't got the skills to do a kind of breathless romance. I've given it a go, and I found myself parodying myself ... But we tend to overlook the fact that literary books have always existed, albeit with small markets. Joyce, when he first published *Ulysses*, published a grand total of 500 copies ... Good writers have always starved.'<sup>53</sup>

In some ways Castro's conception of 'the writer' as self-absorbed is rather that of a Romantic.

When I spoke to [Castro] last month, the Miles Franklin [Award] had just been awarded to Tim Winton for *Cloudstreet*, and, while Castro was warm in his congratulations, he calmly insisted on the unimportance of winning prizes. Writing, he says, is outside all that.

Brian Castro has a pragmatic attitude to his art. He considers opposition, the critical edge, to be the most important part of his writing, and if this means he might not be catering for readers, then that's the way

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<sup>52</sup> Letter to MD, 10 September 1997

<sup>53</sup> Libby O'Loughlin, 'Talking to Writers', *Redoubt*, No. 21, 1995, p. 114



it must be, he says with a laugh. His passion for writing leaves him unconcerned about whether or not he's going to win prizes, please readers, or introduce him[self] into the literary celebrations. 'This is heresy,' he says, 'but I've never considered the reader. I don't write for therapy or posterity. I write because I have a sense of being involved in literature, in writing, and it's exciting.'<sup>54</sup>

Castro is sometimes labelled 'Postmodernist' and accused of writing for writing's sake or to make intellectual amusements, something he denies. Overall, Castro prefers the term 'high Modernist' to 'Postmodernist'.<sup>55</sup> He elaborated his position to Rosemary Sorensen:

He feels comfortable with the term post-modernism, to a point. It is useful, especially, to describe the way in which he uses multiple discourses, where two or three consciousnesses run side by side, overlapping and interacting with each other. 'My yearning,' he says, 'is for diversion,' by which he means that the streams of his narrative move in ways that are neither neat nor conclusive. He sees things in a 'prismatic way' ...

There is a problem here, though. If the narrative takes its own course, dividing up rather than being tied down at points of climax and resolution, surely the writer is choosing the moments of these diversions in just the same way as a more traditional writer will control the turns of a narrative? That, suggests Castro, is where he parts company with the post-modernist approach. He calls the decision-making process 'intuition', and laughs heartily at how very old-fashioned this sounds. 'There's a point where narrative fails,' he explains, 'and I have to revive it. I have to change the flow, the point of view. I don't know what the process is, perhaps it's physiological.'

And so, while writing cannot represent reality, it is nevertheless *affective*, involving and changing the writer, if not the reader, by its physical presence on the page. This is writing in action, and in keeping with this way of looking at the process, Castro sees it as transient. Books are enjoyed for a few weeks, and then forgotten, that's the way it is, he says.<sup>56</sup>

### Artistic engagement

This attitude of lack of authorial responsibility for interaction with the reader invites the consideration of artistic engagement: to what extent does the writer interact with society? If one secludes oneself in a garret, can one *engage* with the world? Does one have anything to say *to* the world *about*

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<sup>54</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Yearning for Diversion', *Australian Book Review*, No. 142, July 1992, p. 8

<sup>55</sup> 'I'm not Postmodern ... I consider myself a very high Modernist.' Interview MD, 29 November 1997. In any case, Castro abhors this sort of 'labelling'.

<sup>56</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Yearning for Diversion', *Australian Book Review*, No. 142, July 1992, p. 9

the world? If one remains uncompromisingly true to one's art, does this result in narcissistic solipsism? Castro, for his part, argues that he does engage with the world of other people.

I debated with myself over such issues as to whether books can ever change people's minds, whether polemics can shape history, or whether the writer can be truly independent. On the other hand, I asked myself whether entertainment is a truly worthwhile activity, whether art can maintain its loftiness quite apart from incidents of racial hatred, intimidation and repression. Each time I came up not with contradictions but with paradoxes. Language simply refused to be categorised. Language which ceased to be functional in fact opposed any power position framed by categories.<sup>57</sup>

Castro accepts that the paradox of engagement and responsibility to the reader exists. Patently, it is absurd to deny that one's writing does not have any effect on readers, even if you cannot unequivocally articulate what that effect is or how you achieve it. Castro simply acknowledges that words do not fit into neat categories that allow them to be used in neat ways: any overt political purpose, any exposition of 'power', is bound to be limited by the slipperiness of language.

When asked directly if he thinks that what he is writing could be termed 'moral fiction', he gave a qualified assent.

I agree to a certain extent, but I come to the point at which there ... used to be a barrier which a reader had to transgress in order to turn the picture around so that it isn't just a moral view. But I think that that point in history has been passed, or surpassed, in the sense that I now feel that I'm actually retreating, back to the moral stance. I don't want to use the word 'moral' because I don't think it's a very useful one ...

... in fact [it's] *wholly* been devalued. That's why I'm going back to it. Because every time something is devalued I want to bring it back! And I think that's an important point in the sense that people are now saying that they are writing 'post-disciplinary' writing—texts that don't have any moral point of view, don't have any particular position. Yet I feel that I'm linked in and that's why Walter Benjamin is so important to me. I don't write anything without a reference to him now, because I think that I'm linked in to that idea that there is a—for want of a better word—'social theory' behind one's commitment to things, and it's not just 'the word' out there not really representing, not being a referent, not being a symbolic reference to something else. There is an element of commitment in terms of words ... words are commitments, words are actions, to a degree. That is where I come back down, you see, and that is where I say to myself this whole new generation of writers who have no

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<sup>57</sup> 'Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom', p. 5

commitment, not even in a very minor way, leaves me cold, leaves me entirely cold. I don't subscribe to that.<sup>58</sup>

This statement is a refutation of Poststructuralist or Deconstructionist notions that language is empty and non-referential, and is a grudging acceptance that his novels do have some 'purpose' behind them.

I think you have to have a personal stake somewhere along the way. If you put yourself [into] words, you can't simply be ironic all your life, you can't simply play games with ideas and words, and I think that's where I'm heading, back to the position in which I find that socialist ideals have significance.<sup>59</sup>

When the publication of *Birds of Passage* brought hate mail from the National Front, Castro was forced to confront the social and political aspects of writing novels.<sup>60</sup> He was given a way forward when he began re-reading Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.

I think I needed to recover a language which I believed came from the interior. And it was this language in Proust that showed me the way out of the dilemma. It showed me that writing was on the outside, that language was a process which continually remade itself as an object, in the spaces between events. It taught me that writing was the constant process of experience sliding into thought; that it relinquished the past as nostalgia for a future possibility which would *resist the gratification of immediate understanding and possession*. Above all, it taught me that it came out of a crisis of contradiction. For instance, the more I admired Proust for the subjectiveness of language, the more mimetic my own writing became. The more I tried to underpin its illusions with reality, the more it strove to be antihistorical, becoming fiercely determined to establish its own ineffable truth.<sup>61</sup>

This typically oblique passage shows Castro grappling with subjective concepts. As I interpret the passage, the two important points Castro makes are the need for the writer to rely on his inner feelings rather than try (artificially) to relate to the outside world, and secondly, that it is not possible to pin language (or writing style) down. The powerful creativeness

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<sup>58</sup> Interview MD, 27 November 1997

<sup>59</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997

<sup>60</sup> 'The reception of *Birds of Passage* taught me that the idea of the heteroclitite was not a generally accepted one. Although one should never confuse the author with a character or anything said in a work of fiction ... I was, in effect, classified immediately as being or representing my characters ...

'For the first time in my life I suddenly considered myself exclusively Chinese. I was immediately politicised because the blanket term "Asian" [used in the "Asian immigration" debate of the mid 1980s] covered me as well.' 'Writing Asia', p. 13-14

<sup>61</sup> 'Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom', p. 5 (my italics)

a writer generates arises from tackling contradiction, from trying to say the unsayable (or, at least, the very difficult), and the writer is more likely to succeed if he relies on the power of unconscious, intuitive impulses than his conscious, rational abilities.<sup>62</sup> Castro argues the need to let go, and rather than looking backwards in the hope of finding comfort or certainty ('nostalgia'), looking forward to possibilities that 'resist the gratification of immediate understanding and possession'. This sounds very much like Keats's concept of 'negative capability', a striving to grasp the difficult or ineffable without trying to 'tie up all the loose ends'.

Castro is not alone in this belief that things can't be 'nailed down' in the novel. D.H. Lawrence noted that the novel resists the author's attempts to build complete 'moral' systems:

Philosophy, religion, science, they are all of them busy nailing things down, to get a stable equilibrium ...

But the novel, no. The novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own place, time, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own place, time, circumstance. If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail.<sup>63</sup>

Other writers have also spoken against the idea of neat didacticism. John Updike has said that

the absence of a swiftly expressible message is, often, *the* message; ... reticence is as important a tool to the writer as expression; ... what he makes is ideally as ambiguous and opaque as life itself.<sup>64</sup>

Rather than 'teach' the reader a 'lesson', Castro writes to achieve a rhapsodic experience, one which transcends simple explanations and understanding, and which crosses boundaries and produces surprises. If

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<sup>62</sup> Talking about *Double-Wolf*, he distinguishes between 'forebrain' (i.e. 'conscious') and 'backbrain' writing; it is this unconscious 'backbrain' inspiration that provides the real impetus for writing.

<sup>63</sup> D.H. Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel', *Phoenix*, p. 528. I am indebted to Gillian Dooley for drawing my attention to this and the following Updike, Chekhov, Hardy and Hawthorne quotes.

<sup>64</sup> *First Person Singular: Writers and Their Craft*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates, pp. 2-3  
Other writers have made similar pronouncements. Chekhov proposed that of the 'two conceptions, the solution of a question and the correct setting of a question [t]he latter alone is obligatory for the artist' (Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel*, p. 99). In a similar vein: Thomas Hardy—'Novels which most conduce to moral profit are likely to be among those written without a moral purpose' (Allott, p. 98)—and Nathaniel Hawthorne—'When romances do really teach anything ... it is usually through a far more subtle [*sic*] process than the ostensible one' (Allott, p. 93).

you don't believe in absolutes, then you cannot really expect to deliver 'truths' in the conventional sense. If you could explain in simple words what effect you were trying to achieve then it would not have been worth the effort because it would have been too simplistic.

An artist lives in categories that are transcendent to the understanding. Once you vocalise or outline your intended notion you've lost the point of the art.<sup>65</sup>

In the short term he seems to be happy with any piece of writing that achieves a transcendent effect, as is apparent from his essays, interviews and correspondence, which often contain gnomic sayings which teeter between profundity and incomprehensibility.<sup>66</sup> Looking at it from the opposite direction, Castro abhors writing that is reducible to reductionist, 'rational explanations', and is only content with writing that surprises. He is prepared to take great risks to do so.

This is the process which others have called a necessary idiocy. It is not a posture but simply an emptying and a testing. The freedom to fail.<sup>67</sup>

But given this intention, it needs to be pointed out that not *all* is gravitas. In Castro's writing the portentous is leavened with playfulness. When things start to get serious in *Pomeroy*, Guitierrez warns Pomeroy 'One of the things about this game is that you've got to keep it as a game.'<sup>68</sup> Play has dual functions. It does provide a pleasurable, leavening element which reminds us not to take things *too* seriously, and to enjoy the pleasure of the text and its precocities, but for Castro play is also a tool. In *Double-Wolf* Castro has his Wolf-Man saying that 'It was Freud who first taught me that parody comes before the paradigm, play before principle.'<sup>69</sup> This suggests that thinking proceeds according to rules that are more unruly than Western syllogistic argument normally accepts.<sup>70</sup> Play is a way of

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<sup>65</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 14

<sup>66</sup> One must also keep in mind the performative aspect of a writer's pronouncements about himself.

<sup>67</sup> 'The Private and the Public: A Meditation on Noise', *Island*, no. 47, 1991, p. 16

<sup>68</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 29

<sup>69</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 23-24

<sup>70</sup> Castro consistently disparages deterministic thinking, reductive thinking, positivism. In *Pomeroy* Guitierrez is disparaged because he does everything rationally and logically. 'Frisco would forever outwit himself, I am thinking, because he never doubts, never becomes puzzled about the species of which he forms a part ... *homo perplexus*. (p. 29) His thinking is restricted. In *Double-Wolf* Art Catacomb 'plays' with (the mischievously named) Ludmilla Wittgenstein as they have sex. 'She offered

experimenting with the world, trying out unusual or unprecedented combinations. It is a characteristic of the way Castro writes, 'playing' with ideas and techniques, mixing genres.

Even in his thinking about novel writing, Castro does not want to become too serious.

'Since these theories [postmodernism, literary theory] are plays—plays on words, plays on ideas—I've also felt it necessary to play with them,' he explains. 'One of the impressions I get of, say, the American or English or Australian interpretation of these theories is that it is very serious, very austere. The French themselves never approached them in that way. They used them to explore what they call the *jeux d'esprit*, the play of the mind. It's interesting to a certain extent, but I don't think one can use them in fiction. To actually write a novel based on theory would be a grave error.'<sup>71</sup>

We therefore arrive at a paradoxical position: Castro's novels are at the same time philosophically serious and highly playful, and they need to be read both ways at the same time.

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propositions. I countered them. Hypothetical syllogisms. *Reductio ad absurdum*. She was a logical positivist.' (p. 150)

<sup>71</sup> Peter Fuller, 'Freud's Wolf', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1991, p. 41

## Chapter 3

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# Writing: Language and Technique

But then again, while one is influenced, this does not necessarily translate to writing. The goal, I think, is to write better than the influence. To overturn the influence with imaginative bravado. This is hardly ever done. This is perfection in its most suicidal form.

Brian Castro<sup>1</sup>

Brian Castro's style is distinctive and has few parallels with other Australian writers. Castro admits that this is a central concern for him, and he admires other writers who share this concern. He calls them 'the language writers',<sup>2</sup> and includes writers such as Joyce, Beckett, Bernhard, Faulkner, Bellow, Burgess, Pynchon. Patrick White wears the mantle for Australian writers, but few other Australian writers excite him.<sup>3</sup> Castro wants to be known for his *writing*, as opposed to just his 'novels' or his 'narratives', and aspires to write as well or better than those he admires.

Castro is very particular about wanting an idiosyncratic style, one that reflects the idiosyncrasies of its author. He takes issue with arguments about the death of the author or the absent author, and praises writers like Hemingway who 'inhabit' their style.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to MD, 19 June 1997

<sup>2</sup> For example: 'These are what I call the "language" people. They add a dimension to the English language. Their prose is dense, thoughtful, surprising.' (Letter to MD, 19 June 1997)

<sup>3</sup> One of the few he has been prepared to single out is Tom Flood, the West Australian writer, whose style makes few concessions to the reader in terms of continuity, but whose output to date has been limited (one novel, *Oceana Fine*, Australian/Vogel and Miles Franklin Award winner), making it difficult to consider his position as an enduring writer. Tim Winton and David Foster have also been favourably mentioned.

<sup>4</sup> 'That's why I would rather read an author like Hemingway who has a tremendous amount of fictive subject there—huge, legendary. Hemingway, the figure. But also a large part of the substance that went into that was real experience. And I think that I fall back on that to a certain extent. I'm not sitting in an academic office pretending and writing about writing ...'

Interview MD, 29 November 1997

(Castro wrote a short story called 'Three Hemingway Pieces')

The author cannot be dead even if he/she is in reality: Henry James is still Henry James in his novels ... style *is* the man/woman. Style is the indelible mark of a particular author, and in this sense; perhaps *only* in this sense, is the author 'within' the novel ... the grain of the voice ... the path of invention ... the insistent/repetitive conceptualisations.<sup>5</sup>

Castro is aiming for a voice that is honest to Brian Castro,<sup>6</sup> that reflects his personal interests, and, as I suggested in Chapter 2, he is (in Bloom's terms) in 'loving but fierce competition' with other writers, following on but aiming for distinctiveness.

As he says in interviews and essays, he is pleased when he can push back the envelope of normality and achieve in his writing something that is striking and new, even when that means that the writing presents difficulties. Hence the Castro style is dense with possible meaning, and often very compressed. Castro regards Walter Benjamin not so much as a good philosopher/literary critic, but as a stylish writer. He quotes the following comments on writing from Benjamin: 'Each book is a tactic ... nothing is straightforward. Everything is—at the least—difficult ... Ambiguity displaces authenticity in all things ... the "innocent" eye has become a lie', and goes on to comment that '[Benjamin's] style was unimaginably compact and bristling with meaning. Each sentence had to say everything.'<sup>7</sup> The last sentence sums up Castro's aim to invest as much as possible in every sentence. In his own words, 'It's the passionate intensity of the words that makes my writing'.<sup>8</sup>

For Castro style is just as, if not more, important than content. Form is paramount.

Style and form. As a writer, these things have always been my major preoccupation—and [they seem] still to be found in Asia ... In Australia, we've tended to do the reverse. To make meaning overly determined and dogmatic; to judge others in terms of our own narratives, our plain-

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to MD, 10 September 1997. It is obvious that Castro dismisses the dogma of 'the death of the author', but, overall, he retains respect for Barthes as a thinker. He often quotes Barthesian phrases (here, 'the grain of the voice'), but he jokingly dismisses Barthes's 'death of the author' in *Birds of Passage*.

<sup>6</sup> Note that Castro means here 'Brian Castro the writer', not 'Brian Castro the person': he admits that 'Fiction writers are notoriously anarchistic regarding personal details, and though there is indeed some basis of fact in novels about themselves, each related experience is so transmogrified as to ultimately be worthless in "truth value".' Letter to MD, 10 September 1997

<sup>7</sup> Letter to MD, 10 September 1997

<sup>8</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997



speaking and our pus-coloured realism. This has, in the past, seemed to be the criterion for 'Australian content'.<sup>9</sup> But in countries in Asia, form and style are relentlessly invoked, and while they do not dominate, they are the agents of fragmentation and rupture which bring about an overturning and a renewal of value. This is the juxtaposing of which I had spoken earlier.<sup>10</sup>

And every Castro sentence should have a felt force for the reader, engaging him/her mentally and physically.

Reading novels and poetry is of course experiential. In the way that it extracts a language for decoding. Reading theory or philosophy is different in that the language has to be as plain as possible so that decoding doesn't take the place of a thesis. When people muddle this up and want to have it both ways, they dislocate the experience of wonder from language on the one hand and they destroy stimulus brought forth from lucid ideas on the other. Viz. most 'fictive' postmodernists.<sup>11</sup>

I have already suggested a parallel between Castro and the American novelist Don DeLillo, another writer who has talked about style in a similar vein.<sup>12</sup> DeLillo was asked in an interview how his background of growing up the sixties and seventies had influenced his writing. His reply highlights how *style is generated within the writer* and is an expression of himself, not a predictable or mechanical response to the physical influences of the surrounding world.

That's very difficult for me to answer. But the influence is almost metaphysical. I don't think I could make any kind of direct connection [with particular events and influences]. I think fiction comes from everything you've ever done, and said, and dreamed, and imagined. It comes from everything you've read and haven't read. It comes from all the things that are in the air. At some point, you begin to write sentences and paragraphs that don't sound like other writers'. And for me the crux of the whole matter is language, and the language a writer eventually develops. If you're talking about Hemingway, the Hemingway sentence is what makes Hemingway. It's not the bullfights or the safaris or the wars, it's a clear, direct, and vigorous sentence. It's the simple connectives—the

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<sup>9</sup> Jim Legasse reported that in the late 1970s an Angus & Robertson editor was (still) advising that 'Australian style' consisted of 'simple declarative sentences', reflecting the 'straightforward, no nonsense attitude' of Australians. The 'sophisticated marks of punctuation like the colon and the semi-colon' were to be used 'sparingly'. Jim Legasse, 'The Voice of the Form and the Form of the Voice', *Westerly*, No. 1, March 1980, p. 98

<sup>10</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 12

<sup>11</sup> Letter to MD, 11 November 1997

<sup>12</sup> Castro is impressed by DeLillo, although he considers *Underworld* to be disappointing stylistically. 'I have read the latest DeLillo, *Underworld*, and I don't feel any rapport with it at all in the sense that I think he's flattening his style to the point at which there is no return.' Interview MD, 29 November 1997

word ‘and’ that strings together the segments of a long Hemingway sentence. The word ‘and’ is more important to Hemingway’s work than Africa or Paris. I think my work comes out of the culture of the world around me. I think that’s where my language comes from. That’s where my themes come from. I don’t think it comes from other people. One’s personality and vision are shaped by other writers, by movies, by paintings, by music. But the work itself, you know—sentence by sentence, page by page—it’s much too intimate, much too private, to come from anywhere but deep within the writer himself.<sup>13</sup>

And in rather the same way that Castro suggests that language and style often get overlooked in critical responses to a work, when the interviewer asked DeLillo if ‘he recognised himself when he read academic criticism or journalistic reviews of his work’ he replied:

Not really ... What’s almost never discussed is ... the language in which a book is framed. And there’s good reason. It’s hard to talk about. It’s hard to write about. And so one receives a broad analysis of, perhaps, the social issues in one’s work but rarely anything about the way the writer gets there.<sup>14</sup>

I have indicated that Castro, also, wishes to be seen as a language writer, someone whose ‘prose is dense, thoughtful, surprising’.<sup>15</sup> He becomes irritated when his work is not seen in terms of its exuberant prose style. He would probably be less riled by those who claim that his work is ‘all style’: at least they are acknowledging his writing *as* writing.

It is the style that accomplishes the task:

... it comes back to this—and ... not many people (well none!) have commented on this particular point—and that is that it’s the style that does this. It’s the style I’m interested in that brings you straight into a situation. And so many people can’t do that ... I am a minimalist—put it that way. Within the sentence itself I want to bring you there. I want to bring you, within that sentence, to not only just a place but a framework of mind. So you are entering somebody’s mind.<sup>16</sup>

Castro feels that it is his style that makes him the writer he is—as opposed to say his narrative skills, or his ability to portray the world. I suggested to him in an interview that his style is ‘what I loosely call a “poetic” style of

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<sup>13</sup> David Remnick, ‘Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo’s Undisclosed Underworld’, *The New Yorker*, 15 September 1997, p. 47

<sup>14</sup> David Remnick, ‘Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo’s Undisclosed Underworld’, *The New Yorker*, 15 September 1997, p. 47

<sup>15</sup> Letter to MD, 19 June 1997

<sup>16</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997

writing, where the writer is more interested in the effects that he generates than trying to tell a story that comes to some “conclusion”’. The idea struck some sympathy.

I suppose the two things are that you’ve got to define what ‘poetic’ is and also not to confuse that with ‘poetics’ as such ... there is a poetics of Postmodernism, a poetics of metafiction, where the idea comes very much to the fore, the idea of writing. But that’s very different from the idea of poetic style in the ordinary sense, and I think I’d rather go for the latter, in the sense that I do feel that it’s very important in terms of style to bring back the subject, the poetic subject as it were. It’s the passionate intensity of the words that make my writing ...<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere Castro has said: ‘I enjoy reading David Malouf and Rodney Hall. Both those writers are in the poetic vein and I find I am most comfortable with that.’<sup>18</sup>

‘Poetic’ is a very moot term, covering a broad range of meanings for different people. It is also a word that is challenged whenever it used in an academic setting. Yet at its simplest and broadest it seems to be a term widely understood by non-specialised readers. If you describe a book (or a film or many types of art) to people as being ‘poetic’ there is an understanding that you mean it somehow influences the feelings and emotions, and that it is elegantly expressed. In short, that ‘style’ adds something to the concrete meaning.

Such a usage is too broad for my purposes here, and has the major drawback that it tends to exclude a work that is written with gusto and force. The lay meaning of ‘poetic’ is often inclined towards the elegant and effete, as equated with romanticness, and it ignores the more passionate, robust forms of ‘poetic’ writing.

For the purposes of this work I propose to use ‘poetic’ to mean writing that affects the emotions or feelings rather than conveying information to the rational faculties. In other words writing that ‘affects’ the reader, as opposed to simply conveying information. The definition is closely related to the idea of connotative language being distinct from denotative language. Whatever disrupts the mundane correspondences between

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<sup>17</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997

<sup>18</sup> Michael Shmith, ‘Castro’s Lament’, *The Age Saturday Extra*, 1994, 20 August p. 8

descriptor and described, in a way that makes us appreciate in a different way the thing being described, is in this sense 'poetic'. The principal effect occurs intellectually, but there is a new sensation of something that was mundanely unaffecting through the staling of custom.

I will apply this usage to language rather than to narrative or other aspects of writing (that is, the story-telling capacity of prose). Obviously it is possible to affect readers by means of the story itself, using fairly concrete, 'unpoetic' language ('The little girl's kitten was run over by a car'). And by the same token I do not mean as poetic what is merely maudlin emotionality: there has to be intellectual engagement.

I would therefore describe Brian Castro's prose as 'poetic' in the sense of engaging the emotions and senses in such a way that the reader feels or regenerates those emotions and does not passively 'receive'.<sup>19</sup> I also argue that writing that is 'poetic' is not easily explicable, and may even be ambiguous, or contradictory, irrational or perhaps 'supra-rational'.

I do not think that it is possible to produce some 'scientific' definition of 'poetic', and would argue that this would be self-defeating ('poetry' being that part that you cannot describe) and in any case is outside the concerns of this thesis. However, it is possible to expand on what the term might encompass.

A writer's 'diction' is 'the kinds of words, phrases, sentence structures, and figurative language' that make up his/her style.<sup>20</sup> It can be analysed according to 'the degree to which the vocabulary and phrasing is abstract or concrete, Latin or Anglo-Saxon in origin, colloquial or formal, technical or common, literal or figurative'.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, figurative language can be analysed as 'a departure from what users of the language apprehend as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect. Such figures were long described as primarily poetic "ornaments",

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<sup>19</sup> Other works that I would describe as 'poetic' include David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, Robert Drewe's *Our Sunshine*, and even DeLillo's *White Noise*.

<sup>20</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Sixth edition, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, Fort Worth, 1993; p. 163

<sup>21</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p. 163

but they are integral to the function of language, and indispensable not only to poetry, but to all modes of discourse.<sup>22</sup> Figurative language, or the use of ‘tropes’, is language which conveys a meaning different from the standard or ‘literal’ meaning.

In my usage of the term ‘poetic’ I am including language that conveys meaning beyond the literal, but which may not equate precisely with the traditional definition of similes, metaphors and so on. A writer does not have to use recognised figurative language to write ‘poetically’.

Another definition of poetry is ‘what gets lost in translation’. This is a clue that the ‘poetic’ aspects of language are those that are hardest for another person to convey using a different set of words, and that it is this connotative aspect of the writing that is important. The ‘what gets lost in translation’ definition is one that is particularly apposite for Castro, because he is keenly interested in the idea of translation and of the problem of where the ‘meaning’ resides in words. He has also seen several of his books translated; in particular, *Birds of Passage* was translated successfully into French,<sup>23</sup> and *After China* translated into Mandarin less successfully.<sup>24</sup>

Castro uses the words ‘poetic voice’ in discussing Pons’s translation (see footnote 23), and this probably provides a better way of understanding ‘poetic’ or ‘poetic diction’ than the simple textbook definitions quoted above. Voice has been used to describe the idiosyncratic aspects of a writer’s style, and in particular has been developed by the Russian literary theorist Bakhtin in a systematic way.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p. 66

<sup>23</sup> ‘Xavier Pons’ translation was particularly good, for while it didn’t take great liberties with the text, it rendered the prose with a much more poetic voice ... as only the French can do, without losing its precision.’ Letter to MD, 2 February 1998.

*Birds of Passage* has also been translated into Chinese, and *Pomerooy* and *Stepper* recently translated into German, with *Drift* to follow. Letter to MD, 29 July 1999.

<sup>24</sup> The translation formed the basis of Fen Liang’s doctoral thesis: ‘Brian Castro’s *After China*—A Translation into Mandarin and a Study of the Novel’s Linguistic and Social Contexts in Australia and China’, unpublished PhD, Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1997. The translation was published in China by Baihua Arts and Literature Publishing House, May 1995. Castro felt that ‘the translation itself was rather literal, lacking in any sense of the playful and missing all the puns and intended parodies of the original’. Letter to MD, 2 February 1998. Fen Liang admitted the difficulty of translating Castro’s novel into Mandarin.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, ‘From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse’, *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, pp. 41-83

Bakhtin showed how the ‘voice’ of a piece of prose can be in one of several ‘registers’, and can at times be (or seem to be) in different registers at the same time. Castro is adept at shifting subtly between these registers to give a ‘polyvocal’ effect that adds to the poetic intensity of the prose. Like irony, ‘voice’ or ‘register’ resides somewhere between the words themselves, and exists only in the mind of the sensitive reader. It cannot be ‘pinned down’.

How does the writer achieve his/her ‘poetry’ and his ‘voice’? In *Hamlet* the following exchange takes place.

*Polonius:* What do you read my lord?  
*Hamlet:* Words, words, words.<sup>26</sup>

Hamlet is teasing Polonius by stating the blindingly obvious, and yet all that any writer can do is set words down on the page. Why is it that some writers can make such wonderful contrivance out of a set of basic words that, in theory, are available to us all? If Castro makes claims to be ‘a language writer’, can we see elements in his style that can be attributed to his use of language?

Many commentators have noted Castro’s brilliant use of language. As Rosemary Sorensen has said:

The sentences whisk along, buffeting and exhilarating. With one hand to hold down your hat and one to keep the flaps of your jacket wrapped close, the reader’s position is precarious.<sup>27</sup>

Castro’s prose does indeed often ‘whisk along’, but it is often the words themselves whisking past rather than fast-paced action. Only rarely does Castro present fast action sequences (such as the death of Tzu in *Birds of Passage* or the fight scene in *Pomeroy*), but often the mental/verbal action runs at quite a pace. Castro is particularly good at conveying a lot with few words. There is intensity in his prose.

To illustrate, here are selections from Castro and two other writers for comparison. I have chosen Alex Miller and Nicholas Jose not as particular

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<sup>26</sup> *Hamlet*, II.ii.191-193

<sup>27</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, ‘Story upon a story is mainly sleight of hand’, *The Sunday Age*, Agenda, 24 July 1994, p.8

exemplars of prose writing, but because they have written 'Asian' novels. The point here is to compare some prose styles.

Firstly Castro:

You wake up in a guesthouse in Katoomba. The air is bracing when you open the window. They don't encourage you to open the windows because the heating bill soars. Sometimes, on the rare days when it snows, you open all the windows of your room, simply to defy. Simply to let the dark day drift into yourself. And if it snows you will walk into the bush forever, afraid to be silent you will marry silence, never to be heard of, from, again, in order to understand something, you don't know what, perhaps the beginning, the idea of freedom without hope.

You've been in the Aeneas guesthouse for five years. Mrs Harris, the concierge ... although concierge is a bit French and pretentious ... Mrs Harris, the old slut that runs this place, eyes you off in mock flirtatiousness every morning before your walk, eyes you off as she runs her hand lasciviously over the tea cozy. 'Professor Catacomb,' she purrs, 'are you taking your morning constitutional then?'<sup>28</sup>

Although there is little action in this scene-setting introduction of a new character, the reader is led along a string of rapidly unfolding ideas, which paint a picture of seedy dilapidation, but which tell little of the physical world. The action is verbal, mental, psychological. The expression is wryly ironic, and economical.

In a similarly introductory chapter opening, Alex Miller takes a different approach.

At afternoon recess the man and the woman were there again in the staffroom. As before, they were in conversation by the gas heater. The heater wasn't lit as the weather was fiercely hot, but the man held his hand out to it behind him every now and then as if he were in need of its warmth. She was taller than he by several centimetres. She was wearing a grey dustcoat and dark pants and she stood still and kept her hands thrust into her pockets. She didn't look directly at him, even when she spoke to him, but gazed steadily in the direction of an unoccupied table tennis table by the far wall.<sup>29</sup>

The prose here is highly concrete, the sentence structure formal (to the pedantically correct 'taller than he'), and the psychological development is *told* to the reader ('She didn't look at him ...'). The pacing is even and slow.

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<sup>28</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 8. As is often the case, names are significant; in this passage 'Aeneas' and 'Catacomb' are obvious (and *deliberately* heavy-handed?) symbols.

<sup>29</sup> Alex Miller, *The Ancestor Game*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1992, p. 9.

The reader has no trouble re-painting the picture the author describes. The prose is economical, but not intense in the way that Castro's is.

Finally, Nicholas Jose.

Clarence walked into the cold. At night, disguised like a homecoming worker in cap, scarf and coat, he became a faceless swimmer in the darkness. He loved the night, when his camera was stowed and he could cease looking for shots. He had come to Peking to prevent his mother turning him into a character in one of her novels. She had only the notoriety of literary London to confer. Clarence the child, Clarence the teenager, had been utilised more than once in the Honourable Ann Codrington's heightened fictions. Growing older, he had learned to put himself out of reach, studying a language that could not be quoted on the page, and then moving safely East. His mother's mighty pen had hung over his head through adolescence, forcing private turmoil back on itself to escape expression.<sup>30</sup>

This piece, in contrast to the other two, is so 'lumpy' and overwritten that it seems almost a self-parody. There is no rhythm or flair. While it may be subjective and unfair to represent a writer by one example, Jose is an author who may tell a good story, but who does not write stylish prose.

Now Alex Miller *does* write stylish prose, and though the scene quoted is not in itself exciting, his sentences have rhythm and there is some poetic force in the writing. Miller is also able to vary his style to suit the voice of the character speaking, and his prose is always a pleasure to read. Nevertheless, it is usually formal and evenly paced.

Castro, however, has a variety of styles of writing, which vary quite dramatically, and not only with the varied registers of the characters' voices. The prose ranges from lyrical and poetic descriptions, usually from the narrator, to fast, wise-cracking self-parodic banter between characters. Usually the prose is quite dense—even to the point of being opaque—and requires concentrated effort on the reader's part.

Castro rarely spends much time on setting a scene or describing the physical setting. The action tends to start immediately—contrast Miller's leisurelypsychological scene-setting (above) before any genuine action or development begins with Castro's immediate launch into Art Catacomb's

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<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Jose, *Avenue of Eternal Peace*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1989, p. 26.



progress—and to take place in the mental realm rather than the physical. Castro is not interested in the merely concrete world, but in the richness of imaginatively constituted ‘place’:

As I am very much an anti-realist, I abhor the idea of place as represented. I rejoice at the loghorroic<sup>31</sup> denial of the myth of place when authors like Joyce or Rushdie begin with the premise that place is language and language is experience.<sup>32</sup>

An example of Castro’s minimal use of setting, and of his ability to change pace can be found in his description of the death of Tzu in *Birds of Passage*.

It was an unusually hot day for that time of the year. A bee floated lazily among the bottlebrushes. There was a smell of wild honey in the heavy air. Tzu stood mid-stream, the cool water coursing around his shins ...

‘That’s him. The big bastard,’ they said. He could not understand them, or their anger. He tried to walk between the horses. They jostled him. The buckets were only half full now. He made off in another direction. A horse blocked his path. He was struck across the back. He dropped the buckets. Desperation rose like an icy current from the pit of his stomach ... A rope flew over his head, tightened around his neck. He reached up to stop it from choking him. The rope dragged him off along a path. Stumbling, running as fast as could to ease the tension from around his throat, he began to shout. He tried hauling in the rope. The speed of the horse increased. Suddenly he was on the ground. He was dragged over some bushes. A rock split his mouth ...

As he lay under a large tree-fern in a dank rain forest, he choked back on some blood and felt a joy pass over him. His pains disappeared. It was as though a door had opened ... He was warm, asleep. Then a boulder the size of a bucket extinguished the last glimmer of consciousness left in him.<sup>33</sup>

This passage gives no location, and we must infer that the Chinese is filling water buckets in a stream. Yet the suggestion of heat and the smell of honey create a sensuous setting. The early sentences are evenly paced and lulling. The action is introduced abruptly with the shout of Tzu’s persecutors, and the sentences quickly build up rhythm. With great economy Castro conveys the confusion and urgency as Tzu is dragged by the rope, and he does so without recourse to specialised or ostentatious words. Castro conveys the increasing pace and jerkiness, and the sense of desperation. The final *coup de grâce* is both violent and restrained: as Tzu drifts off into

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<sup>31</sup> Logorrhoea (literally, ‘a mental disorder characterised by excessive, and sometimes incoherent talking.’ *Macquarie Dictionary*) is a term that might well be applied to Castro’s prose at times. It is often richly worded, to the point of excess.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to MD, 11 November 1997

<sup>33</sup> *Birds of Passage* pp. 110-112. I have extracted only parts of the passage.

peaceful, final reverie, the fall of the rock abruptly terminates the scene, and his life. What is remarkable is the sense of emotional involvement that Castro is able to elicit, while never mentioning any details of the violence. The withholding suggests the implied violence, in the reader's imagination, in a way that actual description would not achieve. The lyricism of the scene suggests the gentleness of Tzu and contrasts it with the smouldering violence of his tormentors, without Castro having to tell us this.

The *Double-Wolf* passage quoted above (page 47) also contains many stylistic devices. It may take several readings to gain the full impact of the passage, but there is no doubting its ability to both affect and to unsettle the reader. Firstly, the second person narration makes it difficult to work out who is speaking. We can only guess that it is the 'you' character, Catacomb, speaking of himself. But is he speaking as a character, or as narrator? The mode is Bakhtin's dialogic mode,<sup>34</sup> combining elements of both and neither one nor the other. The tone of seediness and combativeness is quickly established. But there is more than just Catacomb's sparring with Mrs Harris. Castro has elided the object of the fourth sentence, so Catacomb is 'defying' something general. What it is we are not told (landlords? the system? life?), and Castro's 'explanation' is given in typically vague, gnomic phrases. 'Simply to let the dark day drift into yourself' is understandable in emotional terms (note its 'poetic' effects: lyrical expression and alliteration, languid flow), but 'afraid to be silent you will marry silence' defies any simply rational explanation. There is a zen-like contradiction, the unusual metaphor of 'marry', and although we don't know why this character is 'afraid to be silent', we start to get some inkling that Castro is not describing Catacomb's volubility. Catacomb may be afraid to be silent because he has secret knowledge that he needs to disburden himself of. It may be the silence of non-existence, representing Catacomb's existential fear of non-being, death.

There is wonderful rhythm in the passage. The pacing changes as the subject chops about: 'You wake up ... The air is bracing ... They don't ...'

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<sup>34</sup> More correctly, Bakhtin's 'doubly-oriented' or 'doubly-voiced' mode, in which the voice is not coming only from one source, and is not 'straight', that is, it contains other levels of interpretation than just the denotative content. See David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp. 59-60.

These three declarative sentences (the sum of Castro's 'scene setting') are followed by a combination of declaration and musing. What starts as declaration, tails off into the objectless 'simply to defy' truncating the sentence. This truncation is then taken up with the repeated word 'Simply', continuing the mental musing. A disjunction turns into the languid flow of 'dark day drift'. The musicality of this prose just begs that it be read out loud, and most of Castro's writing invites this.<sup>35</sup>

Castro does not have a single 'style', but a hybrid style that switches from chapter to chapter, page to page, even paragraph to paragraph. He is prepared to borrow and parody other writing styles (*Pomero* is the example *par excellence*), and to mix styles within a novel. His writing is characterised by changes, sometimes quite dramatic, between limp, lyrical sections, muscular and harsh sections, jokey, even low-humour sections, academic/pretentious sections, and parodies of other styles, even of his own preceding writing.<sup>36</sup> On occasion the prose degenerates into self-parody as each successive sentence subverts or undermines the previous, and the reader is left wondering where he/she stands.

I noted that Alex Miller changes voice<sup>37</sup> to suit his different characters, but Castro changes 'voice' (or style) in his prose to create effects, not to represent characters' speech. (In fact, his characters more often than not speak in a standard style—comparatively articulate, expressive, non-concrete, verbally playful—and Castro makes few attempts at 'realism' in direct speech.) Castro himself has at times distinguished some of his idiosyncratic 'styles'.

Maybe to clarify my style I can use a metaphor much used by historians for describing Imperialism and Colonialism in the Far East: *the Empire and the Garden*. My father and my mother. The European adventurer who delighted in travel and conquest (my 'oceanic' writing). The disciplined Chinese naturalist who lived for harmony and miniatures (my spare 'arrangements' and obsession with form). Incidentally, to achieve the latter, I devour every notable Japanese novel, namely, Endo, Kawabata,

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<sup>35</sup> For example, Rob Johnson in his review of *Double-Wolf*: 'It offers the sort of writing that, in my case, excites an irresistible impulse to read aloud.' 'A Reappraisal of the Wolf-Man's Dreams', *Advertiser*; 29 June 1991, p. 12

<sup>36</sup> Murray Bail is another writer who often invokes his own preceding works, as well as the work of others (for example, *Eucalyptus*).

<sup>37</sup> Miller's characters tend to speak in (Bakhtin's) monologic register: the voice *belongs* to the character speaking or the narrator, not to a combination of speaking positions.

Tanizaki. For a taste of the strange served within traditional forms, no European modernist, Dadaist or post-modernist, can beat the Japanese.<sup>38</sup>

In an interview he speaks of his swapping between the short and sharp style and the long, flowing sentence style.

Well this [*Stepper*] being a spy story gave me the idea to use something that's rather brief and clipped, but at the same time I didn't relinquish what I call my oceanic writing, which is the long sentence and the long breath. I mean Allan Ginsberg ... he's a great influence. So ... I looked at the lyrical element of the story as well as the spy element of the story and tried to balance the two.<sup>39</sup>

A favourite syntactical usage is the truncated sentence. This gives the effect of incompleteness (the missing subject or verb signifying 'something important is missing'). The truncated sentence is sometimes used as a one-off for dramatic effect (a fairly typical literary use), but sometimes used several times in a paragraph or in a string. This gives a very disrupted and jerky effect. In *Drift* it signifies the mind of B.S. Johnson—jerky and quirky. An example can be found in the opening of *Stepper*:

Nineteen thirty-three.

You're on a steamer, in the middle of Tokyo Bay, making love to a woman with one leg shorter than the other.

One shot at it. You've got one shot. Now make it count, Victor.

Click.

Your name?

Stepper. Victor Stepper.

Remember it.

A wash of yellow.

Chrysanthemums. Looking like paper, floating on the grey sea. A heaving field of flowers. You have to be specific. Not just chrysanthemums but bodies too, beneath.<sup>40</sup>

In this example the detached sentences are used to build up a picture in snapshots. At other times the short and the flowing are interspersed to create contrasts and changes in pace. The following example of mixed style brings out characterisation.

She wrote him notes. Hundreds of them. Lined them up from the bathroom to the bedroom in the morning. Filled his postbox with them in the evening. Left them under his pillow, in his shoes, in the pockets of

<sup>38</sup> Letter to MD, 19 June 1997

<sup>39</sup> Ramona Koval, 'Ramona Koval interviews Brian Castro about his new novel, *Stepper*', *Australian Book Review*, No. 190, May 1997, p. 8

<sup>40</sup> *Stepper*, p. 1

his coats. Made him search for them in her underclothes. They were immensely happy, as much as he would allow that happiness trembled briefly on the vine before being plucked by greedy practicality, or was continually being deferred for the sake of an impossible, non-existent storage. But he gathered her notes and used them as bookmarks and never ceased to be charmed and surprised when he found one, folded in the form of a crane or flower burgeoning with love. Which also made him sad.<sup>41</sup>

The first seven sentences are short, or composed of short clauses. They represent the spontaneous playfulness of Reiko, and her childish joy in their love. Suddenly the prose changes into longer sentences that represent Stepper's more stolid, reasoning approach, and his inability to be emotionally spontaneous and responsive over any period of time. The final sentence, though, still in Stepper's mindset (though none of the sentences represent dialogue), is short, providing a dramatic contrast with Stepper's previous 'thinking', and a symbolic transition to Reiko's more human approach.

### Voice

Castro likes his prose to be psychologically direct. Although he peppers his writing with exotic words at times, his language is often straightforward and blunt. 'A misty rain is falling. It smears the glass like somebody's spit. Somebody talking too loud, too fast.' These opening sentences of *Double-Wolf* contain no unusual words, no *traditionally* 'poetic' words, but they make an immediate and direct impact on the reader. They immediately establish a 'voice', a style that is recognisably Castro's.

The immediacy of the prose is probably the first thing that will strike the reader of a Castro novel. There is generally no preamble, or scene setting, no instructions from the author: the reader is dropped straight into the story. Castro says it is one of his aims not only to get the reader into the story quickly:

It's the style I'm interested in that brings you straight into a situation. And so many people can't do that. So many writers want you to spend 300 pages before you even *get* some idea of where this world is.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Stepper, p. 178

<sup>42</sup> Interview MD, 29 November, 1997

Another aim is to get the reader into the emotions and feelings of the novel's characters.

Within the sentence itself I want to bring you there. I want to bring you, within that sentence, to not only just a place but a frame of mind. So you are entering somebody's mind.<sup>43</sup>

There is little interpretation done by the narrator on behalf of the reader: you must work out the implications for yourself by following and *feeling* the events of the novel.

Most of the action in Castro's novels takes place in the characters' minds. When external action is described (for example, the various storms that occur) it is usually described from the point of view of a single character; and it is rare for another character to give a variant interpretation. The writing voice is usually a form of interior monologue, interspersed with some dialogue. (There are very few 'crowd' scenes.) There is almost no plain description by the author of the action or the setting: it is painted in briefly and loosely by the author, and when he does so it is often in a narratorial voice as if he is part of the novel rather than a detached author. There is a constant shifting between an authorial narrator and a character narrator.

The voice is close to free association at times, in the sense that characters skip around somewhat and often 'talk to themselves'. The characters themselves are more often than not baffled by their circumstances, and are invariably thinking, quite deeply, about the existential problems facing them.

Castro also employs a polyphonic technique, where there is a babble of voices competing for the reader's comprehension.

I write in a kind of fugal way and I'm a great admirer of Bach. It's this sort of counterpoint and that sense of voices chasing each other and yet able to come back to the point of origin. This babble of voices in other words, but all making very clear sense, is what I like about it. There's a purity about it, when the obvious thing to say is that it's a confusion.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Interview MD, 29 November, 1997

<sup>44</sup> 'Outside the Prison of Logic', p. 23

This subtle shifting of voice not only keeps the reader concentrating to try to work out just 'who' is speaking, but provides changing perspectives on the action of the novel.

This shifting voice is matched by the use of shifting 'person': it is a consistent feature of Castro's writing that the grammatical voice often moves between the first and third person without obvious reason. Occasionally, the strange, second person is employed ('You felt that you had done such and such ...'). While it is not uncommon in novels for changes in person between dialogue sections and narratorial linking sections, the difference is that in Castro's writing the speaking voice is still identified with the actual character, who seems to speak about himself, even when shifted into the second or third person. Once again the reader has a different perspective when grammatical person and tense keep changing.

Castro often brings ideas about language directly into his novels. *Birds of Passage* and *Pomeroy* have lengthy discussions about language and literary theory, and *Birds of Passage* also deals directly with the problems of translation. Various characters in his novels talk about how language is inadequate to express themselves.

Castro is exercised by the same problem that David Foster highlights in *Moonlite*:

No, the real problem, and I see it in my lucid moments, is the incapacity of language to deal with the complexity of life, when categories become fluid. We say a man is good or bad, but he's generally good in one respect, bad in another. And these respects are infinite.<sup>45</sup>

Castro's characters are on the whole linguistically adept. (Contrast say Tim Winton's 'unempowered' inarticulate characters.<sup>46</sup>) But they find that for all their skill, they cannot always convey their thoughts and desires accurately and reliably to others, and often, even to themselves. Language

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<sup>45</sup> David Foster, *Moonlite*, p. 199

<sup>46</sup> Winton's characters prove to be quite powerful speakers, despite their lack of words. Ort in *That Eye the Sky* and Quick Lamb in *Cloudstreet* convey meaning through their emotional honesty. Like Castro's novels, Winton's rely on co-opting the reader in an emotional experience.

is too fluid to represent a reliable world. Language is part of the ontological problem that faces Castro's characters, and by extension, all of us.

Language is also a culturally specific system, and Castro's characters are cultural hybrids crossing linguistic-cultural boundaries. While this can cause problems in terms of translation—the problem of conveying an exact world to another person in words—it can also provide opportunities. Language can offer a way of metaphorically expressing one's world to someone else when the speaker has a rich command of the metaphoric (or 'poetic') side of language, and in Castro's view this is enhanced when the metaphors are new and strange to the listener. The process is most vividly portrayed in *After China*, where You Bok Mun draws on ancient Chinese cultural 'myths' to bring understanding to the woman writer. She says of his stories: 'Your stories are mirroring some of the truth.'<sup>47</sup>

The same might be said of Castro's novels. While it is hard to explain what has happened during the novel in the sense of paraphrasing it, and a 'resolution' may not be possible, the novels mirror life prismatically, offering glimpses of 'truth'.

### **Narrative voice**

Generally speaking, in Castro's novels the characters all speak out of an amorphous, mythic 'voice', which rises out of some collective maelstrom of voices. (There are no female narratorial voices, and not many female characters' voices in his novels, although women feature strongly in all novels.) At times the narrator displays a *limited* omniscience which would be unlikely in real life—for example, Ishigo Isaku narrates the whole story of *Stepper* even though he cannot have been privy to many of the events—but full omniscience is not employed. These voices never seem to belong *strictly* to one character, but to be part of a psychological whole or archetype. Similarly, the narrating voice blends in with these characters' voices, and voices shift between *predominantly* authorial, *predominantly* narratorial and *predominantly* characters in character. They never seem wholly to be one or another. This psychological world is similar to those generated by Don DeLillo, William Faulkner or Cormac McCarthy.

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<sup>47</sup> *After China*, p. 128



Contrast this with, for example, Alex Miller's *The Ancestor Game* where characters are more definitive in terms of 'voice'. Each speaks with a distinctive idiolect and voice, and there is less shifting between author/narrator and the separate characters. Like a movie director 'cutting' from one character to another, Miller swaps between characters in distinct slabs of text. The narrating character, Stephen Muir, has a rather effete, old-world English sensibility (despite having lived in Australia). August Spiess, is four-square German, despite his love of classical learning and German Romantic literature. Even though Stephen tells us most of the stories (only Spiess narrates himself, and then in translation, via his daughter), he adopts the personas of the people he is narrating as he imagines them into being for us.

Castro uses language to give us fresh and strange views. Where Miller's prose is rich and painterly—a Merchant-Ivory vision of a curio world seen from the comfort your armchair—Castro is disconcerting. In a Castro novel there is no helpful narration to integrate what is happening to the characters.

### Vocabulary

Reading a Castro novel the reader quickly develops the sense that the writer is using his words carefully and accurately. It is hard to describe how one becomes aware of this: it is the feeling that words are being used with precision. This is entirely different from the notion that a writer is using *unusual* vocabulary or *complex* words, although sometimes the two occur together. With Castro there is often the sense that the words are being used in their precise, arcane, etymological sense, rather than their perhaps loose everyday contemporary sense.

Beckett uses words with enormous precision, but he also uses many unusual words that the average reader will not know, and so draws attention to his usage. Castro rates Beckett's *Molloy* trilogy very highly, and one can see similarities with his playful and careful use of words and Beckett's.<sup>48</sup> For example in *Molloy*, we find: 'She favoured voluminous

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<sup>48</sup> The Beckett trilogy also offers a regression of authorship: Malone in *Malone Dies* claims to have written *Molloy*, and a mysterious 'author' in *The Unnamable* claims to have written *Malone Dies* (and therefore *Molloy*). Castro plays just these types of games with authorship in his novels, for example, *Birds of Passage*, *Double-Wolf*, *Drift*, *Stepper*.

tempestuous shifts and petticoats ...'<sup>49</sup> Here the 'tempestuous shifts' are both dresses and changes in mood. There is a double valency. Beckett also enjoys playing with words, too, as this piece of mild bawdy indicates.

More precisely, I was bent double ... when she, undertaking me from behind, thrust her stick between my legs and began to titillate my privates.<sup>50</sup>

The double meanings and suggestiveness of 'stick', 'thrust', and 'titillate' combine comically with a novel use of 'undertake'. This word is formed by analogy with 'overtake', but has no logical connection with the idea of going past someone: instead it suggests some sort of sexual act (or 'undertaking') that reverses the normal mode of 'mounting' from above. And finally, there is the connection with death ('undertaker'), ever-present in Beckett's work.

In 'For death is a condition I have never been able to conceive to my satisfaction and which cannot go down in the ledger of weal and woe',<sup>51</sup> the verb *conceive* is employed as a pun on 'conceive of', but used ironically and oxymoronically ('give birth to death'). 'Satisfaction' is also used ironically in the sense of pleasing, but implies the literal etymological sense of 'making complete' or 'fulfilling' (Latin: 'make enough').

Similar wordplay is used by others of Castro's favourites, notably Joyce and Nabokov.

Castro is fond of using unusual vocabulary. For example in *After China* there are many architectural terms, and *Stepper* is peppered with Japanese words (*samisen*, an instrument; *gaijin*, foreigner; *gaman*, endurance; *seppuku*, disembowelment), as well unusual English ones. The words can be considered part of the atmosphere, but they are not actually necessary in terms of the plot. For example, we do not need to know what 'ashlars' or 'soffits' are to follow the narrative in *After China*. If we look them up they do not significantly help our understanding of how the hotel actually looks. Castro uses them not so much to set the architectural atmosphere as to generate an atmosphere of exoticism; this is an exotic building, the

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<sup>49</sup> *Molloy*, p. 76

<sup>50</sup> *Molloy*, p. 77

<sup>51</sup> *Molloy*, p. 91

architect is an exotic person, the narrative itself is exotic. We do not need to know the Japanese words in *Stepper*: some are translated in the text, some are not. So the words work in several ways. They do support the atmosphere being built up by the text, but they create an exotic aura in the narrative, and they draw attention to the prose itself—the words as words—as exotic. Castro's aim is to produce a 'strange array'. A word like 'ashlar' is not used because it is a technical term for a column, but because it has a strange and pleasing sound. 'Ashlars' sound somehow tree-like, but most of all they sound exotic: 'ashlar' does not sound like a Greco-Roman word, and not immediately Anglo-Saxon; it sounds as if it might be Middle Eastern or Arabic.<sup>52</sup> The word 'soffit' has a pleasant, breathed sound to it, and is also unlikely to be known by the average reader. It is much more exotic than 'the under surface of a beam, arch, stair, architrave, or the like'.<sup>53</sup>

Other examples of strange words include *potlatch*, *nacreous*, *nictate*, *prepotent*, *chiasmus*.<sup>54</sup> The word *borborygm* can only have been used<sup>55</sup> for its wonderful strangeness of appearance and sound. While it looks suspiciously Russian, which would be appropriate for the novel, it is in fact a Greek-derived medical word, meaning simply a rumbling noise in the bowels. It is hardly in common parlance (it is not listed in the *Macquarie Dictionary*, but is in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). It is most self-consciously exotic.

The overall effect is that words in a Castro novel are often pregnant with mystery and symbolism. Thus things and words tend to become super-real,

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<sup>52</sup> An 'ashlar' is in fact a 'squared block of building stone, finished or rough' and the word is derived via Middle English *asheler* from Old French *aisselier* from Latin *axis* meaning 'board'. (Macquarie Dictionary, 4th ed.) So its origins are in fact comparatively prosaic and Anglo-Latinate, though the appearance of the word remains exotic.

<sup>53</sup> *Macquarie Dictionary*

<sup>54</sup> These words are rich in detailed meaning, with both technical and associative meanings. *Potlatch*: (among some North American Indians of the northern Pacific coast) a ceremonial festival at which gifts are bestowed on the guests and property destroyed in a competitive show of wealth. *Prepotent*: pre-eminent in power, authority, or influence; predominant. Genetics. denoting, pertaining to, or having prepotency. from L *praepotens*, having superior power. *Prepotency*: the ability of one parent to impress its hereditary characters on its progeny because it possesses more homozygous, dominant, or epistatic genes. *Chiasmus*: a reversal of the order in which two grammatical elements occur in a pair of parallel phrases (e.g 'I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed'). From *chiasma*, (biol.) a crossing point in conjugating chromosomes (like the Greek letter chi, χ X)

<sup>55</sup> *Stepper*, p. 13

and almost metaphysical, rather than just mere objects. The sense of uncanniness generated can be quite disconcerting, and even alienating.

Many authors use unusual or difficult vocabulary. Nabokov is one of the most adventurous, but there is often a sense that Nabokov is showing off or snubbing his readers; his prose is called 'smug' by Castro for this reason. (Castro and Nabokov certainly use some unusual words in common: 'nacreous' and 'nictate' are ready examples.) Castro's usage is probably closer to Beckett or Joyce, who use words for their ability to evoke strangeness, but also often in play.

### Words in games

Castro, too, likes to play with language. In *Stepper* one of the characters is described as a 'titubator' (a stutterer).<sup>56</sup> He stutters on the word 'cunningly' and almost gives us 'cunnilingus'; hence the first syllable of titubator reinforces the sexual connotation. Some times the play is obvious to the reader, and sometimes the play is partially or wholly concealed. Characters' names are usually significant (Estrellita, Stella, Feingold, You Bok Mun), but Castro also often amuses himself with concealed references and jokes (Mrs Bernhard, Hume's syndrome).<sup>57</sup>

Sometimes the play is remarked upon, and seems to have no overt purpose in the novel itself. It is an acknowledgement by Castro that he is aware of his usage, and either planned it or recognised it as part of the hidden order that exists in coincidences. In *Stepper*, Isaku (as generalised narrating voice) says 'Don't condemn my anaphora'.<sup>58</sup> The five sentences of the paragraph that precedes this remark begin with 'You may well imagine ...'; the fifth consists of just these words on their own.

Castro is also strongly attracted to puns and word games. At times, though, Castro's punning can seem compulsive, and there are times when even the dedicated will become weary of the cleverness.<sup>59</sup> Castro admits that *Pomeroy*

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<sup>56</sup> *Stepper*, p. 115

<sup>57</sup> Characters' names are discussed in the novel in which they feature (Chapters 5–10).

<sup>58</sup> *Stepper*, p. 99

<sup>59</sup> Castro is not the only author to enjoy puns. Nabokov enjoys such games (the last words of *Bend Sinister*, 'A good night for mothing' were notoriously changed by a typesetter who felt sure that Nabokov had meant 'nothing'), and Russell Hoban's *Kleinzeit* is an elaboration of puns on 'a barrow full of rocks'.

was an attempt to push this idea to its ultimate, to try to exhaust the possibilities of words and metaphors. Hence there are lengthy punning games in *Pomeroiy* which are often quite witty and amusing, but which sometimes stale as an extra meaning or joke is forced out of a construction to the detriment of the prose. At other times the punning is pathological but appropriate, as Sergei Wespe demonstrates. He is unable to let the possibility of a pun go by, and though it suits the character of Wespe (pathological, and a writer/fabulist), it also seems to reflect something in Castro.

But it is very hard to judge when humour and puns are funny and when they become overdone or obsessive. For someone like Castro who enjoys using words, it is easy to leave the reader behind.

Another extreme eccentric admired by some [experimental] writers is Jean-Pierre Brisset, who was, if anything, even more extreme in his devotion to the notion that (as he put it) 'it is not I, but the Word that speaks'. Brisset would scrutinize the sound of a word, a phrase, or a sentence and find different possible meanings in it. From the French word *logé* (which means 'lodged'), for example, he derived the following sentences:

1. l'eau j'ai (I have water)
  2. l'haut j'ai (I am high)
  3. l'os j'ai (I have a bone)
  4. loge ai (I have a lodge)
  5. lot j'ai (I bear my lot)
- etc.

After generating such a set, Brisset would construct an elaborate though rather arbitrary story to tie the sentences together; in this instance it was a myth of origins about the frog ...<sup>60</sup>

While Castro's novels are too well written to show signs of the narrative following the puns, there are times when the reader will be bewildered.

### Translation

Translation for Castro means not only a moving between languages, but between cultures. We cannot translate between languages by a method of word equivalence, we must understand the culture and be able to mentally translate ourselves between cultures. Nor can we 'understand' what people say to us, because we cannot faultlessly translate between another person's mind and our own. For Castro translation is the bold imaginative step of

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<sup>60</sup> Louis A. Sass. *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, Basic Books (HarperCollins), New York, 1992, p. 489.

trying to cross boundaries to see what someone is saying by getting inside their mind-set. It is a process of hybridity, not trying always to translate something into our own mind-set (our words, our philosophy, our culture), but being prepared to jump over into another language/culture/mindset to get a different perspective. As many people have noted, different languages convey meaning differently, and some are intrinsically better at some things than others. Castro would argue that we should not try to translate, say, a work in Japanese into English, but jump across into the Japanese work to see how it works in its own terms. This means temporarily 'becoming Japanese'. Only then can we make some attempt to translate the work into our own language, and only then will we have sufficient idea of how imperfect that process is.

I think one of the tasks I keep in mind while writing is that of 'translating' other worlds, as well as a translating of oneself to the world. I see (now) that my 'project' is a project of memory—both fictive and historical—both intangible and experiential— ... the force of felt experience.

You could link [this with] polyglottism. This kind of hybridity is more abstruse because in my work it functions within memory and experience set into a rather conventional glossary—an index of the strange which I try to make actual. This is very different from the overt melding and meshing of foreign suffixes as in Salman Rushdie's novels.<sup>61</sup>

The idea of translation is also involved in Castro's notion of translating the world to oneself, as one constructs myths about the world and reacts to what is happening in the world. His novels are an exploration of existence through the device of language.

Language marks the spot where the self loses its prison bars—where the border crossing takes place, traversing the spaces of others. When one speaks or translates Chinese, one metaphorically becomes Chinese; when one speaks Japanese one 'turns' Japanese. Each language speaks the world in its own ways. The polyglot is a freer person, a person capable of living in words and worlds other than the narrow and the confined one of unimagined reality. When we translate from one language to another we not only reinvent ourselves but we free up the sclerotic restrictions of our own language. We feel free to transgress, to metamorphose, to experience the uncanny, where we are receiving what Wilson Harris has called the 'quantum immediacy' of another culture. Other cultures and languages reinforce and enrich us by powerfully affecting and destabilising our familial tongue. We gain by losing ourselves.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Letter to MD, 22 September 1997

<sup>62</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 9

The topic of translation is further considered in Chapter 5 in connection with *Birds of Passage*.

### Techniques

As well as displaying idiosyncratic language, Castro's writing employs some consistent techniques, which reflect his way of thinking and can often be directly traced to his philosophical position as outlined in Chapter 2.

### Time's arrow, non-linearity of this world

Non-linearity is employed in all Castro's novels. While we are compelled by the laws of the universe to live our time in a linear chronology—at least for the bulk of our conscious time, with perhaps occasional lapses such as altered psychological states, dreaming, reminiscence, *déjà vu*—we do not necessarily experience our world in a linear fashion. An obvious example is how we learn about our friends. Typically we begin to know them in the middle of an eventual, 'linear' chronology; the point when we are first introduced to them. At this point we form a first impression of them, but with each subsequent meeting we learn more about them, both forwards and backwards. Our picture of them develops as we share experience with them after the first meeting, but we also learn more about them as they tell us what has gone on in their past. Even when their past is not being related to us directly by them, we infer things from what they say (for example, 'I went to a private school' suddenly offers a whole raft of possible interpretations for their current behaviour), and from extraneous sources, such as what other friends may tell us about them or their recorded history. At certain times a new piece of information will offer a revelation, either adding a whole new aspect to our understanding of that person, or perhaps contradicting some aspect that we thought we knew. Typically our knowledge of a person is a hybrid construct, being constantly modified by both present and past information.

At a more philosophical level, philosophers and writers such as Borges dispute the concept of time as a fluid continuum. If, in the mind, 'each moment is autonomous',<sup>63</sup> then why do we construct 'reality' as chronologically linear? If we admit this position, then (at least in the mind)

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<sup>63</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'A New Refutation of Time', *Labyrinths*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 258

time can be simultaneous, cyclic, multi-pathed: 'a tireless labyrinth, a chaos, a dream'.<sup>64</sup>

In this sense non-linear narrative in a novel represents life more accurately than a strictly chronological linear novel. *After China* works in this way. The Chinese architect and the Woman Writer learn about each other as they move forward and share experience, and also they tell each other stories about their past. In particular, the behaviour of the Woman Writer's father—and therefore her view of him which does not seem to accord with the picture of the loving father taking his daughter on fishing trips—does not become clear until page 128 when the Writer is able to retell for You the darker aspects of her father's behaviour. The novel is, for the reader, literally incomprehensible on this matter up until this point. Of course this often happens with friends: their behaviour may be incomprehensible until we learn about a certain aspect of their past.

Castro often withholds parts of a story and then presents them much later in the novel when they become the key to retrospectively unlocking the story. Unless you have an eidetic memory you are unlikely to piece the story together at first reading. Even when the 'facts' are there you may not realise that they are significant. To interpret Castro's novels you have to re-experience them. You need to re-read passages, perhaps even the whole novel, but each time you learn something more.

Castro's position is based on a psychological approach to 'reality'. We grapple with but are never comfortable with the strange world around us. This is the idea of uncanniness, the feeling that the world possesses strange order that we do not understand. For example, Castro often employs ideas of circularity or looping, an idea that finds many other supporters, among scientists as well as among writers and philosophers.

The Strange Loop phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving up or down through levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started. Implicit in the concept of Strange Loops is the concept of infinity since the Loop is a way of representing an endless process in a finite way. Hofstadter's book<sup>65</sup> is built around the central notions of hierarchical systems and self-reference, in particular,

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<sup>64</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'A New Refutation of Time', p. 256

<sup>65</sup> Douglas Hofstadter, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Vintage Books, New York, 1980



the snarls which arise when systems turn back on themselves (science probing science, art violating the rules of art, humans thinking about their own minds).<sup>66</sup>

Godel's work is a mathematical counterpart, a translation into mathematical terms of the Liar paradox, using mathematical reasoning to explore mathematical reasoning. The Strange Loop is in the proof of Godel's Incompleteness Theorem, which hinges on writing a self-referential mathematical statement (in the same way as the liar paradox is a self-referential statement of language). Godel established that there are true statements of number theory which its methods of proof are too weak to demonstrate. Like the quantum revolution, Godel's Theorem brings philosophically disorienting messages about subject and object and the Strange Loops of human consciousness. The Godelian Theorem hinges on understanding not just one level at a time, but the way in which one level mirrors its metalevel and the consequences of this mirroring. The crucial point is in the level-crossing within Strange Loops, the point of crossing between different levels of the Tangled Hierarchy.<sup>67</sup>

This is a theoretical way of expressing the problem, but we can find 'everyday' analogies. For example, how do we interpret a Bach fugue? Do we listen to the voices (the parts) as they interweave, or the whole? In a sense we cannot *just* do either; it is a complex process of listening to detail and to the whole effect. Bach also provides us with examples of counterpoint in which the individual notes form disharmonies as written on the page, yet they dynamically 'resolve'—sound like harmonies—as the piece is heard in performance.

### **Hybridity and characterisation**

The characters in Castro's novels are hybrid types. We often forget in Australia that by calling ourselves multicultural we are referring to our hybridity. Modern Australia was made up of the British/Celtic/Gaelic races—English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish—followed by waves of European migration—the Italian, Greek, Yugoslav, Baltic—and more recently Asian migration. At each stage there has been a considerable Chinese input. Notwithstanding this, Australian culture developed a myth of the homogenous 'Australian', a white Anglo-Saxon with peculiar traits developed from the bush. These were the 'stock' characters that until recently appeared often in our literature. Castro has been at pains to explode this myth. His first novel, *Birds of Passage*, features two hybrid

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<sup>66</sup> *Liars*, p. 33

<sup>67</sup> *Liars*, p. 34

Chinese Australian characters, which Yasmine Gooneratne acknowledged as being among the first *genuine* Australian/Asian characters in literature. Putting forward Castro's case for being in an Australian canon, she has said:

When I was attempting in my novel *A Change of Skies* to create fictional characters of Asian background who have settled in Australia, ... there was hardly anything already written that I could draw on ... I found no attempt by Australian writers to get away from the inherited British/colonial negative stereotypes of Asians ... It seems to me that an Australian novelist who wants to truthfully depict contemporary Australia will need, at some stage, to recognise the diversity of the society in which we live, and deal with it intelligently in fiction. Yet ... there were no novels by Australians of Asian background nominated [for a putative 'Australian canon' in an email discussion list survey]. Do the novels of Brian Castro—for example—not 'count' as part of Australian literature? ... How long will he have to write before they do?<sup>68</sup>

*Birds of Passage* is not the only Castro novel with hybrid characters. Jaime Pomeroy moves between Hong Kong and Australia, and is, like Castro himself, a blend of European, Asian and Australian: the architect You Bok Mun (*After China*) is a refugee from Communist China; *Drift* is peopled by mixtures of white and Aboriginal Australian and European people; and Victor Stepper is a German-Russian working in Japan.

But racial hybridity is not the only form of hybridity. Castro is concerned with the hybridity—and this is linked with translation—of people's identity. Both Sergei Wespe and Victor Stepper are persons whose life is fluid and self-invented. Wespe is 'manufacturing' his identity to please Freud: he is 'writing' his own life, a hybrid of reality and fantasy. Stepper is a spy who must slip between identities. He has mixed ethnic background and mixed political interests. He is a study in the ability of a person to shift between identities, though in doing so he can never comfortably inhabit any one identity. The crux of the novel is his lack of stable identity. You Bok Mun and Shan are both Chinese who rebel against the traditional Eastern Chinese modes of being and philosophy (You is imprisoned to undergo 're-education' under Mao's Cultural Revolution program), and they both graft onto their 'Chineseness' a degree of 'Australianness', which makes them hybrid Eastern/Western in terms of their thinking and philosophy.

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<sup>68</sup> Email message, 'Austlit' discussion group, 20 August 1996. Castro has now been joined by other writers, such as Ouyang Yu and Beth Yahp, among many.

## Humour

Reading Castro's novels can require application at times, but they are always leavened by humour. Humour operates at various levels: it can be sheer good fun, compulsive, sometimes bitter and sardonic, and perceptive, offering a view of events from a different angle.

Aside from the lightening effect of humour in the text and its reflection of Castro's personality, it also forms part of his style of writing. With his sense of fun and his propensity towards parody, the reader must always be alert to the multiple possibilities of the text. When is Castro just joking for the sheer fun of amusing himself? (At times one feels he can't resist a joke, and they sometimes intrude on what he is saying. For example, in 'Heterotopias', he can't resist including the Marco Polo/noodles joke.) When is he being 'serious' and when 'joking' in some of the black humour he writes? And when is he indulging in parody for the sake of literary style, commenting on the writing rather than the plot of the novel?

In this sense humour also becomes another destabilising agent, forcing the reader to consider different viewing positions, making the text open to various interpretations (often nominally exclusive ones: compassion set off against black humour), and keeping the reader guessing about the author's stance. We are often not sure whether or not Castro is joking.

Castro's propensity for intertextuality and humour lead naturally to parody. *Pomeroy* is essentially a parody of genre writing, but all the novels include parodic elements, either of characters or of writing styles.

Castro frequently parodies various theories in his novels, parody being another method of making things strange. Occurrences are pointed out in the chapters dealing with his novels, but it is worth drawing attention here to episodes such as the Pomeroy/Guitierrez exchanges in *Pomeroy*, the Roland Barthes cameo in *Birds of Passage*, Uncle Amando's being washed up half-eaten by a crocodile still clutching Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* in his hand, the jokes at the expense of Freud and Wittgenstein in *Double-Wolf* passim, the anagram on Lacan ('canal' incorporating 'anal') in *Double-Wolf*, and so on.

Parody has its serious purposes, and is not just an excuse to be funny. It is a means of interrogating existing texts by looking at them askance. It is not necessary that parody should ridicule the text (though this is frequently the case), only that it should show the workings of the original and thereby open it up to fresh examination. As Robert Phiddian has pointed out, it is a way of engaging with the world outside the text.

Parody knows that reference occurs, *despite language*. It shows that there can be no monolithic Scriptural reality, on the one hand, and on the other that there are things beyond texts and which texts cannot control the construction or operation of. The Don [Quixote] fights with real windmills. *Gravity's Rainbow* represents a real world war and its aftermath—the point may be that the world has become surreal, but experience (physical, emotional, even moral) does not evaporate merely because it becomes conceptually problematic.<sup>69</sup>

### Structure

Castro has also been prepared to experiment with structure. *Birds of Passage* and *Double-Wolf* both employ sophisticated doppelgänger architectures, as well as reflecting them at lower structural levels of character, incident, etc. The doubling theme persists throughout all of Castro's work. In *Drift* these doublings act as reflections of each other, as different characters and different positions in history provide different, Escherian viewpoints.

Castro also uses other texts as counterpoints to his own work. *Drift* 'continues' the work of B.S. Johnson, and *Stepper* and *Double-Wolf* retell the Sorge and Wolfman stories respectively. *After China* uses a very basic love story, almost banal in its simplicity, to provide a framework for a series of exotic and disparate stories.

These examples are dealt with in relation to the novels in later chapters. It will suffice to say here that Castro novels work at various levels of interconnection, and despite their maze-like complexity, are held together with considerable writing skill.

### Summary

Overall, the key elements of Castro's style can be summarised as follows:

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Phiddian, 'Are Parody and Deconstruction Secretly the Same Thing?', *New Literary History*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1997, pp. 691-692

- a linguistically rich style, striving for abstract, 'poetic' effects
- a detached style, so interior that it can be quite difficult to follow at times.
- mixing of writing styles and registers: from 'high' to 'low' quite abruptly, in the space of a few paragraphs, and polyphonic, with several voices interweaving
- lack of connective 'author' or 'narrator' material to guide the reader between these sections
- non-linearity: broken time, abrupt and unannounced switches from character to character, and from narratorial position (grammatical person: first, second, third)
- parodic and self-undermining styles
- structural experimentation such as framing devices (M.C. Escher, B.S. Johnson, architecture).

As a final comment, Castro's writing can be appreciated at multiple levels. At times it is quite difficult to read because of its complexity and because of its stated aim of destabilising the reader. The plot often becomes obscure, and needs to be taken on faith. Sometimes the plot untangles itself as the novel progresses, and sometimes a re-reading clarifies sections (or even the novel!). But, sometimes it doesn't. Thus it is easy to become frustrated at times with these complex and showy pieces of writing. At such times, one needs to remember that all of Castro's work is written with great elan, and a lot of it with humour and playfulness. It is writing that can always be appreciated 'locally', to use Richard Poirier's term. In speaking of another labyrinthine novelist, Thomas Pynchon, Poirier notes that some readers take the text *too* seriously and do not seem capable of

reading Pynchon for the fun of it, for the relish of local pleasures, for the savoring of how the sentences sound as they turn into one another, carrying with them, and creating as they go, endlessly reverberating echoes from the vast ranges of contemporary life and culture.<sup>70</sup>

His advice to enjoy the trees while looking for the forest serves well for Castro's novels.

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Poirier, 'The Importance of Thomas Pynchon', in *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, eds. George Levine and David Leverenz, Little Brown and Company, Boston and Toronto, 1976; pp. 15-29. Poirier is particularly commenting on the tendency of some readers to 'revere' the text because it was written by a 'serious' author. For example, many readers fails to see the fun and lightheartedness in Shakespeare because he is a 'heavyweight' writer.

## Chapter 4

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### 'Writing' Asia

Well, I'm a writer, not an academic nor an Asianist nor an Australianist.  
And a writer must teeter on the brink of such chasms  
Brian Castro.<sup>1</sup>

For a writer who disavows categorising and does not espouse any particular political aims in his writing, it must be galling for Brian Castro to be dragged into debates about multiculturalism and the Asia/Australia connection. He has always wanted to be just 'an Australian writer', but his background will not let him be so.<sup>2</sup> This has many drawbacks, but there have also been some positives.

I never questioned the fact that I was Australian until the Asian immigration business blew up in 1984. From that point on I felt awkward and alien because you think you are something, and suddenly you feel that people are looking at you in a different way entirely, and that you don't really belong.

I don't know whether it was a good or a bad thing. There was a kind of schism, and I looked at my own difference again. In that sense I reconnected with some of my Chinese past, my mother's past.

But really, I'm a Westerner looking at China with slightly more inside information.<sup>3</sup>

Like it or not, Castro is often turned to to offer views, opinions and explanations about Asia as an 'Asian/Australian' writer. He does not object to this in principle, only to the notion that people and events can be easily categorised. For Castro, 'Asia', 'Australia' and 'national identity' are fluid constructs, and should not be *presumed* as they so often are in cultural

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<sup>1</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 6

<sup>2</sup> 'I have been described as Chinese Australian. The assumption would be that there is no other way I can write besides that of dealing with racism and the Chinese question ... Some people would like to relegate immigrants to writing about their own society.' Brian Castro, 'Bridging Cultural Concepts', p. 48

<sup>3</sup> Susan Geason, 'In the China Hotel', *The Sun-Herald*, 6 September 1992, p. 118

debate. As Graham Huggan has suggested Australia's position in respect of Asia is anomalous and evolving:

The 'East' is primarily a European construct: its geographical and cultural coordinates have historically been determined by the 'West' in order to consolidate the imagined primacy of its own culture. The case of Australia, however, is something of an anomaly; as Bruce Bennett has observed,<sup>4</sup> Australia enjoys the democratic advantages of being a Western nation in the South Pacific ...

[Recently], an increasing number of Australian writers have begun to 'turn to Asia', confronting the dilemma that faces a nation whose cultural affiliations with Europe have always been out of kilter with its geographical location in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Asia still tends to be seen as a mythic 'other'. As Huggan points out, 'Contemporary literary encounters between Asia and Australia are more self-conscious, to be sure, more sophisticated and better researched than the vast majority of their—often crudely exoticist—predecessors. Many of them, however, continue to be plagued by Orientalist myths and stereotypes ...' He continues:

[C]ontemporary Australian writers attempting to redefine the coordinates of Australian culture have become aware that they are separated from their Asian 'neighbours' not only by vast cultural differences but also by persistent myths and stereotypes which link them back to the West. The so-called 'turn to Asia' in this sense looks suspiciously like a *return* to Europe, or at least like a return to inveterate European fantasies about the fabulous, yet treacherous, Orient.<sup>6</sup>

The changing attitudes to Asia, what has been accomplished and what remains as problematic, has been catalogued in detail by Alison Broinowski in her study of Australian artistic responses to Asia, *The Yellow Lady*.<sup>7</sup> She admits to having wanted 'to find that Australians, uniquely placed to take advantage of the stimulation of ancient cultures, innovative modernity,

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Bennett, 'Perceptions of Asia in Australian Poetry', *Commonwealth* 8.2, (1986); p. 1

<sup>5</sup> Graham Huggan, 'Looking (North-)West to the East: Some Thoughts on the Asianisation of Australian Literature', in Werner Senn and Giovanna Capone (eds) *The Making of a Pluralist Australia 1950-1990*, Selected Papers from the Inaugural EASA Conference 1991, Peter Lang, Bern, 1992; p. 219

<sup>6</sup> Graham Huggan, 'Looking (North-)West to the East: Some Thoughts on the Asianisation of Australian Literature', in Werner Senn and Giovanna Capone (eds) *The Making of a Pluralist Australia 1950-1990*, Selected Papers from the Inaugural EASA Conference 1991, Peter Lang, Berne, 1992, p. 220

<sup>7</sup> Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996



and growing economies in their region ... are well on the way to doing so.<sup>8</sup> While her Preface to the second edition of the book admits that much has changed for the better, still the qualifications expressed in the first edition Preface remain: 'What this study has taught me is how powerful images are and, once received, how resistant to change.'<sup>9</sup>

Beth Yahp has given a personal view of the situation in her imaginative essay, 'Place Perfect and the Other Asia'. An Australian of Malaysian extraction, and for most intents and purposes a 'native' Australian, she is still categorised as being an embodiment of that fiction of Australians, 'the other Asia': exotic, neat, petite, and well-mannered.

In Australia, whatever her faces, the Other Asia is exotic. She always comes from somewhere else, even when she's born in Australia, even if she's fourth-generation Australian, sooner or later she provokes compliments. How nice her people are, so gentle and friendly and always smiling, how good her English is, and where did she learn to speak it, and how long has she been in Australia, and does she like it here?<sup>10</sup>

Yahp acknowledges that these views are often well-intentioned, but they are prejudiced. What is perhaps more revealing is that she admits that she herself maintains a fictional 'Asia' as a "place-perfect", the yearned-for, and not where we currently are', which she frequently 'visits'.<sup>11</sup> For her, the mythical Asia also has its uses, as an imagined space or as a stereotype into which she can retreat when convenient, as (in *Bird of Passage*) Shan does on the goldfields.<sup>12</sup>

Castro, similarly, does not argue that we should not have 'myths' about Asia, only that our myths need constant interrogation to determine their accuracy and usefulness. Too often Western myths of Asia remain outmoded, simplistic and patronising.

In keeping with his philosophy generally, Castro would like to shift the Asian/Australian relation into a more fluid and nebulous zone, without

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<sup>8</sup> Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. xii

<sup>9</sup> *The Yellow Lady*, p. xii

<sup>10</sup> Beth Yahp, 'Place Perfect and the Other Asia', *Westerly*, No. 1 (Autumn) 1996, p. 65

<sup>11</sup> 'Place Perfect and the Other Asia', p. 68

<sup>12</sup> Shan feigns lack of English when he feels threatened by Clancy (*Birds of Passage*, p. 116); Yahp finds it a useful shield to avoid boring bus passengers ('Place Perfect and the Other Asia').

cultural boundaries or prescriptions. Asia is not waiting to be re-interpreted by Australia, nor does it bring any absolute cultural system with it. Both regions need to be constantly re-interpreting their 'identity', and benefiting from an interaction based on equality, not presumed superiority.

While Castro is quite caustic in 'Writing Asia' about politico-economic relationships, accusing Australia of naively expecting to be able to profiteer, he is mainly interested in cultural interaction. Naturally, for him this centres on writing, and the doctrine of multiculturalism.

Noting that much of the multicultural debate, when it has risen to the level of cultural debate as opposed to immigration debate, has centred on writing, Wenche Ommundsen has pointed out the need to distinguish 'multicultural writing and theorising' from 'multicultural policymaking', that is the literary-cultural from the political.<sup>13</sup> Problems can arise when this distinction is not carefully maintained.

But this has occasionally been a source of conflict, as certain critics and commentators have been accused of making the transition from multicultural writing and theorising without clearly differentiating between these spheres of action. Multicultural writers have been attacked on a number of fronts: for being insufficiently literate, for not being representative (sometimes for being *too* representative), for not doing what they in most cases never set out to do, that is, provide ethnic minorities with a voice to air the social and political concerns of the group.<sup>14</sup>

This is an important distinction worth keeping in mind. The political aims of multiculturalism in Australia are directed towards harmonious co-existence of differing ethnic and cultural groups. But when naively applied, people can be forced at times into artificial categories. Furthermore, the political aims (such as equal access) can be extended into areas where they have no real business, such as in art.

This issue was taken up by Robert Dessaix in his essay 'Nice Work if You Can Get It'.<sup>15</sup> Dessaix argues cogently that the political thrust of

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<sup>13</sup> Wenche Ommundsen, 'Multiculturalism, identity, displacement: The lives of Brian (Castro)', p. 149

<sup>14</sup> Ommundsen, 'Multiculturalism, identity, displacement', p. 149

<sup>15</sup> Robert Dessaix, 'Nice Work If You Can Get It', *Australian Book Review*, 128, March 1991. pp. 22–28

multiculturalism actually harms the people it is supposedly trying to help. He suggests that 'multicultural writing' is an artefact generated and maintained by academics and arbiters of literary taste (such as critics and grant-givers) working within institutions, and that, in spite of their good intentions, these people harm rather than help the writers they set out to help by *inadvertently* marginalising them. Dessaix argues that multicultural writers are no more 'marginalised' than any other person setting out to be a writer, but that the well-intentioned efforts of supporters of 'multicultural writing' force these writers into a category that then *invites* marginalisation.

What I would like to argue is that, firstly, the patronising picture of a marginalising Anglo-Celtic culture and a marginalised body of ethnic writers exists only in the heads of the culture doctors and the 'cures' work to their benefit, not the writers'; secondly, that those who uphold it are causing considerable harm to writers of non-English speaking background; and thirdly, that the true picture contains problems to which the second law of thermodynamics is the only solution.<sup>16</sup>

The direct consequence was that the label 'multicultural writer' became a sign of marginality, and therefore of irrelevance to the general reading public. For this reason Castro has been careful to avoid becoming a 'multicultural writer'.<sup>17</sup> As well as avoiding the label, Castro has been reluctant to take up 'Asian issues' that would then invite categorisation as 'multicultural issues' (for example, the migrant experience in Australia). And yet, he cannot avoid dealing with Asia, either: it is too much a part of his background. He is therefore careful to tread a delicate line, trying to avoid cheap politicisation.<sup>18</sup> It is not a clear-cut task.

### Asia as political

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<sup>16</sup> 'Nice Work If You Can Get It', p. 24

<sup>17</sup> Other writers have felt similarly. 'Andrew Riemer ... resents the label and its part in distancing and seemingly separating his work from where he wants it to be—in the dominant arena ... George Papaellinas ... writes "I have never understood the political worth of contesting the undeniable, historical chauvinism of Anglocentric Australian society with counter-chauvinism, by separation." ' The Chinese-Australian writer Ien Ang is also wary of accepting such labels: 'if I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*.' Quoted by Tseen Ling Khoo, 'Who Are We Talking About? Asian Australian Women Writers: An Overview', *Hecate*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1996, p. 12

<sup>18</sup> Dessaix also argues that writers must be judged on their writing ability, and not have some 'allowance' made for 'poor English'. Castro has always relied on the power of his writing, including his mastery of Australian setting and idiom.

In *Writing Asia*<sup>19</sup> Castro decries the confusion of ‘engagement with Asia’ with mere ‘economic engagement’—the political approach. He has also taken some pains to state his position as a writer—insider/outsider, hybrid, and so on—but never a ‘spokesman’ for or against Asia or Australia.

The essay ‘Writing Asia’ is therefore something of an exception, and is interesting not only for its content, but its uncompromising tone. In a television interview which touches on such matters, Castro as interviewee is totally charming, and at one point makes light of being mistaken for a new migrant with no English.<sup>20</sup> He talks of

walking up the street, meeting people who don’t know me—people would speak very slowly and loudly in case I don’t understand English [laughs]. So that is a little disconcerting, but I can kind of cope with it now after thirty years. I can understand a migrant straight off the ‘plane, who speaks English, having to cope with this. I guess that’ll all change in the future.

There is a suggestion that such attitudes still rankle (‘I can kind of cope with it now after thirty years’), but he is able to laugh at it in the interview. However ‘Writing Asia’ reveals a level of exasperation lurking beneath the role of ‘obliging novelist’. Only occasionally does Castro reveal the extent of his anguish over racial categorisation. In an essay called ‘Winning the Race’ he reveals that he at times has been very sensitive to racial slurs, and feels rather ground down with the battle to counteract them.

A long time ago I possessed a sackful of sarcasm, a vade-mecum, if you like, of pithy returns for racial indiscretions ... I’m tired of all that now; tired of having bat-like ears with which to catch every phrase and innuendo ... Sometimes I wish I could not understand English ...<sup>21</sup>

That last comment is all the more poignant coming from someone who revels in the use of English. It is a response to attitudes such as that of a hitchhiker he once picked up, who bold-facedly told him ‘Asians breed like rabbits ... No offence, but youse lot would breed us out.’<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This chapter has been titled ‘Writing’ Asia to draw attention to the title of Castro’s essay. He has used ‘Writing Asia’ as opposed to ‘Writing on/about Asia’ to indicate his active sense of creating, not commentating from the sidelines.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Meaghan Morris, *Dateline*, SBS TV, 4 July 1991; see Appendix 3.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Castro, ‘Winning the Race’, *Made in Australia: an anthology of writing*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 167

<sup>22</sup> Brian Castro, ‘Winning the Race’, *Made in Australia: an anthology of writing*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 169

In 'Writing Asia' Castro is very critical of Australian attitudes towards Asia. His anger is not so much that an unenlightened attitude grew up decades ago, but that there is little to encourage the view that things are improving in this age of putative 'multiculturalism' and 'engagement with Asia'.

Castro bemoans the equation of 'engagement' with 'economic engagement', which limits the possibilities of interaction and cross-fertilisation.

Economic growth, of course, has a real potential to retard rather than accelerate cultural influences and absorption. We seem to have somehow overlooked the blind spot that even in cultural terms the word 'Australia' is now interchangeable with the term 'Australian economy'. Asia is simply seen as a marketplace, and there seems to have been few sensitive and insightful ideas into deeper cultural exchange. Australia merely wants to sell itself to Asia without realising either that it is dealing with master-practitioners of both the soft and hard sell, or that Asia is composed of a diversity of countries, economies and cultures which are not amenable to a simple and single-minded offer which seeks to get something for nothing.<sup>23</sup>

Castro's complaint here is not just the stupidity of this simple-minded greediness, but the fact that it impedes the possibility of a deeper or more meaningful engagement at the cultural level.

According to Castro, this short-sighted approach has its basis in 'fear and loathing' of anything foreign, rooted in a lack of firm national identity, a deep psychological insecurity resulting from its isolation from the motherland and its unfinished task of becoming fully independent.

Maybe Australia's the odd country that expends more time and energy worrying about itself, about its cultural and racial composition, perhaps because it is constantly in the grip of its own fear and loathing.<sup>24</sup>

From his personal experience he recalls growing up in Hong Kong in a society that was multicultural 'before anyone trumpeted it'. He has a mixed racial background, but 'There were no racial slurs in the schoolyard.' 'The first time I was asked not *Who* are you but *What* are you, was when I arrived in Australia.'<sup>25</sup> In a country with a short history and in which most

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<sup>23</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 2

<sup>24</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 3

<sup>25</sup> 'Writing Asia', pp. 6 & 7

of the inhabitants are relatively new arrivals, the question is all the more poignant.

He further argues that the problem of identity is a problem of myth. In its historical position as offspring of the British Empire and inheritor of the European tradition, Australia has felt itself isolated and has tended to look back to a mythical past.

Australia has had to define itself against others. But the tendency has been that instead of defining itself, and realising itself as a continually changing society, it has nostalgically yearned for stasis, drawing on a large number of myths which, while uniting segments of its population, retards its overall ability to absorb newness and deal adequately with others.<sup>26</sup>

But avoiding stasis and rewriting the myths involves of necessity a degree of uncertainty.

Uncertainty, of course, is not only what a writer needs to face but needs to create. No art arises out of cozy [*sic*] security, regional or otherwise. *Uncertainty is the substratum upon which a nation progresses or declines.* Uncertainty is the immigrant, the traveller, the visionary. It is cast for the bold and embraced by the daring. Those however, who subscribe to fear and loathing will opt for the myth. The power of myth resides in the static, unchanging darkness of exclusion and denial.

The myths of superiority, of domination of the West over the East, and English over foreign languages abound.<sup>27</sup>

But while Castro sees himself as a writer actively involved in interrogating and re-interpreting cultural myths, he does not want to generate new (static) myths, and does not take an overt political stance. Whenever he talks about his position as a novelist dealing with things 'Asian', 'Asian/Australian', or 'multicultural', Castro makes his position clear:

Well, I'm a writer, not an academic nor an Asianist nor an Australianist. And a writer must teeter on the brink of such chasms.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 4

<sup>27</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 5

<sup>28</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 6. In a similar vein, Nabokov claimed that although his novel *Bend Sinister* is an allegory and powerful refutation of totalitarianism, his position as a novelist was not 'political'. 'I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment ... I am not "sincere", I am not "provocative", I am not "satirical". I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer.' (Introduction to *Bend Sinister*, p. 6)

His approach could be contrasted with the purposes of a novel such as Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*, which is a multicultural social satire, designed to query norms and point out the foolishness of certain behaviour. This novel implies a normative paradigm for human behaviour. Castro's novels never do this, preferring to destabilise without offering certainty.

So Castro opposes the myth of nationality as a singular construct, and prefers a hybrid notion of nationality that does not delimit a person. Castro regularly takes Australians to task for being obsessed with their 'national identity' as a shared construct instead of defining themselves in terms of their own, individual accomplishments and desires. He rejects the idea of 'national writing', as well. 'When we have this idea of being an Australian writer, I am tempted to say that we are writers first of all; our material is writing, we are not a nationality.'<sup>29</sup>

### **Polyglossia**

In Chapter 3 I quoted Castro's description of language being 'the spot where the self loses its prison bars—where the border crossing takes place, traversing the spaces of others', and where we feel 'the "quantum immediacy" of another culture'.<sup>30</sup>

Australia has produced few writers capable of this polyglot exploration of Asian culture and identity. The result has been to Australia's disadvantage. Castro's honourable exceptions are Alex Miller and Nicholas Jose,<sup>31</sup> who have attempted to engage with the culture and philosophy of Asian countries.

While the West seems to have run out of ideas in the creative and cultural fields, relying on images of sex and violence, reviving old canons and dwindling to parody and satire in what can already be seen as one of the dead ends of postmodernism, the Asian region is alive with opportunities for a new hybridisation, a collective intermix and juxtaposition of styles

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<sup>29</sup> Brian Castro, 'Bridging Cultural Concepts', *Writing in Multicultural Australia 1984: an Overview*, edited by Jacques Delaruelle, Alexandra Karakostas-Seda and Anna Ward, 1985, (North Sydney, NSW: Australia Council for the Literature Board. p. 49)

<sup>30</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 9

<sup>31</sup> See 'Writing Asia', p. 9. Nicholas Jose worked as a diplomat in China and is fluent in Mandarin.

and rituals which could change the focus and dynamics of Australian art, music and language.<sup>32</sup>

The situation is slowly changing, as Australian writers feel more confident in dealing with Asia, but more importantly, as more Asian migrants or first generation (Asian-)Australians begin to publish in Australia. Names such as Ouyang Yu and Beth Yahp spring readily to mind, and a recent issue of *Meanjin*<sup>33</sup> devoted to Asian writing was able to introduce original fiction from a variety of 'Asian' writers, as well as commentary from a wide range of Asianist scholars. The increasing interaction between Asian and Australian writing has been thoroughly documented by Catherine Bennett in her PhD thesis.<sup>34</sup>

Castro himself is linguistically accomplished. It has been important that his English is of an exceptional quality, and not just grammatically correct (an editor could fix such simple problems) but able to catch idiom well, especially the rhythms of Australian life. Hence there has been no opportunity for critics to be condescending about his writing. He is competent in Cantonese, which makes his Chinese settings convincing, not just because he understands the language but because he understands the culture associated with it. (He obviously spent some time studying Japanese when writing *Stepper*.) His French gives him access to European modes of speech and thought, and his Portuguese to both European and colonial modes. But most importantly, his multi-lingualism acquaints him with the shifting world of the traveller and the migrant, swapping between 'identities' and inhabiting several at a time.

### 'Asia' in Castro's novels

Castro's name is always likely to be invoked whenever the topic of Asia arises in connection with literature. Despite the fact that he considers

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<sup>32</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 10

<sup>33</sup> *Meanjin* The Asia Issue, (ed. Stephanie Holt) Vol. 57, No. 3, 1998. Contributors included: Geremie Barmé, Francesca Beddie, Alison Broinowski, Natasha Cho, Keith Foulcher, Robin Gerster, Jane Hutcheon, Neil James, Nicholas Jose, Umar Kayam, Mabel Lee, Yan Lian, Jan Lingard, Peter Mares, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Paddy O'Reilly, Wenche Ommundsen, Simon Paten, Pham Thi Hoai, Suzan Piper, Gayla Reid, Rendra, Ton-That Quynh-Du, Sang Ye, Ouyang Yu and Leslie Zhao. (Compare *Westerly's* Asian issue, which drew on 36 years of publishing: *Westerly Looks to Asia: A Selection from Westerly 1956-1992*, published in 1993.)

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Bennett, *The Asian Australian Migrant Experience in Australian Literature 1965-1995*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 1996



himself Australian and does not parade himself as an 'Asian', his background is well known. And he has dealt with Asia in several of his books, in a way that is natural rather than tokenistic. As Ouyang Yu has written, Castro has for the first time in Australian literature been able to give a representation of 'the Other' by someone who *is* 'Other'.<sup>35</sup> Yu notes that Castro's writing is 'revisionist', but only in the sense that he retells history (such as the Lambing Flat riot) from the point of view of the Chinese, and not as a white Australian writing the white history, or as a white Australian trying unsuccessfully to create Chinese characters.<sup>36</sup> Castro overturns stereotypes about the Chinese—that they speak pidgin, that they work like slaves, that they are 'birds of passage' eager to return to China—but does so by showing them naturalistically.

*Birds of Passage* deals with Chinese characters in Australia, and is partly set in China. Although Castro's concerns are wider than migrant experience, the 'multicultural' theme is often focussed upon in literary discussions. (One wonders whether in some respects *Birds of Passage* has not become something of an albatross for its author, 'typecasting' him as an Asian specialist.) As Xavier Pons points out:

Although race is the major external factor of alienation in his novel, the implications are not limited to the predicament of the man who is made to feel alienated because his skin is the wrong colour. To some extent, this is merely a convenient peg on which Castro hangs his wide-ranging analysis of the sense of displacement which all human beings come to experience. Nor does the author endorse political solutions of any kind. Being a writer, not a reformer ...<sup>37</sup>

### Settings

Although parts of *Pomeroy* are set in Hong Kong, the novel does not deal with Asia other than as a part of normal daily experience. The Hong Kong sections could just as easily have been set in London or New York; Castro has simply used a setting he is intimately familiar with.

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<sup>35</sup> Ouyang Yu, 'Brian Castro: The Other Representing the Other', *The Literary Criterion*, Vol. 30, No. 1 & 2, 1995, pp. 30-48

<sup>36</sup> For example, David Martin's *The Chinese Boy* which was described by Frank Kellaway as 'tendentious'. (see 'Distinguished Fiction', p. 65)

<sup>37</sup> 'Impossible Coincidences: Narrative Strategy in Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Oct. 1990, p. 464 [464-475]

*Double-Wolf* and *Drift*, have no Asian connection to speak of. Both *After China* and *Stepper* deal with Asia, but the connection is more psychological than physical. *After China* is set in Australia, but the architect's Chinese life haunts his search for psychological peace. As the title suggests, China is the pre-determining factor in the architect's Australian life, and the novel is as much about 'Australian experience' as, say, Patrick White's *The Tree of Man*. The Chinese stories are certainly exotic, but their use is entirely functional: the architect recites them as part of his heritage in the same way characters in *Such is Life* or Henry Lawson's works might recite camp-fire yarns.

*Stepper*, although nominally set in Tokyo, deals not with 'Asian' questions but problems of identity, honesty/duplicity, multiple selves, loyalty, etc. Stepper is attracted to the 'Japaneseness' of Reiko, but he himself is an exotic, hybrid character. Ishigo Isaku is a man torn between Japanese traditions and his desire for Western life styles. The novel is an existential examination of identity, in which race plays a co-incidental role.

Curiously, Tokyo itself is largely an absence: despite being the setting for the novel at the day-to-day level of back streets and bars, it is a cosmopolitan blend of pre-War cultures and does not assert itself as an independent, Japanese presence. Furthermore, Australia is even more absent from this novel: the token connection to Australia is entirely inessential. As a whole, *Stepper* demonstrates Castro's confidence in being able to set his 'Australian' novels without other than passing reference to Australia, and make his themes independent of physical setting.

It is also important to observe that Castro does not exhibit a one-sided sympathy for his Asian characters. They are never made out to be angelic or innocents, but are shown to be (statistically) just as patronising and prejudiced as Australian or other Western nationalities. Castro always acknowledges that Australians do not have a mortgage on racial prejudice. While Castro's 'Celestials' and Seamus are pejoratively labelled by Australians (Chinks, Chongs, Chinamen), the Chinese also return the favour.

The point is put into perspective in Sang Ye's collection of interviews *The Year the Dragon Came*, in which Chinese working in Australia speak frankly about their hosts. Racial stereotyping (generalising) and insulting labels

(‘foreign devils’) are just as natural to the Chinese as to the Australian population.

China is a country with a strong xenophobic, isolationist tradition; a place where deeply racist sentiments are not uncommon.

... Even [at the turn of the century], most Chinese had trouble even conceiving of such things as languages that were non-Chinese. The schools that taught foreign languages at the time were called ‘colleges of diverse dialects’. Nearly all of the interviewees here [*The Year the Dragon Came*] referred to Australians as ‘devils’ (*guizi*) or ‘foreign devils’ (*yang guizi*) or the slightly more polite ‘foreigners’ (*laowai* or *waiguoren*), apparently oblivious to the fact that in Australia it’s they who are the foreigners. Calling a Caucasian a ‘foreign devil’ is akin to calling a Chinese person a Chinaman or Chink, terms to which most of these interviewees would certainly take offence.<sup>38</sup>

This characteristic can be found in all races. In *Stepper* Castro points out that the Japanese were (and perhaps are) chauvinist and isolationist. His characters regularly use the word *gaijin*, or ‘foreigner’, and at one point Shimamura upbraids Reiko for consorting with foreigners, ‘big, stinking busybodies who have no place in our small and perfect society’.<sup>39</sup>

Castro makes the point that all communities tend to band together and to define and then reject those who look or act differently. And those in the worst position are often those who don’t fit one or other stereotypes: those of mixed race, such as ‘ABC’ Seamus (and ‘CBA’ Castro). The problem is an inability to cope with things that do not fit easy categories.

Castro has been a victim of not fitting on both sides, and knows whereof he writes. In Australia, he has been patronised as a ‘new Australian’ who probably can’t speak the language, and has felt the opprobrium/vitriol of the bigots.

I found it difficult living in Australia after the immigration debate because not only was the word ‘identity’ so virulent, so ubiquitous, so self-conscious that it destroyed any psychosomatic process [Steiner’s notion that creativity begins deep in the unconscious realms of the body] inherent in the act of creativity, but also because I felt it would be the end of my art if I debated it or took a line on it.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Sang Ye, *The Year the Dragon Came*, pp. vii-viii

<sup>39</sup> *Stepper*, p. 227

<sup>40</sup> ‘Writing Asia’, p. 14

And on the other hand in China his work has been censored as too licentious and offensive to Chinese tradition.

In China recently, they excised the first chapter of my novel, *After China*, because of its salacious parodying. They also shifted events to give the impression of political correctness. Needless to say, a much loved child returned to me a hare-lipped stranger. This must have been the ultimate in Chinese Whispers. Something in me died.<sup>41</sup>

Castro would like to be rid of the concept of nationality. Whenever we see 'nationality' or 'nation' being invoked, we should look out for sham. Too often it is invoked in the way that Dr Johnson implies in his epithet 'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel'.

Castro argues for a hybrid, interactive view of nation, which is continually renewing itself.

Australia needs Asia not only for trade but for reasons of [military] security, and for that which is often overlooked: a cultural impetus in the form of injections of new ideas.<sup>42</sup>

And so:

Perhaps it is time to write Asia; to write *within* it and *of* it, rather than just about it. The word *Asia* is found, after all, in the word *Australia*.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 'Masked Balls, or All Translators are Faithless', *Heat*, No. 1, 1996, pp. 71-72. Fen Liang, who translated *After China* [as *The Other Beach*] reported on the difficulties of translating Castro's complex, punning language and of meeting the requirements of the Chinese publishers/bureaucracy, who excised or downplayed sections that they considered morally or politically offensive. See Chapter 3, 'Brian Castro's *After China*—A Translation into Mandarin and a Study of the Novel's Linguistic and Social Contexts in Australia and China', unpublished PhD, Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1997

<sup>42</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 10

<sup>43</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 20. Castro is straining a bit here; but he could of course have used 'Australasia'.

## Chapter 5

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# *Birds of Passage:* Hybridity and Translation

They complained that the Chinese were birds of passage, eager to leave  
Australia ...

Brian Castro's first novel *Birds of Passage* is a very assured work. It is on the one hand ambitious in its structural complexity and subject matter, and on the other so well executed that it appears, for the most part, effortless. It is probably his most conventional work: the subsequent novels tend to flaunt their experimental daring. To date *Birds of Passage* is the closest Castro has come to a 'popular' novel, though it is still too esoteric to have achieved a genuinely broad readership.

Although *Birds of Passage* was Castro's first novel it is a combination of polished assurance and precocity. When it won the 1982 Vogel Award it was in part being acknowledged as a 'first work' by 'a writer under the age of 35'. It was an exciting debut for a comparatively young (Castro was 32) and unheralded writer.

*Birds of Passage* is in many respects a realist novel (Xavier Pons uses the term 'metarealistic' to describe it<sup>1</sup>), to the extent that it uses historical settings for its action<sup>2</sup> and despite its interweaving parallel narratives, the

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<sup>1</sup> '... one could describe it as a metarealistic novel, that is, one that goes beyond the accepted conventions to create, in its own terms, its own brand of realism, which is credible in many respects and incredible in others unless one believes in the reality of the imagination'; Xavier Pons, 'Impossible Coincidences: Narrative Strategy in Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4, October 1990, p. 464

<sup>2</sup> The events described directly, such as the Lambing Flat riots and the landings at Robe, and indirectly, such as the Eureka Stockade, are historically accurate. Castro's papers in the Mitchell Library (ML 1933/96) record his research for this and other books.

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impulse is linear. Much of the narrative is realistic, especially the reconstruction of Shan's history, and the novel moves towards closure.

The novels after *Birds of Passage* all employ a highly developed sense of play, emphasising Castro's sense of humour (evident even in *Birds of Passage*), and his conscious decision to move into a more Postmodern, art-as-art metafiction mode. This change in technique, and the resulting publishing hiatus of seven years between *Birds of Passage* and Castro's second novel, is discussed in Chapter 6. However *Birds of Passage* forms the basis of Castro's style, which is later embellished and experimented with. (Interestingly, in his later works he says that he has moved back towards the more straightforward aspects of his technique, so *Birds of Passage* is not in any way 'immature' in style.)

The novel is structured as two interweaving narratives, recounting the experiences of two Chinese Australian protagonists from a very Australian perspective. Despite the Chinese characters, *Birds of Passage* feels and sounds very much like an Australian novel. For this reason it is seen by many critics as groundbreaking, the first convincing depiction of migrant Australians in fiction.

The historical narrative centres on Lo Yun Shan, a gold miner in 1850s Australia. This narrative draws on the history of goldfields Australia and

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Shan's shipwrecking is historically based. Shan buys passage on 'the British ship *Phaeton*, bound for Australia' (*Birds of Passage*, page 20), the master was 'a red-haired Englishman by the name of Morrison' (p. 30), and Shan is shipwrecked on 'the second day of February 1857' (p. 63).

A contemporary report by the 'Receiver of Wrecks', Henry D. Melville, describes the wrecking of the *Phaeton* as follows:

This was the first wreck I had at Port Robe. She was a splendid ship of a thousand tons and was quite new. She entered harbour on 2nd February 1857. It was a beautiful morning with a light breeze off the land. The master would not heave to for the pilot but sailed up [Guichen Bay] in grand style, but went too far before putting his ship about. When he did she missed stays and drifted on to a sandbank from which she never came off. No lives were lost, but the vessel became a total wreck. The greater part of the deck cargo was saved.

Melville's account differs from Castro's fictionalised version only in that it seems conditions were calm and no-one was actually flung into the sea. There were, however, many violent wrecks near Robe, the *Admella* being the most notorious.

The *Phaeton* was recorded as being of 1,032 tons, under the command of Captain Morrison, carrying 32 seamen and 250 Chinese. Melville's shipping records estimated that 45 vessels landed more than 20,000 Chinese at Robe.

From *The Ecstasy and Agony of Guichen Bay*, Wilf Sprengel, Naracoorte, 1986. (See also note 19)

appears to be 'realistic'. In the second narrative, Seamus O'Young's early experiences are recounted more or less realistically, but he becomes an increasingly symbolic character as the novel progresses. Castro employs these parallel narratives to investigate questions of identity, in terms of self-construction through language and imagination, and in terms of the need for human engagement. He suggests that history is not a linear evolution but a cyclic repetition of the same questions that need solutions: in *Birds of Passage* Castro goes as far as suggesting that the past and present mutually influence each other, the most striking idea in the novel. Like Castro's other novels, *Birds of Passage* must be read with a sympathetic and constructive attitude on the part of the reader. Much of the novel is suggestive, evocative rather than conclusive in its findings. It is an argument against neat and final categorisation.

*Birds of Passage* is the story of two men searching for identity and meaning in their life. Lo Yun Shan comes to Australia at the time of the gold rushes. He leaves behind a China in which the traditional way of life is collapsing: the Chinese are coming face-to-face with the West via the Opium Wars, his father's position in traditional Chinese society as an eccentric 'poet' seems to Shan sterile and exhausted. Wanting to become 'a modern man', he comes to Australia to seek new possibilities for himself, not so much materially but spiritually and psychologically. While in Australia he is a foreigner, subject to the brutalities of racism, but he has also in many ways been an outsider amongst his own people, like Camus's Meursault in *L'Etranger*. Shan's sense of himself is challenged as he struggles to re-interpret the moral ideal of Confucius's 'Great Man'.<sup>3</sup> He rejects the outmoded superstitions of Chinese life,<sup>4</sup> but has frequent recourse to his spiritual training as a monk. He survives and profits from his testing experiences, returning to China with a better understanding of himself and human nature.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Shan speaks of worrying about 'my basic cynicism, my radical association with chaos, my irresponsibility and rejection of my filial duty (that great Confucian ideal)'. *Birds of Passage*, p. 46

<sup>4</sup> 'exploited, antiquated Qing dynasty China', as Nicholas Jose styles it. 'Dead Jumbuck', *The Age Monthly Review*, January 1984, p. 20

<sup>5</sup> I must disagree with Fen Liang's interpretation\* that Shan dies before reaching China. She interprets 'the passage was clean and fast, but not fast enough for Shan' (*Birds of Passage*, p. 153) as implying that Shan dies. However, I interpret this as indicating Shan's eagerness to get home: he feels 'pursued by ghosts' (p. 153). The last chapter of *Birds of Passage* is subtitled 'Kwangtung 1863' and describes Shan's reactions to his

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Shan's narrative is unveiled with dates and place-names that allow the reader to reconstruct his story quite accurately. Seamus's narrative, however, is not linear, and is less well defined. No exact dates are given, though we can deduce<sup>6</sup> that Seamus's story is nominally set in the 1970s when he is in his twenties. Seamus is ignorant of his past and uncertain about his present (his identity) so his narrative is correspondingly more abstract and vague than Shan's. As Pons says, 'Seamus ... has no clear sense of chronology because his inner life is full of confusion and he can't envision a real future.'<sup>7</sup>

Seamus O'Young's story is used to frame Shan's story. It opens in contemporary suburban Sydney, and is the story of an Australian-born Chinese trying to come to grips with *his* identity, caught as he is between two cultures. He has no family background (he is an orphan;<sup>8</sup> his foster parents, the Groves, are kind but incompetent as parents) and he thinks of himself as 'an Australian', just like those around him. Not knowing his Asian background, he daydreams ('Then I began to invent fictions of my past.')<sup>9</sup> that he is a descendant of 'a great Manchurian lord'. However his Asiatic features set him apart from the European Australians, and he is subjected to anti-Asian discrimination. But Seamus is troubled by his identity as a whole, and does not fit into *any* racial group. He has an apparently Irish name, which makes him a complete puzzle to his peers, someone they cannot 'pigeonhole':

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old village and concludes with him 'foreseeing' (literally) Seamus: 'I, too, am waiting ... a child waits for me'. (*Birds of Passage*, p. 157)

\* Brian Castro's *After China: A Translation into Mandarin and a Study of the Novel's Linguistic and Social Contexts in Australia and China*, PhD thesis, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> From internal evidence. 'Suddenly I knew I was feeling exactly as Shan had felt a hundred and twenty years ago' *Birds of Passage*, p. 107. The novel opens in 1856, and the main action occurs over a period of about three or four years. (Shan's last comments in the book are made in 1863.) Castro had certainly finished a draft of his novel by 1981; the Barthes cameo was a late addition to the story, Barthes died in 1980; when Seamus is a young schoolboy 'there was a lot about Cuba in the news' (*Birds of Passage*, p. 13)—the Cuban missile crisis occurred in 1962.

<sup>7</sup> Xavier Pons, 'Impossible Coincidences: Narrative Strategy in Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4, October 1990, p. 470. Pons also makes the point here that Castro rarely allows his two main characters to speak in the future tense.

<sup>8</sup> Although Castro is not an orphan, he was sent out to Australia as a young boy and was largely cut off from his family. He 'lost' much of his Hong Kong background.

<sup>9</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 9



'O'Young. What kind of a name is that?' he asked.

You see, I have blue eyes. That is why I could not be completely Chinese. I used to think long and hard about this when I was a schoolboy. Every morning I used to look into the mirror at my blue eyes, and I used to think of where they could have come from. One day I asked my best friend in the playground to describe me. This is how he saw me.

'You have a moonface,' he said, 'with black hair sticking out of the top and your eyes are slits. Your nose is flat and you have yellow skin.'<sup>10</sup>

Perceived as 'Chinese', Seamus seeks out his Chinese connection. It is the prime conceit of the novel to make the two protagonists' stories move first in parallel and then converge towards each other. In the epiphanic conclusion their paths imaginatively coalesce and they 'meet' each other in an imagined physical encounter. Seamus O'Young is revealed as the descendant of Lo Yun Shan.<sup>11</sup> It is important to the success of the novel in convincing us that Shan's and Seamus's search for identity and completion that this spiritual 'meeting' occurs. As Pons points out:

the basic narrative problem consists in linking the two in order to bridge the chasm of time, in showing the underlying unity of experience between Shan and Seamus which allows a temporary sense of wholeness to emerge. Solving such a problem required a great deal of imaginativeness and it is one of Castro's achievements to have devised an appropriate method.<sup>12</sup>

It is not far into the novel before the more conventional aspects of the narrative(s) have given way to a highly imaginative, almost 'magical', element, in the form of 'impossible coincidences', to use Xavier Pons's term. The two narratives are made to resemble and echo each other, and the various characters blend to become a mixture of character 'type' and physical or metaphysical *doppelgänger*. Clancy/Fitzpatrick of the gold fields merges with Bill and Edna Groves' 'Fitz',<sup>13</sup> Fatima of Seamus's story is belatedly prefigured by Mary O'Young's Fatima, and the two Carloses with

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<sup>10</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 10

<sup>11</sup> Seamus's foster mother Edna researches his genealogy in Hong Kong and finds that his ancestors were from Kwantung province: 'The name was Sham ... or something like that. I could only obtain it through word of mouth. ... Most of the records were destroyed in the war.' *Birds of Passage*, p. 135 According to Seamus, *sham* means 'clothing', *shan*, 'mountain'. There is also a pun on the English meaning of 'sham'.

<sup>12</sup> Xavier Pons, 'Impossible Coincidences: Narrative Strategy in Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4, October 1990, p. 465

<sup>13</sup> 'Bill Grove, also known as Fitzpatrick, or "Clancy", with a shadowy past.' (*Birds of Passage*, p. 15) The shadowy past does not refer so much to Bill Grove, whom we do not meet, but the Fitzpatrick of the Eureka Stockade who changes his name and is on the run. This same Bill Grove may or may not be Edna's lover 'Fitz' late in the novel.

disfigured noses are connected as bull-like stereotypes. Shan begins to inhabit or haunt Seamus, until he is resolved as great grandfather.

### Parallelism and 'impossible coincidences' in *Birds of Passage*

Seamus	Shan
Learns Chinese	Learns English
Practises abnegation	Practises abnegation
Declines into monkish asceticism	'Declines' from being an ascetic monk towards sensuality
Sexually restored by Anna Bernhard	Sexually restored by Mary O'Young
Mr Feingold, the German	(Unnamed) German standover man
Fatima (Fatiminha) the artist	Fatima the prostitute
Fatima Feingold/Abraham Feingold	
Anna Bernhard & Anna the mute	
Jack Grove's twin brother Bill, 'also known as Fitzpatrick, or "Clancy" ' (p. 15); Edna's lover 'Fitz'	Clancy, whose real name is Fitzpatrick
Catholic priest friend, Terry	Jesuit priest
Carlos the bull-like man at Feingold's	Carlos the bull-like man attacks Shan
Seamus ages ('Hume's syndrome')	?Shan would be approx. 140 if alive

The text of the novel also begins to show resonances that have no other apparent meaning than to draw attention to this parallelism. For example, on page 38 of the novel Shan speaks of 'the magnetic pull of the land [i.e. Australia]', and a few lines later in the text Seamus on a train journey says that 'the magnetic pole draws me on in my tube of steel'. These subtle resonances in language occur before readers are aware of the significance of the double narratives.

At times the actions of the characters can only be explained by reference to parallelism. The curious incident of Seamus eating a frog seems only explicable by the reference a few lines above (but in Shan's story) to 'Ching

chong Chinaman/ sitting on a log/ eating the guts/ out of Tommy frog',<sup>14</sup> but we eventually learn that Shan, on the run, had been forced to eat 'goannas and frogs' to stay alive.<sup>15</sup> There seems no real narrative reason why Seamus should age prematurely ('Hume's syndrome'): the reader can only hypothesise that he is symbolically and sympathetically ageing as he comes closer to his ancestor.<sup>16</sup>

These together with structural devices such as anaphora (beginning sentences, chapter openings, and so on with the same or similar words) tie the narrative parallels even more closely together. Thus we are introduced to the two protagonists in similar ways that set up the novel's first, and lasting, resonance. Shan says 'My name is Lo Yun Shan' (p. 1); two pages later Seamus says 'My passport lies open on the table.' We are shown the passport's first entry: 'NAME: SEAMUS O'YOUNG'.

The total effect is to generate two worlds distanced by 120 years, but in many respects repeating the same cycles. Time has lost its unidirectionality and past and present become co-etaneous, informing each other.

*Birds of Passage* establishes many of Castro's themes: identity, multiculturalism, double existence, the role of language, translation (of language and identity), sex, psychology. It is a very clever exploration of these themes, and despite being rooted in reality the novel is a *tour de force* of imagination. It is a tempting trap to equate the experience of Seamus with the personal life of Castro—a trap that Castro deplors<sup>17</sup>—but this is not consistent with the imaginative force of the novel and overlooks the life-versus-art tension. Castro as author has his character Seamus speak

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<sup>14</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 83

<sup>15</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 152

<sup>16</sup> 'Hume's Syndrome' is another of Castro's jokes. There is no medical condition known as Hume's syndrome: he has invented a syndrome and named it for David Hume, 'the eighteenth-century philosopher who bored me to death at university. He was an empiricist and a positivist and detested metaphysics ... So Hume's Syndrome was that perverse state of being utterly in touch with common sense and reality and ... ultimately ... extreme boredom and rapid ageing.' Letter to MD, 18 October 1998.

In *After China* Castro uses cancer as a symbol of a person withdrawing or refusing to engage with life (see Chapter 8). The Writer withholds her being, and this is expressed physically as a movement towards death, in this case, via cancer. Seamus can similarly be said to be moving towards death by withdrawing from life.

<sup>17</sup> 'Everyone's first novel is automatically claimed by critics to be autobiographical in some way. Mine wasn't.' 'Auto/biography', p. 32

about the need to represent another person honestly,<sup>18</sup> so Castro is similarly under some obligation to be true to his created character's life, and not invest it with *unnecessary* personal biographical detail.

However, a brief cross-reference is useful. There are obvious similarities between Seamus as an Australian-born Chinese and Castro as a Chinese-born Australian (ABC and CBA often being confused)—appearance and the sense of being an alien being the most obvious—and if Seamus's encounter with the immigration authorities in Folkestone is not taken directly from Castro's own life, then he will have had experiences very similar. The occasional autobiographical inclusions are for verisimilitude: the novel is not in the traditional sense 'autobiographical'. On the same tack, Shan's experiences on the gold fields are accurate,<sup>19</sup> but his is not merely a chronicle of Chinese experience in the 1850s. He is an alter ego for both Seamus and Castro, and for us as readers, and it is his struggle with his own sense of identity that is critical to the novel.

The central theme of *Birds of Passage* is existential identity, and racial identity is just one aspect of our existence.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> '... these shards of the past have invested me with a responsibility for another life, demanding that I write honestly' (*Birds of Passage*, p. 4) It is also a concern of Castro's that a text *does* have a relationship with its author, *pace* Roland Barthes.

<sup>19</sup> Castro's research notes in the Mitchell Library include references to history sources such as Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*, Nancy Keesing's *The History of the Australian Gold Rushes by Those Who Were There*, A.T. Yarwood's *Attitudes to Non-European Immigration*, and many others, as well as to contemporary newspaper accounts. Castro's historical settings are accurate, although he emphasises that he is not trying to write 'historical novels', but using history as a basis for siting his imagined narrative.

For example, see Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. IV, 'The Earth Abideth Forever', 1851–1888*. Chapter 6, 'A Colonial Bourgeoisie' gives the background to the gold rushes, and its account of the Chinese experience accords well with Castro's descriptions (such as pages 73–78 of *Birds of Passage*). For example:

The masters of ships sailing from the ports of Kwangtung discovered that the way round [the landing tax] was to land at such passengers at Port Adelaide and Robe in South Australia. ... In Adelaide boys [watched] the horde of queerly dressed Orientals ... pass at the 'Chinaman's trot' with their pigtails hanging down their backs.

... The Chinese coolies were landed at Robe and left to their own devices. Inhabitants of the town volunteered to act as guides. By the second half of 1855 travellers on the overland route from Adelaide via Encounter Bay to the gold-fields of Ballarat, Bendigo or the Ovens saw processions of six hundred to seven hundred men walking [*sic*] in single file, each one bearing a pole and two baskets over his shoulders, every one yabbering to his mate in front in a sing-song tone. p. 114

<sup>20</sup> Michael Deves, 'Brian Castro: Hybridity, Identity and Reality', in Jennifer McDonnell and Michael Deves (eds.), *Land and Identity: Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual*

'Seamus O'Young. It's not my real name. I'm not Irish. I am in fact an ABC; that is, an Australian-born Chinese. Yes and no. I find your questions infuriating. People are always very curious about nationality. They will go to extraordinary lengths to pigeonhole someone. They think this knowledge gives them *power*.'

... 'Yes. ABC. The first three letters of the alphabet. It was a classification which straddled two cultures. Yes. ABC. I am a refugee, an exile. My heart and my head are in the wrong places. There was no country from which I came, and there is none to which I can return. I do not speak Chinese, but I am learning it. At the institute where I attend classes they think I am a little strange.

I believe my name is Sham Oh Yung, but I am unable to find any records of my past. I am truly a stateless person. When I go to Chinatown I feel at one with the people, but then the strange tones of their language only serve to isolate me.'<sup>21</sup>

In notes included with a typescript draft, Castro explains some of his original ideas for the novel.<sup>22</sup> Before publication the novel was titled *Solitude*, and Castro writes repeatedly of the ontological solitude of his two characters. The word 'solitude' appears regularly throughout the novel, but without the explicit key to the concept of existential solitude.<sup>23</sup>

In his notes Castro draws attention to the structure of the novel. Shan's journal becomes a novel-within-the-novel, but the movement between the two parallel stories occurs in both directions. Not only does Seamus have to

*Conference, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1997, ASAL, 1998; pp. 220–225*

Note also that although one of the epigraphs to *Birds of Passage* is from Geoffrey Blainey and talks about racism, the other is a quote from G.M. Hopkins's sonnet about existential dread, 'No worst, there is none'.

The lines quoted echo the psychological darkness that Castro's characters must confront: 'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap/May [those] who ne'er hung there.'

(*Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner, Penguin, Ringwood, 1953, p. 61)

<sup>21</sup> *Birds of Passage*, pp. 8–9

<sup>22</sup> Typescript notes with typescript of the novel, at the time titled *Solitude*, with a prologue and epilogue deleted from the final novel. Dated November 1981. ML 1933/96, Box 1.

<sup>23</sup> Castro explains that he changed the name of the novel from *Solitude* to *Birds of Passage* because Allen & Unwin thought it 'a bit dour'. He was reading Geoffrey Blainey's *The Blainey View* (ABC/Macmillan, Sydney, 1982; see p. 52) at the time: '... he called the Chinese "birds of passage". This was used as the title in a kind of ironic way since I didn't think Blainey's remark was at all complimentary'.

The prologue and epilogue were also deleted. (Letter to MD, 18 October 1998)

The original title, 'In My Solitude', then shortened to 'Solitude', is a reference to Duke Ellington's jazz classic (Castro mentions it in the deleted epilogue), and presumably a glancing tribute to his father, who was a jazz musician, and who is obviously the model for Fats Pomeroy in *Pomeroy*. The word 'solitude' appears often, and a section on page 110 of the novel begins 'In my solitude ...'

re-create Shan, but he feels that somehow Shan is 'creating' him. We later learn about the genealogical link, which provides a factual base to this metaphor, but throughout the novel Seamus is conscious of this two-way process.

'[Shan, h]asn't your journey then been in effect a translation of yourself and a transition for me? (You have begun to learn English, and I Chinese.) Shall we come to know each other through such adjustments?'<sup>24</sup>

The earlier incarnation of the novel explicitly demonstrates Castro's purposes, which in the published form remain more suggestive than explicit. In his notes to *Solitude*, Castro repeatedly asks the question 'Who is writing this novel'.<sup>25</sup> Seamus's self-consciousness inducts us into this mode of thinking. To what extent are we collaborating in the process of 'writing' the two characters? And where does the author fit in in this? He is not dead in the Barthesian sense, and in the *Solitude* draft of the novel an 'author' actually features in the prologue and epilogue.

The original prologue included a voice, which may be Shan's or may be Castro's, musing about 'writing honestly' and illusions that 'have sprung up in the wake of your solitude, this self-imposed solitude which is your attempt to come to the grips with the situation haunting you'.<sup>26</sup> (Castro also draws attention to the word *Doppelgänger*.) In material now omitted, he (Castro? Shan?) continues: '... and so to the "I". I am released, finally, into my own world. (Already I feel the difficulty of writing "I" without a certain ironic intent).'<sup>27</sup>

In the abandoned epilogue, Castro writes himself into the novel as a character. He talks of 'crossing the border at Sum Chun, between Kowloon and the People's Republic of China':

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<sup>24</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 62

<sup>25</sup> 'The twin notions of "tradurre" and "tradire", translation and deception, come into play. Is SEAMUS translating a real journal, or is he inventing it? Furthermore, is he being invented by it? SHAN, on the ship, addresses him as his "mythic translator". Who is writing this novel?' (ML 1933/96, Box 1; prefatory notes, page 2)  
[Italian: *tradurre*, translate; *tradire*, betray, deceive]

These notes seem to be an author's synopsis to explain the novel to prospective a publisher.

<sup>26</sup> ML 1933/96, Box 1; page 3

<sup>27</sup> ML 1933/96, Box 1; page 5

[The border guard] had asked me my name, and I had replied that it was Castro. 'That's a funny name for you to have', he said in a dialect I could just understand.<sup>28</sup>

This exchange echoes accurately Seamus's exchange at Folkestone<sup>29</sup> on page 8 of *Birds of Passage*. Castro then comes upon a book-burning in China:

I picked up an old-looking yellow manuscript that had fallen to the floor. I began to read the first few lines of it.

'There will be many times that I will ask you what it means to be writing as honestly as you can, when your mind is already dislocated by so many illusions. Such illusions that have sprung up in the wake of your solitude ...'<sup>30</sup>

These abandoned pieces emphasise that the focus of the book is identity.<sup>31</sup>

Seamus's sense of statelessness is not only geographical but psychological. Castro does not focus on racial discrimination as the source problem, only as the manifestation of a deeper psychological problem. Castro takes pains to characterise the 'Australians' as themselves a disparate and motley crew of aliens, most of them newly arrived and more 'European' than 'Australian'. This applies to both the miners on the gold fields and the inhabitants of the Surry Hills textiles sweat-shop where Seamus briefly works. In Castro's terms, all the participants are hybrids, and their attempts to categorise each other are shown to be misguided and psychologically damaging.

In Surry Hills the workers are a mixed lot, led by Abraham Feingold, or Mr Gold as he is known, who is presented as a caricature European. His prejudices against Seamus are ironic, as he himself is a migrant with the caricature speech patterns of a music-hall German. It is also unforgivable in

<sup>28</sup> ML 1933/96, Box 1; page 225

<sup>29</sup> The novel has 'Folkstone', presumably a typographical error.

<sup>30</sup> ML 1933/96, Box 1; page 226

<sup>31</sup> Castro has said: 'I cut the epilogue and prologue because they seemed too artificial once I read the manuscript in typescript. In longhand, for some strange reason, they seemed to continue the flow of the narrative, dragging it back into real time.' Castro also hints that his editor, Beatrice Davies disapproved: '[she] hated such Postmodern intrusions as the appearance of Roland Barthes.' Letter to MD, 18 October 1998

The extra layer of framing—the author appearing overtly in his own novel, and identifying himself directly with Seamus—would have masked the circular closure of the novel as it now published. (The first and last sections of *Birds of Passage* are now both titled 'The Other Life' and describe Shan in China.) Having 'Castro', in the epilogue, reading the opening words of the prologue would have made the book infinitely circular, perhaps too Escherian or Borgesian, or too like *Finnegan's Wake* or Beckett's *Molloy* trilogy.

an educated man, a trained lawyer.<sup>32</sup> Feingold has firmly stereotyped notions of what a 'Chinaman' should be.

'My name is Seamus O'Young. I've come about the job.'  
 'Oh, yes. Vat ist you say your name?'  
 'Seamus O'Young.'  
 'Such a funny name for a Chinese.'  
 'I'm Australian.'  
 'Really. Hum. You haf some Chinese blod. I can see that. Your fater ist Chinese? Your mutter?'  
 'I don't know. I'm Australian.'<sup>33</sup>

This semi-comic exchange is highly ironic as Seamus, with his Australian accent, is quizzed by a European with a heavy accent. Feingold, whose 'factory' relabels garments made in China, is disappointed by Seamus *because he doesn't act like a Chinese*:

'You know, ven I put the position in the employment office I ask specially for a Chinese. You know, a Chinese because they have respect. They verk hard. But I see you are not like that. You are just the same as the rest. No respect, no principles, vat I vant vith you ...'<sup>34</sup>

It is the need to simplify our interactions with others, rather than outright hatred, that characterises this type of racial stereotyping. And, as occurs later in the novel on the goldfields where migrant Europeans look down on Shan, it is a case of the marginalised judging the marginalised.

Castro goes to some pains to show that the prejudice on the gold fields is simply a result of unthinking behaviour. The diggers, themselves riff-raff, insult the Chinese merely because they form an identifiable 'other' on whom they can vent their spleen at being themselves repressed and downtrodden. When they stop to think, people such as Clancy realise the stupidity of their approach and feel a kinship with the Chinese. Clancy

wanted to express the ideas of a brotherhood he had crudely formed in his mind; a brotherhood that made no distinctions between race or religion.

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<sup>32</sup> 'I was sitting in front of his desk, looking up at the two framed law degrees on the walls.' *Birds of Passage*, p. 28. Castro may also be suggesting that Feingold is himself discriminated against by not being allowed to practise law in his adopted country. But this is conjecture: the degrees are in English and begin with the standard phrasing of the University of Sydney's degrees (Castro has a Masters degree from Sydney).

<sup>33</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 24

<sup>34</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 30



'You're no different from the next man,' he was saying to the Chinaman.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless the pull of the crowd usually proves too strong, and Clancy cannot maintain his rational approach.

Apart from these opinions, Clancy thought no more of them. They were a blot on the landscape, but he could ignore them quite easily. They never made much noise; they worked most of the time; gambled, never lazed around much. They abided by the law, had some sort of reverence for old age, kept to themselves. He wondered why they were hated to the point of violence. Something in his intelligence and something in his conscience told him it was wrong. They shaped up for a battle between his feelings and his overwhelming need for acceptance.<sup>36</sup>

But Clancy is a coward, both in the physical sense<sup>37</sup> and morally. His soapbox speeches are not carried over into action.

While the picture painted of the diggers is repugnant and meant to disgust the reader, Castro reminds us that they are not 'all bad men', and that the Chinese are at times themselves repugnant. (Shan's uncle, So Ah Fung, is a shifty trader; the Chinese enjoy gambling, whoring and opium; Shan's star pupil Fook degenerates into an opium addict.)

### Hybridity and translation

It is possible to characterise the problems described above as fitting under the general heading of hybridity, and our need to be able to *translate* between different states, avoiding fixed states. I have discussed hybridity and translation as concepts (Chapter 3), but I will now examine how these ideas work out in practice in this novel.

The communication/translation metaphor is a continuing metaphor throughout *Birds of Passage*. It is something that Castro pursues in nearly all his writing, and which, as a writer inclined to introspection, *he* must confront himself: how does he know that what he is writing will be 'understood' by his readership?

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<sup>35</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 115. Clancy's name of course invokes the nostalgia for a lost type, the innocent, honest (mythical) Australian bushman.

<sup>36</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 113

<sup>37</sup> At Eureka, 'A few idealistic men like himself cowered in their tents while their comrades screamed in their shepherd's holes, exposed to the fire and steel of Her Majesty's forces.' *Birds of Passage*, p. 82

The obvious focus for the metaphor of translation is Shan's life, as presented through his journal. When Seamus finds the journal—a critical moment in the novel—he does not know what it is and cannot read the Chinese characters. As he comes to learn to read the journal, he literally 'translates' Shan's life into existence for himself and us.

As Seamus tries to construct/reconstruct this other life, to translate another's reality, he is burdened by the responsibility of this onus, and feels that besides his own shortcomings, perhaps he is let down by the 'intervening years of decaying language and translation'. The burden of making a movement towards someone—knowing another, understanding another, as we try to do daily in our lives—is here further complicated by the difference in language and time.

I have read and re-read those words, translated and re-translated them, deciphering the strokes of the Chinese, building up their meaning, constructing and reconstructing their sense. I feel the closeness of the situation the author is describing; I feel I am the counterpart of this man who was writing more than a century ago.<sup>38</sup>

In some planning notes, Castro explains that this other life is incomplete: 'Shan's writing leaves gaps—papers lost or destroyed or he didn't write down the rest. [Seamus] has to flesh this out ...'<sup>39</sup> As in all aspects of life, the 'text' is incomplete, and we must actively construct our understanding of what is around us, including the lives of other people. Seamus must actively come to know or construct Shan: he cannot passively *receive* this other person's life. To recapitulate Steiner's notion, Seamus re-interprets Shan by 're-experiencing' (and even re-suffering) his life. Translating the words on the page is not the real problem; translating the 'person' behind is the real task.

As Seamus begins to interact with this nebulous figure, he begins to identify similarities. 'The similarity of his situation to mine does not disturb me as much as the almost complete identification of his style, choice of words and tonality with my own.'<sup>40</sup> This slight eeriness becomes immediately apparent to the reader as well as Seamus; it is the first hint of

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<sup>38</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 4

<sup>39</sup> ML 1933/96, Box 1

<sup>40</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 4

ancestral connection, and it is the opening gambit in Castro's development of the sense of one character's in-dwelling in another.

Furthermore, Seamus's predicament is also ironically Castro's, as he authors his characters, he is also authorising them—he has the responsibility for their actions—and there is an onus on him to write honestly: 'It is possible that these shards of the past have invested me with a responsibility for another life, demanding that I write honestly.'<sup>41</sup> By 'writing honestly' Castro means that the author must strive to be true to his own beliefs and values, true to his characters', and while writing fiction as best he can be aware that this is a process of human artifice, not something that has 'divine' existence. Above all, he means not playing tricks with the reader to give a false impression of perfection. While *Birds of Passage* is not a *flauntingly* self-conscious work, Castro nevertheless reminds his readers that they are reading something constructed by an author. We must read at both levels.

While Seamus must struggle with learning Chinese, for Shan language is also a critical part of his make up. As he travels to a new land, he is hybridising himself, and must learn not only new customs but the *means* to learn them. On the ship to Australia he tells us: 'I am learning English. It is a strange language. I am learning it in spite of myself.'<sup>42</sup> He regards language as part of people's existential make-up (the English, he deduces, are born to serve). It is significant, then, that Shan learns English from the ship's carpenter, a 'builder'.

After a few weeks I had learnt the fundamentals of the language, and the fundamentals of seamanship, the two being quite similar in my mind, marking a deliberate course over roughly charted seas of bountiful metaphors and conspiring adjectives.<sup>43</sup>

It will be important for Shan in Australia that he is the one who knows enough English to translate for the others, and it becomes a measure of his translation of himself into 'an Australian'. At a significant point in the novel, when Shan knocks at Mary Young's door, he crosses a moral boundary to accept the need for physical, human love: ' "Hello. My name is

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<sup>41</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 4

<sup>42</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 48

<sup>43</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 49

Shan," the Chinaman said in perfect English.<sup>44</sup> He has moved on from his Chinese/Confucian construction to a new hybrid form, that of a Chinese Australian.

However, it is also significant that Shan can use language as a shield. Shan hides behind language to assess Clancy, reverting to a basic pidgin English so as to keep an advantage over his interlocutor.

(Shan withdrew in pidgin English. For once language intervened in his emotions. He was not going to compromise himself with grammatical English. Besides, this appearance of ignorance protected him, provided him with a mask.)<sup>45</sup>

This masking function is simply the ability to move between states, the translational mobility provided by hybridity.

As with many of the themes in *Birds of Passage*, Shan's progress in language is mirrored by Seamus's progress in learning Chinese. At first Seamus finds retreat and sustenance in Shan's journals: 'They protect me from paranoia. They are my *raison d'être*. I know they are not fiction.'<sup>46</sup>

As his quest deepens he begins to interact with Shan, not just on the page but in his head, and the two identities form each other (retrospectively and proleptically). Seamus actually begins to address Shan. Seamus, noting that Shan's name is written (as a Chinese pictograph) like three mountain peaks 'rearing up from the page', asks Shan if it is not:

... a too-vigorous demonstration of yourself? Are you afraid of being deprived of your identity?

So you are discovering a new land, and yourself as well, modifying your views, readjusting your stance. How much of your foreignness will you retain, how much will you lose? Hasn't your journey been in effect a translation of your self and a transition for me? (You have begun to learn English, and I Chinese.) Shall we come to know each other through such adjustments?<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 119

<sup>45</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 116

<sup>46</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 20. Once again, Castro's use of the word 'fiction' is loaded: he argues that the distinctions between 'fact' and 'fiction' are fluid.

<sup>47</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 62. Translation and transition are very similar etymologically. (Translate, carry across; transit, go across.) 'Translate' has a transitive sense, 'transit' is intransitive, so for Seamus these are two aspects of the same process.

What Seamus is *dis*-covering is a hybrid identity, one that integrates his unknown, Chinese past and his known (but not integrated) personal history. He is not trying to move from one to another state, but to access all those pasts and possibilities in a more dynamic sense. 'Different worlds open up. I inhabit all of them.'<sup>48</sup>

### The reader as translator

In a critical section about one-third of the way through the novel, Castro deals with the pivotal point of the novel, Seamus's discovery of Shan's journal, and thus Shan. This section (pages 50–53) is very curious in that the prose becomes unrealistically theoretical, and the reader has the firm sense that Castro himself has stepped into the novel to make some didactic points about reading and the relationship between author and reader. Reading is presented as a process of imagination, which can release the reader into new worlds.

Edna's 'voice' suddenly alters: from having been a bleary dipsomaniac at the beginning of the novel she suddenly reveals herself as a bibliophile and (rather implausibly) begins to articulate literary theory. The 'voice' of Edna becomes dialogic (in the Bakhtinian sense that it is a meld of character and author), as she lectures Seamus, who conveniently plays the 'Dorothy Dix' or 'dumb guy' role. The change is rather off-putting. Castro apparently feels comfortable with this Postmodern break in register, as it occurs elsewhere in the novel, for example, when Fatima spouts art theory to Seamus, when Clancy expounds social theory to Shan, and Seamus's old school friend Terry talks about the priesthood. Castro does not mind his characters being a mixture of fictional character, historical person and mouthpiece.<sup>49</sup>

Edna introduces Seamus to books.

I had not read anything since I came here. I felt that there was a certain power in books ...

One day I spoke to Edna about this anxiety. ... I told her about this power certain words had over me, as though voices were guiding me

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<sup>48</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 52 This is a practical expression of Castro's heterotopia or multiple world.

<sup>49</sup> This is taken towards the extreme in *Drift*. Castro says of the factual/fictional characters in that novel: 'I became accustomed and confident enough now to write in a form which precluded the assumption of a 'unified subject'. 'Auto/biography', p. 35

along some secret path. I was afraid that I was becoming obsessed. Edna looked at me, her bright eyes flicking glances ...

'So you hear them too.' She sighed. 'I'm sure it is just the effects of this place, of its isolation ... Though I do have another theory.'<sup>50</sup>

Edna's 'theory' begins with the interaction of writing/reading and the imagination, and how this affects our self-consciousness.

... when a child reads a fairy-tale for example, he or she is really writing the book in the subconscious. Textual images become experiences which the child has created. There is nothing with which to compare them ... am I making myself clear?'

Not in the least; but Edna fascinated me. She had never spoken this way before.<sup>51</sup>

There is a sense of humour here as Castro/Seamus mock-naively pretends not to be understanding this mini-lecture, complete with its use of 'he or she', not the sort of phrase one would tend to remember to use in everyday conversation.

'As you get older,' she continued, 'your own experiences become more important, and you compare them with those presented in books. Your imagination, your freedom to create, becomes restricted by the omniscient author, so that myths and tales seem to lose their freshness. The primary source of the imagination has been sullied.'<sup>52</sup>

By this point the use of the words 'omniscient author' have destroyed any pretence that this is 'real' dialogue. Edna is apparently aware of literary criticism, and has views on the power of (primary) imagination which seem to echo the Romantic writers (Coleridge comes readily to mind), but also Freud. Her rebuttal of the 'omniscient author' is a rebuttal of the notion that there is one, 'true' reading of life. It is an enjoinder to refuse static or monolithic interpretations as we 'author' our lives. (This is Castro's 'myth-busting' notion.)

This is the central theme of *Birds of Passage*, that imagination creates our 'existence'. Castro elaborates this a step further to pursue the conceit that we are to some extent formed by our ancestral experience. (He appears to

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<sup>50</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 50

<sup>51</sup> *Birds of Passage*, pp. 50–51. The final sentence can be taken as a bit of a wink from Castro to the reader, acknowledging the egregiousness of the situation.

<sup>52</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 51. There is also an echo here of ideas in David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, which inspired Castro to write *Birds of Passage*.

draw on Jungian ideas of archetypes and the collective unconscious, but the system is not elaborated further.)

'Books can set off moods and ideas, though giving them direction becomes increasingly difficult the more books you read. You are really exhausting the potential within yourself.'

I know. There was fear and trembling in me; the anxiety of another's influence. But then Edna made it all clear to me.<sup>53</sup>

The words 'fear and trembling' identify Seamus's existential angst with Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*,<sup>54</sup> another clue to the reader. While Edna has been talking about books in general, Seamus naturally relates this to Shan's 'book' or 'text', which he is subliminally beginning to sense. At this stage, although we as readers are well into Shan's narrative, in the chronology of the novel Seamus has not discovered Shan, so we need to believe that Seamus is sensitive enough to have been picking up this extra-corporeal influence without being aware of either Shan or his own past. This is crucial to the novel: if we are to believe that the two characters can later coalesce or meet then we must at this stage believe that Seamus *feels* 'inhabited' before there is any physical evidence of his history.<sup>55</sup>

Edna conveniently explains this theory of ancestral/genetic memory:

These voices that you hear ... are the accumulation of the imaginations of all your predecessors. You are picking up signals reaching you from well beyond your childhood, far back from your ancestry. You are listening to the primary sources of the imagination of your race. Molecules of their ideals, their ethics, have trickled through in the forming of your genes.<sup>56</sup>

Seamus then takes up the theory:

Could my genetic make-up be a legacy of history? Did my racial characteristics inform my memory with a past beyond my own which surfaced from the unconscious? I needed something substantial to guide me; a sign, a written word.

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<sup>53</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 51

<sup>54</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1954

<sup>55</sup> As early as page 26 of the novel he hears a mysterious voice giving him a rather ideological message. When Seamus is at a low point, scraping the floor in Feingold's factory, he thinks he hears 'a voice deep within me say: "Compromise and resignation are traits that reach far back into your ancestry. They understood, those people, that freedom is economic, not ideological." ' *Birds of Passage*, p. 26

<sup>56</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 51

[Edna's] ... theory had opened up a channel in my mind through which I made contact with the prepotent past.<sup>57</sup> The real and the abstract had already begun to merge: I had a craving for a bowl of rice.<sup>58</sup>

Not only is Seamus's mind empowered by his increasing ability to imagine, but he feels physical effects such as 'craving a bowl of rice'.<sup>59</sup> Other physical manifestations will occur, such as his premature ageing<sup>60</sup> and his hearing voices that he thinks might be Chinese. When he comes out of his coma-like state late in the novel he begins to talk in Chinese, even though he has hitherto only been teaching himself to *read* Chinese.<sup>61</sup>

This ancestral identification is not just a case of 'haunting' in the ghost sense: Seamus not only gains entrée to his ancestral life, but to a wider world of many lives, and his existence becomes not just a double life, but a hybrid life, unbounded in its possibilities, mediated by words, by translation and by imagination.

I saw myself reading, lying on the bed, three or four open books around me ... I jump from one book to another, catching the mood from one and then linking up to another. After a while, passages from different books interconnect ... Different worlds open up. I inhabit all of them.<sup>62</sup>

Note also that Seamus does all this self-consciously: he is aware, as is Castro in his writing, of what he is doing and how he is creating a world out of words. As Seamus reads himself into a febrile state, he works up to the

<sup>57</sup> The word 'prepotent' has both a generalised meaning ('pre-eminent in power, authority, or influence; predominant') and a specialised scientific one: 'Genetics, the ability of one parent to impress its hereditary characters on its progeny because it possesses more homozygous, dominant, or epistatic genes'. (*Macquarie Dictionary*) We can assume that Castro is using this word in its specialised, deterministic sense as much as its general sense.

<sup>58</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 51–52

<sup>59</sup> Earlier in the novel, when Edna unthinkingly assumes that he will want to eat rice, Seamus rejects it in favour of 'Australian' fare: 'pies, steaks and chips'. Castro regularly connects somatic effects with the power of imagination, for example, illness in *After China* and *Drift*.

<sup>60</sup> The issue of Seamus's ageing is confusing. It may be symbolic identification as the two characters move towards their meeting. On page 130 Seamus says that Lo Yun Shan ('Shan's full name') translates as 'old person mountain', though Shan connects his name with 'Tai Mo Shan, which is the Big Mist Mountain' (a real mountain) (page 1). [There is a typographical error (confirmed by Brian Castro) in the Allen & Unwin paperback of 1993, which prints 'Lo Yun Shun' instead of 'Lo Yun Shan' on page 130.] Castro himself says that 'Hume's Syndrome' is a joke (see footnote 16), and that Seamus ages because he loses the power of imagination and withdraws into unimaginative reality and asceticism.

<sup>61</sup> His first English sentence, after 'babbling' in Chinese, is the mysterious and rather pregnant: 'A Chinaman, when he is ruined, destroys himself.' p. 149

<sup>62</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 52



critical event in the novel, the discovery of Shan's journal. In another self-conscious literary allusion, Seamus is started on a journey of self-discovery when, just as it did for the Lady of Shalott, 'the mirror cracked'.

I was reading in this way. My head felt hot, as though I had a fever ... I got up from my books, went to the mirror above the old dresser, saw myself in it, saw a flushed face, an elongated head, ears protruding. I had completely forgotten the way I looked. I was looking at another person ... Is this how others see me? I tilted the mirror. I straightened it. My features were definitely Asiatic ...

... I tilted the mirror again. Without the wall to limit the angle of tilt, the mirror was suddenly released from its hinges and fell to the floor ... The mirror lay in three large pieces on the wooden floor. I saw myself standing in three places above it.<sup>63</sup>

There are some obvious points of similarity with the Lady of Shalott myth,<sup>64</sup> but Tennyson's version is cleverly vague (though psychologically suggestive), and it would be hamfisted to try to force it to fit Castro's story. It is only necessary to see the mirror as a symbol of a break with a superseded identity. Seamus doesn't recognise the reflection of himself, and when the mirror breaks he is 'split' into several reflections or open-ended possibilities. It also releases the key to his development: Shan's journal.

As I picked up the pieces I noticed that the wooden backing to the mirror was also cracked. Inserted between it and the glass were hundreds of pieces of fine yellow paper which came apart in my hands as I picked at them. ... I noticed some faint marks on them. When I held them up to the light I was able to see a kind of calligraphy, looking like Chinese or Japanese script ...<sup>65</sup>

Thus begin Seamus's efforts to reconstruct himself, and Shan, with the aid of imagination. It is important also to remember that Seamus finds the journal a burden as well as a comfort. He feels a responsibility for it and its contained life, which is as fragile as his own life is proving.

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<sup>63</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 52

<sup>64</sup> The myth is explained in Tennyson's poem. The Lady is bound by a curse that enjoins her not to look directly at the world: 'A curse is on her if she stay/to look down to Camelot', though 'She knows not what the curse may be'. She sees only a reflection of the real world: 'And moving through a mirror clear /...Shadows of the world appear.' Her situation, existentially, is one of being held back from involvement in the real world around her. She craves involvement: 'I am half sick of shadows'. She breaks the injunction (she looks at Lancelot) and is released from her captivity when, dramatically, 'The mirror cracked from side to side'. For her the release results in a journey towards death.

'The Lady of Shalott', *The Poetical Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, W.P. Nimmo, Hay & Mitchell, Edinburgh, n.d. Parts II and III

<sup>65</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 53

The wind is ripping away pieces of the yellow paper I have in my hands. I put the remainder in my pocket. I shall have to protect them enclosing them in something. Their frailty cannot stand the present.<sup>66</sup>

The journal, together with other books, becomes an obsession. Seamus is not sure whether he is creating the journal or the journal him:

I have been living in the worlds of books and languages. They have imprisoned and confused me. Time; reality; structure. The bars of my cell. The inner life composed entirely of words was proving agonizing. Is this the price one has to pay to flesh out another existence? I began to wonder if Shan were my reason for being. *Was he creating me out of this silence, so that deprived of his voice, I could discover my own?*<sup>67</sup>

Trying to translate is frustratingly difficult, because it is not just the words that need to be moved from one language to another, but feelings that need to be moved across time and cultures.

In the library I consult Chinese dictionaries. How does one give meaning to feelings in another language, especially one that is built on images?<sup>68</sup> Are the feelings exact? Are the words exact? I want to feel exactly ...

Are the feelings the same even if these things occurred more than a hundred years ago?<sup>69</sup>

Seamus identifies with Shan's difficulties in writing down his life and feelings. As Shan becomes more despairing his writing style changes. Shan feels the certainties of life—his Chinese culture and philosophy—are failing him, and words fail him as they do not express what he wishes to express. Seamus feels the same inadequacies:

Suddenly I knew I was feeling exactly as Shan had felt a hundred and twenty years ago. He was struggling with language and experience. His soul, imprisoned, had sought escape through language. Now raw and potent experience began to destroy the meaning which he had found in pity and humanism and which he had sought to express in his writing. Had he been turning away from real life? ...

I had noticed that his writing no longer sheltered beneath a comfortable lyricism.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 54

<sup>67</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 65 (my emphasis)

<sup>68</sup> Chinese being a pictographic language.

<sup>69</sup> *Birds of Passage*, pp. 104-5

<sup>70</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 107. Similar problems of 'translating' oneself are expressed in Ouyang Yu's poem 'Translating Myself':

translating myself into English  
as if I were a language  
but am I not Chinese  
am I not that ancient language that

At his worst times Seamus also despairs of using words to communicate.

And the words I am trying to translate, crawling like ants across the page, renounce their own responsibility so that I am left to create meaning out of them from my own head.<sup>71</sup>

While we follow Seamus's attempts to translate Shan's journal, we begin to see, as well as the record that Shan creates, some of the reasons for his need to express himself to someone. Shan explains that:

I have to write for somebody who can understand. Every single Chinaman aboard this ship is illiterate.  
So I shall address you, dear reader, and tell you how the ship made landfall ...<sup>72</sup>

This incident echoes the scene in Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, where Ovid, deprived of language, communicates with an unknown future to preserve his identity.

I speak to you, reader, as one who lives in another century ...  
I cast this letter upon the centuries, uncertain in what landscape of unfamiliar objects it may come to light, and with what eyes you will read it. Is Latin still known to you?  
... Have you heard my name? Ovid? Am I still known? ... Have I survived?<sup>73</sup>

As a parallel, while Shan is beginning his journal Seamus has to get a new passport because he cannot resist scribbling 'down my thoughts on any

resembles myself, is myself ...

translating myself is a problem  
I mean how can I turn myself into another language  
without surrendering myself  
without betraying myself ...

I translate myself  
from Chinese into English  
disappear into appearance of  
another existence looking back across  
the barrier of tied tongues ...

Extracts from 'Translating Myself', *Moon Over Melbourne*, Papyrus Publishing, Melbourne, 1995

<sup>71</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 128

<sup>72</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 57. In the typescript version of the novel ('Solitude'), Castro used the words 'mythic translator' instead of 'dear reader'.

<sup>73</sup> David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, pp. 18, 19. Castro acknowledges *An Imaginary Life* as the seed for *Birds of Passage*.

paper that came to hand.’<sup>74</sup> His passport is not only a make-shift journal,<sup>75</sup> but like Shan’s it is his recorded definition of himself:

I carried it around with me all the time. I couldn’t do without it; I couldn’t let my identity slip out of my hands. It was constantly under threat from the other self.<sup>76</sup>

The ‘other self’ here can be read ambiguously as both Seamus’s insecurity and ‘Shan’. A passport is also a ‘proof’ of one’s identity and one’s travels through life. The confusion, or perhaps conflation, of identities is taken further.

Shan’s journals, real and imagined, have merged. Notice how I’m beginning to harness his voice with quotation marks. It fills me with excitement. Not only am I the *author*, the originator, but I am his *progenitor*, having impregnated myself with these fictions.’<sup>77</sup>

The word ‘progenitor’ suggests the ‘parenting’ of this identity.

Towards the end of the novel it is not only Seamus who is conscious of the reciprocal process of writing/reading. When he has returned to China (‘Kwangtung 1863’), Shan sees in his imagination his descendant(s), and feels the presence of Seamus (and the future).<sup>78</sup>

When the two narratives finally intersect, Shan sees not ‘his descendant’, but a more inclusive term, ‘his reader’.<sup>79</sup> Seamus is not just the biological descendant, but the ‘reader’, and therefore translator of Shan’s existence. We, as readers of the novel, also become spiritual descendants of Shan, having participated in his life, just as we are ‘descendants’ of (or inheritors of) Ovid, the artist whose work we still read.

### The need to act

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<sup>74</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 58

<sup>75</sup> Seamus explains that he likes to write in his passport because it has wavy lines which he compares to money, but which we compare to Shan’s sea journal being written contemporaneously in novel time.

<sup>76</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 58

<sup>77</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 58

<sup>78</sup> ‘I feel the presence of the future, hear a voice cutting across mine.’ *Birds of Passage*, p. 156

<sup>79</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 144

Another important concern of the novel is the relationship between imagination as set against experience, and the mental as set against the physical. In *Birds of Passage* action is a problem for both protagonists. Shan is goaded into action by the taunts of his pupil Fook; though he rejects Fook's materialism, he finally decides that he must move out from his narrow, circumscribed life. Later, on the goldfields, he struggles with maintaining his Chinese traditional philosophy of life, and especially his ascetic lifestyle. When he finally makes the step to cross this moral border, it is into the arms of Mary Young, who 'initiates' him into the physical life.

Seamus's main problem as he struggles to find his identity is that he withdraws into contemplation and monkish sterility (while Shan moves in the opposite direction). He degenerates eventually into a comatose state, from which he is saved by Anna Bernhard, who gives herself to him physically. In both cases the men are restored to wholeness by women, and their restoration involves acceptance of physicality, of action over just mental imagination.

In working notes Castro characterises this struggle as a 'tension between the rational and the sensual—parallels/oppositions—see-sawing', and he deliberately contrasts his two characters: 'Shan gradually becomes decadent as S[eamus] O'Y[oung] gets stronger'.<sup>80</sup>

What drives SOY [Seamus] to fasting is that he loses the battle with nature. He is unable to find real solitude because of society's incursions, the demands of the body, the intransigence of reality (doesn't coincide with desires). So he *sublimates* by self-abnegation—fasting, ultimately blindness.<sup>81</sup>

As I have just noted above, it is women who provide the significant circuit-breaker for both Shan and Seamus. Throughout the novel women are portrayed as nurturing, and sex is a redeeming process. The men seem to be in some senses the weaker, more ambivalent characters.

Shan is presented as a strong-willed, determined, moral and thoughtful person, but as he is worn down by his experiences in Australia he fears that he is losing his moral strength. Seamus fears that his hero is heading off the

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<sup>80</sup> ML 1933/96. Diary with notes for 'Solitude'.

<sup>81</sup> ML 1933/96. Diary with notes for 'Solitude'.

rails, and Castro gives indications that Shan is sinking towards despair and moral corruption. However he is 'saved' by the prostitute Mary Young, who is portrayed sympathetically (at their first meeting on the road to Bendigo) and given a quasi-metaphysical power (her hair doesn't just *shine* like gold, it is full of gold dust that falls like a benison on Shan). Mary is a strong woman who has been able to survive Clancy and her clients, and when she goes back to her previous lifestyle it is of her choice and to seek new opportunities.

Mary is able to 'save' Shan because with her he does not indulge in lust, but human care. She restores him by providing human warmth and contact, welcoming him back into the human fold and accepting him into the 'local' community (a sort of naturalisation ceremony?). It is important that their liaison is sexual and not merely friendship. This has symbolic notions of miscegenation, that is hybridisation, joining the disparate and 'transgressing the boundaries'. And of course it produces Seamus's Australian-Chinese line.

Mary also prospers amongst the community of women, who succour and support each other, which the men on the gold fields rarely do. (The exceptions are the Chinese elders, Big Wah, Shan and his two mates, Ah Pang and Tzu.)

Seamus is a curiously passive/impassive creature. He begins his life alienated, lacking a sense of identity. He is an orphan, physically and emotionally. He has a tough life in the boys home and his foster parents are 'well-meaning but incompetent'.<sup>82</sup> Edna is at first a harmless drunkard, but she later becomes a wise mentor to Seamus. Jack Grove, a pleasant but incompetent foster father, is another man who seems not to cope with life: he dies early on. Edna is a curious creation. She has some of the comic forthrightness of Edna Everidge, and is perhaps in her own way an Australian 'everywoman', flawed but generous.

Although nurtured by Edna, Seamus is first 'rescued' by Fatima, an unlikely hybrid (Australian/Portuguese, of indeterminate sexuality) who articulates art theory. Although she at first makes a very positive

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<sup>82</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 13

impression on Seamus, their union is not consummated. Fatima is shy of sex, though she becomes homosexual. Seamus takes up her theories, and practises sexual abnegation: physical contact is denied, to increase the spiritual/mystical satisfaction. (These Confucian ideas of restraint are explored again in detail in *After China*.) He also actively embraces voyeurism, which was first suggested at the beginning of the novel when he spies on the women in Feingold's factory.

I remembered her saying that a body should not be conscious that it was being seen; that there should not even be the intention of seeing. It was this unintentional documentation, this unplanned voyeurism, that described our sexual relationship; the process of casual, carnal witnessing. ... it was only in total self-control and abnegation that I could see clearly.<sup>83</sup>

This proves to be another example of theory not working out in practice. Seamus's belief that sex can be enjoyed by abstinence—relying on the mental and denying physical action or engagement—is unproductive and unhealthy for him, and he moves into a state of catatonia, no longer engaging with the world. Existentially, Seamus is no longer actively participating in his life and building his self.

Seamus is eventually 'restored' by Mrs Anna Bernhard<sup>84</sup>, who has herself been 'struck dumb' by disappointment. She tries to support Seamus with physical nourishment (such as the scones, themselves symbolic of a past(?) Australian era), which are necessary, but not sufficient, attributes for life, 'useless appendages to her emotions'.<sup>85</sup> It is not until she loses her inhibitions and gives herself to Seamus that he and she are fully restored.

Sexual union is, in *Birds of Passage*, a regenerative process. (Even Edna has been 'restored' by her physical coupling with 'Fitz' in the woods.) Castro seems to argue that sexual sharing/giving is necessary to support a fully alive life. Both Seamus and Shan learn that abnegation is not an answer, and that interaction and commitment are required. It is worth

<sup>83</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 81

<sup>84</sup> Her first name, Anna, links her to the mute in Mr Gold's factory; the second name is a homage to one of Castro's idols, the writer Thomas Bernhard. In a plot summary prepared for an early typescript of the novel, Castro says that Seamus meets 'the love of his life' in the factory; see ML 1993/96, Box 1. Castro invoked Thomas Bernhard both as a 'homage' and a reference to Bernhard's 'isolation', which he took to extremes. (Letter to MD, 18 October 1998)

<sup>85</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 145

emphasising this point: we would expect that the resolution of the two narratives would provide a resolution for Seamus, but his mystical encounter with Shan does not resolve his personal problems. Although it releases the mental shackles restraining Seamus, the intellectual resolution of their quest is, for both Shan and Seamus, not as critical as their human resolution, through love.

### Play

Although *Birds of Passage* is in general more straightforward and less parodic than the later novels, there is still much linguistic play, which is a natural component of Castro's style.

Most of the playing is intellectual/literary/textual, such as the Barthes joke mentioned above. At a semiotic level, Castro could be said to be 'playing' with symbols, mirroring or echoing some, and creating a tangled network of interconnections. However, the play is very much peripheral compared to later novels, for the pleasure of the aware reader, and while the jokes occasionally comment on the novel or the writing, they don't *drive* the story the way they do in say *Pomeroy*.

There are few outright jokes. One example, 'my father was a visiting seaman (the pun unnoticed at the time) from Manchuria', seems to be a case of Castro being unable to resist: he probably didn't see the pun himself at first, but noticed it once it was written and has left it there because it is amusing and because it is, ironically, an artefact of the text.

There are occasional lightly comic scenes: the Groves's city house is called 'Nirvana' with some ironic sense of its Asian origin and the oblivion in which the Groves live. Seamus, the 'Asian', does not recognise the name and thinks it the capital of Cuba (Castro's surname gives this a further edge!).

Castro's own tastes come out when he has Seamus, in his comatose state, responding positively to Kafka and Patrick White, but being stultified by Henry James or Anthony Trollope.<sup>86</sup> Kafka is invoked in a black comic way when Seamus attends his scholarship interview and finds the building like

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<sup>86</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 148



K's bureaucratic mazes in *The Trial*. The black comedy continues when Seamus is asked to read from *The Yellow Race*.<sup>87</sup>

Some jokes are even more private: the Jesuit missionary is a Portuguese who has a hot temper. He is also an amateur phrenologist (or 'psychologist'), and a parodic figure, as are the psychiatrists' reports interspersed in the novel. Castro's dislike of quacks, played to the full in *Double-Wolf*, is already evident.

Another more subtle 'joke' is Castro's quotation of Shan's poem,<sup>88</sup> which he has presumably written himself. The joke is entirely private: Castro 'doesn't write poetry'.

No Castro text is ever straightforward. It is full of multiple meanings, allusions and references, which can be read at various levels: serious, jokey, parodic. Although Castro in his next published novel made a quantum move towards parody and play, the same forces form an essential part of the Castro style, even in this, his most straightforward novel.

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<sup>87</sup> *Birds of Passage*, pp. 60-61. Castro admits that although the title of the book is made up, he had a similarly embarrassingly tasteless experience.

<sup>88</sup> *Birds of Passage*, p. 74

## Critical reaction to *Birds of Passage*

*Birds of Passage* won the 1983 Age/Vogel Award

The following discussion summarises the critical reception to *Birds of Passage* in reviews of the novel and journal articles. (A complete list of reviews and commentary on this novel can be found as a separate listing in the Bibliography. In this section I will discuss the major reviews and omit the passing notices.)

As a (joint) winner of the 1983 *Australian/Vogel* prize, there was much interest in this new writer. However, many reviewers were apparently intimidated by the more Postmodern attributes of the novel. It is difficult to judge just how familiar Postmodern novels were to readers and reviewers in 1983, perhaps Postmodernism was not then widely understood. The response is thus mixed, though positive overall, and most reviews are sympathetic in wanting to acknowledge the positive aspects of the novel.

As an example of a 'mixed' review, Mark Thomas headed his *Canberra Times*<sup>89</sup> piece 'Serious and impressive but disjointed novel', and opened with the following assessment:

Some novels win prizes, others win hearts. *Birds of Passage* has already picked up one major award, but is unlikely to gain a mass audience.

Calling the novel a 'quiet, odd novel' based on a 'conjunction of peculiar narrative devices' Thomas felt that 'the plot itself is as painstakingly slow as Australian films'. He thought it too ambitious.

Castro is inclined to sacrifice action for atmosphere, and to use incidents principally as illustrations of grander themes or wider morals. The atmospherics are consistently excellent, but they leave the impression that the novel became, in the writing, too studied and too mannered. Castro's characters remain too slight to carry the weight of symbols, emotions, associations and history which he imposes on them.

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<sup>89</sup> Mark Thomas, 'Serious and impressive but disjointed novel', *Canberra Times*, 8 October 1983, p. 19

This criticism applies to all Castro's writing, and must ultimately be resolved at the level of personal taste.

He complained that they 'produce a disjointed, scrapbook-like novel. *Birds of Passage* is cluttered with fine ideas for short stories.'

He admitted that 'Where Castro gives his introspective, melancholic writing full play, he can produce the most memorable scenes.' He thus recognised the lyrical writing ability. He summarised *Birds of Passage* as a 'serious and impressive work, but not one which provides diversion, light amusement or simple pleasures'. Surely one would not *primarily* expect 'light amusement' in a 'serious and impressive' novel. As this was a newspaper review, we must allow that he was warning off the general public from a 'too-hard' novel.

But Thomas did make one concession towards breaking new ground when he noted that 'The two protagonists, Lo Yun Shan and—bizarrely—Seamus O'Young, are the first serious Chinese characters introduced into Australian fiction.'

Turning now to a literary journal response, Frank Kellaway says in a review of four works in *Overland* that Castro need feel no embarrassment about being in distinguished company (Bruce Dawe, Barry Hill, Fay Zwicky, who had each published collections of short stories).<sup>90</sup>

He calls it 'an impressive performance, complex and well-structured' which 'skilfully intertwines' the two narratives.

I have not read anywhere else (not even in David Martin's lively but tendentious *The Chinese Boy*) so vivid a re-creation of the life of the Chinese on the Australian gold-fields from their own point of view. The tale of racial discrimination and persecution is balanced against the more subtle pressures on the Australian born Chinese in our own day. However, tendentiousness at no times takes over. The non-Chinese characters are always as well-drawn and as complex an amalgam of good and bad as the Chinese ...

There are remarkable dramatic passages like the death of Tzu and the attempted murder of Shan. Throughout the style of the writing is very concrete, giving a strong sense of the look, feel and smell of how it was.

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<sup>90</sup> Frank Kellaway, 'Distinguished Fiction' *Overland*, no. 93, December 1983, pp. 65-66

He concludes very positively, calling *Birds of Passage* a ‘highly intelligent book by a young writer’, and looks forward to Castro’s next novel.

In a long and percipient review,<sup>91</sup> Nick Creech went to some pains to come to grips with the novel. He considered *Birds of Passage* a worthy winner of the Vogel prize:

*Birds of Passage* is itself a book of genuine—though difficult—substance, and as such a worthy winner, but more significantly it reveals Castro as already being a master of technique. His writing here is as spare and controlled, yet as eloquent, as flowing and as compelling as the finest Oriental painting.

He went on to compliment the writing style:

The plot is equally as spare as his use of words ... The historical segments are seemingly simple narrative, full of subtle colours, flavours and insights, and entirely convincing. The modern segments are downright difficult, involving, it seemed to me, a composite modification of Jung’s race memory and Herbert’s melange-induced ancestor memory, reincarnation, and apparently arbitrary though obviously purposeful *deus ex machina*.<sup>92</sup>

I have to be honest and say I do not understand the thrust of the modern segments. However, there is so much that is so very good in the book that I am prepared to accept *pro tem* that this is my failure not Castro’s. I find there [are?] so many levels of meaning and possible meaning that the author’s intention quite eludes me—which may well be his final intention: to demonstrate that meaning is never absolute but a function of imagination or the lack of it.

The jacket notes describe Castro as being of ‘Portuguese and Chinese/English parents’, which leads to a further difficulty. The temptation is to say of this book, what a splendid exposition of the Oriental psyche—which indeed it is—but one must then qualify this by asking from which point of view: Occidental, Oriental or somewhere in between? And does that point of view, whatever it is, make the book any more or less valid? Again, I don’t know.

All of which leads to a different temptation: to reject the book out of hand. But I for one found I couldn’t do that. I have thought about it a lot, worried about it, which is the clearest indication I can give that this is a book worth bothering with. Perhaps it exposes me as a fool: perhaps I am a fool for thinking that it may, but either way it has certainly not left me untouched, and such is art.

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<sup>91</sup> Nick Creech, ‘Winging towards elusive heights’, *The Weekend Australian*, Magazine, 20-21 August 1983, p. 15

<sup>92</sup> The sense is obscure: perhaps ‘ancestor memory, [or] reincarnation, [an] apparently arbitrary though obviously purposeful *deus ex machina*.’ The comment that it is a convenient *deus ex machina* seems quite fair!

Nicholas Jose, writing in *The Age Monthly Review*,<sup>93</sup> was not convinced by *Birds of Passage*, although he wanted to be. 'It is a fascinating idea, but in this case good intentions are not enough. This is trebly a pity, given how little is written from the point of view of Chinese Australians.' Jose's argument seems to be that the novel does not fit *his* idea of what the novel should be: for example, 'the narrative is so fragmented that it blocks involvement and momentum.' Describing *Birds of Passage* as 'a prose meditation on metaphysical themes', he concludes: '... what we have is private, therapeutic writing, but not the satisfactions of a novel'.

Another reviewer not satisfied was Graham Burns.<sup>94</sup> He rightly distinguishes between the more or less straightforward historical account of the Shan narrative and the 'basically expressionistic' Seamus episodes, 'so oddly imagined, [which] lack dramatic force and adequate clarity'. While perhaps expecting a more conventional approach, Burns does at least make the following perceptive allowance:

It is true that if *Birds of Passage* is cut loose into the realms of critical theory it manages to raise some fashionable exegetical questions. Do Seamus and Shan in a sense write each other's stories and 'intend' by their fictional existence Castro's eventual third-person intervention at the centre of the text? Is the oddness of what happens to Shan ... a sly invitation to the reader to complete the novel by supplying his own symbolic code?

Burns is one of the few reviewers to comment on the 'creating by writing' aspects of the novel, though his last question seems more appropriate to Seamus's situation than Shan's.

In a brief notice in the *Canberra Times*<sup>95</sup>—published in 1989, six years after the novel's release (perhaps to co-incide with a new paperback edition?)—Veronica Sen sums up *Birds of Passage* as 'A novel that both stimulates the imagination and engages the emotions'. In the same year John McLaren made the novel his 'Critic's Choice' in *The Good Reading Guide*.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Nicholas Jose, 'Dead Jumbuck', *The Age Monthly Review*; January 1984; pp. 19-20

<sup>94</sup> Graham Burns, 'Travelling Birds', *Australian Book Review*, no. 60, May 1984, pp. 17-18

<sup>95</sup> Veronica Sen, 'Story of Alienation stirs and engages', *Canberra Times*, 4 June 1989, p. 18.

<sup>96</sup> Helen Daniel (ed.) *The Good Reading Guide*, McPhee Gribble Publishers, 1989, p. 42

Only one reviewer, Alan Gould in the *Age*,<sup>97</sup> was openly hostile. Speaking of the Vogel award as the richest literary prize (at the time), he opined:

One might expect the judges to have discovered a very meritorious novel indeed.

I found *Birds of Passage* a scrappy, ill-researched work, one that sacrifices telling observation in the attempt to gain poetic effect and metaphysical resonance. I found this despite the fact that it hangs upon an interesting idea.

Gould considers the book 'ill-researched' for the following reasons.

But my irritation had been aroused when I detected some inaccuracies of nautical detail quite early in the book. My thought was, if resonantly maritime words such as 'ratline' or 'windlass' are going to be misapplied in the straining after poetic effect, how soon will it be before the more important matter of character-creation becomes contrived rather than observed.

Sure enough a certain Edna Groves, foster-parent of Seamus, who on page 14 had been described as a chronic alcoholic, was able on page 52 to give a most erudite account of the theory of racial memory. It is *my* observation that alcoholics have diminished powers of erudition. Perhaps Edna was not a typical alcoholic. But neither is she a vehicle to be used at one moment for some local poetic color, and at another as a mouthpiece convenient for giving a speech convenient to the author's theme. Her life must be her own and consistent and it is the author's job to observe where it naturally leads on the basis of his understanding of alcoholism.

It is easy to dismiss most of this as irrelevant: the quibbling minutiae of maritime terminology (assuming the reviewer is himself correct) are surely trivial in the overall impact of the novel. Castro's research notes for the novel show that he is meticulous in his research. Gould's complaint about Edna is more worthy of discussion, not so much on the point of her alcoholism (it is implied in the novel that Edna has undergone some sort of revitalisation after the death of her husband—she submerges herself in books, she meets the mysterious but symbolic 'Fitz'), but because she breaks out of her 'character' voice to become an authorial voice, and does rather lecture the reader. As I have suggested earlier in this chapter, Edna's lecture is a textual incursion by Castro, and is a deliberate device, now more familiar in Postmodern writing. If something in the novel is *done* for effect, it must be *judged* for its effect, poetic or otherwise. Edna is not a 'conventional character', but clearly Gould has a very prescriptive idea of what an author *must* do: '[Edna's] life must be her own and consistent and

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<sup>97</sup> Alan Gould, 'A prize in doubt', *The Age*, 17 September 1983, Saturday Extra, p. 15

*it is the author's job* to observe where it naturally leads ...' (my emphasis). This is exactly the problem highlighted in Helen Daniel's imagined dialogue between Reader and Writer/Liar quoted in Chapter 11: what *is* the author's 'responsibility' to his readership, today?

But even if we were to agree with Gould that the author's technique is at some points ham-fisted, this would be very much a personal judgement on the part of the reader: it does not wreck the novel completely. Castro, like any experimental or difficult author, needs a degree of sympathy from his readers, and plainly he does not have this from Gould, who feels that the judges of the Vogel have seriously miscarried.

Gould insists on a fairly realistic reading of the text (this from a poet!) and he finds the text 'bombastic': 'too much of the text expounds rather than shows, while passages that strain after psychological or metaphysical authority are simply bombastic.' Gould admits that part of his complaint about this 'mediocre' book—'plainly ill-made'—is that it won a major literary prize, and that the judges should not have been so easily duped. The vinegary smell of sour grapes is all too apparent.

In 1988 *Birds of Passage* was published in a French translation by Xavier Pons, as *Les Oiseaux de passage*. The book was favourably reviewed in France, the reviewers complimenting the writing itself (and the translation), and drawing attention to the philosophical questions—the quest of the self for identity—raised by the book, and to the engagement with the problems of racism, 'which concern here in the first instance Australia, but which apply to all countries'.<sup>98</sup>

There has been little in the way of literary analysis of *Birds of Passage*, aside from the above reviews which appeared on publication. An exception is Xavier Pons's *Australian Literary Studies* article, already referred to in the discussion in this chapter. It is a percipient piece, but then, where other reviewers had to make what they could of *Birds of Passage* in a few weeks, Pons wrote his article in 1990, seven years after publication and having translated the novel into French. It is not surprising that he was able to see

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<sup>98</sup> Jean-Paul Delamotte, 'Intolérance aux antipodes', *Le Monde*, 23 December 1988; François Poirier, untitled review, *Art Press*, 30 October 1988, p. 60; Jean-Paul Delamotte, untitled review, *Magazine Littéraire*, October 1988, p. 84

how the narrative structure works so sophisticatedly to bind the novel together.

All this gives the novel an almost oneiric [i.e. dreamlike] quality, a metarealistic tightness: each detail is part of a large puzzle, the design of which emerges only when we have pieced it all together. Taken separately, the details are realistic enough, believable in terms of the conventions to which the average reader subscribes. But above this level we encounter the many coincidences I have outlined, and they strain the reader's credibility. They occasionally sound contrived. It is only when one has grasped the book's overall design—the pursuit of oneness—that such objections vanish as metarealism asserts itself. The main two narratives mirror one another, down to very small details, producing a sense of 'déjà vu' which is an important aspect of the novel's characteristic flavour. The two worlds are really one and the same. History does not so much repeat itself as re-enact the same basic pattern.<sup>99</sup>

The above comments apply with equal force to all of Castro's novels: they can only be 'understood' in hindsight and with a lot of work on the reader's part. Pons concluded of *Birds of Passage*:

Many novelists have explored alienation, outlining minute shades of mental or physical suffering. But few have been able to match their psychological insight with an equally imaginative narrative technique, as Castro does in *Birds of Passage*.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Xavier Pons, 'Impossible Coincidences: Narrative Strategy in Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4, October 1990, p. 474

<sup>100</sup> Xavier Pons, 'Impossible Coincidences', p. 475



## Chapter 6

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### *Pomeroy:* Postmodern Contexts and Auto/biography

‘One of the things about this game is that you’ve got to keep it as a game.’<sup>1</sup>

*Pomeroy* was published in 1990, approximately seven years after Castro’s first novel, *Birds of Passage*. This seems a long break for an author who won the *Australian/Vogel* award for his first book. The reason for the hiatus also partly explains the style of *Pomeroy*.

After *Birds of Passage* Castro wrote a long novel titled *After the Deluge*. In typescript it runs to 710 pages.<sup>2</sup> He could not get it published. The novel could be said to be similar in style to *Birds of Passage*, in the sense that it has an identifiable storyline and narrates identifiable biographies of its characters. It is hard to see why it was not published. Presumably the publishers did not feel it had sufficient sales potential; perhaps its length was a problem.<sup>3</sup>

This was understandably disillusioning for Castro, as he admits.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 29

<sup>2</sup> The novel is held in manuscript and typescript form in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, with Castro’s literary papers. (ML 1933/96, Boxes 1 & 2) Part of the novel (nominally most of Chapter 2) was published as the short story ‘The Cave’ in *Meanjin*, Vol. 42, No. 1, March 1983, pp. 94-101. This is not unusual for Castro, as he has published several extracts of work-in-progress from his other novels. It is not certain whether ‘The Cave’ was a short story that Castro expanded into a novel, or was always part of a larger work-in-progress.

<sup>3</sup> It does seem somewhat unfocussed. In his journals Castro himself commented that he felt the manuscript was becoming ‘deadlocked’ and lacked ‘a real centre’. ML 1933/96 Box 1

Well I think after *Birds of Passage* I went into terminal failure mode and I wrote a very large manuscript of 700 pages ... —very realistic, naturalistic almost—and found that (a) few publishers were interested ... and (b) that it was something that I think I invested so much creative energy into that I was fairly disappointed with the reactions. So I needed to more or less drag myself up by my bootstraps in another direction.<sup>4</sup>

He reconsidered his writing style. In a newspaper interview<sup>5</sup> published to coincide with the launch of *Pomeroy* Castro is quoted as saying that *Birds of Passage* was ‘mainly an obsession with form’, and *After the Deluge* ‘a kind of meditation’.

Then I suddenly realised I was through with that in a way. ... I felt that was going nowhere; artistically it was a dead end. There needed to be some energy. So I thought—why not try to exploit my energetic side instead of being so contemplative, so monkish.<sup>6</sup>

The new book was *Pomeroy*, and it introduced a new style for Castro. Although it has many points of similarity with *Birds of Passage*—unlikely coincidences and connections keep popping up unexpectedly—*Pomeroy* made a quantum jump away from realism (or Castroian metarealism) towards Postmodernism, and away from the contemplative to a level of high energy flippancy that fizzes off the page. *Pomeroy* at times threatens to self-implode, parodying itself out of existence.

What *Pomeroy* seems to do is perform a self-conscious parody of novel writing and subvert genres such as the detective or spy thriller.<sup>7</sup> It concentrates on play, and while also dealing with serious matters, such as death, it often does so in an ironic manner. It becomes a ludic ‘dance of death’.

The interest in the storyline is secondary to the enjoyment of the word play and the way the storyline turns back in upon itself in a regressive series of puns. An obvious model structurally is Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which the text meanders around in a rather rococo fashion, getting off the track regularly, although a very broad overall pattern—the journey—can be discerned.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Brian Castro reads his poetry [sic] at ADFA’, see Appendix 4.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Fuller, ‘Reality offers chance to reproduce it in writing’, *Canberra Times*, 7 March 1990, p. 32

<sup>6</sup> Peter Fuller, ‘Reality offers chance to reproduce it in writing’, p. 32

<sup>7</sup> Even the pirate story genre is called upon: Pomeroy and his predecessor as editor receive bottles of Black Label scotch as warnings that their time is up, just as the black spot was used in R.L. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*.

Underneath the entertaining banter and games, the tone is blackly comic, and the protagonist often seems as perplexed and rudderless as one of Beckett's characters, adrift in a nonsensical world.

In *Pomeroy*, Jaime Pomeroy's journey, narrated as detective thriller, is the nominal core narrative. There are many asides or digressions, and many puzzling passages that leave the reader grasping for comprehension. Like *Ulysses*, *Pomeroy* is extremely frustrating at times. Of all Castro's novels, *Pomeroy* is probably the least cohesive. The main narrative *looks* as if it will be straightforward, but increasingly abrogates narrative direction—the third section of the book does not connect well with the earlier sections—and the many digressions continually divert the reader's attention.

What Castro claims he was setting out to do was to avoid classification or pigeon-holing as a writer. He expressly tried to avoid 'genre', which is why it is hard to classify. It is experimental in the sense that Castro gave full reign to his exuberance, and disregarded consistency of genre.

My second novel *Pomeroy* which was written cold-bloodedly and deliberately to parody all the genres it could possibly accommodate: the thriller, the crime novel, the romance, had at its heart a postmodernist puzzle and a thinly disguised autobiography. It scored this for a review: 'In *Pomeroy*, Castro is simply trying to get onto the crime shelves'.

Well, nothing could have been further from the truth. In that novel, I was really trying to get on the *Deconstruction* and *Literary Theory* shelves.<sup>8</sup>

I suppose I'd been fighting against genre classification all my writing life, and the generic function I've used most of all to do this is a form which is not only unstable in itself and which has undergone intense transformation, but which has the potential to transgress the furthest. This the auto/biographical form.<sup>9</sup>

Castro argues in his essay 'Auto/biography' against the debilitating attempts that humans make to control things by classifying them. He points out that Foucault has already demonstrated that we still try to classify things when a new *episteme* is wanted.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The slightly acidic joke about trying to get onto certain shelves in the book stores is based on real experiences: his books have been included under some bizarre classifications ('ornithology', 'history').

<sup>9</sup> 'Auto/biography', in *Writing Asia & Auto/biography*, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1995, p. 26

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London, Tavistock Publications. An 'episteme' is 'the total set of relations

*Pomeroy* does deal with very serious matters—the perpetual frustration of desire, existence, death—and underneath the playfulness of the telling there is a sad and depressing tone, which weighs more heavily as the book progresses. It is hard not to sense from this a writer who is himself feeling rather weighted.<sup>11</sup> There are many points of biographical correspondence between Pomeroy and Brian Castro (and one cannot help wondering at the irony of Pomeroy's first name, Jaime, or *j'aime*, 'I love'.<sup>12</sup>) I will return to the topic of autobiography later.

Castro has explained how the technique of mixing bleak seriousness and sophisticated playfulness arose:

... there is this other side of me ... I am a great admirer of Joyce and Beckett and that kind of almost black humour, so I started writing in this semi-serious vein using puns and playing with words and things like that, and it gradually developed into *Pomeroy*. *Pomeroy* was a book in which I decided to throw everything out the window, all the realism and the sparseness of my prose, and sort of use a baroque method, where [I was] elaborating, consistently elaborating, on figures—metaphors and figures of speech—... And I found that there was a certain way of doing it where you can loop back the metaphor along the line ... When you use a certain figure of speech most people ... don't tend to exhaust its possibilities, so I tried to attain a method whereby you could exhaust every possible meaning from it by sort of looping it back and creating an extra one-liner from it. So I think that's how the style began with *Pomeroy* and with *Double-Wolf*.<sup>13</sup>

The humour in *Pomeroy* relies on punning, whereby meanings mix with and slide into other meanings, whereby misunderstanding is used to unsettle the reader's attempts to make sense of the text. In fact 'balance' is one of the protagonist's holy grails. The technique is very funny, but also often obtuse, wry and cynical. What seems to be a serious debate between

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that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalised systems of knowledge.' see Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Literary Theory*, p. 108 f.n.

<sup>11</sup> This is of course speculation, but the tone does suggest problems in his own life, which any person might expect to confront: his being cut off from his past? his failure to find fulfilment? the problems of maintaining his successful place as an author?

<sup>12</sup> R.F. Brissenden saw here a connection with *Lord Jim*. 'Not only do the central characters of the two novels bear the same name— Jaime/James/Jim—but Castro's hero, like Conrad's, is obsessed with "a compulsion to leap", often into that "destructive element", the sea.' Brissenden also draws in for comparison *Tristram Shandy*, *Moby-Dick* and *Finnegan's Wake*. 'Dangerous Investigations', *Editions*, No. 8-9, September 1990, p. 8

<sup>13</sup> 'Brian Castro reads his poetry [*sic*] at ADFA', see Appendix 4.

the characters will digress into another area, often comparatively trivial, undercutting the argument.

At times the schoolboy level of the jokes undercuts the 'serious' development of the story. (Admittedly, some of these are given to Guitierrez to indicate his lack of sophistication: he has 'a third [-class degree] from Oxford'.<sup>14</sup>) This mixture of 'high' and 'low' literature seems intentionally Postmodern, generating a text of excess, replete with 'drek'<sup>15</sup>.

Thus *Pomeroy* can be seen as a baroque construction, intentionally over-elaborate. Borges remarked that the Baroque is 'that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders on its own caricature'.<sup>16</sup> Castro tacitly endorses this when he has Pomeroy say: 'I sensed that things were exhausting their possibilities. We were living in Baroque times, all excess and no centre. But if there was no Olympian perfection then there was a greater cause for redemption.'<sup>17</sup>

### Structure

Turning now to the novel's construction, it can be considered in three major groupings, which correspond fairly closely with the three sections of the book:

- Pomeroy's exploits as an investigative reporter in Hong Kong, the most playful and jokey sections of the book
- Pomeroy's more realist account of his life in Australia, including his childhood in both Hong Kong and Australia, his development, and the

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<sup>14</sup> For example, on page 58 Guitierrez recites the drunk-and-the-blow-up-doll joke, but the novel ends with Frisco telling another brothel joke, which is incomplete, tempting the reader to try to attach significance to it.

<sup>15</sup> This is a familiar Postmodern concern. 'We like books which have a drek in them, matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, not at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a sense of what is going on.' Jim Legasse, 'The Form of the Voice and the Voice of the Form', *Westerly*, March 1980, pp. 97-101. Castro seems only to be pointing out the absurdity of much of what the characters do and say.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by John Barth in 'The Literature of Exhaustion' in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1984, p. 73

<sup>17</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 57

reasons for his 'present' condition (the nominal present of the book). This section centres on Estrellita, his lost and unattainable love.

- a brief coda in which he ventures to Europe as investigative reporter once more and meets his end. This is a bleak and depressing section, increasingly anarchic, as the courier becomes a victim of his own plot.

Like all Castro's novels, *Pomeroy* is non-linear and the three groupings cut in and out of each other. In particular, at page 162 the novel itself loops back to its beginning, with Pomeroy in Rory and Estrellita's house. The intervening 160 pages have been a mixture of flashback and digression.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the novel it is possible to untangle a narrative, but as one reads the novel this is not always immediately possible, and in any case is not the important thing to do.<sup>19</sup>

The darker themes explored in the novel are hinted at in the part titles, with their reference to winter, which seems inappropriate to the opening Australian and Hong Kong sections, but which becomes more appropriate in the European last section of the book. In early draft form the novel was titled *Waiting for Winter*.<sup>20</sup>

Part 1, 'Winter in the Heart' sets the tone of the book, a contemplation of loss of love, post-Estrellita; Part 2, 'Winterfalls of Old' (from an A.E. Housman poem<sup>21</sup>) gives the background to Pomeroy's early life and

<sup>18</sup> Castro jokes about this. 'Well here I am, (at last, I hear you say) well and truly in the present this time, in the flesh. Habeas corpus. In propria persona.' (p. 162) Castro is admitting that the reader will have become somewhat exasperated, and is drawing attention to the dual authorship of Castro/author and Pomeroy/narrator.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Kenneally admitted to reading *Pomeroy* 'wrongly' the first time: 'Brian Castro's new book annoyed me intensely on first reading and pleased me a great deal—in parts—second time around. I think I read it too fast, in search of the story. In my defense [*sic*], this is what most readers will do.' 'Compelled to Connect', *Australian Review of Books*, No. 118, 1990, pp. 15-16

<sup>20</sup> Typescript in Mitchell Library, ML 1933/96, Box 3. As for the new name, it is not apparent that the title has any significance. Naming it for the eponymous protagonist makes it sound like a thriller, of the type *Pomeroy Investigates*. Pomeroy speculates on the origin of his name on page 104 of the novel, where he sees multicultural possibilities: 'French, Pomme Roi; maybe a touch of Jewish, Pomoroy'.

<sup>21</sup> Rory Harrigan is pondering the lines 'And winterfalls of old / Are with me from the past' on page 94 of the novel. Pomeroy/Castro does not like Housman—'Not really my kind of poet' p. 94, he says in a self-conscious comment. The poem is not a great one:

The night is freezing fast  
To-morrow comes December

*continued over page*

relationship with Estrellita; Part 3, 'Waiting for Winter' is the prelude to Pomeroy's death.

A big temptation in reading *Pomeroy* is to treat it as a mystery, to be solved. The detective genre invites this, but Castro is dissembling. The actual 'mystery' is never fully outlined—it is hinted at as involving major pharmaceutical multinationals and corrupt politicians and perhaps the media—nor is it actually 'solved'. We only hear the rumour that Guitierrez is 'blowing the whole syndicate apart'.<sup>22</sup> The motives and actions of the characters are never totally clear. (Fats Pomeroy, King Fisher, Rory Harrigan and Stanford Ward are all involved in scams and deceptions of varying sorts.) The interest is in the broader philosophical issues, but even these are not clear: as always, Castro raises questions rather than provides answers. For this reason it becomes counterproductive to try to fathom out the 'story' as it is unfolding: instead, the reader must 'go with the flow', taking a Keatsian approach to the details. Castro has admitted to building more allusions and puzzles into his novels than any reader could ever hope to untangle, and many of these are in fact red herrings.<sup>23</sup> The achievement is in the accumulation of information that makes us question our ability to solve, while realising, from echoes and resonances, points of identification.

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And winterfalls of old  
Are with me from the past;  
And chiefly I remember  
How Dick would hate the cold

Fall, winter, fall: for he,  
Prompt hand and headpiece clever,  
Has woven a winter robe,  
And made of earth and sea  
His overcoat for ever,  
And wears the turning globe.

A.E. Housman, 'XX', *Last Poems*, Grant Richards, London, 1922

Not only this but most of the poems in Housman's *Last Poems* are melancholy, recalling the losses of the Great War. Housman himself felt defeated: 'it is not likely that I shall ever be impelled to write much more'. Foreword, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> In his lectures F.R. Leavis used to use this as an example of poor poetry (H. Tranter, pers. comm.). This may be why Castro has the plodding Rory fascinated by it. *Pomeroy*, p. 79. It is suggested that the syndicate is supporting the manufacture of a pharmaceutical equivalent of cocaine (for example, see page 166 where Rory 'helps himself to ... furrows of white powder ... It was good enough for Freud, Rory rationalised.')

<sup>23</sup> Speaking about *Double-Wolf*, which was being written at more or less the same time as *Pomeroy*, Castro said: 'One of the great influences on my writing life has been Joyce, and when Joyce said that he was going to provide some clues in his book *Ulysses* for professors for a hundred years to work out, well that was the challenge.' Interview with Dinny O'Hearn, 'Australian Writers 1', *The Bookshow*, SBS; see Appendix 5.

Looking now at the introductory chapter of *Pomeroy* (pages 3 to 9) it can be seen how compressed the writing is. As with much of Castro's work, it is not possible for the reader to appreciate the significance of many of the allusions without several re-readings.

A short epigrammatic opening obliquely suggests the difficulty of life and the possibility of suicide, which itself seems arbitrary and likely to be thwarted. The life/death quandary will remain a theme of the novel throughout. The storyline is introduced, and principal characters Rory Harrigan and Estrellita. The latter is identified early as a symbolic figure:

Estrellita: you could make words of her. A letter. Lettres. Littera. Something read; dropped from her bed. Both beautiful and profane. She was never literal, that was one thing she wasn't.<sup>24</sup>

The punning with her name introduces the idea of life-as-writing: a letter, a letter of the alphabet, *belles lettres*/literature. Someone to be 'read', as *Pomeroy* (a writer, as well as lover) tries to do, before himself being dropped from her bed. (Her name, 'little star' in Portuguese, will be parodied by another character, the dubious Stella Wang.)

*Pomeroy* makes a half-hearted attempt at suicide (page 4) that echoes Evelyn Waugh's similarly pathetic attempt (page 3). *Pomeroy*, who feels a 'compulsion to leap'—here physical, but also metaphorical—is interrupted by a Mr Whippy driver (sounding like Abraham Feingold in *Birds of Passage*) who thinks it an opportune time to pick up a cheap car. Most of this will bypass the reader at this stage, but the introduction sets the wry, self-deprecating tone that will resonate throughout the book.

The narrator then suddenly changes tone, giving a lyrical description of the countryside, in 'ordinary' realist fashion. 'I unhitched the gate over the cattle grid, drove through, caught sight of a brown snake wriggling beneath, went past ceramic cattle looking brittle and hot under shredded trees, sped into pockets of warm air smelling of rust.' This is Castro in sensuous 'Australian realism' mode, making the reader feel the heat and oppressiveness of the Australian countryside. With a glancing ironic

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<sup>24</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 4



comment about his ‘Hong Kong-made styrofoam esky full of Hunter wine’ the realist mode continues for nearly a page until we are brought to a suspenseful stop with a foreboding of doom: ‘I knew I had been remiss in not answering the bird—ignoring an act of kindness’. This is the characteristic telegraphic hint of the thriller genre.

Then another quick change of tone forces the reader into a philosophical mode:

To be surprised. I used to argue with Rory about that. I used to think, and still do, that to be surprised is the object of all life, the point of living. I no longer had surprises; something had closed up, had withdrawn into prescription. I foresaw everything. I foresaw the end of my life. I was living, as some people said, in the recent future.<sup>25</sup>

This blunt change, introduced by a typical Castro sentence fragment, will indeed surprise the reader. Castro here interpolates his own credo that the purpose of writing is to surprise, disrupt, make strange; in giving it to his protagonist, he makes him a mouthpiece for the author. The passage in fact presages the death of Pomeroy, who is spiritually deadened long before his physical end. This tone of ennui lurks throughout the novel just below the surface playfulness.

This philosophical interlude presented, we are returned to the story, and introduced to Stella Wang and her nebulous publication *I.D.*, ‘which stood ambiguously for International Detective, Investigative Dialectics, Indecent Disclosures etc.’, and even, for a struggling writer like Pomeroy/Castro, ‘Income for Destitutes’. The surprise among these puns on ‘identity’ is not the detective names, but the theoretical ‘Investigative Dialectics’, which proves rather apposite once the office staff crank up their office discourse.

Castro hints at the problem of the fact/fiction divide when he has Pomeroy ruminating about his investigative journalism:

As an impressionist I wrote better PR than revelations. Most of my pieces would metamorphose into huge fictions spun out from miniscule facts, facts which became as real to me as the gulls I would feed some mornings along the sea walls ...<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pomeroy, p. 5

<sup>26</sup> Pomeroy, p. 7

The ‘confession’ is itself pregnant with loaded words: Pomeroy uses the word ‘impressionist’, a curious choice to replace ‘journalist’; ‘metamorphose’ glances in the direction of Kafka (alluded to throughout the novel); ‘gull’ is a suggestion that those who believe his fictive ‘impressions’ are themselves dupes. Castro’s wording is rarely innocent or straightforward.

The use of ‘impressionist’ is an example of Castro deliberately undermining his own text. The first use of this word suggests that Pomeroy’s work is insincere or lacking in conviction. ‘I had always felt that the work I did was meaningless ... I was a small fish who did a great impression of big morality.’<sup>27</sup> Then to use ‘impressionist’ to imply that his reports were ‘fictional’—‘better PR than revelations’—brings the added sense of ‘Impressionism’ as an artistic technique that relies on suggestion rather than complete, ‘realistic’ description. It is now hard to decide whether Pomeroy is worrying about his honesty or acknowledging his ability to write compelling fictions. Pomeroy then relates a tangential story about having pretended to be a medical student: he was being ‘an impressionist’ in the sense of acting. The reader cannot tell which sense of the word is most appropriate; though the various meanings are all suggested. The final pun a few lines later—‘I was smart enough to know that impressionists are fleeting’<sup>28</sup>—neatly confuses any progress the reader may be making. Is this a serious comment on Pomeroy’s self-awareness (‘I know my position in the scheme of things’), a proleptic hint at his impending death, or an elaborate scheme for the author to work in a pun? While the resonance is becoming portentous, the pun compromises the gravity of the situation. The reader does not know whether to read seriously, or read for the jokes. Should we empathise with Pomeroy, or laugh at his throwaway verbal facility?<sup>29</sup>

Returning to the story, we are introduced to Estrellita in person, in a cross between detective thriller and plain realist prose. ‘When Estrellita opened the door ...’. Estrellita, in a significant example of slippage of language, mispronounces her former lover’s name: the ‘I love’ of *Jaime* becomes a

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<sup>27</sup> Pomeroy, p. 6

<sup>28</sup> Pomeroy, p. 7

<sup>29</sup> Several reviewers mention this problem of empathy: generally they conclude that they *do* sympathise with Pomeroy as a character *in spite of* the novel’s playing with their responses.

more prosaic *Jamie*. Into this mixture of comic realism, Castro inserts throwaway observations, some of which elude comprehension (other than at a symbolic level); for example, 'I was living in an age when everyone died ... suddenly there was the shock of incompleteness'. Any serious intent this observation may have is immediately challenged by 'She offered me a drink as though we were in a movie.' Pomeroy himself is aware that this life that he himself is narrating to us is an unreliable phantasmagoria of ideas and imaginings. The reader is offered various ways of 'seeing' or 'framing' what is going on, but no stable position.

The notion of life-writing is further amplified with another author/narrator observation:

It was never any use to go back. Not if you tried to believe a linear life was the healthiest, even if the most deceitful. At Rory and Estrellita's wedding I had watched my life come apart, like the time my father had his hand up the skirt of my girlfriend.<sup>30</sup>

What seems to be a serious attempt to communicate is undercut with the comparison to his father's lechery, which is then amplified into self-deprecating jokes about Mercedes. To round off the opening chapter, Castro leaves the reader with a very pregnant impregnability: 'I felt the deceit of a premature darkness and its crude alliance with the treachery of the heart.'<sup>31</sup> While this is indeed a very poetic observation, its lack of context leaves the reader to ponder over its significance.

And so, after nine pages, Castro has probably both captivated and baffled his reader with his dense, allusive writing. Much of it will become clear on a second reading of the novel, but even then, the prose has a poetic force that eludes easy explanation, and the looping of each idea and narrative segment back into others sets the scene of the complex puzzle that sustains the narrative. The punning tries to exhaust the possibilities of the words, and their juxtapositions, and the reader will be rightly suspicious of words and their meanings for the next 200 pages.

### **The three sections of *Pomeroy***

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<sup>30</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 9

<sup>31</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 9

The first third of *Pomeroy* deals with Pomeroy as an investigative journalist. This is a parody of the detective genre, in the Raymond Chandler/Sam Spade/Humphrey Bogart tradition. Pomeroy is portrayed as a world-weary type mixing with hard-bitten journalists in a seedy world of power and corruption, but Pomeroy is more of an anti-hero than a Hollywood detective. The very opening of the novel suggests this world-weary, whisky-whetted wisecracking:

Life is a blank sheet you dampened with whisky. Let go, recharge the glass if not the batteries, they said. A new lease of life.

They were wrong. At forty<sup>32</sup> I couldn't afford the rent and found myself hauling on life with a slender toilet chain.

This particular life stuck with me, tried to pull me under.

Evelyn Waugh once wrote a suicide note, swam out to sea, was stung by a jellyfish and retreated home. I might have had the same tendencies once, and was flippant about it. It was a childhood condition. If you don't succeed after twenty there was no use trying.<sup>33</sup>

The action is more intellectual than physical, the characters trying too hard to fit into a genre that doesn't suit them ('It was like the Paris-Marseilles express. Whole lot of fellows in trench coats looking desperate.'<sup>34</sup>) and much of the talking is jokey discussion of literary theory, written in a parody of the wise-cracking private eye. As in *Birds of Passage*, the characters occasionally express their views on literary theory out of context, and we are treated to some verbal banter that has only a tenuous connection with the events of 'the story'. (More inter-genericism?—the novel as literary theory textbook?)

*Pomeroy* is set in a world of investigative journalists seeking the 'truth' about goings-on in the Hong Kong underworld, but becomes a metaphoric exploration of the protagonist's wanderings through the philosophical underworld, where truth is relative and fact and fiction coalesce. The metaphor is spelled out by Frisco Guitierrez, the voluble and expansive journalist to whom Pomeroy plays a more terse foil.

'That's why we're in the prison house of language. For us ... there is really nothing outside the incriminating text. Just think ... the mobster as reader. We are the point of his paranoia. How can we make him believe we

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<sup>32</sup> Castro was nearing forty at the time he was writing this novel, which was published in 1990 when he was 40. The marked up copy of the final typescript for typesetting is preserved in ML 1933/96 Box; it was sent for setting in 1989.

<sup>33</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 3

<sup>34</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 13

are dead? That is what is called the coming together of theory and praxis—a dialectic of risk.<sup>35</sup>

So for Guitierrez, the spy/detective world can be doubled (or parodied) by the literary world of imprisoning words, where the actors do not exist outside of the text, where the mobster could be thought of as an external reader controlling the actors, who cannot ‘speak’ outside of the text, and where the cut and thrust of goodies and baddies is turned into a philosophical debate about theory and thought versus action and accomplishment. Just as this can be seen as an only half-serious metaphor—Guitierrez is later called a ‘motormouth’ by Pomeroy—we cannot quite be sure of where Castro the novelist stands on this matter: Guitierrez’s wisecracking speech is hard to decipher, and sounds like a parody of half-baked theoretical discourse in the mouths of pseudo-academics.

The ‘story’ in the first part of the novel is not the sole focus for the reader in terms of its mysteries, as we would expect in a detective novel, though it is well enough constructed in its own right and not without its own suspense. What the reader is forced to do is work out the motivations of the characters. The focus is firmly on Pomeroy, though he does his best to avoid scrutiny, but the riddles thrown up by Carter ‘Boy’ Wong and Stella Wang provide the intellectual grist. Not surprisingly, the resolution of Stella Wang’s ‘identity’—a construct that is hybrid and formed by loss, both physical and interpersonal—provides a powerful parallel to Pomeroy’s own searching, and brings to a close the first narrative of the novel. Like Pomeroy, Stella sees her life as strange enough to be fiction, and it is difficult for her to ‘follow the plot’. Pomeroy ‘could see she was playing out a drama all her own which didn’t read the same way as the script written in the real world. I did feel pity for her ...’. Stella admits to Pomeroy that she hired him so that he ‘could rediscover’ her: ‘I needed you to *see me*’.<sup>36</sup> ‘Seeing’ is a repeated theme of the novel: the position of viewing is significant, even if not understood—Pomeroy goes to a lookout to ‘see’ Estrellita through a telescope. Is this a symbolic gesture of unattainability, or a conscious act of deferral? Elsewhere in the novel

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<sup>35</sup> Pomeroy, p. 13

<sup>36</sup> Pomeroy, p. 73. The idea of Pomeroy ‘seeing’ Stella is doubly significant in that he *has* seen her before (as Carter), and she needs him to *see* her physically and ontologically as a new person.

Amando points out the importance of the gaze, in his exposition of anamorphosis.

‘Anamorphosis was the creation of distorted images which looked normal when perceived with an anamorphoscope ... The same process could be accomplished in the imagination via the *gaze*, a different way of seeing ... You want to see yourself as your own invention, but unceasingly what you look at reflects an emptiness ... a hollow into which your existence falls ... a gap unbreachable by the self, a zero ... “madness” is not simple metamorphosis, “madness” ... is METAPHOR, a gap that is not only between word and image. We have lost the ability to see. Now all that remains is a kind of vague uneasiness, a mourning for the loss of vision.’<sup>37</sup>

The first section is then a mystery/thriller in which the problems are not the solving riddles of physical nature (‘what is going on in Hong Kong’) but existential riddles, cast in a framework of loss of view and loss of language.

Castro also uses the novel as an interrogation of mythmaking. In another ‘didactic’ section, Guitierrez and Pomeroy debate myth.<sup>38</sup> Guitierrez suggests that Pomeroy will be like a cub reporter, not knowing the ropes.

‘Stella told me a few things,’ I said. I always layered the light with the heavy in the first round. ‘One thing about crime, it’s closely tied in with myth, and myth is pretty international.’

‘How do you mean?’

I’d caught him with a nice cultural jab.

‘The least realistic people in the world are criminals. They tend to follow codes.’

‘That’s because myth is tied to money,’ Frisco said, and money tries to *represent*. It drowns in its own abstraction. Realism is a hoax anyway, though it tries to be respectable. But myth interests me,’ Frisco said, his eyes squinting. ‘Innocence last summer. Someone could market that as a fragrance.’

‘They already have.’

‘That, I suppose, is the essence of crime.’ He stopped to ponder over his fingers. ‘And of art ... knowing the irony that there is no innocence and that people believe it but can’t help themselves. What do they call it? The necessary idiocy. Jail’s full of necessary idiots. You ever been in jail?’

‘No. But I’ve made a few visits.’

‘Jail is pure theatre. Pretty damned unreal—and terrifying.’<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Pomeroy, p. 141

<sup>38</sup> The exchange actually begins with Guitierrez poking fun at Pomeroy for having been away for 25 years and probably having forgotten how to speak Chinese: these are of course self-reflexive jokes about Castro, who would have spent nearly this amount of time away from Hong Kong before returning for any length, and whose Cantonese was no doubt somewhat rusty, but not forgotten.

<sup>39</sup> Pomeroy, p. 15

This banter is so quick-fire and parodic that it is hard to know just how seriously to take these points. Castro suggests that we use things that we choose to value as signs, symbols, representations to construct myths of our world, even though at the same time we realise that the representations are arbitrary, not absolute. Crime is posited as a metaphor for life/reality: crime puts value on money as its driving symbol, even though it is not in itself of value, just a convenient representation of value. Crime works according to codes. For Castro any system of attaching value to signs or symbols (codes, semiotics) is fraught with the same problems of relativism or arbitrariness, and there is no sure way to get from theory—the mental part of trying to understand life—to praxis—the putting into action of our thoughts and desires. Jail is full of ‘idiots’ who confuse theatre/myth with ‘reality’. The tension between us realising the irony that innocence is lost/unattainable and needing to act, rather than falling into inaction/paralysis (as tends to happen to Castro characters), is the root of existential angst.

This passage also demonstrates how Castro’s punning keeps drawing the reader off in different directions and running back over previous ground in a confusing way. The verbal sparring of Pomeroy and Guitierrez is linked to the theoretical with ‘cultural jab’. When Guitierrez tangentially suggests ‘Innocence Last Summer’ as a suitable name for a perfume, Pomeroy spoils the fun by saying that it has already been done (the repetition/staleness theme of Postmodernism), before Guitierrez reconnects with crime by punning on ‘fragrance’ and ‘essence’. Castro then draws attention to his own essay, ‘The Necessary Idiocy’,<sup>40</sup> by introducing its title in connection with jail, which itself is portrayed as a sort of ‘theatre of the absurd’. The whole metaphor is summed up as terrifying, echoing the terror of existence. Once again, the reader is left to fathom what of this is serious. The looping back and exhaustion of the symbols leaves the reader without an obvious line of thought.

The banter continues, reading morality as myth.

‘It’s based on voluntary blindness. The culture industry and the judiciary. You see them feeding each other. Magistrates reading Raymond Chandler, winking at Triad bosses. It’s become a way of life. Crime as fiction.’...<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> ‘Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom’, pp. 5-7

<sup>41</sup> Pomeroy, p. 16

In Postmodern fashion Castro is not afraid to put some of his arguments into a mouthpiece, with little more than a glance towards incorporating them 'realistically' into the story. The mouthpiece here is Guitierrez, who pushes the line that our mores have no underlying, absolute moral basis, and any problems we have are 'aesthetic' ones, that is, failure of execution, rather than inherently right or wrong.

'For a while you too cared for money,' the girl said to Guitierrez.

'Who doesn't care for money? ... But being that positive about culture forced you into unhealthy reconciliations. Old debts have to be repaid. Besides, you *reduce* everything, my dear. All right, I have to live. There's no pension plan or unemployment benefits in this town.'

'As if *you* would ever come to that,' the girl said. 'Your politics are gilt-edged. At least *I* don't venture into hypocrisy.'

'Hypocrisy?' Frisco shouted. 'The point I'm making is that there's a basic puritanism about any society that seeks solace for conscience in myth. That's the ultimate in hypocrisy. Artists as well as criminals drive rented cars; they don't care what they smash. Praxis, Pomeroy, is the first premise. Culture needs to be criticised; it doesn't need protecting. Maybe there's a point and maybe there isn't. But that's an aesthetic problem, not a moral one.'<sup>42</sup>

This outburst culminates in an expression of Castro's own central premise, that praxis, or enactment—or putting it more simply, just doing something—is more important than simply theorising, and that all of our beliefs, all of society, needs constant re-evaluation. As Guitierrez points out, our culture should be re-evaluated—i.e. *criticised*—constantly. To do nothing is, in Castro's terms, amoral. We must be constantly 'pushing everything into the conceptual light', not necessarily finding fault, but testing and re-assessing.

Frisco was a motormouth, I saw that without much effort. He was both arrogant and likable in his spirit of opposition, but he pushed everything into the conceptual light, and there were some things that simply dwelt in the dark. He was frothing. He did something at Oxford. Fine arts? Did they offer a poncey subject like that there?

I took a course once and had a murderer for a colleague, a real case. He'd knifed a woman he thought had crossed him. Then in jail he knifed a warder. The other inmates egged him on. He was a passionate man. But he was old and they let him out to do the course. One day I brought in some Botticelli prints. I showed them to him while the lecturer droned on about something called metafiction or metabolism, I can't remember. He looked at my prints. His eyes narrowed. He hawked. He spat on the floor.

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<sup>42</sup> Pomeroy, pp. 16-17



Phlegm veined with blood. He said just one word: 'Serenity.' He was the greatest art critic I'd ever met.<sup>43</sup>

There is, in Castro's world, no need for elaborate theory. The convict's straightforward 'Serenity' is both a sufficient and passionate summing up of the aesthetic world he is evaluating. Castro consistently drops droll insults—'poncy subject', 'metafiction or metabolism'—to indicate his dislike of *mere* textbook theorising.<sup>44</sup>

The real and fiction are closely related. In fact Castro's view is that we both interpret and create each from the other. Guitierrez continues his exposition:

'What are you writing these days, Pomeroy?' Frisco asked.  
 Dare I say a novel? Fragments? Epiphanies? God forbid. Fictions? It sounded too much like Guitierrez.  
 'A story.'  
 'About what?'  
 I hated that question. 'About an obsession.'  
 'God,' Frisco said. 'You're further gone than I expected.' ...  
 'That's retirement material,' Frisco laughed. 'Phew. That's *convalescent* material. It smells like a novel.'  
 'What do you mean?' ...  
 'Surely you write novels only after you've had some sort of nervous breakdown?'

'I thought I was in the middle of one.'  
 Frisco laughed. That cooled things down.<sup>45</sup>

Pomeroy does indeed feel like he is the middle of his own life-novel, 'writing' the story of himself and his obsessional quest for Estrellita.

How much should I reveal? Doesn't he know that I saw my life as prescribed already, as an endless dissimulation?  
 ... An investigation like this has nothing to do with morality or hypocrisy or any of the garbage that goes with that. We need someone like you who can work the system ...  
 'Are you talking about treason or amorality?'  
 'Neither. I'm talking about myth. About that myth called the honest writer. I'm talking about autobiography.'

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<sup>43</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 17

<sup>44</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Castro is well-read in literary and cultural theory, and values the stimulation and exchange of ideas theory provides; he is only complaining about those people for whom theory becomes the end in itself, rather than an intellectual tool.

<sup>45</sup> *Pomeroy*, pp. 18-19

‘Autobiography?’  
 ‘Precisely, but I don’t like the term.’  
 ‘I don’t follow.’  
 ‘Poor fellow. Let me spell it out ... Theory and practice. You become what you write. It cracks open mysteries. That technique has never failed.’<sup>46</sup>

Pomeroy is therefore portrayed as a working example of fiction, not just someone who is writing a novel in his spare time, but someone whose life is being lived out as auto-biography.<sup>47</sup> Pomeroy the writer is ‘both inside and outside’, not just in terms of his returning to the Hong Kong world of investigative journalism, but as a person constructing or writing his own life, being both the actor and the subject (‘actee’). (This is emphasised by having Pomeroy speaking alternately in first and third person voices.) And of course, being a mouthpiece for Castro, who is himself writing his own life, as a job, and as a way of seeing himself in relation to the world. (The auto-biographical aspects of *Pomeroy* are discussed later in this chapter.)

For Pomeroy (and therefore Castro), the key to living is invention through imagination. Guitierrez, he notes ‘does everything rationally and logically and takes a long time about it ... never makes a move without calculating everything. He is not a speculator; he has no imagination.’<sup>48</sup> In contrast to Pomeroy:

I am not like him at all. I feel a hundred theories firing at me from all different directions and I follow my nose. Only connect, a famous novelist once said. In my world everything connects. That is why things sometimes go wrong, and I have these breakdowns. The system gets overloaded. Frisco never feels the pressure of this. He raves about the Enlightenment, Rationalism, morality, belief, Nietzsche. But he doesn’t *feel* anything. When he tries, it is so prosaic and cliché-ridden it makes me want to laugh. Oh, Frisco is erudite.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Pomeroy*, pp. 19-20

<sup>47</sup> Castro’s essay ‘Auto/biography’ presents the theoretical background to this example-in-action.

<sup>48</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 28. Guitierrez’s name seems to come from T.S. Eliot. In his poem ‘Animula’, Eliot tells us to ‘Pray for Guitierrez, avid of speed and power’. (*Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber, London 1963, pp. 113-114) Eliot said Guitierrez was meant to represent a ‘type of career, the successful person of the machine age’. (B.C. Southam, *A Student’s Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, Faber, London, 1968, p. 145). Note, however, that the Eliot’s spelling differs from Castro’s.

<sup>49</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 29. The ‘famous novelist’ is E.M. Forster, whose novel *Howard’s End* has as its epigraph ‘Only connect’. The novel is concerned with relationships and the possibility of reconciliation of opposites.

For Pomeroy life must be passionately experienced, vigorously imagined, and at times things will not work out;

Frisco would forever outwit himself, I am thinking, because he never doubts, never becomes puzzled about the species of which he forms part ... *homo perplexus*.

Pomeroy is a Castro species, *Homo perplexus*. His world will never be *resolved*.

Another characteristic that *Pomeroy* shares with other Castro novels is the doubling of stories and/or characters. In *Pomeroy*, Stella serves as a counterpoint to the Estrellita/Pomeroy story. Pomeroy first meets this mysterious person as the young schoolmate Carter Wong,<sup>50</sup> who trades in schoolboy pornography and whose sexual advances to Pomeroy go unrecognised.<sup>51</sup> In a prolepsis, Pomeroy comments before he knows the truth about Stella that 'Carter Wong's effeminacy resembles my boss Stella Wang's masculinity'.<sup>52</sup>

Stella's predicament is not just physical but metaphysical. In her 'unveiling' she tells Pomeroy that you can only know love

when you're on the verge of becoming something else ...

You wouldn't understand that some people feel the need to belong to what is most natural. The way you eat, sleep, fart, piss. You don't think about it do you? You don't have to. But for some people everything, all the bodily functions have this excess of thought that goes with them. Every act is like contemplating the divide. Trapped in a man's body with a penis the size of a slightly larger than normal clitoris, the hormones gone terribly wrong, nothing can be understood simply. Everything is magnified in this huge, natural world. Belonging, Pomeroy, becomes the most important procedure of life. No-one is simply just a person. There is almost an extravagance of detail. Details you wouldn't even notice which are extremely important. Yes, you might even call me an extreme conformist.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The names seem to be significant: 'Wong' quite easily metamorphoses into 'Wang', as a new identity is generated: 'Stella' suggests comparisons with 'Estrellita'. 'Carter' suggests the mystery writer, Carter Brown. Pornography is another representation in the novel of voyeurism and 'viewing'.

<sup>51</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 26

<sup>52</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 26

<sup>53</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 72

Once again we encounter a character stepping somewhat out of role<sup>54</sup> to give a lecture to the reader. The lesson is about ‘belonging’, being able to construct an identity that joins a person into the world, but needing always to be in transition to do so, and being always askance.

The obverse to this story and the ultimate focus of the novel is Pomeroy’s love for his cousin Estrellita. This is the subject of the second part of the novel, which ranges over Pomeroy’s life in Australia and his boyhood memories of China. His love for Estrellita is not requited, but not because Estrellita does not like him. She is a woman looking for her own destiny,<sup>55</sup> and she feels she does not fit in with Pomeroy’s needs and wants. They are somewhat star-crossed—fated to have different paths, which although they intersect at many points cannot run in tandem. Theirs is a metaphysical mismatch, as Pomeroy wanders seemingly aimlessly through life without a job or a purpose, and Estrellita compromises herself in a materially comfortable but unsatisfying life with Rory Harrigan. They spark off each other, but cannot form a stable long-term relationship. Pomeroy suggests that this may have something to do with growing older; he feels that she changes: ‘she was beginning to spin in the opposite direction, out of my sphere’.<sup>56</sup>

They have a passionate and fulfilling sexual relationship (despite being first cousins), and the impossibility of their relationship is tied to the impossibility of achieving the desired. Estrellita becomes a broad symbol not only of the eternal feminine, but of unattainable desire in life (which is echoed in the process of writing). For example, Pomeroy’s first sex with Estrellita is described rather unusually:

... she uncovered herself awkwardly, crying softly: Write me! Write me! But it was my imagination. She didn’t really say anything ...<sup>57</sup>

Quite plainly, Pomeroy wants something more than just physical love from Estrellita. In fact, despite her ‘betrayal’ in marrying Rory, Estrellita is

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<sup>54</sup> This itself becomes parody in Castro’s rococo style: ‘Stella came towards me with a smile playing on her lips. I could imagine the shadow of moustache beneath the makeup. Her/his hand was tucked into her/his kimono. Did s/he have a gun in there? A knife?’ (p. 72)

<sup>55</sup> In some ways reminiscent of Mary who leaves Shan in *Birds of Passage*.

<sup>56</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 111

<sup>57</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 89

in her own way faithful to Pomeroy, refusing to have a child if she cannot have his.

... I wanted a child. She said: it'd be better if you wrote a story instead. I did, and called it 'Estrellita'. She said that she liked the story, but that it wasn't her. I was disappointed. 'Isn't that how it always turns out?' she said mysteriously. Perhaps she meant that words were always still-born. 'I would love to have your child,' she sighed. 'But it would be disappointing. Freakish, perhaps even interesting for a while, but ultimately disappointing.'

She said it as though she had done me a huge favour, and her cold-blooded interest in genetics rang alarm bells.<sup>58</sup>

Even within the novel she becomes a symbol of enigma: 'Estrellita exchanged nothing; her meaning was her own prohibition.'<sup>59</sup>

The theme of unattainability persists through the novel. Pomeroy's Uncle Amando provides another subplot, a counterfoil to Fats. He is a rather doomed, romantic figure, and in some ways seems to be a Castro 'Romantic ideal'.<sup>60</sup> He is always puzzling away at the world. A 'European man lost and isolated in the East, silted with written history and choking on the dust of ages' he is the opposite of Pomeroy's father.

He appeared to be in a constant state of bewilderment, and wasn't this, I was later to be told again, the finest state of humanity?

My father had none of it; no bewilderment, no whimsicality, no sadness. He was an optimist devoted to gain. He had faith.<sup>61</sup>

The first two 'sections' of the novel repeat and echo each other, forming a tangled but consistent resonance. But the increasingly oppressive feeling of connectivity and looping back to the past usher in the final section. Pomeroy feels bound to the past, almost determined by it.

... the enigma of return. That really broke me, the misplacement of time, the displacement of space. I kept coming back to the past.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Pomeroy*, pp. 100-101. A telling passage: Castro's first published short story was indeed 'Estrellita' (published in the *Union Recorder* in 1973 while he was still at university). As explained in Chapter 11 (see note 24), Estrellita is both symbol and person. (The comments about 'freakish' and 'genetics' relate to the fact that Pomeroy and Estrellita are first cousins.)

<sup>59</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 30

<sup>60</sup> Amando seems to be in relation to Fats what Pomeroy is to Guitierrez: Romantic quester versus grounded pragmatist.

<sup>61</sup> *Pomeroy*, pp. 23-24

<sup>62</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 88

In the final European section, although Pomeroy is nominally finalising the Hong Kong mystery, he is both depressed and isolated; the fun and the parody of the first part of the Hong Kong mystery have gone, both in the character of Pomeroy and in the story itself. This part of the novel does not seem to integrate with the preceding sections.

The action is rather hard to follow, and culminates in the seemingly inexplicable death of Pomeroy at the hands of mysterious thugs. Castro has explained the ending as a homage to Walter Benjamin (his words echo Benjamin's; see footnote), but it is hard to see how the average reader would be able to make such a connection, and even given the clue the sense remains obscure.<sup>63</sup> As he is dying Pomeroy has a vision of history exploding and propelling into the future, backwards. In a world-weary gesture, Pomeroy accedes to his 'compulsion to leap', which was introduced at the start of the novel. It is hard not to see this gesture as negative—the two words 'Already written' imply a sense that life is finished, and ultimately determined—and therefore a suicide. But the leap may be the uncertain Kierkegaardian leap into *possibility*, refusing to be bound by the exigencies of the world. Perhaps, in this sense, it is a final defiance, a victory of still being able to act.

### Autobiography

Castro has included in the novel material from his own life, but although he admits that the novel contains a lot of 'thinly disguised autobiography',<sup>64</sup> we should not read this as literal, historical autobiography.

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<sup>63</sup> Benjamin explains it as follows. 'A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught on his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.' Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, Jonathan Cape, London, 1970; pp. 259-160 (See Appendix 8 for a reproduction of *Angelus Novus*.)

<sup>64</sup> 'Auto/biography', p. 26

Castro has warned us not to treat any of the material as other than fictional, nor to try to 'verify' material outside of the text itself. The reader needs to trust the text and his/her own interaction with it, without recourse to an author to 'validate' a reading.

To what extent do we, despite sundry post-structuralist critiques, still depend however covertly or unconsciously, upon the idea of an [*sic*] homologous fit between author and text, where an author can be called upon to authenticate aspects of our reading and interpretation of their texts?<sup>65</sup>

This is not a claim that the author is 'dead', but that he inhabits it as myth, a *striving after truth*, but not 'fact'. As Castro explains his position:

I shall begin by quite categorically stating that unlike some writers, I come from a family whose main export is storytelling but whose main obsession is with truth.<sup>66</sup>

In view of what I have just said, it may seem perverse to look at autobiographical elements in the novel. Yet these do illustrate that Castro sees a connection between life and art, and it is worth examining how some detail has been incorporated to make *Pomeroy* engage with the concerns of real people. Some 'facts' correspond very closely to Castro's life. These include some of the memories of his childhood in China, his multilingual upbringing, his returning to Hong Kong 'as a tourist', with his Cantonese perhaps rusty but still intact, and his growing up in Australia which included holidays from boarding school spent with schoolmates' families.

But the 'facts' have been adapted to build a novel. Pomeroy speaks of

the two Asian languages I picked up at University without picking up anything else and the three with which I had the good fortune to grow up ...<sup>67</sup>

Castro had English, Portuguese and Cantonese as family languages, and studied French at university (not 'two Asian languages'), where he certainly did 'pick up' a literary education and an MA degree.

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<sup>65</sup> 'Auto/biography', p. 24

<sup>66</sup> 'Auto/biography', p. 24

<sup>67</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 6

The family background is also a mixture of 'fact' and fiction. Compare the novel with Castro's own recollections:

*Pomeroy*

I had every sickness you could think of when I was a child. I had hepatitis at the age of six, I had tonsillitis, bronchitis, pneumonia, typhoid, even cholera, and they said I would not survive. Sachiko kept burning rose petals in a porcelain dish to appease her ancient gods.

Most people had these illnesses after the war ... When I convalesced at home, my father made me up a bed behind a screen. On the other side of the screen they played jazz, talked, drank and smoked. I was lulled by these activities.<sup>68</sup>

*Castro*

There were two [influences], I think, illness and typhoons. Both were an attempt not to have to go to school. I felt that by being ill you could lie back and actually absorb a lot of what was going on around you: the talk, the adult world that you weren't privileged [to be part of]. But you also read a lot and, you know, if I had some advice for young writers I would say don't be laid back, be laid up!

I had every illness under the sun. Between the ages of five and ten I had cholera, hepatitis, I had pneumonia on and off, I wasn't expected to live. At times.<sup>69</sup>

'Fats' Pomeroy is modelled on Castro's father, a larger-than-life person, but is a lovingly exaggerated portrait. In a newspaper article,<sup>70</sup> Castro sketched the following 'story' of his father. His father, Castro said, never wept, except for joy. He liked horse racing, and was a 'streetfighter' in the French Shanghai of the 1930s. He was born in 1899, significantly, the same year as Borges: Castro likens his father's life to a Borges story. He married a French girl 15 years younger than he, and once, while courting, he burned down her parents' orchard in a fit of pique. 'His first wife was to die of a cocaine overdose on a snow-covered tennis court in Mukden.'<sup>71</sup>

Shanghai in the late 1930s was under Japanese military control. His father 'helped smuggle plates for the printing of [counterfeit] money, while working for De La Rue and Company, poling up the Whangpoo in a tiny sampan on moonless nights.' In one escapade, being chased by police he

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<sup>68</sup> *Pomeroy*, p. 25

<sup>69</sup> *Between the Lines*, Caroline Baum interviews Brian Castro. Appendix 7

<sup>70</sup> 'Passions : Brian Castro on Grief', *The Age Saturday Extra*; 1993; 30 October p.3, 6



'led them upstairs to his grandmother's house and while she coaxed them with tea and gave them racing tips, leapt off the balcony, his umbrella opened in para-Chaplinesque optimism. He fractured an ankle but made good his escape by hobbling on to a passing trolley-car.'<sup>72</sup>

The 'real' Castro père (though we cannot tell how much Castro's essays and interviews embellish and romanticise the real person) is described thus:

I can still see him now, stepping on the wharf at Pyrmont ... standing there in his three-piece suit, two-toned shoes, fedora and sunglasses. He looked vaguely like Truman Capote.

My father represented everything that was Western. His parents were Portuguese but he was born and raised in Shanghai and moved to Hong Kong just before the war.

He believed in progress, spoke of 'good taste' and 'style' and was a jazz musician. He had visited the Chicago of Al Capone ...<sup>73</sup>

Note that Castro sees his father as a symbol of Western culture. His mother, on the other hand, was a symbol of the Orient. 'My mother symbolised everything that was Eastern. Serious and concerned, she was dedicated to survival.'<sup>74</sup> She appears to have been a sad figure: 'She was the guru of grief, the matriarch of mourning, the doyenne of depression. Her middle name? Dolores.'<sup>75</sup>

When these sketches are fitted into *Pomeroy*, however, some changes are made. Castro makes Pomeroy the son of 'Fats's' *first* wife, who dies of a cocaine overdose. Sachiko, with 'her dumb acceptance of fate' (p. 24), and who 'scarcely ever said a word to me' (p. 21), seems to be modelled on Castro's actual mother. Pomeroy's father dies while attempting to leap 'with characteristic bravado' from one ship to another (p. 28); this fate actually befell Castro's paternal grandfather.

But Castro's 'excuse' for embellishing is attributed to the Portuguese influence: 'After all, Latin culture has always believed that life is an

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<sup>71</sup> 'Passions : Brian Castro on Grief', p. 3

<sup>72</sup> 'Passions : Brian Castro on Grief', p. 3

<sup>73</sup> 'Memoirs of a Displaced Person' *National Times*, 6-12 January 1984

<sup>74</sup> 'Memoirs of a Displaced Person' *National Times*, 6-12 January 1984

invention. You make it or you fake it.<sup>76</sup> The Latin inventiveness is portrayed in the dreams and schemes of Pomeroy's father and Uncle Amando, including 'The Great Stock Market Hoax'. Castro had a real model in his Uncle Umberto, whom he describes as a fake priest who went into the carwash business. 'Hyper-reality was the business of my Uncle Umberto.'<sup>77</sup>

Castro also links *Pomeroy* to his previous novel, *Birds of Passage*, which is named in passing on page 7: 'Like a bird of passage, without a landfall ...'. Amando's wife is the fierce Fatiminha, a name familiar from the earlier novel, though this earlier character seems to have little in common with Estrellita's obstructive mother. Not only do real life and fiction mix, but various fictions mix.

These connections with Castro's life illustrate that he uses his writing to explore real people, though not as 'real people'. He interrogates the 'myth' of his father, his uncles, his youth, his country.

### Castro and Postmodernism

The question may well be asked, is *Pomeroy* a 'Postmodern' novel? As one might anticipate, the answer to this will be both 'yes' and 'no'. Castro does not like the term being applied to his writing, but it is obvious that his writing is in many respects self-conscious in a way that qualifies it for the tag 'Postmodern'. Again, the question becomes a matter of definition of terms.

Castro prefers to see himself as a 'high modernist'.<sup>78</sup> He identifies most closely with writers like Joyce and Beckett, and looks back to Kafka. But then he firmly resists the idea of categorisation—as I have explained earlier in the remarks on his anti-genre stance—and would consider himself as

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<sup>75</sup> 'Passions : Brian Castro on Grief', *The Age Saturday Extra*; 1993; 30 October p.3, 6

<sup>76</sup> 'Auto/biography', p. 25

<sup>77</sup> 'Auto/biography', 1995, p. 25. The 'hyper-reality' allusion makes a connection to Umberto Eco.

<sup>78</sup> Interview MD 27 November

part of a broad tradition or church, but not an acolyte of any particular author(s).<sup>79</sup>

I will not attempt to classify Castro as *definitively* Postmodern or not. Different theorists use different systems of classification, and any label given to an author is an artefact of the taxonomic system used. But it is obvious that Castro shares many of the attributes that are often associated with Postmodern fiction. For example, Patricia Waugh prefers to define Postmodern writing as *metafiction*, 'a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.<sup>80</sup> This definition would neatly encapsulate Brian Castro's fiction. Brian McHale, on the other hand, makes the distinction that Modernism is characterised by epistemological concerns, and Postmodernism by ontological.<sup>81</sup> Castro's epistemological concerns always lead to ontological ones, and so by McHale's definition Castro is, again, in the Postmodernism camp.

I would like to use the views of the American novelist John Barth to illustrate Castro's relationship to 'Postmodernism' as a broad ethos, partly because I see some similarities with both writers' approach to their writing, but mainly because Barth has also strived to avoid being labelled. (He is, by the way, mentioned in passing in *Pomeroy*.<sup>82</sup>)

Barth has written two important essays on Postmodernism. The first 'The Literature of Exhaustion'<sup>83</sup> was a consideration of the position of the contemporary novelist in 1967, which canvassed many of the ideas of Postmodernism, and the second, 'The Literature of Replenishment'<sup>84</sup> was

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<sup>79</sup> 'I can't say an author influences me so much as an individual work.' Letter to MD, 19 June 1997

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, Routledge, London, 1984, p. 2

<sup>81</sup> For example: 'In postmodernist texts ... epistemology is *backgrounded*, as the price for foregrounding ontology.' Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Methuen, New York, 1987, p. 11. McHale argues that both types of concerns (epistemological, ontological) co-exist within texts, but one or the other becomes the 'dominant'; see pp. 3-25

<sup>82</sup> 'It was French, by some guy called Barth or Barthes or Barthelme.' *Pomeroy*, p. 71

<sup>83</sup> 'The Literature of Exhaustion' in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1984, pp. 62-76. This essay was first published in *Atlantic* in 1967.

<sup>84</sup> 'The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction' in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1984, pp. 193-206. The essay was first published in *Atlantic* in 1980.

in some ways a reconsideration of the first essay, and an attempt to place Postmodernism. In the later essay Barth admits that he did not, and does not, really know what the term means. He wrote the essay because ‘in response to being frequently labelled a postmodernist writer, I set about to learn what postmodernism is’. His broad conclusion is that there is no consensus.

What I quickly discovered is that while some of the writers tagged as postmodernist, myself included, happen to take the tag with some seriousness, a principal activity of postmodernist critics ... consists in disagreeing about what postmodernism is or ought to be, and thus about who should be admitted to the club—or clubbed into submission ...<sup>85</sup>

The situation has not changed much in the subsequent years: the avant-garde theorist Terry Eagleton has devoted a whole book<sup>86</sup> to considering what the term might mean, and with similar lack of success if one wants easy definitions. A useful distinction that Eagleton does make in his Preface, is to separate ‘postmodernism’ as an attempt at producing a theoretical and philosophical system from ‘postmodernity’, the general approach to thinking that pertains to contemporary human endeavour. While the idea of producing a workable theoretical system seems impossible—after all, the tenets of Postmodernism are more or less self-undermining—human thought moves on from paradigm to paradigm with time, and we have moved further down the track from Modernism.

At the risk of confusing Eagleton’s terminology, I suggest that what he outlines as the *overall thought culture* of postmodernity—which I will refer to simply as Postmodernism—is essentially the broad definition that is used by Barth, and which by inference from his own work applies to Castro’s view. Eagleton’s definition is:

Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable,

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<sup>85</sup> ‘The Literature of Replenishment’, p. 194. I included the last few words of the quote because, like Castro, Barth is very fond of the joke and the play on words. On another point of similarity, Barth mock-critically recalls that on one of his earliest pieces of writing a critic wrote: ‘Mr Barth alters that modernist dictum, “the plain reader be damned”: he removes the adjective.’ (p. 194) Castro is often accused of this, and admits that he expects his reader to work hard at the text. (see Chapter 2)

<sup>86</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1996

indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations that breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities.<sup>87</sup>

The broad thrust of this definition is that there are no absolutes to which the artist can appeal, and that novelty is not possible in any simple sense. Barth used the term 'literature of exhaustion' to convey this sense, but he was not intending the term to be negative. In his later essay, he explains that his 1967 essay was 'much-misread':

The simple burden of my essay was that the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness, at least in the minds of significant numbers of artists in particular times and places: in other words, that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work.<sup>88</sup>

Barth does not suggest that new writing is impossible, only that we must continually move on, finding new ways of writing about a changing world. He notes that 'literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted—its "meaning" residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language'.<sup>89</sup> He makes an analogy with 'good jazz or classical music: one finds much on successive listenings or close examination of the score that one didn't catch the first time through: but the first time should be so ravishing—and not just to specialists—that one delights in the replay.'<sup>90</sup> This analogy applies admirably to Castro's novels: they are both delightful and baffling on the first reading, and they reward any number of re-readings by disclosing further delights. What is required in reading Castro is what David Foster has called 'intensive' reading, where one re-reads and studies, and even learns by heart, a small number of valued texts, as against what he calls 'promiscuous' reading which seems to characterise contemporary society, where we read large numbers of books, and having 'done' them, cast them to one side.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1996, p. vii

<sup>88</sup> 'Literature of Replenishment', p. 205

<sup>89</sup> 'Literature of Replenishment', p. 205

<sup>90</sup> 'Literature of Replenishment', p. 205

<sup>91</sup> '... from the Middle Ages till about 1750, men read "intensively". They had only a few books—the Bible, a devotional work, perhaps a couple of classics—which they read over and over again ... By 1800, men were reading "extensively", that is to say promiscuously, as we do now.' 'Classics and Canon', *Studs and Nogs: Essays 1987-98*, Vintage, Sydney, 1999.

Castro does not employ mere ‘tricks’ for the sake of being clever or writing in ‘Postmodern mode’. His novels are dense with implied meaning, if recondite and hermetic, and the purpose is always to produce something ‘new’. (This does not mean that at times effects may fail or may appear to readers to be pretentious.) But whether or not Castro *prefers* to see himself as a late Modernist, he is part of the Postmodern generation, and his avowed intention of moving forward means that he will not repeat (even if such a thing were possible) the great Modernist text. All writing is historically contingent. As Barth puts it:

What my essay ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ was really about, so it seems to me now, was the effective ‘exhaustion’ not of language or of literature but of the aesthetic of high modernism: that admirable, not-to-be-repudiated, but essentially completed ‘program’ of what Hugh Kenner dubbed ‘the Pound era’.<sup>92</sup>

In these terms, Castro can identify with writers and many of the aims of Modernism, but knowing that he must move forward and must write out of his intellectual environment—‘art and its forms and techniques live in history’ says Barth<sup>93</sup>—he will *naturally* move into a Postmodern modality, whether or not he self-consciously adopts particular conventions.

To give Barth the last word on the essential seriousness of the Postmodern thrust, he says of Borges (himself a writer who is perhaps Postmodern without ever having intended to be such):

he writes [in ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’] a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature. His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work. If this corresponds to what mystics do—‘every moment leaping into the infinite’, Kierkegaard says, ‘and every moment falling surely back into the finite’—it’s only one more aspect of that old analogy. In homelier terms, it’s a matter of every moment throwing out the bath water without for a moment losing the baby.<sup>94</sup>

The requirement that the novelist move on is also expressed very strongly by one of Castro’s acknowledged role models, B.S. Johnson. In an

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<sup>92</sup> ‘Literature of Replenishment’, p. 206

<sup>93</sup> ‘Literature of Exhaustion’, p. 66

<sup>94</sup> ‘Literature of Exhaustion’, p. 70

introductory essay to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*, a collection of his short fiction,<sup>95</sup> Johnson outlines his reasons for being an 'experimental' writer, one who moves on from what has already been done. Johnson acknowledges that art forms wear out their public usefulness—just as 'five-act blank verse drama' became obsolete 'because the form was finished, worn out, exhausted, and everything that could be done with it had been done too many times already', so the novel must mutate to remain relevant. Johnson is quite happy to admit that film and television are now better media than the novel for telling 'simple' story, but argues that the novel should continue to concentrate on what it does best, exploring the inside of the writer's skull.

Johnson's touchstone is Joyce.

Joyce is the Einstein of the novel. His subject-matter in *Ulysses* was available to anyone, the events of one day in one place: but by means of form, style and technique in language he made it into something much more ... What happens is nothing like as important as how it is written ... Joyce saw that a huge range of subject matter could not be conveyed in one style, and accordingly used many. Just in this one innovation (and there are many others) lie a great advance and freedom offered to subsequent generations of writers.

But how many have seen it and followed him? Very few. It is not a question of influence, of writing like Joyce. It is a matter of realising that the novel is an evolving form, not a static one, of accepting that for practical purposes where Joyce left off should ever since have been regarded as the starting point. As Sterne said a long time ago:

'Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we forever to be twisting, and untwisting the same rope?''<sup>96</sup>

For Johnson, everything changed with Joyce (and each other ground-breaking writer). Johnson believed that novelists of each generation should start *from* the point where their predecessors left off, not simply twist and untwist the same narrative devices.

In his recent novel *Eucalyptus* Murray Bail says essentially the same thing.

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<sup>95</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*, Hutchinson, London, 1973. The Introduction is dated 4 May 1973.

<sup>96</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*, Hutchinson, London, 1973, pp. 12-13

It is these circumstances which have been responsible for all those extremely dry (dun-coloured—dare we say that?) hard-luck stories which have been told around fires and on the page. All that was once upon a time, interesting for a while, but largely irrelevant here.<sup>97</sup>

Bail invokes Patrick White's injunction about the 'dun-coloured realism' of the past, mentioned in Chapter 1, interesting perhaps *then*, but now irrelevant because superseded. The task of the novelist, argues Johnson, is to engage with the world he/she lives in, and to respond to change.

... today what characterises our reality is the probability that chaos is the most likely explanation; while at the same time recognising that even to seek an explanation represents a denial of chaos. Samuel Beckett, who of all living is the man I believe most worth reading and listening to, is reported thus:

'What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos ... The forms and the chaos remain separate ... to find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.'

Whether or not it can be demonstrated that all is chaos, certainly all is change: the very process of life itself is growth and decay at an enormous variety of rates ... No sooner is a style or technique established than the reasons for its adoption have vanished or become irrelevant.<sup>98</sup>

This need to find new methods led Johnson to explore many of the 'tricks' associated with Postmodernism (the pages printed black, the holes cut out of pages so that the reader could 'foresee' a future event, the loose-leaf novel<sup>99</sup>), and while many of these now seem mere gimmicks, much of his material still reads well. Johnson was able to joke that 'just as I was beginning to think I knew something about how to write a novel it is no longer of any use to me in attempting the next one'.<sup>100</sup> This echoes Castro's position after *Birds of Passage*. So, to try to avoid stagnation or repetition, Castro has been prepared to try new methods with each of his novels, to strive for what he calls 'perfection in its most suicidal form'.<sup>101</sup>

While Castro's writing has many of the essential characteristics of Modernist texts—a focus on the individual psychology of the characters, a

<sup>97</sup> Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1998, p. 2

<sup>98</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*, Hutchinson, London, 1973, p. 17

<sup>99</sup> In, respectively, *Travelling People* (1963), *Albert Angelo* (1964), *The Untouchables* (1969)

<sup>100</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*, Hutchinson, London, 1973, p. 17

<sup>101</sup> Letter to MD, June 1997



love of form and language, a wish to move forward into new areas—he also employs methods that are considered characteristic of Postmodernism. These include a self-conscious writing position, an eclecticism of style that does not insist on consistency on the part of the characters, and a willingness to re-work existing material or styles, especially in parodied format. These aspects are apparent in *Pomeroy*, as well as his other novels. It seems reasonable to conclude that, overall, Castro's work can be considered Postmodern, but that it is idiosyncratically so and aims to serve Brian Castro's purposes rather than fit an accepted style.

## Critical reaction to *Pomeroy*

*Pomeroy* was widely reviewed upon publication, and while most reviewers were positive towards it, many placed caveats on their assessment. Only one critic, Peter Fuller, seemed completely convinced of *Pomeroy's* success. His assessment that *Pomeroy* 'will not be bettered in this country, this year' was quoted on the front cover of the Allen & Unwin paperback edition.

Fuller published in the *Canberra Times* both a profile of Castro<sup>102</sup> at the time of the launch of *Pomeroy* (at the 1990 Adelaide Festival Writers' Week), and a review<sup>103</sup> of the novel in the Saturday edition.

In his profile piece Fuller highlighted Castro's equation of fact and fiction. Noting that 'critics of earlier generations' would have complained about unlikely coincidence in a novel, he agreed with Castro that 'Truth, however, is stranger than fiction'. He quoted Castro as saying that 'Funnily enough, life itself seems far more contrived than writing ... Some of the strange things that happen in life you couldn't put down in writing ...' Fuller felt that Castro has the skill to employ 'coincidence and unlikely connections' to link the characters and generate narrative momentum.

He noted that Castro is 'not particularly enamoured of the conventional novel, with its beginning, middle and end laid out in order—but nor does he set out to write a simply literary work.' He quotes Castro:

I think, when I first started to write, I was imbued with literary theory and all that sort of thing. I got tired of that very quickly—which is probably a good thing ...

I think I have to get away from too much cleverness—I'm prone to trying to be too clever.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> 'Reality offers chance to reproduce it in writing', *Canberra Times*, 7 March 1990, p. 32

<sup>103</sup> '*Pomeroy* will not be bettered', *Canberra Times*, 10 March 1990, p. B4

<sup>104</sup> 'Reality offers chance to reproduce it in writing', *Canberra Times*, 7 March 1990, p. 32

Fuller says that '*Pomeroy* ... from its first pages has the pace, tone and density of an intelligent thriller ... The thriller mode, however, is only an excuse for Castro to explore other concerns—the agonies of obsessive love and betrayal, the aridity of materialism, the nature of writing, the grip of the past, the interconnectedness of things'.<sup>105</sup>

*Pomeroy* is composed of large pieces of that testament [Pomeroy's life]. *Pomeroy* is novel as novel, but also novel as autobiography. Pomeroy's story is the work both of Brian Castro and of Jaime Pomeroy himself: the two texts, alternating throughout, 'connect', complement and comment on one another ... It's a measure of Castro's art that the texts fold into one another so smoothly, that the echoes, references and cross-commentaries are so finely placed, the whole thing seems so—natural.

Fuller feels that 'everywhere Castro's reach is adventurous and his grasp secure. The novel convinces at every level ... And do not let me give the impression that this is simply a type of brilliant artistic exercise: we care for Pomeroy, a flawed "Knight of righteousness" ...'. Nevertheless, Fuller was forced to close with a minor caveat:

Faults? If there is a problem, it is my feeling that the playfulness, the elaborateness tends to distract us from the tragedy ... *Pomeroy* starts like a more cerebral Peter Corris and finishes something like Kafka. It is an astonishingly assured book, and it will not be bettered in this country, this year.

Katharine England summed up the case against.

*Pomeroy* ... is a complex, obscure and sometimes pretentious post-modern thriller cum love story cum family saga. It is scattered with tantalising clues/red herrings connecting subject and form ...

The book bounces off—occasionally pancakes into puns ...

There is much to savour in this book, much to entertain, but for me any final coherence is lacking.<sup>106</sup>

This was repeated more gently in another article. In a comparison of recent fiction,<sup>107</sup> Katharine England offered a brief paragraph on *Pomeroy*.

*Pomeroy* takes the reader through a teasing and sometimes tortuous labyrinth of allusions, connections, digressions and diversions to map out

<sup>105</sup> '*Pomeroy* will not be bettered', *Canberra Times*, 10 March 1990, p. B4

<sup>106</sup> Katharine England, 'A post-modern thriller and some loud laughter', *Advertiser*, 3 March 1990, Magazine p. 17

<sup>107</sup> Katharine England, 'Plotting 6, a Quarterly Account of Recent Fiction', *Overland* 120, 1990, p. 50. Other novels published at around the same time included Tom Flood's *Oceana Fine*, Peter Carey's *Illywhacker*, David Malouf's *The Great World*, Janette Turner Hospital's *Charades* and Thea Astley's *Reaching Tin River*.

a complicated love story, family-saga and post-modern thriller which seems to end with the death of the author.

Peter Hutchings<sup>108</sup> felt that Castro needed to be brought to heel:

A writing which concerns itself with the business of literature and its contexts, particularly with ideas of 'internationalism', cannot afford to rest comfortably in its self-conceived marginality, absolved from the disciplines of generic decorum. A commitment to a questioning of literature cannot allow itself to go unquestioned.

Not that he did not see a lot of food for thought.

... *Pomeroy* has much to offer. It is not a book written in the ignorance of recent ideas about what literature might be and do. Through its interests in the constraints of language and myth-making, it avoids much of what Don Anderson has termed (claiming that he was quoting Frank Moorhouse) 'platitudinous humanism'. It does show something of the external forces that determine and fragment an individual.

Hutchings complained that 'the writing loses its direction in its attempts to present literary theory in a conventional guise', and that the characters become mere mouthpieces.

... I've never heard any conversation remotely like that of some of the characters. Which isn't a criticism in itself: I've never heard any conversations like those that you might find in a Thomas Pynchon novel. But Pynchon establishes the likelihood of his crazy conversations, and exempts them from earnestness. Castro's conversations are never presented with humour, but with an undergraduate gravity.

This last comment is rather strange: most of the conversation is parodic and humorous, and Hutchings's view is a matter of personal taste as to what is 'undergraduate'. While many of Hutchings's comments are quite astute and fair, the whole review nevertheless has the air of someone looking down his nose at a boy who doesn't play the game according to *his* rules.

His final statement does connect with what Castro seems to be trying to do: unsettle the reading position. 'There is no secure framework for these qualities in the book's generic mixture. It tries to do too many things at once, and is able to do any of them to any purpose only occasionally.'

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<sup>108</sup> Peter Hutchings, 'Disconnections and misdirections', *Adelaide Review*, no. 74 March 1990, pp. 20, 22

Castro said that he wanted to avoid generic straightjacketing in this novel, and Hutchings admits that, for him, ‘fiction is not very interesting when all the rules are abused’. Hutchings is therefore a case of a reader with insufficient sympathy for the author to give him the required degree of suspension of disbelief.

Another reviewer who thought that Castro was attempting too much was Alan Wearne.<sup>109</sup> Concluding that on the evidence of *Pomeroy* ‘the jury is still out’ on Castro, he wrote:

Given that this time his ambition galloped away from him, and given that for all the novel’s faults the protagonist is likeable, believable schmuck, Castro’s next may pleasantly surprise.

Marion Halligan<sup>110</sup> also found *Pomeroy* unworkably dense. The language she found allusive, and ultimately elusive. She acknowledges the role of the novelist in keeping language healthy and relevant:

We depend on writers to keep rethinking [our] metaphors to keep our perceptions fresh, not necessarily to tell us new thing but to make sure we are seeing the old with some sort of clarity ... Brian Castro likes to bring us jaggedly up against the implications of our lazy language patterns, to tease, to play games, to mock—all entirely with intent.

However, drawing attention to *Pomeroy*’s quoting of Forster’s ‘Only connect’ and his admission that sometimes for him ‘The system gets overloaded’, she found that Castro’s allusive coding overloaded *her* circuits:

But the thing about codes is they can become cryptic. The reader finds herself struggling to find out what’s going on. Is she supposed to understand, or just accept? Become involved, or simply observe? ... the characters seem to be undergoing crises of identity, not sure whether they’re archetypes or individuals ... and the reader is equally puzzled. Is Estrellita a woman or an idea? Does it matter?

Halligan has in fact quite perceptively summed up the novel. As has been suggested elsewhere in this chapter, *Pomeroy* is a mixture of ‘reality’ and metaphor, and to some extent it *doesn’t* matter whether the two are at times indistinguishable. Nevertheless, it is hard for a reader not to feel

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<sup>109</sup> Alan Wearne, ‘Childhood outshines adult plot’, *Melbourne Sunday Herald*, 25 February 1990, p. 38

<sup>110</sup> Marion Halligan, ‘Long on metaphor, short on craft and meaning’, *Weekend Australian*, 26-27 May 1990, Review p. 5

bamboozled by the text. There is certainly some truth in Halligan's conclusion that 'the prose is too thick, too dense—it loses its rhythm. That is, it's overwritten.'

She looked forward to reading subsequent novels, because 'There is such promise in Castro's writing. More control, more clarity, less post-modern angst—what possibilities.' It is not hard to agree with Halligan that *Pomeroy* as a novel is 'over the top': whether Halligan felt that his subsequent novels showed more control is an interesting conjecture.

R.F. Brissenden was prepared to consider *Pomeroy* positively, but admitted that not everyone will agree with him.<sup>111</sup>

*Pomeroy's* text is certainly incriminating. It is also dense, dazzling, complex, recondite, and many-levelled. Too clever by half, some readers may feel ... But to aficionados of [Umberto Eco's] *The Name of the Rose* it won't seem excessively demanding.

Brissenden drew attention to parallels with other texts, such as *Tristram Shandy*, *Lord Jim*, *Moby-Dick* and *Finnegan's Wake*, the connections being picaresque plots, obsessional protagonists and water. Brissenden was happy with the rather strange mixture. His reservations accurately point out the rather artificial ending (the European section), which does not have the same rhythm and conviction as the two earlier sections.

The answer is that it works. *Pomeroy* is a brilliant, lively, idiosyncratic and original piece of work, self-consciously literary and allusive, but never in such a way as to drain the life out of the story. Brian Castro is a very talented and entertaining writer.

This is not to say that *Pomeroy* is completely successful. The concluding sequence lacks the substantiality and authenticity of the first two thirds of the novel. And the denouement is presented in a rather hurried and obscure fashion.

But these deficiencies are not fatally damaging.

Penelope Nelson in a short review<sup>112</sup> was not willing to commit herself one way or the other: like Alan Wearne above, she was prepared to leave the jury 'still out'.

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<sup>111</sup> R.F. Brissenden, 'Dangerous Investigations', *Editions*, no. 8-9, September 1990, pp. 7-8

<sup>112</sup> Penelope Nelson, 'Deep sleep—a nightmare, no less', *Weekend Australian*, 17-18 August 1991, Review p. 5

I greatly enjoy Brian Castro's fast-paced prose, zingy metaphors, wit and dialogue. I also like his ability to conjure up places ...

But I confess to being thoroughly confused by this novel ...  
which Nelson likened to a labyrinth of mirrors.

It is worth reading for Castro's firecracker language, so long as you take pleasure in tinkering with a Chinese-box puzzle and don't expect conventional answers to the questions raised.

Another reviewer who found *Pomeroy* too dense was Catherine Kenneally.<sup>113</sup> I quoted earlier in this chapter her admission that she read the book 'too fast' the first time, 'in search of the story'. On a second reading she was able to enjoy the book more, though not completely. She felt that the reader needed to be able to get more of a purchase on the novel.

It's difficult to feel the narrator and Pomeroy are distinct from one another, because it seems much of the material must be autobiographical in the strict sense ...

It's a regular badminton match ... with Jaime and Pal Frisco tossing bits of arcane discourse back and forth. I'd have been on the next plane back to Sydney if I was greeted with a comment to the effect that there is nothing outside 'the incriminating text', and bidden to imagine 'the mobster as reader' ...

Overload is the reader's problem too. *Pomeroy*/Castro is such a compulsive maker of connections the result is labyrinthine ...

Only like minds will persevere with *Pomeroy*. It's hard to tell what's being satirized and what's for real. Such a self-conscious writer needs to signal when he's in earnest, or we're in danger of thinking it's all an elaborate game.

Kenneally thinks Castro is an 'intelligent and talented' writer, 'sophisticated and amusing', who 'doesn't need to wear his erudition lightly: this book works best when he goes for broke'. Nevertheless she recommended dispensing with unnecessary cleverness to clarify the plot.

The multitudinous allusions could be culled, to remove the platitudinous. ('She changed, like Kafka's cockroach.') The throwaway pieces of cleverness ('Facts are what people use to close the door with') should be thrown away.

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<sup>113</sup> Catherine Kenneally, 'Compelled to Connect', *Australian Review of Books*, No. 118, 1990, pp. 15-16

Castro has at a later date conceded that *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf* are to some extent overworked. He said that with *After China* he went back to a sparer style. One has to agree with the critics above that *Pomeroy* probably does go too far for most readers. But density is certainly a feature of the Castro style, and *Drift* and *Stepper* are as dense as any of his novels.



## Chapter 7

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# *Double-Wolf:* Doubling and Transgression

‘But you see, all those constructs must be questioned.’  
The Wolf-Man<sup>1</sup>

‘I also have to look at psychoanalysis critically, I cannot believe  
everything Freud said, after all.’  
The Wolf-Man<sup>2</sup>

### *Prologue*

*By way of convention, throughout this chapter I will refer to the Wolf-Man as ‘Wespe’ when I am discussing Castro’s character, including his ‘biographical’ background, which may or may not correspond with Freud’s patient’s background. I will use ‘Wolf-Man’ to indicate Freud’s patient.*

*Freud never named his patients when reporting his case studies. The Wolf-Man’s first name was Sergei, and Karin Obholzer, the journalist who ‘discovered’ the Wolf-Man, knew that his surname started with a ‘P’, which is how she found him.<sup>3</sup> Castro gave his Wolf-Man the surname ‘Wespe’, which is the German for ‘wasp’.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Karin Obholzer, *The Wolf-Man: Sixty Years Later*, trans. Michael Shaw, Routledge and Keegan Paul, London, 1982, p. 40

<sup>2</sup> Obholzer, p. 36

<sup>3</sup> ‘[Obholzer] explained that she knew, from reviews of the book [*Der Wolfsmann*], that my first name was Sergei and also that my last name started with a P. So she looked through the Vienna address directory, and since both my first name and my surname sound Russian, it was not difficult to find me.’ Letter from the Wolf-Man to Muriel Gardiner, quoted in Muriel Gardiner, ‘Wolf Man’s Last Years’, *Journal of the Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1983, pp. 867-897.

The Wolf-Man’s real name was in fact Sergei Constantinovich Pankeiev. (Nicholas Rand, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, translator’s introduction, p. lii.)

<sup>4</sup> The name is taken from an incident recorded by Freud (‘An Infantile Neurosis’, p. 94). The Wolf-Man was relating a dream to Freud but could not remember the German name of the insect he was describing. He called the insect an *Espe*. Freud pointed out

*continued over page*

*Double-Wolf* was written at around the same time as *Pomeroy*,<sup>5</sup> and has some similarities of style, although it is not as parodic as *Pomeroy*. The subject material seems to be something that Castro had thought about for some time. Psychoanalysis is lampooned in both *Birds of Passage*, where Doctors 'X' and 'Z' speculate ineffectually on Seamus's condition,<sup>6</sup> and in *Pomeroy*, which includes several disparaging comments about psychoanalysis.<sup>7</sup>

Castro has said of *Double-Wolf*—perhaps somewhat disingenuously—that it is 'a terrifically playful book. I don't think there's anything serious in it all'. The interviewer Dinny O'Hearn, rightly demurred: 'Oh there are *some* things in it that are serious.'<sup>8</sup> But Castro emphasised that play is a very important part of *Double-Wolf*, (as it is in all of his novels).

*O'Hearn* It's clear that you have this great love of language. You also have a great love of puns. They're not very much in fashion these days, are they?

*Castro* No, I think that's exactly what's wrong with novels that are being written at this time. They're very serious and there's no humour in them. You're always looking for the humour. People are going into issues—too serious about issues and messages—when in fact language is something to be played with.<sup>9</sup>

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that it was in fact a *Wespe*, or wasp. The Wolf-Man then realised: 'But *Espe*, why, that's myself: S.P.' [his initials]. Freud points out that 'Like so many other people, he used his difficulties with a foreign language as a screen for symptomatic acts.' Freud interpreted *Espe* as a 'mutilated *Wespe*'. The Wolf-man, as a Russian emigré, had to swap between many languages at times, and often had to ask people he was talking with what was the correct word. At times, language would have been a genuine barrier to his interpretation and expression of the world. Whether the connection between 'S.P.' and *Espe* is *post hoc* and fortuitous, or significant as Freud argued, is at the heart of psychoanalysis and Castro's novel *Double-Wolf*.

<sup>5</sup> *Cleaner Dreams*, the early model for *Double-Wolf*, has passages that were recycled into *Pomeroy*; for example, the story of the sweetpeas being used around his brother's deathbed (*Pomeroy*, p. 11) appeared on page 73 of the typescript of *Cleaner Dreams*.

<sup>6</sup> See *Birds of Passage*, pages 87-88, 99-100, 124-126

<sup>7</sup> For example, 'No one thanks the psychoanalyst. He does his duty in the measured economy of time. The analyst is that bastard in each of us ...' *Pomeroy*, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Dinny O'Hearn, *The Bookshow*, 'Australian Writers 1', SBS TV, 1993. See Appendix 5.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Dinny O'Hearn, *The Bookshow*.

Although *Double-Wolf* seems like a very serious book—daring to challenge one of the great myth-makers of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud—it is important for the reader to keep in mind at all times that Castro is playing, with language and with plot. It is tempting to try to find the significance of everything that Castro writes into his novel, but the reader must be wary of treating it *too* seriously and forgetting to *enjoy* the novel. Castro is confident that any serious point he is making will come through, despite the apparent distractions of jokes, puns and red herrings. In fact Castro even has Freud saying that play comes before principle, implying that we learn about the world by playing with it.

‘What I was trying to do in *Double-Wolf* was not just to dramatise another scene from Freud, but to add, to make an addendum to the sorts of very theoretical issues that are presented in the case with the Wolf-Man ... It’s the asides that I’m interested in, the what ifs, the speculations outside the documented theory’. He laughs. ‘Mocking Freud was so much fun, because everyone took him so seriously when he himself never did.’<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the Freudian myth is such a powerful one in Western thought that no-one could read *Double-Wolf* without engaging with the myth itself.

Castro wrote a complete novel, *Cleaner Dreams*, which explored similar ideas to *Double-Wolf*.<sup>11</sup> It was extremely dense, cerebral and tendentious, and did not attract support from a publisher. With *Double-Wolf* Castro

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<sup>10</sup> Libby O’Loghlin, ‘Talking to Writers’, *Redoubt*, No. 21, 1995, p. 113

<sup>11</sup> Three copies of the typescript are held in the Mitchell Library, ML 1933/96, Box 5. The script was apparently sent to different publishers. A form letter beginning ‘Dear Publisher’ and dated 24 July 1987 is appended to one.

There is a synopsis attached to the typescript which explains the theoretical motivations behind the book. It is probably fair to assume that the script was not accepted because of this tendentious and unappealing approach. Once Castro came across the story of the Wolf-Man, he was able to dress his ideas around a story that could carry weighty concepts. The synopsis begins:

The setting is a lunatic asylum, variously called the Institute, the sanatorium, the hospital, the hotel, (the structure of writing itself).

Let us begin firstly with the more overt ‘intention’ of the book. I wanted to write a ‘novel’ that was ‘up front’ as it were, not with ideas but with the way of making them; a novel that constructed and deconstructed itself, so that it was no more a novel than a discourse on that phenomenon called the novel. I wanted to overturn the ideological configuration of a novel, i.e. the expectations upon which it is based, and since ideology is practice, TO BE SILENT is one alternative to break with it. The text then is underpinned by silence; necessarily dangerous of course, not only for the writer (for the position of the writer is constant impotence ...

found a framework in which he could discuss his ideas in a more accessible way.

*Double-Wolf* is enhanced by being read with a knowledge of the actual Wolf-Man case. It would be naïve to imagine that readers would be able to follow much of the story without some understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis, and human beings being curious creatures, those who do know something of Freud will naturally be tempted to compare *Double-Wolf* with the real case. In other words, the novel is deliberately written against another text, another myth. To set the novel in context, I will summarise Freud's case history, written up as 'An Infantile Neurosis'.<sup>12</sup>

As is pointed out in the Editor's Note, 'This is the most elaborate and no doubt the most important of all Freud's case histories.'<sup>13</sup> There are several reasons why this is so. Firstly, the Wolf-Man provided Freud with the basis for his theory of infantile neurosis, the concept that many neuroses begin with problems in early childhood, and specifically, problems with a sexual origin, which Freud called 'primal scenes' or 'primal phantasies'. At the time Freud's work was being challenged by famous psychologists such as C.G. Jung and Alfred Adler, who found Freud's imputation of sexual mental life to children abhorrent. Freud considered the Wolf-Man case a vindication of his total approach to psychoanalysis. Secondly, this was the first case in which Freud introduced the idea of setting a time-limit to therapy. This was later expanded on in 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable'. Finally, the details of the Wolf-Man's case convinced Freud that we are all born bisexual to a certain extent, and that both masculine and feminine impulses are part of our psychological make up.

It is also worth noting the praise given by the Editor to the way in which Freud presented his case. Freud has always been admired for the literary

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<sup>12</sup> *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, Hogarth Press, London, 1955. I will use 'An Infantile Neurosis' to refer to this work; when the case was first published separately it was titled *Aus der Geschichte einer Infantilen Neurose*, and translated as *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* in English.

skill with which he presented his case histories, but the editor's comments now have a loaded prescience, given *Double-Wolf's* premise that Freud was writing fiction, at least in a Castroian sense. The editor commends 'the extraordinary literary skill with which Freud handled the case ... The outcome is a work which ... from first to last holds the reader's fascinated attention'.<sup>14</sup> With hindsight, we can see why Castro considered the case of the Wolf-Man a fair target for 'rewriting'.

I do not want to reiterate all of the case details of Freud's analysis—Castro is not setting out to dispute the facts of the case—but it is helpful to point out important concepts about the way in which Freud constructed his conclusions about the Wolf-Man and psychoanalysis. In his case summary Freud admits that there is a polemical intent: he was setting out to counter 'the twisted re-interpretations which C.G. Jung and Alfred Adler were endeavouring to give to the findings of psychoanalysis'.<sup>15</sup> Freud uses the words 'polemic' and 'twisted interpretations', the latter on several occasions. We must therefore keep in mind that Freud must not be accorded the position of neutral dispassionate scientist in his writings.

Freud also mentions the Wolf-Man's willingness to be involved in this written report. The Wolf-Man in fact wanted Freud to write more: 'In spite of the patient's direct request, I have abstained from writing a complete history of his illness ... because I recognized that such a task was technically impracticable and socially impermissible.'<sup>16</sup> Here and in other places it is obvious that the Wolf-Man enjoyed being in the limelight, and participated in the writing of his 'story'.

Freud remarks on the co-operation provided by the Wolf-Man. He was surprised that the Wolf-Man stayed in analysis for so long; he remarks on his intelligence; and he admits to forming a relationship with him that he could then trade off for analytical benefits.

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<sup>13</sup> 'An Infantile Neurosis', p. 3

<sup>14</sup> 'An Infantile Neurosis', p. 6

<sup>15</sup> Freud's footnote, 'An Infantile Neurosis', p. 7

<sup>16</sup> 'An Infantile Neurosis', p. 8

The patient ... remained for a long time unassailably entrenched behind an attitude of obliging apathy. He listened, he understood, and remained unapproachable. His unimpeachable intelligence was, as it were, cut off from ... his behaviour ...

I was obliged to wait until his attachment to myself had become strong enough to counterbalance this shrinking and then played off this one factor against the other.<sup>17</sup>

It is not hard to assume that while Freud was manipulating his patient, his patient may just as easily have been manipulating Freud. Freud reports that the treatment proceeded nowhere for the first few years, that at one point when some progress was being made the Wolf-Man stopped 'working in order to avoid any further change', but once Freud enforced a cut-off date and played on their relationship the Wolf-Man suddenly showed dramatic improvement and his symptoms disappeared.<sup>18</sup>

Freud also makes what now look like compromising statements about this case. In summing up his Introductory Remarks, he concludes: 'On the whole its results have coincided in the most satisfactory manner with our previous knowledge, or *have been easily embedded into it.*'<sup>19</sup> This does not sit well with his assurance that 'Readers may ... rest assured that I myself am only reporting what I came upon as an independent experience, uninfluenced by my expectation.'<sup>20</sup> It is statements like these that provide Castro with licence to rework the case in an alternative formulation, and to question the divide between 'fact' and 'fiction'.

To summarise briefly Freud's view of the Wolf-Man, Freud argued that he was not a manic depressive, as elsewhere diagnosed, but was suffering from

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<sup>17</sup> 'An Infantile Neurosis', p. 11

<sup>18</sup> 'An Infantile Neurosis', pp. 10-11. Note that this case study reports only the analysis Freud conducted between February 1910 and July 1914. The Wolf-Man, who had already been a patient of famous psychologists such as Ziehen and Kraepelin, would continue in and out of analysis for most of his life.

<sup>19</sup> 'An Infantile Neurosis', p. 12 (Emphasis added)

<sup>20</sup> 'An Infantile Neurosis', p. 12. Later in his discussion of the case history, Freud decides to re-interpret the dream so that the Wolf-Man does not see his parents copulating but some sheep-dogs; he 'transfers' the idea from the dogs to his parents. Freud comments 'It is at once obvious how greatly the demands on our credulity are reduced.' (p. 58). Unfortunately the reader's credulity is stretched at the ease with which Freud changes his mind. Freud himself closes this particular chapter in his case

*continued over page*

an obsessional neurosis. Freud eventually reconstructed the 'causes' of his neurosis as follows. As an infant, his sister, two years his elder, used to tease him by showing him pictures of a wolf from a fairy-tale book. The Wolf-Man later recalled that his sister had tried to 'seduce' him; that is, they had inspected each other's genitalia and she had played with his penis. He had 'rejected' her, and had transferred his affections to his Nanya (nanny). She had reprimanded him for masturbating<sup>21</sup> and explained that doing so would cause a 'wound' there. He confused this idea with the female genitalia. His sister later became depressed and poisoned herself in her early twenties. (Other members of the family had also been afflicted with mental illnesses.) The Wolf-Man was not affected by her death as would be expected, but transferred some of his grief to grieving for 'a great poet' (Lermontov), who was killed in a duel.

In transferring his sexual interests from his sister to his Nanya and then back to his father, he developed firstly sadistic tendencies and later masochistic tendencies, as well as confused ideas about gender roles. He also developed what became a lifelong preference for girlfriends beneath him in social status (particularly servant girls), for ample buttocks, and intercourse 'from behind' (*a tergo*). These preferences Freud explained through the critical event that crystallised the Wolf-Man's problems. This Freud called 'the primal scene'.

The primal scene was reconstructed from Freud's analysis of a dream that the Wolf-Man had had. He was lying in bed and dreamt that the window suddenly opened of its own accord and he saw six or seven white wolves sitting in the walnut tree outside. They stared at him intently; he screamed and woke up.

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with the words: 'I intend on this occasion to close the discussion of the reality of the primal scene with a *non liquet* [legal expression for 'it is not clearly decided']. ' (p. 60)

<sup>21</sup> The origin of his guilt about masturbation and his inability to use the word *tieret* or 'rub'.

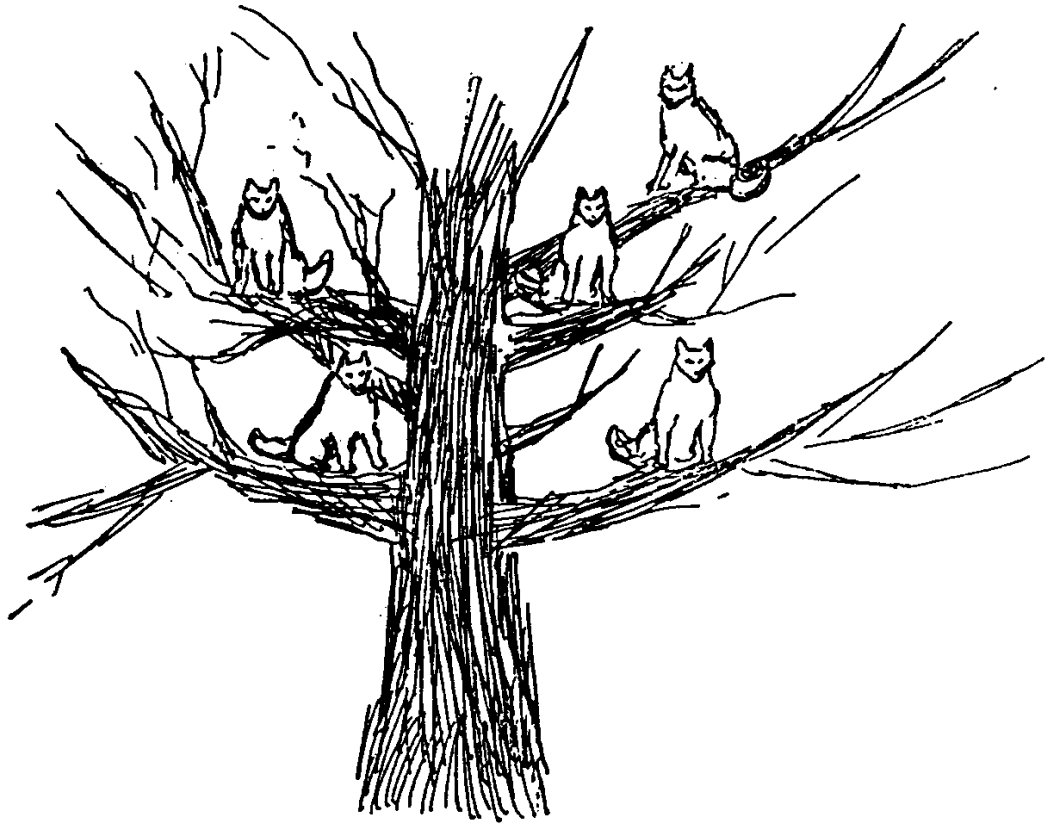


Figure 1. The Wolf-Man's sketch of his dream. Note that he drew only five wolves in the sketch, though he describes 'six or seven' in his account.

Freud's interpretation was that at the age of about one-and-a-half, the Wolf-Man had been suffering from malaria and had been sleeping in a cot in his parents' bedroom when he woke and saw them having intercourse, three times, *a tergo*. His mother was on all fours (*more ferarum*, 'in the manner of wild animals'), and his father, standing, seemed to be in the pose of the fairy-tale wolf (claws out and growling).

The above summary does not do full justice to the complexity of the case, or to Freud's painstaking reconstruction and connection of events and syndromes.<sup>22</sup> It must be remembered that many other factors came into consideration, and the Wolf-Man had many other problems. However, this is the basic story that Castro interrogates in his novel, and Castro does not

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<sup>22</sup> Freud's lengthy summary of the dream is given as footnote 2 on p. 42, but extends across several pages.



question the material facts, but suggests a different way of looking at the events.

In *Double-Wolf* Castro does not differ from Freud's case history as recorded in 'An Infantile Neurosis', but he amplifies his portrait using material available from Gardiner, Obholzer, and other sources. Castro uses the names of family members and acquaintances, details of the estates on which the family lived, and so on. His recreation is quite meticulous.<sup>23</sup>

To what extent does Castro push a particular line? In Chapter 2 I have discussed Castro's ideas on didacticism in novel writing. These views have been re-iterated in connection with *Double-Wolf*. In the Dinny O'Hearn interview already referred to, Castro was asked to what extent he tried to incorporate politics in his novels. He replied:

I try to push it to one side because I don't think that's the province of the novel. The novel may have as its ostensible matter politics, but to really delve into that to a great degree would be to compromise yourself. I always feel that the novelist has to have ambiguity and it's that ambiguity that gives you your vision in the long run. If you come down too strongly on one side or if you declare certain influences and positions and ideologies, you are not only alienating half your readers virtually, but at the same time you are making yourself a proselytiser.<sup>24</sup>

It would be difficult to find any 'line' that Castro is pushing in *Double-Wolf*, although one central focus is the way in which language *frames*. Castro does not say what line that questioning should take, nor does he even argue that Freud was 'wrong', although some critics have assumed that this is a polemic piece directed against Freud himself.<sup>25</sup> It is, at most, a questioning of the idea of mythmaking in general terms and the idea of 'truth'.

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<sup>23</sup> There is one tiny discrepancy: on page 126 of *Double-Wolf* Castro introduces a 'Wilhelm Drones': Obholzer gives the name as 'Drosnes' (for example, page 39). This may simply be a case of variant transliteration of names (she uses 'Sergej', for example), and in any case is not significant.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Dinny O'Hearn, *The Bookshow*, 'Australian Writers 1', SBS TV, 1993. See Appendix 5.

<sup>25</sup> See the reviews by David Tacey and Michael Dudley, discussed in 'Critical Reaction to *Double-Wolf*' at the end of this Chapter.

He explained his position in an interview at the time of the release of *Double-Wolf*.

Castro insists that *Double-Wolf* 'isn't just totally a debunking of Freud'. Rather it has allowed him to air some broader anxieties about single viewpoints, easy assumptions and misinterpretations.

'Freud had a certain style,' he says, 'and may have had aspirations to write creatively as well, so I look at a lot of his case histories as narratives. But at the same time I think he probably did indulge in brutal interpretations, where he fitted things in to make his theory work.'<sup>26</sup>

Many other critics have also found Freud's explanations *too ad hoc*, and accuse him of trying to make events fit his theory. For example, Nicholas Rand summarised the case:

The Case of the Wolf Man ... should have provided a complete paradigm for the definition and practice of psychoanalysis, but it rebelled against both. ... Freud's overt response to seeing the living challenge (the Wolf Man [who clearly was not 'cured']) to his 'foolproof' paradigm (*The History of Infantile Neurosis*) consisted in viewing the paradigm as healthy. He ... attempted to attribute the Wolf Man's lapses to a transference residue ...<sup>27</sup>

Freud's analysis of this particular case formed the foundation of his psychoanalytic theory, and was critical in establishing his own position against the competing camps of practitioners such as Carl Jung. The interest in this particular case became strong when people began to realise, firstly, that the Wolf-Man was still alive (Freud himself died in 1939), and secondly, that he had begun to publish autobiographical sketches of his life. This material was collected in Muriel Gardiner's book *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*,<sup>28</sup> published in 1971, and includes *The Memoirs of the Wolf-Man*, written between 1957 and 1970, 'My Recollections of Sigmund Freud' (1951) and letters written to Gardiner, who also analysed the Wolf-Man, over a twenty year period.

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Fuller, 'Freud's Wolf', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1991, p. 41

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Rand, Translator's Introduction, in Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, pp. liii-liv

<sup>28</sup> The American edition published by Basic Books, 1971. The English (paperback) edition was published by Penguin in 1973 under the title *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud*.

In an article on ‘the Wolf Man as Autobiographer’, psychologist Celeste Loughman drew into the light the rich possibilities in examining the Wolf-Man’s construction of his own story. She expressed surprise that no-one had thought of this before (comparing later material on the Wolf-Man with Freud’s early case histories). She used the material to examine autobiographical writing.

Because of the dangers of distortion and falsification when one attempts to reconstruct experience and to write a literary as well as a factual document, there is always the question of validity of autobiography. The Wolf Man—landscape painter and lover of literature—had a highly developed aesthetic sense and wrote with conscious literary intent. He claimed to have kept himself ‘down to reality, without mingling poetry and truth, and without ornamenting truth with fantasy ...’ Yet he was always conscious of his memoirs as ‘story’, and his techniques—foreshadowing, melodrama, suspenseful and dramatic section endings—are those of the novel. Too, the Wolf Man wrote in late life, and retrospective renderings necessitate, as Freud (1918) says, ‘our taking into account the distortion and refurbishing to which a person’s past is subjected when it is looked back upon from a later period ...’<sup>29</sup>

Loughman notes that ‘Although he speaks in different voices, the multiple, or often contradictory selves converge and bring to light the Wolf Man’s narcissistic personality ...’. She continues in her article to analyse the Wolf-Man in terms of (psychological categories) of narcissism, the detail of which is not important to a discussion of Castro’s novel. What is important are her comments on the unreliability of the Wolf-Man’s autobiography in terms of ‘factuality’, and the fictional impetus which drove it. His narcissism is important to the degree that it explains his ‘multiple, and often contradictory selves’, as he tries to present his biography in the most favourable light, and his ambivalence towards Freud as he feels himself alternate between ‘star patient’ and mere pathological case.

As Gardiner (1971) observes, the first chapter of the *Memoirs*, ‘Recollections of My Childhood’, is of special interest because it covers the same period as Freud’s ‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’. A stiff,

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<sup>29</sup> Celeste Loughman, ‘Voices of the Wolf Man: The Wolf Man as Autobiographer’, *Psychoanalytic Review*, Vol. 71, No. 2, 1984 (no pages). Castro used this paper as part of researches for *Double-Wolf* (there is an annotated copy in his papers in the Mitchell Library), but he got the idea of using the Wolf-Man as the basis for his novel independently. (See discussion later in this chapter.)

perfunctory recitation of events, it is the least effectively written section. Its autobiographic and literary weakness is due to the self-consciousness of the narrator, his acute awareness that he is writing an account that is supplemental and subordinate to the impressive psychic explorations of Freud's case history. The overt voice is reticent, deferential toward Freud ...<sup>30</sup>

The Wolf-Man himself called into question much of Freud's interpretation of his case. Although he was deferential to Freud as a person and said that the psychoanalysis had helped him, he claimed—at least later in life and with the benefit of hindsight—that he did not believe Freud's 'constructs'. As he told Karin Obholzer:

In my story, what was explained by dreams? Nothing, as far as I can see. Freud traces everything back to the primal scene which he derives from the dream. But that scene does not occur in the dream. When he interprets the white wolves as nightshirts or something like that ..., that's somehow far-fetched, I think. That scene in the dream where the windows open and ... the wolves are sitting there, and his interpretation, I don't know, those things are miles apart. It's terribly far-fetched.<sup>31</sup>

The Wolf-Man calls into doubt many of Freud's 'constructs'.

If one [reverses the direction of syllogistic argument], and concludes from effects to cause, it's the same thing as circumstantial evidence in a trial. But that's a weak argument, isn't it? [Freud] maintains I saw it [his parents copulating], but who will guarantee that it is so? That it is not a fantasy of his?<sup>32</sup>

These are factors that Castro became aware of as he constructed *Double-Wolf*. He explained the genesis of his novel at a public reading. The idea first came to him

around 1978 ... when I was teaching in France, and I was on a railway station, and they were making the film *Julia* ... And when the film came out ... I realised it was based on one Muriel Gardiner who was a psychoanalyst and who was the Wolf-Man's confidante and who also protected him from publicity. So much so that nobody realised that the Wolf-Man was actually alive and living in Vienna up until 1976 [The Wolfman died in 1979].

... a very diligent journalist Karin Obholzer ... tracked him down through a series of photographs—she found the embossed photographer's

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<sup>30</sup> Loughman, 'Voices of the Wolf Man: The Wolf Man as Autobiographer', page 4 of the article. This is a case of intertextuality, writing against another work (presuming it), which is what Castro also does in *Double-Wolf*.

<sup>31</sup> Obholzer, p. 35

<sup>32</sup> Obholzer, p. 36

mark on the back of one of them and tracked down the photographer ..., and so she was able to get a hold of the Wolf-Man's address and interview him.

Now having read that interview I suddenly found out that he was harbouring an ambition to be a writer, although what he said about his manuscripts may have been a fiction.

So it led me to thinking that perhaps the Wolf-Man himself was inventing himself all the way along with Freud, in psychoanalysis sessions. That perhaps he was a writer who needed to recompose or recreate himself each time he went to Freud.<sup>33</sup>

Castro did not put pen to paper until 'about 1988. I took about two, two-and-a-half years to research and write'. Reading the Wolf-Man's own version of events, Castro realised that he was both revealing and concealing his story: 'When he wrote that autobiography, I found that what he was really doing was trying to avoid things ... He left huge gaps in what he wrote.'<sup>34</sup>

Castro was also struck by the photographs in the Wolf-Man's autobiography: 'I found that they were incredibly haunting, particularly one of him walking down a street—I think it was taken in 1937. He was just a picture of desolation.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 'Brian Castro reads his poetry [sic] at ADFA', video recording, 25 July 1991. See Appendix 4.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Fuller, 'Freud's Wolf', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1991, p. 41

<sup>35</sup> Peter Fuller, 'Freud's Wolf', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1991, p. 41



*'The Wolf-Man on a street in Vienna, during the Nazi occupation.'*  
*The photograph, reproduced in Gardiner, that Castro found 'haunting'.*

*Double-Wolf* begins with a parenthesis, which is not closed until the end of the book, inviting the reader to read the novel as a parenthesis—comment, elaboration, aside, digression—on the Wolf-Man story. Parentheses have multiple associations throughout *Double-Wolf*. Wespe himself explains his idea of parentheses: they are not only a replacement for the word he cannot say,<sup>36</sup> but a representation of what cannot be told, what is in the place of 'the real object/story' (an aside), and, in Wespe's case, something with other associations, such as buttocks.

I've been thinking that two halves never make a whole because there's always a gap in between ... The in-between is represented by a pair of brackets: () thus. A pair of buttocks. Yoked bullocks delivering an infinite

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<sup>36</sup> See *Double-Wolf* pages 197-199. The immediate symbol is the Russian word *tieret*, literally 'rub', but with the implied meaning of masturbation. It is not too fanciful to include the notion of 'wanking' in the symbolic meaning of the parentheses.

aside. If you penetrate the aside, you discover the apostrophe [i.e. elision] of truth, which is empty ... I hadn't learned how to devour truth and to live on its emptiness ... to bullshit, like everybody else.<sup>37</sup>

Parentheses are therefore a site for contention between reality, non-existence, symbolism and imagination.

The first sentence of *Double-Wolf* is significant as well. 'A misty rain is falling', we later learn on page 177, is also 'the first line of one of Wespe's books', according to Art Catacomb.<sup>38</sup> As Catacomb is an unreliable narrator and Wespe an invented 'Wolf-Man' (now writing 'mindblowing' 'psychoanalytic thrillers' according to Catacomb), we can safely assume the opening sentence is actually Castro's. So Castro's fiction itself begins with a fiction. But it is also an early indication that this novel is overdetermined, and everything will *seem* to connect with everything else, as happened in *Pomeroy*.

*Double-Wolf* is narrated by two narrators, Sergei Wespe and the fictional Art Catacomb.<sup>39</sup> Not only do these narratives interleave, but both narrators work between the past and the present, various locations, the nominally factual and the suppositional. The narrative line is further complicated by a shifting grammatical voice, principally first and third person, but, unusually, with Catacomb using the unfamiliar second person in his 'Katoomba 1978' chapters.<sup>40</sup> A non-specific narrator also makes an occasional foray into the story, usually with some of the characteristics of the person in whose chapter he appears, but having limited omniscience about that character. As usual, virtually all the action of the novel comes directly from these narrators: there is no 'personless' narration.

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<sup>37</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 65

<sup>38</sup> Castro has Wespe writing 'psychoanalytical thrillers', such as *Broken Dreams*, (parodying Castro's unpublished *Cleaner Dreams*) by 'The Wolf-Man', packaged with an emblem of a 'silhouette of a wolf's head with a hat pulled down over the eyes'. *Double-Wolf*, p. 60

<sup>39</sup> His surname suggests underground, labyrinthine, and his first name abbreviates to 'art'. His 'art' is labyrinthine and dark storytelling.

<sup>40</sup> In a note to his editor Castro indicated that he wanted to have all of Catacomb's second person narration printed in italics 'to avoid confusion' by making an obvious link between his 'Katoomba 1978' musings (in the nominal present) and separating them from his other material, which all belongs to 'The Catacomb Diaries', all 'past writing (primal and supplemented by the hypothetical)'. Obviously the request was not carried out. Letter dated 'Aug 1990', ML 1933/96 Box 4.

Castro again uses the second person narration with effect in *Stepper*, as Isaku tells and 'writes' Stepper's story.

The only exceptions to the two narrators are the chapter 'Photo: Thérèse' (pages 116-117) which is narrated by Thérèse in a curious 'American loudmouth' argot, which Castro presumably employs to indicate that she is a 'megaphone mouth', and a couple of short 'factual' chapters inserted by Castro, for example, pages 181 and 219.

The 'photo' technique is very reminiscent of that used by Janette Turner Hospital in her 1992 novel *The Last Magician*. She uses photographs to frame a section of her characters' stories. The photograph 'composes' life, and it also shows some parts while excluding those parts not included in the frame, but which seduce the imagination of the viewer, who reconstructs that which is hidden outside the frame. As the photographer Charlie suggests, 'It is what is *not* seen that tantalises us. It is what is excluded from the frame that we desire.'<sup>41</sup>

Speaking about narratorial voice, Castro has said:

'I've never actually enjoyed reading a book where there's an authorial omniscience,' he admits, and refers to Patrick White. 'He never does it. He never tells you exactly in third person way how the book is going to go. It's always in the minds of his characters, in their voices ... or else in the second person, placing you *in situ*.'<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the voices in *Double-Wolf* are not ones that the reader is sympathetic towards. 'These are the kind of characters you can be objective about because they don't seep into you. You can't have a sympathetic character and still play in the ironic mode.'<sup>43</sup>

The book is divided into short chapters given to either Catacomb or Wespe, and in most instances with headings giving the setting and date. I will examine the first few chapters to show how this voicing works.

The first chapter begins with one of the few passages of description in the novel, a pensive and lyrical description of Katoomba in winter, not at first attributable to a character. This voice gradually merges into someone talking in the second person—the first appearance of it, 'If you stand still

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<sup>41</sup> Janette Turner Hospital, *The Last Magician*, UQP, St Lucia, 1992, p. 229

<sup>42</sup> Libby O'Loughlin, 'Talking to Writers', *Redoubt*, No. 21, 1995, p. 115

<sup>43</sup> Libby O'Loughlin, 'Talking to Writers', *Redoubt*, No. 21, 1995, p. 115



now ...', seems to be the impersonal use that equates with the third person 'If one stands ...', but the next usage makes the second person dominant: 'Many years ago you stood not far from here ...'. Thus the (as yet unidentified) voice of Art Catacomb emerges from the description in the same way as the setting he is describing emerges from the mist. The chapter ends with a dramatic statement, introducing the narration of a story about someone called Sergei which will be concerned with 'betrayal', and one of Castro's trademark mysterious sentence fragments: 'Falls upon your head'.

Chapter 2 also starts with a nominally impersonal narrator, omniscient about Wespe and his surroundings. Wespe is described as 'Standing there like Rodin's statue of Balzac. A favourite author since his cure', making the novel's first association with writing. This is quickly embellished with Wespe's statement that 'All writers are wankers', and advice to an audience 'Let them eat words.' The theme of writing-as-life is handled much more reticently than in *Pomeroy*, without the heavy-handed theorising that Guitierrez and Pomeroy ladled out. It is clear that the person being described is mentally unstable, as his mind wanders in the past. The narration suddenly changes into first person Wespe, and we realise that the third person narrator who has been introducing this chapter is more or less Wespe himself, rather than an independent voice. Wespe's story is confusing, giving the reader random chunks from his history and admitting that he is confused about his wife Thérèse, who has been dead for thirty-three years. He also compares his family to something 'straight out of *The Brothers Karamazov*', suggesting that the story we will hear is epic Russian psychodrama.

At this point the reader may be thoroughly confused, with so many tempting lures put out by Castro's narrators but no logical explanation yet with which to interpret them. This begins to change in the third chapter, as Catacomb steps out *in propria persona* and begins to narrate his concerns and some of the themes of the book. He does this in second person narration, maintaining a sort of detached unreality, observing himself and having dialogue with himself, with the reader as silent witness. This chapter includes a passing reference to James Joyce (*Introibo* appearing in the first paragraph of *Ulysses*), the first mentions of doubling (Catacomb

studies his double in a window) and the wolf theme ('howling'), and the themes of sex, intellectual game-playing<sup>44</sup> and Freudian psychoanalysis.

The next chapter is nominally third person, but Wespe makes it apparent that he is actually the narrator on page 12 when he interpolates 'I remember that it was cold.' From here on the narration will always be given in the voices of either Wespe or Catacomb (or a sub-variant of Catacomb, his 'diaries'),<sup>45</sup> and the impersonal narrator makes only rare appearances. This is typical of Castro to relay all of his novels through his characters' voices, so the reader is always looking into or out of someone's head. There is no neutral point of observation: everything is biased, and everything is value-laden.

### The two primary narratives

Having established his thesis, the questioning of Freud's 'myth' of psychoanalysis, Castro presents alternative possibilities. It is not that he offers a single or coherent alternative to Freud's narrative, but that he calls it into question. Like Borges's 'The Garden of Forking Paths'<sup>46</sup> the suggestion is made that there is an infinite number of 'histories'<sup>47</sup> of a life, like a story that potentially may fork at each fact or action. Castro draws attention to this notion with one of his epigraphs: 'The rest of us live with the suspicion that there are as many histories as there are people and maybe a few more'.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the Wespe narrative follows Freud's in substance (as presented in *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*), recalling in some detail the events up to 1914, but Castro at times has Wespe offer alternative possibilities to the interpretations made by Freud. He also at times includes information

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<sup>44</sup> Castro's word-play is as complex as ever, but less overwrought than in *Pomeroy*. The first substantial pun is made on Descartes's formulation 'Cogito ergo sum'. Castro/Wespe construes this as 'Corgi a tergo zum ... Dogs do it backwards' (p.15), playing on the Wolf-Man's obsession with coitus *a tergo*.

<sup>45</sup> I have mentioned already a couple of exceptions, but should comment on Freud's voice as reported to us by Wespe. Freud speaks in a very colloquial voice: is it Jewish, Jewish American, 'ockerese' as Imre Salusinszky calls it, or just a Castro funny voice? Castro admitted that he enjoyed 'mocking Freud'.

<sup>46</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, Penguin, 1970, pp. 44-54

<sup>47</sup> And Castro would be well aware of the French *histoire*, both 'story' and 'history'.

<sup>48</sup> Epigraph taken from Robert Coover, *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?*

from other sources, such as Gardiner and Obholzer. Wespe's chapters often merge into highly allusive and poetic ruminations, and speculative imaginings. Among other points being made, Castro suggests that Freud's was a restrictive reading of the complex information given to him, in other words, procrustean. Wespe often wanders off into fantasy, and offers rich and multiple versions of his mental life. It is not possible for Castro's reader to sort out fact from fantasy.<sup>49</sup>

Much of Wespe's narrative is set in Vienna in 1972, when he was 85. He (that is, the Wolf-Man) had written most of his memoir material (it was collected and published by Gardiner in 1971), and is shown reminiscing about his past, and responding to the promptings of Art Catacomb to re-write his memoirs to protect Freud's reputation. We need to keep in mind that Wespe is by now an old man, with a mind starting to wander and not always reliable in its recollections.<sup>50</sup> Others of Wespe's chapters are historically set, relating his history in Russia, his later life and his interactions with Freud.

Interspersed with this narrative line is Art Catacomb's recollections of his involvement in the case. This is of course, entirely fictional, as are the characters Ishmael Liebmann and Ludmilla Wittgenstein who are part of his narrative. Catacomb's narrative is not only questionable in its own right—he admits to being a charlatan, with faked degrees—but his 'Katoomba 1978' chapters, the day or two in which he narrates his version of the story, at times clash with the alternative 'Catacomb Diaries' version. These diaries are supposedly edited by Ludmilla Wittgenstein (which itself seems impossible given the characters' relative positions in the novel), and are written in a parodic style which reminds one of the wisecracking detective parody so prevalent in *Pomeroy*. Thus anything Catacomb relates

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<sup>49</sup> Towards the end of the novel, an *obvious* fantasy is presented when Wespe imagines that he shoots and kills Catacomb (pages 174-175): this is patently not correct, and in fact we are given several possible versions of 'what happened', as in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

<sup>50</sup> This is brought out strongly in Karin Obholzer's interviews. They ramble from subject to subject, the Wolf-Man at times complains about his hearing, his age, his hard life,  
*continued over page*

is potentially unreliable, and anything Wespe tells us is coming from the mind of a confessed 'madman'. By the latter part of the novel, the Wespe and Catacomb narratives begin to mesh, and Castro moves away from the area of recorded history into speculative reconstruction. There is no objective framing position, so the reader is in a position similar to Freud at the start of analysis, not knowing what is reliable or verifiable, and presented with a very strange narrative to untangle.

According to Castro, Wespe quite consciously 'writes' his life, not in the sense that he 'makes it up', but in the sense that he fits his life into discernible patterns which he combines together as 'narratives'. Reading the Obholzer and Gardiner accounts of his life makes it apparent that there are differences in interpretation between the narrative as constructed by Freud and other possible narratives of the Wolf-Man's life. If nothing else, he is an accomplished performer, often erudite and urbane, always polite and wanting to please his interlocutor. (Though he at times does this by criticising or questioning the accuracy of some of the earlier accounts.)

Catacomb draws attention to Wespe's writing abilities. In the chapter in his memoirs titled 'Everyday Life', 'the Wolf-Man lets slip one important fact. It is the seemingly open secret that he *wrote*.'<sup>51</sup> Aside from his writing ability, the Wolf-Man was always proud of his intelligence, and his knowledge of literary and artistic matters.

Quite early in the novel Wespe suggests that his life is a patchwork of lies. After a doctor treats him 'like a child', he says: 'And like a child I have to

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and so on. It is obvious that his recollections are at times inconsistent and inaccurate, and are occasionally moulded to impress his interviewer.

<sup>51</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 19. The real life reference to writing is in fact rather dull. The Wolf-Man admits only that: 'In the 1930s I was a contributor to a journal for insurance matters. I was always very successful in this, and the editors were always asking me to send in new articles.' Muriel Gardiner (ed.), *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud*, Penguin, 1973. This edition is apparently slightly different from the American edition of Basic Books, 1971, which is titled *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*, although the same material seems to be in each. The chapter 'Everyday Life' takes four-and-a-half pages in the (smaller format?) Penguin edition, not three-and-a-half as Catacomb/(Castro) says.

To Obholzer, he makes the claim that he had written a film script about the 1825 'Decembrist' uprising. There is no substantiation for this claim.

confront these lies all over again. Lies. All lies. The fiction of my life.<sup>52</sup> The suggestion here is not so much that *he* lies but that life is full of deceptions.

What Wespe does is to allow for the possibility of multiple lives. In 1972, ruminating on the success of his book (*The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*), he observes that ‘They say you cannot dip your hand into the same river twice.’<sup>53</sup> The psychiatric profession does ‘all sorts of tests’ on him ‘just to make sure I didn’t make things up’; but there is no way anyone, including Wespe, can go back into the past to verify the absolute truth of the facts he has put in his book.

In fact it is Freud who gives Wespe ideas about multiple possibilities. ‘It was Freud who first taught me that parody comes before the paradigm, play before principle.’<sup>54</sup> This Castro formulation suggests that life is chaotic, and must first be lived, or *experienced*, in Castro’s terminology, *before* we can make some sort of sense out of it. Freud suggests that you have to have a double, a split personality that has on one side an unfettered, free-thinking, approach to life, and on the other a rational part that can fit life into theories (myths). Or you work with another person who plays the ‘straight man’ role, while you do the free-thinking. Castro’s Freud says ‘People have forgotten that life’s a game. Play is the essence of thinking.’<sup>55</sup> He then adds the suggestion that ‘It’s always the patient who makes the sense’. If we follow this line of thought then Wespe is the person who works to build up a consistent life-story for himself, while Freud operates on a more carnivalesque level.

The doubling and transgression theme is also put forward by Wespe’s grandfather Dimitri. He had been poor before his son’s marriage and

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<sup>52</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 15

<sup>53</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 23

<sup>54</sup> *Double-Wolf*, pp. 23-24. A cryptic utterance. Play can readily be thought of as preceding principle, but parody is usually thought of as criticising an existing paradigm. Perhaps Castro is suggesting that in parodying various aspects—or paradigms—of life, we weed out the weaker and are left with the stronger paradigms. This is another example of Castro’s delight in cryptic Zen-like paradoxes.

<sup>55</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 24

worked as a tailor in Minsk where he turned coats inside out to give the owner extra wear. He applies this metaphor to people:

‘If only,’ Dimitri said to my sister Anna and me one day, ‘if only we could turn our bodies and souls inside out ... That way ... we could be saints on the outside and wolves inside, and in that way keep renewing ourselves.’<sup>56</sup>

Dimitri himself is a story generator. He tells Wespe the critical story of the wolf who loses his tail, which was incorporated into Wespe’s wolf dream.

Wespe observes:

Now, when I look back on it, I understand that he did not really want to tell the story, because even though it may have been an old story, he was inventing it too, making himself the main character. The story gave him life. If he told it too slowly he could lose himself in it. If he told it all at once he would no longer exist.<sup>57</sup>

The observation has implications for Wespe himself. Not only does Wespe tell Freud ‘I felt a loss. I must have felt, I told Freud many years later, the loss of myself at the end of every story. My childhood was full of fictions.’<sup>58</sup> but Freud notes in his case history that the Wolf-Man seemed to prolong his analysis and enjoy being able to spin out his life as neurotic.<sup>59</sup>

Castro suggests that Wespe was writing down material all the while he was in analysis, and that when he showed it to Freud Freud was dismissive of it.

‘I would like to read everything you have written,’ he said ... downplaying their significance ... Freud never showed admiration for my writing. At least he never expressed it to me personally. In his lectures and papers I know that he has more than once used the adjectives ‘interesting’ and ‘imaginative’. In order to please him I’ve had to become more and more obscene. But Freud was never ecstatic about the manuscripts. He took all of them.<sup>60</sup>

This has two important implications. Firstly, that Freud was ‘stealing’ Wespe’s life, either literally or in the sense of taking over and appropriating

<sup>56</sup> *Double-Wolf*, pp. 26-27

<sup>57</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 27

<sup>58</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 29 Castro actually draws attention to the pun on the loss of the tail/tale when tale/story gets ‘funnelled into theory’. (p. 29)

<sup>59</sup> ‘An Infantile Neurosis’, pp. 10, 11. Freud implies that if he had not decided to limit the Wolf-Man’s analysis then it would have gone on interminably.

<sup>60</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 34

Wespe's life/narrative, and that Wespe felt he needed to become more lurid to keep Freud's interest, that is, that he embellished his life to make 'a good story'. These are the reasons why some psychoanalysts have objected to Castro's novel, claiming that it makes Freud a charlatan stealing his patient's writing. However, on the level of fiction, Castro's thesis is tenable.

Freud accuses Wespe of transgressing the lines of authoring, and therefore of authority.

When Freud read the original and complete version, he flew into a rage ...

'By what authority,' he shouted, 'do you take the liberty of misusing this information?'

... I was dumbfounded. Did he believe that pornographers rendered something called the 'truth'? ... Did he mean to say that sexuality had firmer foundations than narrative, than a patient construction of scenes? I doubted that this angered him. It was rather that I, a patient of his, *wrote*. Shit. He said as much.

'All you do is complicate matters.' He was now calming a little ...

'You know,' he smiled, shuffling over to his desk and putting my manuscript on it ... 'psychoanalysis is writing at its greatest desire to *prove*. We mustn't get ahead of ourselves in making up fictions which invade propriety.'<sup>61</sup>

This passage raises several questions about authorship, control of myth-making, and the fact/fiction divide. Freud can be seen as both an honest seeker after scientific 'truth', and as a jealous inventor and gatekeeper of myth. To this day the intellectual community cannot decide how much of each there is in his legacy.

To this point we have had only the story of Wespe and his relationship with Freud. Castro then begins to weave in the Catacomb narrative. Art Catacomb is a fake psychoanalyst, who is hired by the ASPS ('American Society for the Protection of Sigmund'!) to get Wespe to stop publishing because he is damaging the reputation of Freudian psychoanalysis. At first Catacomb tries to warn Wespe off.

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<sup>61</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 41. Freud, of course, strove to be as scientific as he could, but it has always been a weak point of psychoanalytic method that it is interpretative and *inherently* 'unscientific'.

'Your wild claims do nothing for your reputation ... after all the great man had done for you,' he used to say ... He was always reprimanding me for playing tricks on Freud ...

'What do you expect me to do?' I asked. 'Tell lies? Invent fictions?'

'There was no doubt,' said Artie, 'that Freud covered his tracks to placate his critics. He didn't want to appear authoritarian. He was a civilised man.'

Artie was referring to Freud's ambivalence over what was primal, fact or fantasy.<sup>62</sup>

Castro then takes his novel into the realms of parody, as warring factions of the psychoanalytic community, led by the egregious Ishmael Liebmann, battle to control the reputation of their profession. When his blandishments to Wespe do not work Catacomb tries to get Wespe to agree to him becoming ghost-writer for his memoirs. But Wespe knows that he has to re-appropriate himself as a person, and come out from behind his written life.

Take Catacomb. He wasn't even born when I began my sessions with Freud. Now he talks as if he knows me inside out ... everything he knows, he's read from journals and books. But the logic of course is this: the logic is that to stop myself from being the observed, the subject, the patient, I have only to come out into the open. To usurp the authority of the story. To legitimise for myself what has for so long been the territory of others: to re-appropriate the ground.<sup>63</sup>

Wespe is feeling hemmed in by his own myth. People watch him all the time—'That's because I'm a classic. They write books and articles about me. They send pretty female journalists with impressive buttocks to interview me ... they present me with orchids'—but they are ungrateful—'Nobody acknowledges the fact that, without me, Freud would never have gained the recognition he did'.<sup>64</sup> Wespe laments that 'I only exist as a pseudonym, but they all come to see me. Yes, I'm a freak show and a conduit to the great man all rolled into one.'<sup>65</sup> At one stage Catacomb counsels him to go with the flow: 'Your only hope is lycanthropy ... *become* what you have been

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<sup>62</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 70

<sup>63</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 72

<sup>64</sup> *Double-Wolf*, pp. 71 & 72. The 'pretty female journalists' include Karin Obholzer: 'they present me with orchids' is a direct reference to Obholzer's remark 'I felt he was the kind of man to whom one gave orchids' (Obholzer, p. 5). Castro cheekily has her actually presenting Wespe with orchids.

<sup>65</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 84



called'.<sup>66</sup> But Wespe does not know which of his double, or many, selves, to inhabit.

Curiously, Catacomb makes a similar observation about Freud, suggesting that at the end of his life Freud 'is already the body of his work',<sup>67</sup> subsumed into the myth of himself. This is a familiar Postmodern trope: just as in Tlön, Uqbar, the writing of a world brings it into existence.<sup>68</sup> Thus Freud posits a theory: it generates itself. Wespe writes himself a life that fits the posited theory.

As Castro increases the parodic element, with the American psychoanalysts acting like paranoid mobsters, Catacomb is instructed to 'take Wespe out'. Liebmann, a comic construction, says Wespe is 'meddling with the Eternal', and 'biting the hand that feeds him'.

The discourse of the analyst is pure art. But when the patient starts playing the analyst ... the patient ... is sullyng the past, and he has to be ... [killed?]

This Wespe character is fuckin' around with Eternity. What I mean is, the guy's trying to re-write Freud. Making what he calls *exposés*.<sup>69</sup>

Once again, only the analyst is 'licensed' to write the pure art of someone's existence. Patients are not 'author'-ised.

Catacomb is instructed to kill Wespe, but by this stage of the novel Catacomb has also become a parodic figure, so there is some high farce about Catacomb running around with guns, grenades and explosives (the explosives at one stage being accidentally swapped for cocaine, an implied pun on 'blowing one's mind'). This spoof section of the novel is independent of the more realistic and sensible discussions with which it is interleaved. The comic section provides its own entertainment, but it also provides an absurdist foil to the so-called serious surroundings in which it is set.

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<sup>66</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 109

<sup>67</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 141

<sup>68</sup> The thesis of Borges's short story, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (*Labyrinths*, pp. 27-43)

<sup>69</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 154-155

Wespe has two defences to Catacomb's comic 'don't shit on [Freud's] head'. The first is a criticism of psychoanalytical method: 'All they have to do is deny'. The second is an implicit criticism of Freud himself: 'What I said to Freud was the truth. I said I was a writer. If he wanted to make interpretations then that was his business.'<sup>70</sup> In fact, in a different section, from his 'Diaries', Catacomb admits that Wespe has been protecting Freud, not trying to destroy him. 'All his life Wespe protected Freud, not the other way round. Protected Freud from himself. From losing his conviction.'<sup>71</sup>

A corollary of this view is that Wespe relied on the analysis continuing (evidenced by the fact that the Wolf-Man was consistently in analysis for most of his life). Offering his own interpretation of the wolf-dream,<sup>72</sup> Catacomb complains that Wespe had a record of

distorting the truth, of relaying it in a way that shifts the focus onto language. How do we *prove* anything? Freud made a heroic attempt. Only to be howled down by Jung and Rank ...<sup>73</sup>

But Catacomb also realises that Wespe must keep up his illness. 'If he is cured he will no longer be a writer in this sense.'<sup>74</sup>

Wespe wants to die, to stop this process of constant becoming. Of going on in a line. Not to go on is his greatest desire. To simply *be*, which is the condition of being a wolf. He is not afraid of the wolves sitting on the walnut tree outside. He becomes them. They glimmer. But it is precisely that part that is missing, this *being*, which is oblique, unseen, whenever he writes.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 173

<sup>71</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 176 (Implying that Wespe said what he *thought* Freud wanted to hear.)

<sup>72</sup> Catacomb claims that Freud misinterpreted the significance of the window in the wolf-dream: 'The window may be the dream's way of saying that Wespe is waking up to watch this scene, but dreaming that he is waking up within his dream is really to die, to have no access to any other waking life. The window, therefore, is *a way back*. It is a rumination, not a dream. But in Freud, the window, the frame, the escape hatch for writing, the process which rescues it from death, is always overlooked. The witness is overlooked in order to get at the evidence.' *Double-Wolf*, p. 177. It is hard to say whether Castro is putting this forward as a serious interpretation of Freud, or just giving his character a plausible position.

<sup>73</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 176

<sup>74</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 178

<sup>75</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 178

The Wespe story is neatly rounded off by Castro imagining Wespe clearing the dream that has persecuted him:

*He ( )s his eyes. The window opens by itself. There is nothing there. No one. Nothing but a white expanse. Nothing.*<sup>76</sup>

This offers several possibilities. Is it Wespe coming to terms with his fears? Is it Wespe dying, drifting into white expanse? Or is there, more mischievously, a suggestion that there may never have been such a dream in the first place, and that the 'Wolf-Man' and Freud's analysis were a complete fiction?

### **Didacticism in *Double-Wolf***

For most of the novel Castro allows Wespe and others to comment on the life/fiction paradigm. Occasionally, however, he enters the foray himself to make a more esoteric comment. In such cases the writing begins to look more like the didactic sections familiar from *Birds of Passage* and *Pomeroy*.

In a section where Wespe is caught without a passport or 'identification' (a real scene from the Wolf-Man's life), Castro has a character called Weinstein say 'It is in *classification* ... that we can make sense of the world', to which Wespe replies 'Whose classification? Whose sense?' Psychoanalysis is a classifying system.

On the idea of myth becoming self-generating, Catacomb says 'Of course ... if you [Wespe] offered an opinion it would immediately become a paradigm, a dominant which would determine your direction. Make the whole thing a Fascist authorising of the text. It would prescribe spheres ... ontologies ... worlds ...'<sup>77</sup>

Castro's symbolism also takes on his own ideas. As part of the wolf/doubling symbol, Castro identifies the wolf with the id, and with untamed instinct. 'He [Freud] saw the id as wolf, pleasure principle, sex,

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<sup>76</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 219

<sup>77</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 102

devourment, desire. It tried to debouch out of the world of culture while the ego, the hunter, the voice or reason, held its finger in the dyke. Sergei Wespe said to me the other day: *writing is being animal.*<sup>78</sup>

He laments the loss of this freeness of spirit in the intellectual world of the twentieth century. 'Wolves are almost extinct. The neurotic is extinct ... When the pressure of time was brought to bear on the imagination, the disease of rationality ensued. It was the great common denominator.'<sup>79</sup> This is one of the few times when the reader feels like Castro is stepping into his novel.

Castro also sees the wolf as id conquering time, in the sense that the id operates outside time. This is one of Castro's regular concerns, the defeat of time. But this positive(?) side of wolf/id is compromised by the connection with Nazi primitivism, which seems to be why the Wolfenschantze club is brought into the story. The symbols themselves are never clear cut or pure.

### Symbols

*Double-Wolf* is replete with symbols. The world seems overconnected, as it did in *Pomeroy*. The symbols are not clearly defined ones, but meld into each other. The wolf is a symbol of anything wild, instinctual, intellectually imaginative as opposed to rational. The symbol of doubling is also used thematically. Only on one occasion does Castro refer to an obvious *doppelganger*, and that is when he links Wespe with Pankeiev as his literary agent. But throughout the novel, doubling and oppositions are prevalent. Wespe is a double of the Wolf-Man, both of whom have multiple possible lives. The Wolf-Man and Freud double to produce the case history; Catacomb tries to double as Wespe's ghost-writer. Wespe is connected to his lost sister, Anna, who forms an absent double.

More abstract doubles are implied in the connection between life and art, fact and fiction, writer and reader, even form and content. It is a measure of

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<sup>78</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 147

<sup>79</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 129

Castro's inventiveness that these symbols never become clearly delineated, and therefore token, but seem to nebulously interconnect to provide us with a double (multiple) world.

Other symbols rely on the fecund inventiveness of the unconscious mind in making connections. This, as the critic David Tacey points out, is Castro's homage to psychoanalysis, and his argument that we need 'to win the unconscious back for life, for art ...'<sup>80</sup> Thus there are numberless references to buttocks, behinds, parentheses, doing things backwards, retroversions and so on linked in an associative complex; suggestions of lupine behaviour; the important complexes of the tail as penis, the loss of the penis as castration complex/loss in general, the association with bottoms and female genitalia; and the intellectual connection via the homonym 'tale', with the loss of tail associated with loss of tale, a kind of castration of identity.

### **Use of humour**

*Double-Wolf* differs from its predecessor in the way that humour is employed. In *Pomeroy* the humour tends to be an end in itself, and it often runs away with the story. In *Double-Wolf* the humour nearly always fits the characters, and is germane to whatever they are discussing. Like all of Castro's novels, *Double-Wolf* relies much on word play. The Wolf-Man moved between several cultures and languages, so he was very aware of language. Towards the end of the novel there is an exchange between Wespe and Wittgenstein which jokes and puns on Wespe's name. Listening to a recording of Jacqueline du Pré playing 'The Dying Swan', Wittgenstein mentions that she died of MS (multiple sclerosis). Wespe notes that inverting MS ('inverting the swan') gives his initials, SW (see footnote 4, where the Wolf-Man makes a word association with his initials). Wittgenstein compares the S and W to the head and neck, and asks what he makes of the 'tail-end' of the word, ANS. Wespe guffaws: 'Only U are

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<sup>80</sup> David Tacey, Freud, Fiction, and the Australian Mind, *Island*, No. 49, (Summer) 1991, p. 13

missing.<sup>81</sup> This clever association is natural for a psychoanalyst and a patient, both skilled in word play, and both aware of the case at hand. (Wespe is fixated on 'tail-ends' (buttocks), and is anal-retentive in Freud's analysis.) The humour in *Double-Wolf* fits into the story, with few exceptions, quite well.

When Wespe is trapped in the events of the 1917 Revolution, the situation is presented in terms of black humour: ('Shit, the bastard's coming at me with his sabre. Fuck, duck. Whew.')82 It is easy to sympathise with the idea of a 'crazy' person being caught up in crazy events and using perverse logic: 'If ever you get caught in a firefight remember this: they can't hit a neurotic.' 'I run backwards. I figure this posture would make them think twice before shooting.'<sup>83</sup> This is an interesting association with Wespe's obsession about 'doing things backwards' and retroversion.

At times the humour seems a little *de trôp*, but is in keeping with the material being discussed. Wespe says at one stage: 'That was Freud. A good family man who was always passing things over. Transferences; transactions. Knew how to do business with the Other'<sup>84</sup>, which seems a little forced, but coming from an obsessional neurotic is not too out of place. Similarly, Wespe describes Freud as looking 'civilised, but discontented',<sup>85</sup> a reference to Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*. This seems a bit laboured.

There is also a large section of straight farce/satire/parody in the novel. The figure of Ishmael Liebmann is used to parody the Jewish American psychoanalyst and the paranoid, mafia-like psychoanalytic associations, guardians of the tradition. At times the characters in these sections of the novel speak in mock Jewish-American or gangsterese, and the action degenerates into pure farce, such as the restaurant scene where Liebmann

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<sup>81</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 217

<sup>82</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 145

<sup>83</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 145, 146. The idea of running backwards probably also alludes to Benjamin and the idea of watching one's life recede rather than looking forward.

<sup>84</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 24

puts out a 'contract' on Wespe (pp. 152-157), the scenes with Catacomb threatening Wespe with his 'piece' and carrying grenades in his pockets (pp. 172-174).

There is also serious irony in a double-edged comment such as 'Reformed neurotics are the worst.' Psychoanalysts are there *to reform neurotics*.

As usual, Castro has also included some more abstruse jokes, for the enjoyment of those in the know. But they are, in *Double-Wolf*, subtle and not intrusive. If read over there is no loss. For example, a seemingly harmless reference to 'keeping up with the Joneses' glancingly invokes Freud's biographer, Ernest Jones. Castro has Wespe (via Louise) send off his manuscripts to a literary agent by the name of S.C. 'Doppelgänger' Pankeiev, which was the Wolf-Man's real name. This has joke value, but also allows Castro to work up the theme of doubleness: the Wolf-Man is writing outwards to his real self, doing commerce with the real world, and so on.

### 'Standard' references

Castro manages to include references to some of his favourite authors and topics, but in a way that is not intrusive. Barthes is suggested by the use of *jouissance* on page 127, and Castro has Wespe reading Kafka with approbation ('He's got it down pat. Families are the source of all evil.<sup>86</sup>)

But not all the rich allusion is invented. Castro has said that life is stranger than fiction, and much of the seemingly crazy material in *Double-Wolf* is not invented, but taken straight from the Wolf-Man's life. The improbably named A.J. Dick was a real tutor; the trip to Pyatigorsk during which 'Weinstein' writes '*La propriété c'est le vol*' ('Property is theft') on Lermontov's monument is also taken from the Wolf-Man's memoirs, though the companion is identified only as 'W'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p.127

<sup>86</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 136

<sup>87</sup> Muriel Gardiner (ed.) *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud*, Penguin, 1973, p. 48

Castro also makes one brief comment in passing on the East/West dichotomy. He suggests that a line on the 30° longitude divides Russia into East and West, and has Wespe seeing an East/West division in himself. The West, as always in Castro, is the principle of rationality, linearity and control; the East, according to Wespe, is represented by

the arabesque. The feminine principle. It was a swerve away from the straight line, from voracious action, from the brutality of a willed result, from instrumental reason ... It was pure movement, force without power, mystery without cipher, a movement *away, never to return while repeating itself*.<sup>88</sup>

While the Wolf-Man was inherently 'feminine', according to Freud, this passage seems rather isolated: there is no further comment in the novel on East and West. The external connection here is spurious, or at the least poetically forced ('When Father suggested I study law in Petersburg, I went westward with an eastern soul.<sup>89</sup>): the Wolf-Man in his memoirs distinguishes between the richer and more sophisticated parts of Russia, such as Moscow and St Petersburg, and the poorer and more backward, which included the south of Russia, White Russia and the Baltic countries to the west. This passage has poetic force, but no direct interpretation into the life of the Wolf-Man.

In one of the few digressions in the novel, Castro introduces Borges and his story 'A New Refutation of Time': 'only one writer has ever fucked around with Freud successfully—Borges'.<sup>90</sup> A connection is made with Freud's essay, *The Uncanny*, and eventually the development leads to a rather coarse pun. It is difficult to see the purpose of this episode.

But digressions are rare, and, overall, *Double-Wolf* is one of Castro's most focussed novels. The main narrative of Wespe and Freud is consistent and closed, and the competing narrative of Art Catacomb is largely set off from the former. Its crazy paranoia is presented as such, leaving the reader to

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<sup>88</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 81

<sup>89</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 81

<sup>90</sup> *Double-Wolf*, p. 155



focus on the 'serious' story of Wespe, but with the crazy world of Catacomb throwing it into relief. While it would be hard to call the novel satisfying in terms of its subject matter, as a piece of art it is a great accomplishment.

## Critical reaction to *Double-Wolf*

*Double-Wolf* won the Age Fiction Award in 1991 and the Victorian Premier's Award (Vance Palmer Fiction Award) in 1992.

*Double-Wolf* has probably been the best received of Brian Castro's novels. Nearly all the reviews were quite positive, and even the less positive reviewers had many good things to say about the novel. Two factors seem to have led to this degree of agreement:

- structural integrity: despite its complexity, *Double-Wolf* is a circumscribed book working mainly within a defined ambit, the Wolf-Man's case, and with few digressive tendencies. Castro also seems to be in strict control of his material.
- many of the reviewers seemed to have become accustomed to Castro's style, and perhaps Postmodern novels in general. There are fewer of the 'this is not my type of writing' comments. Reviewers had had the chance to judge Castro on *Birds of Passage* and *Pomeroy*, and this was a very strong follow-up work after the looser *Pomeroy*.

Several reviewers commented that they thought that this would be the book to establish Castro as a well-known writer.

In one such positive review, Jane Messer described *Double-Wolf* as 'a singular work of imagination and research.'<sup>91</sup> The writing is highly intellectual and the play of ideas and language so adept it is a joy to read'.

In a highly poetic review, John McLaren<sup>92</sup> concluded that it is false to try to make 'sense' of *Double-Wolf*, but to look at the possibilities it opens up.

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<sup>91</sup> Jane Messer, *Australian Bookseller and Publisher*, April 1991, p. 22

<sup>92</sup> John McLaren, 'A Howler', *Australian Book Review*; No.132, July 1991, pp. 38-40

Freud identified as neurotics those who, unable to live with the war [between id and ego], regress to the instinctive, the primitive, the animal.

It is all in his case-history of the Wolf-Man. But the case-history belongs to the analyst, not to its subject, to the reason that seeks to control experience. It has the truth of art. But if the patient is a writer, the truth belongs to him, and not to the analyst. And if the patient has composed his story, then the truth of the fiction that the analyst constructs from the patient's account loses its basis and becomes falsehood, not fiction. (p. 38)

All these events [as events] are contained in the novel called *Double-Wolf*, but this grand narrative is not. There is no single voice to authorise any particular character or narrative, no authorial superego to moderate the conflict of ego and id. Various narratives are carefully located in time and place—Katoomba 1978, Vienna ...—but these are addresses for recollection, meditation, gossip and narratives that may or may not be accurate. Each is true to the time of its telling, but even in the telling it falsifies what it tells ... [I]f we choose we can reconstruct a grand narrative from them, but the form of the book at the same time questions the validity, the authenticity, of every such construction. The only authenticity is the truth of the dream, the world of the wolves, of the id in which there is no time ... (p. 39)

Although *Double-Wolf* deals with the impossibility of true knowledge, either of the individual or of society, it does not retreat from the reality principle into the fashionable concept of language as a game without meaning. (p. 40)

I am not sure what Castro's maze of signs and stories offers, but I am confident its obsessional images will continue to haunt its readers as long as they remain sites for the eternal warfare of the ego and id. (p. 40)

Predictably impressed by *Double-Wolf*, Helen Daniel<sup>93</sup> described it as 'rich fare, profound, witty, inventive, delicately crafted and likely to be one of the literary highlights of the year'.

Writing later in *Overland*,<sup>94</sup> where she compared *Double-Wolf* with novels such as Robert Drewe's *Our Sunshine*, Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom* and Helen Garner's *Cosmo Cosmolino*, Daniel described *Double-Wolf* as 'a bold questioning of the origins of Freud's influence on the culture and philosophy of the twentieth century ... Prowling through the century,

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<sup>93</sup> Helen Daniel, 'Grand Arabesque Through Time', *Age Saturday Extra*; 22 June 1991, p. 8

<sup>94</sup> Helen Daniel, 'Plotting 8, An Account of Some Recent Australian Fiction', *Overland*, No. 126, 1992, pp. 67-73

*Double-Wolf* is an impressive novel, at once elaborate and a free-wheeling, ludic work about life as “a game with the Other”’. (p. 69)

Rob Johnson<sup>95</sup> pointed to the central thrust of *Double-Wolf*; if the unconscious ‘has the potency attributed to it by Freud, the fabrication of memories would surely be child’s play’. Freud is in a double-bind situation!

Johnson commended the structure of the book. ‘The resulting complex narrative is dazzling. This is an Australian novel that I commend with confidence as a significant contribution to the art of fiction, not only in Australia but world-wide.’ He finds the poetic language of the book compelling him to read it out loud. In a nice symmetry, Johnson repeats the comments by David Malouf quoted earlier in this thesis:

This novel reinforces my conviction that much (most?) of today’s best poetic writing occurs in prose fiction. It offers the sort of writing that, in my case, excites an irresistible impulse to read aloud.

Peter Fuller praised the novel, and especially the structure:

Castro’s control of this structure is formidable. The gears grate only occasionally ...  
You don’t need to be conscious of the literary architecture to enjoy *Double-Wolf*, although there’s much enjoyment to be had in watching the number of levels at which the novel is working at any one time.  
*Double-Wolf* is the product of a cosmopolitan mind, in the best and truest sense of that absurd adjective ...<sup>96</sup>

Peter Pierce<sup>97</sup> equivocated somewhat, finding the novel good, but suggesting that ‘Castro runs out of steam half way through. A sign of this is his promotion of Ludmilla Wittgenstein ... and Ishmael Liebmann, beyond their capacities to carry the tale.’ This is a curious assessment, because he otherwise approves of Castro’s mixing up disparate material:

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<sup>95</sup> Rob Johnson, ‘A Reappraisal of the Wolf-Man’s Dreams’, *Advertiser*; 29 June 1991, p. 12

<sup>96</sup> Peter Fuller, ‘Wolves Howling at the Doors of Perception’, *The Canberra Times*; 13 July 1991; p. C8

<sup>97</sup> Peter Pierce, ‘Katoomba the Missing Link’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1991, p. 41

With a carefree daring, Brian Castro insists on the connection of those disparate settings, interludes, eccentrics. Their links are arbitrary, given: the reader proceeds on that basis ...

Later

Castro continues to write with sparky wit. Lots of his fun treads a fine line, as it parodies the novel's habit of reflexiveness ... to the extent of becoming meta-reflective. 'Biography is being subverted,' we read, 'There are only ghost-writers and contracts'.

Sue Walton's positive review<sup>98</sup> of *Double-Wolf* includes the observations that, with its two narratives, 'the reader is treated to the rare situation of having a plot unfold from the beginning and the end almost simultaneously.' She also draws attention to the treatment of historical material:

Skilfully, Castro depicts not only personal aspects but he charts much of the historical horror associated with different eras. However, the historical perspective is presented as an aside rather than as an integral part of the characters' lives. Wespe, in particular, is so self-absorbed that world events appear as peripheral in his life.

In this Castro has faithfully picked up on the tone of the Wolf-Man's own writings and his conversations with Karin Obholzer. He is curiously detached from the events of two World Wars and the Russian Revolution, which take part around him and change his status as a citizen.

Robert Kosky,<sup>99</sup> an Adelaide teacher of psychiatry, wrote that '*Double-Wolf* crackles with energy. It reveals to the reader a kaleidoscope of ideas and never fails to surprise, delight and challenge.' (p. 24) He finds that 'The Wolf-Man comes leaping out of the pages of this brilliant novel and seizes the startled reader by the throat.' (p. 25)

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<sup>98</sup> Sue Walton, 'Rubbing in Freud's Analyses', *Newcastle Herald*, 28 September 1991, p. 12

<sup>99</sup> Robert Kosky, 'Desires that Don't Lie Down'; *Editions 12*, Spring 1991, pp. 24-25

Despite a mild complaint about the 'masculine models of looking, knowing, desiring and writing' of the novel, Marion Campbell<sup>100</sup> found *Double-Wolf* stimulating.

*Double-Wolf*, then, is a novel fuelled by desire and filled with an infinity of signs which multiply narratives, characters and interpretations: never sidetracked by a search for a unified Truth, it is always presenting the Double with its hollow space in between.

Campbell also drew attention to the fact that *Double-Wolf*

mimes the structure of the detective story, the formal genre of detection and revelation which is the mode for the processes of psychoanalysis itself ... Freud tells Wespe that 'I, as the reader, am the detective. You, the ... ahem! writer, are the criminal ... irresponsible, confessional, hiding in your text'. [*Double-Wolf*, p. 42]

The novel keeps multiplying the connections between detective and criminal, reader and writer, teller and told, masculine and feminine, until they become indistinguishable, the Wolf-Man not just doubled but mirrored in the infinite regressions of embodied writing ...

I am quite happy to be cast as Castro's detective/reader, or indeed as the theorist of his story, or even the reviewer forced to try and construct an intelligible narrative from his endlessly inventive speculations and sharp and sardonic writing. *Double-Wolf* is likely to go on providing me with all these pleasures for a long time yet.

In a review of two of Castro's novels, Joe Grixti<sup>101</sup> chose to comment on common themes and writing techniques. He warned that 'These are novels to be taken seriously,' but 'The fragmented narrative style and insistent self-reflexivity, however, also make heavy demands on the reader—and whether one responds with delight or weariness is as much a matter of taste as of training.'

Of *Double-Wolf* he says 'The Wolf-Man, in effect, is here approached as text—a complex configuration of signs which calls for a sophisticated but not exclusively cerebral reading ... we are not allowed to forget the hurt humanity of the individual who has been deconstructed (in more than literary terms) by his many interpreters ...'

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<sup>100</sup> Marion Campbell, 'Double Writing/Bracketing Women', *Overland*, No. 125, Summer 1991, pp. 87-88

Some reviewers did express reservations about *Double-Wolf*. In a lengthy and carefully considered essay in *Island*,<sup>102</sup> the psychoanalytic literary critic David Tacey found both for and against *Double-Wolf*. He is an avowed fan of Castro's writing—

This is fiction on a grand scale and Castro takes on this formidable task with an assurance and ease that highlights his considerable talents as a novelist ... I am impressed by this work because the pleasures it generates are pleasures which only the most enduring literature provides. (p. 8)

—but he considers that Castro has an animus towards psychoanalysis which he takes too far. 'At this level Castro has a vendetta against psychoanalysis and some of the humour of the novel relies upon popular prejudices against Freudianism.' (p. 10)

Tacey argues that most people (and Australians in particular, with, he suggests, their anti-intellectual approach) have not actually read Freud and rely on stereotype views, to which Castro here appeals. In *Double-Wolf*, 'Freud is portrayed as a restrained sort of conman.' (p. 10)

Tacey agrees with the postmodern view of 'fictions'—what Castro calls 'myths'—but claims that Castro misuses the Freudian 'fiction'.

Freud's theories are 'fictional' in the postmodern sense of being enabling fictions—that is, they are contemporary stories based in turn on classical mythological tales [e.g. Oedipus], designed to explain human behaviour ... But, for Brian Castro, Freud's stories are disabling fictions. They dehumanise lives and reduce persons to case studies. (p. 10)

Tacey is right to say that Castro puts a negative slant on psychoanalysis, but whether Castro is putting up a consistent argument or merely exploring possibilities is a moot point. The Wolf-Man's own testimony—which Tacey quotes to show that the Wolf-Man believed psychoanalysis helped him—is inconsistent and ambivalent. But whereas his earlier memoirs are deferential to Freud, late in his life he expressed a

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<sup>101</sup> Joe Grixti, '*Double-Wolf/After China*', *Imago*, Vol. 5, No. 2, August 1993, pp. 92-94

<sup>102</sup> David Tacey, 'Freud, Fiction, and the Australian Mind', *Island*, No. 49, (Summer) 1991, pp. 8-13

more curmudgeonly view of what psychoanalysts had done for him. Surely Castro is justified in at least calling into question the validity of psychoanalysis as a 'grand narrative'. Tacey seems to be being overly defensive on behalf of the psychoanalytic community.

Tacey does make the interesting point that Castro is trying to 'rescue the unconscious' and bring its role in life, and writing, back into the light.

Even as Castro condemns and debunks the psychoanalytic enterprise there is a continued fascination for the ideas and metaphors of psychoanalysis. His own prose is shot through with spectacular verbal punning, with free associations, complex nodal points, recurring motifs and baroque interweaving of feelings, images and ideas. There is intense and sustained interest in the unconscious as powerful subterranean 'place', with drives, secrets and pleasures of its own ... Symbolism exerts an uncanny appeal to the author, even as he undermines psychoanalytic attempts to interpret it.

... It seems that Castro is trying to win the unconscious back for life, for art, and to ridicule only the professionals who 'do business with the Other'. (p. 13)

This is an astute and elegant description of Castro's writing style, and is more in tune with Castro's desire to debunk rigid theorising while exploring the possibilities of new myth-making.

Another psychiatrist, Michael Dudley, examined *Double-Wolf* in a review of literary works that deal with psychiatry.<sup>103</sup> Dudley notes that, 'In true postmodern form, it is about the unrecoverability of truth; its position is that there is no position'. (p. 74)

He notes the comic elements of the novel ('Liebmann, the ultimate caricature of the analyst as narcissist' (p. 75)), but, with Tacey, suggests there is a negative portrayal of Freud and his theories.

The book is a wicked, irreverent and subtle debasing of the pretensions of psychoanalysis to science: but more than this, a purported exposure of Freud as fraud. The Wolf-Man contemplates usurping his own story, taking back what gave Freud fame. (p. 76)

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<sup>103</sup> Michael Dudley, 'Apologia Pro Vita Nostra: Critics and Psychiatrists', in *Literature and Psychiatry: Bridging the Divide*, edited by Harry Heseltine; Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1992, pp. 67-98



Both Dudley and Tacey were anxious at the time because there were some hard-hitting attacks on psychoanalysis being published, especially by their 'enfant terrible, Jeffrey Masson' (*Freud: The Assault on Truth* (1984), *Against Therapy* (1988), *The Final Analysis* (1991)). While both are sensitive about *Double-Wolf* on psychoanalysis's behalf, they both applaud Castro's writing.

Only a few reviewers gave negative assessments. Imre Salusinszky<sup>104</sup> enjoyed the novel to some extent but found it pretentious:

If this sort of thing is fun, it is fun of a rather academic sort, and in this book life tends to be analysed and theorised rather than realised ... Many readers will be intellectually teased and enlivened by it, in a *The Name of the Rose* kind of way, but it eventually becomes a trifle arid, with the exceptions of the evocations of Wespe's wealthy childhood ...

Nicholas Jose's assessment<sup>105</sup> of *Double-Wolf* seems to be predicated on his dislike for Postmodern methods, and is, at best, equivocal. He suggests that *Double-Wolf* returns to the concerns of *Birds of Passage* (i.e. 'those ... unity-denying desiderata of contemporary culture') 'in a work that is once more ambitious and, in some senses, more stylish, yet which offers, at the core, a greater absence.' (p. 97) He feels that '*Double-Wolf* seems to begin and begin, then abruptly terminates, without ever quite getting going,' and that 'Castro oscillates dizzyingly. Nothing is left out, but there is something missing.' (p. 98)

For me, the key came in a moment when Freud [says] 'No, it's not the literary element that interests me, it's the way you jump from one thing to another, which is a form of resistance.' The remark offers an insight not only into this novel, but into others like it, and to the style made possible by lacunae, erasure and jumpy interleaving. (p.98)

This curious admission implies that Jose likes all his novels to follow a more integrated and straightforward line. If this is the case, Castro is never going to gel with Jose.

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<sup>104</sup> Imre Salusinszky, 'The Unconscious—and the Maddeningly Self-Conscious', *Weekend Australian*; 10-11 August 1991; Review p. 4

<sup>105</sup> Nicholas Jose, 'Reworking "The Wolf Man"', *Voices*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Summer (1991-1992), pp. 97-99

Jose also makes some strange comments about Freud, given that nearly all other commentators agree that Freud's methodology followed an uncertain line between scientific and metaphysical discourse.

For all that he produced literary masterpieces, Freud obeyed the rules of scientific investigation. He wrote detective stories bound by logic, sequence, character, political economy, matter. (p. 99)

Freud is taken to task, by the Wolf-Man and psychiatric and literary commentators, for inverting the rules of logic, imposing sequence, disregarding Occam's razor (the rule of logical economy), and inventing metaphysical constructs such as the castration complex. Jose is out on a limb if he thinks to defend Freud for his principled use of scientific method.

Moha Melhem's review<sup>106</sup> in *Australian Left Review* offered an equivocal but essentially negative assessment of the novel, describing it as

highly crafted ... the writing polished and interesting, [but] the reader may never get quite comfortable with the novel. I for one found myself oscillating between sympathising with and feeling alienated from Castro's personalities (for they are more personalities than characters).

Perhaps, (s)he concludes, 'Writing, like psychoanalysis, may after all be just an exercise in con-artistry.'

That might be an appropriate place to leave *Double-Wolf*, on the question of readerly co-operation. Novels are, and always have been, an exercise in 'con-artistry': it just depends on whether one puts a negative or a approving interpretation on the word 'con'.

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<sup>106</sup> Moha Melhem, 'Who's Afreud ...', *Australian Left Review*, No. 131, August 1991, p. 46

## Chapter 8

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### *After China* Story and Australian/Asian Readings

The meaning of a story can't be paraphrased and if it's there it's there, almost more as a physical than an intellectual fact.  
Flannery O'Connor<sup>1</sup>

*After China* is one of Castro's more 'complete' novels. It has a definite sense of closure, and a sense of progress. This is reflected in both the development of the characters and the structure of the novel, which in its closing finalises the themes worked through in the course of the novel.

The tone of the novel is much more elegiac than in other Castro novels; although the protagonists struggle with spiritual difficulties, they reach a state of grace by the end of the novel, and during their journeys their travails are not as dark as those experienced by other Castro characters. The worst of their difficult history is not described, but sketched in lightly by Castro and often either recalled in story format, relying as much on metaphor as direct description, or displaced, offered as parables of being.

The technique of the novel is very balanced throughout, and the rhapsodic passages quite beautiful. They are much more like the lyric rhapsodies of *Birds of Passage*, and the writing style also returns towards the more concrete prose of *Birds of Passage*. There is not the same *compulsive* punning that defines the style of *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf*, and the prose does not

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, quoted by Lisa Alther in the Introduction to O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, The Women's Press, London, 1980, p. 6

turn in on itself and consume or parody itself. Castro has said that after working through the backward-looping style of *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf* he was reverting to a more concrete/realist style, and this is certainly reflected in *After China*.

But in the next manuscript<sup>2</sup> I have gone back more or less to the sparer style because I think one can only do that [convoluted] sort of writing to a certain extent.

I read Thomas Pynchon, for instance, and to go on that long with that kind of long breath as it were, without a full stop or comma, is great for a few pages but after a while I think it pales and you are just trying to endure the book. So I try to mix the two. I don't know whether it's too hard a mixture or not but I try to have the realistic narrative, the spareness, the story telling, and then I go into these waves of lyricism.<sup>3</sup>

As I have suggested, there are times in both *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf* when the reader begins to feel that Castro has indeed overwritten—the baroque striving and multiple energies become distracting—and at times in *Pomeroy* many readers may well be 'trying to endure the book', as Castro says of Pynchon. There is not the same sense of this in *After China*. That is not to say that the book is less complex or that Castro makes the reader work less hard. But the book is more gentle and contemplative in tone and less resistant than its predecessors.

Castro explained his intentions in an interview with Peter Craven:

The reaction to *After China* has nonplussed me because I saw the book as a bit of an interlude, certainly a change of style after *Double-Wolf*. I wanted the writing to have more silence in it after the cacophony which had preceded it.<sup>4</sup>

*After China* is in many senses a 'poetic' book. It is replete with metaphor and symbol, and like a dense poem in that the meaning is not concrete, but cumulative, acquired through the assimilation of a system of metaphor and symbol that *suggests* an understanding of life's problems, such as love

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<sup>2</sup> As Castro has earlier in this interview referred to *Double-Wolf* as his 'latest novel', we can assume that 'the next manuscript' is that of *After China*.

<sup>3</sup> 'Brian Castro reads his poetry [sic] at ADFA', 25 July 1991, ADFA videotape. See Appendix 4.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Craven, 'Double Delights', *The Sunday Age* (Agenda), 12 September 1993, p. 8. Castro added that 'Because *After China* was originally conceived of as an interlude between two longer hauls of writing [*Drift* was being planned] it was written in no time at all—a mere six months, immediately after *Double-Wolf*.'

and death. It draws heavily on Chinese philosophy and its method of expressing 'truths' in poetic but concealed aphorisms. Many of the 'truths' of the novel are illustrated in story. The stories interspersed throughout the novel proper are a mixture of traditional Chinese tales borrowed and adapted by Castro, and Castro's invention of the backgrounds of his two main characters.

[The stories are a]bsolutely all fictional. I think there's one that is original and that is the last one, the one about the Empress who used to have male lovers and then she'd kill them. But all the rest, no. I took examples of beginnings of stories and then worked my own story into it, and I think that was the exciting part about writing *After China*. There were all these stories, which I wasn't simply going to repeat or change or twist. I liked the beginnings, and the beginnings of all these Chinese stories were wonderful: they never ever ever fulfilled their promise, though. In other words a lot of these ancient Chinese stories began with *so many* connections that you could have made, but they always went down the path that was not very interesting.<sup>5</sup>

The stories are marvellously involving, but their significance is often obscure. On a few occasions the 'meaning' is worked out for the reader by the characters interpreting the story to fit their own life, but at other times the stories simply resonate through the novel and remain 'unexplained' in any conventional sense. As the woman Writer suggests, one of the purposes of the stories—especially the stories that are parts of your own history—is that, in formulating the story for someone else, you come to understand its significance yourself.<sup>6</sup> This is a key to Castro's writing itself: the reader must interact with and construct/interpret the text, rather than 'receive' it from the author. Another purpose of the stories is that they become 'gifts' that allow the listener (in the novel) a temporary respite from life's difficulties.

Characteristically *After China* deals with 'death and sex', as all Castro's writing does. However, the focus is on death not as an end, but as a part of the *process* of living, and sex is discussed both in terms of the dilemma of

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5 Interview MD 27 November 1997. Fen Liang has commented on which stories are retold, adapted and invented; see 'Brian Castro's *After China*—A Translation into Mandarin and a Study of the Novel's Linguistic and Social Contexts in Australia and China', unpublished PhD, Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1997

6 'Sometimes it is in the telling that you understand things.' *After China*, p. 35

participating or not participating in life, and of the concept of being able to control time. Principally sex appears in the stories contained within the framing narrative, several of them reporting the fabled sexual customs of ancient China. A repeated theme is abstention from sex, and this is discussed both by the Chinese storytellers (who are themselves commentators and philosophers), and by the characters of *After China*. Both characters are trying to come to grips with the question of how to participate in life. This question is therefore mirrored in the stories by arguments on the benefits of withholding from sex—but not abstaining totally—and the novel opens with a discussion of Lao-tzu preaching the benefits of control and withholding. This is linked with the theme of restraint that informs the entire narrative.

In *After China* the characters do not have a physical sexual relationship,<sup>7</sup> and the tenderness of the story is built around their overcoming their natural reticence and awkwardness with each other, deriving from their respect for each other, and their gradual coming together physically. (Their first kiss occurs very late in the novel (page 119) and is a symbol of their finally *trusting* each other.)

The *immediate* focus in the novel is on death: how do we live in the knowledge that this is our end? For the woman Writer, the question is not just rhetorical: she is dying of cancer. This is not spelled out, only suggested obliquely. The Writer does not talk about her disease, and You must infer it from her wasting away. On page 82 You says 'I know you are ill'. The only indication in the novel that the illness is cancer is passing

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<sup>7</sup> You is not physically impotent, despite this claim being made in several reviews of *After China*: he has been made *sterile* by his accident ('Then the doctor said that I would never have children,' (p. 91). He is sexually active in Paris as a student (see, for example, p. 52), but as an older man in Australia (i.e. after the accident in China), he is ambivalent towards the librarian Laura. On page 36 he is unable to fulfil his desire because 'he was grimacing with pain'. He tells us that 'After China, it had been impossible. He could have said it was middle age, that he had lost his libido. ... If only he could have told stories. To learn, all over again, to express himself. If only he could have slowed things down.' (p. 36) This suggests that he may be physically restricted, but that the problem is essentially psychological. Castro is very delicate about You's and the Writer's relationship: it *could* be physical, but seems not to be. On page 130 we are told 'He had hardly touched her until now. In that long night he traced his finger along her body, memorised her form ...'. At the time she is in remission from her illness, and he knows she has not long to live. The chasteness of the relationship is important in understanding the balanced control of their relationship.

references such as occur on page 10, where the word is used in connection with ‘beach women’, and page 95 (the Writer recalls a Polish film in which a man is cured of cancer). Me Liao speaks of cancer as a physical manifestation of the death-wish, and the Writer is characterised at times as someone who is holding back, not committing herself to life. (See the discussion on Sontag later in this Chapter.)<sup>8</sup>

For the architect, the problem is part of the overall question of engaging in life. He feels emotionally deadened by his life experiences, especially those which occurred in China, and is tempted to withdraw from involvement and engagement. His problem is to come to terms with living in the present—that is, experiencing life and other people, in Castro’s special sense of the word ‘experience’. He faces the imminent death of the woman he is just coming to know, and, in sharing his being with her, comes to terms with his own inadequacies. Death is also intimately connected with time. Throughout the novel questions about time are continually posed: whether to postpone or dilate time as a means of deferral, whether to become timeless, and immortal.

Much in this novel is withheld and oblique. Jane Messer noted in a review: ‘*After China* doesn’t so much tell as story as gesture with a rich and mysterious hand towards two lives’.<sup>9</sup> The two characters are given only sketchy pasts, though the Chinese man is filled out in much more detail. His name is You Bok Mun, which automatically confers on him an ‘Everyman’ status through his equation with the English pronoun—Castro makes the connection in case the reader misses it:

‘Hey you!’ they call, making me smile ...

Yes that was his name. *You*. You Bok Mun. Broadly speaking, his name meant he was well read. Narrowly speaking, he was just You. Everyman.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Castro has confirmed that he was envisaging cancer: ‘I felt the whole idea that in *After China* is that cancer, which is basically a termination and has a chronology—this person who has cancer will die within a certain time ...’ Interview MD, 27 November 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Messer, *Australian Bookseller and Publisher*, May 1992, p. 22

<sup>10</sup> *After China*, p. 7. Castro has elaborated on the multiple resonances of the name. ‘You/Yu/Ue = *fish; foolish; literati; rain*. All of these are evident in the novel in symbolic, sometimes literal or mocking senses. Bok Mun = (literally) *well read; broad knowledge*. This is my own Chinese name based on a homophonic rendition of “Brian”. The similarity with “bookman” is also evident. I like these strange cross-overs in sound and sense, though obviously there is no connection in translation. A

It is through You that we experience the events and mental tribulations of the novel. The woman who acts as the counterfoil is very sketchily described: in fact she is not even given a name (one of Castro's gestures towards 'silence', mentioned earlier). I will simply refer to her as 'the Writer'. Her diaphanous and intangible nature is deliberate on Castro's part. She has been withholding herself from life, and You's attempts to 'grasp' her form the outward manifestation of his attempts to come to grips with life.

Castro has deliberately written a minimally structured book with minimalist characterisation. He explained this in an interview:

This book does take a few risks ... The characters are disembodied, and there's no such thing as a central plot. But there is a story ...

I'm trying to stir a possum here because I felt you can have a book of voices rather than characters. And sometimes it's better to have voices that are not particularly embodied. It gives a different perspective on what people say and how they're saying it.<sup>11</sup>

There are two major metaphors employed in the novel, building and writing. They carry much the same function: ideas of constructing one's life, ways of defeating time, achieving permanence. You Bok Mun is an architect who has unconventional ideas, modelled on Postmodern precepts. The Writer is a novelist or short story writer—we are never told much about her work, only that the last, posthumous book is 'fragments and Chinese stories'—who bases her writing on life experiences.<sup>12</sup> Both writing and building are complementary means of creating, and *After China* is concerned with this overall process of creating, not of works *per se*, but of creating one's life and one's world.

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character called "Bookman" also features in my current [forthcoming] autobiographical fiction, *Shanghai-dancing*.' Letter to MD, 16 February 1999.

To add local flavour, You is also given the colloquial epithet 'Old China', a mark of matey acceptance.

According to Fen Liang, 'You' is a common surname in China. She also points out translations of other names, which Castro uses symbolically, if loosely, and which the average English reader will not be aware of: Me Liao = 'boring, senseless, stupid' (the character is bored and lonely); Long Tsing = 'cold and cheerless, deserted' (the baby is 'abandoned' by her father; Castro 'translates' the name as 'Serenity')

<sup>11</sup> Susan Geason, 'In the China Hotel', *The Sun-Herald*, 6 September 1992, p. 118

<sup>12</sup> Her first book 'was a theft from life. From the wrong side of creation'. (p. 78) Later she asks to 'borrow' You's stories (the courtesan Yü Hsüan-chi, Me Liao/Flower Boat) to incorporate into her writing.



The building and writing metaphors are embodied in the Postmodern hotel.<sup>13</sup> Castro has said 'The book is built around the hotel, which stands as a metaphor for the construction, or rather the deconstruction of the book.'<sup>14</sup>

The hotel ran with the wall, out to sea. There were no enclosed courtyards, no circles, no centres or comforting squares. 'When I built it,' he said, 'I wanted people to be lost in it.'

*The guest was not to come round again with any recognition or familiarity. Movement is discovery.*

So he built it following a snaking line of glass-roofed corridors ... rejoining each other at different angles ...

But he was serious about the incompleteness.<sup>15</sup>

Incompletion here has a positive component: it means that the hotel does not become stale or exhausted, but offers new experience.

The luxury hotel with unexpected corners and small alcoves. A new view of the sea each time, as the sea changes too ... Alcoves leading to bedrooms.<sup>16</sup>

The Writer accuses his hotel of not having a 'heart'. 'Functional. Your hotel is vulgar and functional. It has no heart. You've become too [W]esternised.'<sup>17</sup>

You admits that 'He had purposefully designed the hotel without a heart or centre', and likens it to 'a clipper ship ... forever on the point of a journey'.<sup>18</sup> For him the hotel represents a structure that has no fixed centre or 'home', but which can accommodate the wanderer.

Towards the end of the novel the hotel is nearly destroyed in a storm, but You has reached a stage of personal development where he is ready to rebuild the hotel, and to engage once again with life, even after his losses. An important Afterword to the novel suggests building according to the principles of Shintoism, 'which teaches eternal change in all things and the

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<sup>13</sup> Castro's physical model was a hotel in Terrigal, NSW. His brother-in-law is an engineer, and helped him to 'construct' his imaginary hotel. Rosemary Sorensen, 'Yearning for Diversion', *Australian Book Review*; No. 142, July 1992, p. 9

<sup>14</sup> Susan Geason, 'In the China Hotel', *The Sun-Herald*, 6 September 1992, p. 118

<sup>15</sup> *After China*, p. 16

<sup>16</sup> *After China*, p. 8

<sup>17</sup> *After China*, p. 67

<sup>18</sup> *After China*, p. 67

continuity of the eternal in the transient'.<sup>19</sup> A group of Japanese architects adopted this principle for their 'Metabolist architecture', constructing their theory 'on the Ise Shrine, which is demolished and rebuilt every twenty years'.<sup>20</sup> This metaphor suggests the purpose behind the novel, that of (re)constructing life as we go, and making 'fresh starts'. This is as far as Castro himself is prepared to go in terms of describing the 'purpose' of the novel. Any 'message' is tacit rather than explicit.

The architect is very Chinese in many senses, but most of all in the connections he makes. For example, at the end of the stories, you think there must be a message here, a moral, but the Chinese resile from morals. That's a very Western concept, that we have to learn something from a story. If you could say *After China* is about something, it's about change, and difference, and it's about the fact that those things are the norm rather than the exception. Nothing lasts.<sup>21</sup>

Once again Castro invokes the idea of Keats's 'negative capability': being able to learn from situations without necessarily understanding them in detail. The novel also suggests ideas of deconstructing—catabolism is important in renewal and discovery—and deferral—things do not always need to be 'possessed'.

### Structure of *After China*

There are two component parts to *After China*: the story of You Bok Mun and the Writer, including their pasts, and the stories told by these two characters, seemingly randomly interspersed throughout *their* narrative. The former is in essence a love story, although it focuses more on existential concerns than 'romantic' ones. Most of the narrative centres on You Bok Mun: it gives his history in some detail, and the relationship with the Writer is told principally from his point of view. He also tells the stories from ancient China, which Castro researched.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *After China*, p. 145

<sup>20</sup> *After China*, p. 145

<sup>21</sup> Susan Geason, 'In the China Hotel', *The Sun-Herald*, 6 September 1992, p. 118

<sup>22</sup> 'Some of them are old Chinese folk tales, some are adapted and some I made up.' Susan Geason, 'In the China Hotel', *The Sun-Herald*, 6 September 1992, p. 118. The stories are independent and self-contained. In fact one of them—'Carried Away on a Flower Boat', pages 112-117—was even published separately as a short story (*Scipsi*, 1992, Vol. 7, No. 3 pp. 197-200). As it was published at the time of publication of *After China* and the versions are identical, it is technically an extract from the novel, even though it is entirely self-contained as a short story and was presented as such.

'Flower Boat' is also interesting in that it gets an extra frame: it is told *within* the story of Me Liao. Perhaps Castro felt he needed to do this to incorporate 'Flower Boat' properly. The nominal connection is Me Liao and You escaping from China to Macau, and 'Flower Boat' explains 'how Macau got its name'.

The chapters are typically short, but in this novel are untitled. They shift back and forth in time, so the narrative is not linear, and the characters are not introduced, so the reader must work out who is speaking. As usual, the characters 'speak' their thoughts via internal monologue, and there is little by way of authorial narration. Unlike the earlier novels, there is little or no reflexivity,<sup>23</sup> and Castro-as-author stays out of his novel. Once again, extensive use is made of shifting between first and third person narration, which gives alternative viewpoints on a character's reminiscences. You, especially, is seen observing himself when he speaks in the third person. This distancing sometimes helps him to narrate awkward material, such as his time in Chinese detention camps (he can tell a 'story' about himself as 'another person', trying to make sense of it to himself), and at other times allows him to switch his 'voice' or register. The changing voice also implies ontological uncertainty.

For example, Chapter Two begins in third person past tense, giving some recent history in a meditative register. Suddenly the voice switches to first person present tense ('I cruise up the street and there's a jazz band playing ...' p. 7), and the register is much more relaxed, as You talks about jazz bars and feeling 'cool' and accepted. The voice changes back to third person past tense as the register again becomes meditative, even though the same sort of event is being described (people calling to him 'Hey you'). It is as if Castro has an extra viewpoint and commentator at his disposal, as the various 'personalities' of his character(s) come to the fore. First person is often the 'comfortable' voice, third person the anxious. The shifts in grammatical person are also made further unsettling by the irony of the architect's name: in addressing himself (You) he could also be addressing the reader (you), and any character addressing You also seems to address the reader.

The Writer is largely silent. Her conversations are reported by You, and her stories about her life are detached. (Technically, they are being related by You after her death, but her words often *sound* disembodied.)

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<sup>23</sup> One interesting exception occurs when You is relating the story of Tang Yin. You draws attention to the fact that he is (re-)constructing as well as recalling the story, when he says 'For that, I give Tang Yin a fan' (p. 97), 'I send the cold wind into his room' (p. 99), and 'Four centuries later, I look through the smoked glass window ... (p. 100)

Quite often the reader cannot easily place the voice or the time. This is because all past tenses are general: there is little distinction between simple past (what is often the 'present' of the story being told), and the pluperfect (what had already happened), and because Castro cuts from event to event in a non-linear chronology. Chapter Ten begins with a 'present' situation, a conversation between You and the Writer (p. 35); abruptly moves to relate You's first meeting with Laura (pp. 35-36) in the first person; switches to third person past to continue the Laura story at a later date (p. 36); moves on to a general reminiscence which relates another You/Writer conversation, in which she tells the first part of one of her stories (her father drowning) (pp. 36-37); then interposes a short comic reminiscence of You's time in New York (p. 37); moves back to You and the Writer having lunch, during which he begins to relate his Chinese past and suspects that she may be ill (pp. 38-39), before going into the first of the Chinese stories that You tells the Writer to engage her (the story of You Bao, pp. 39-43). We only infer that this last story is told during lunch because after the story there is a short epilogue mentioning the Japanese businessmen. The Writer has been entranced by the story ('She was staring intently at him, fugue-like, as thought caught in a temporary flight from reality.' p. 43). The chapter closes with a typical Castro punch-line; the revelation by You Bok Mun that You Bao was his father.

The reader will find it hard to piece together the chronology of the above events—precisely the effect Castro wants, of having the reader suspended in timelessness, and rapt into the stories as they occur—and only a very general chronology emerges in retrospect. We cannot tell *exactly* when most of the events occur, only that they have an *approximate* sequence (sometimes this is not absolutely fixed), and there is a sense of being immersed in an ambient time where past and present mix, so one can move backwards and forwards in time through story. Some sections of the narrative eventually connect together, but more importantly sections of the novel begin to amplify others, or simply to echo ideas from other sections. There is a building up process throughout the novel, but never a fixed edifice. The novel mirrors You's hotel.

### **Themes of the novel**

*After China* is a meditation on time, and its relationship to love, death and existence. Castro himself suggested the main idea is change and transience.

... every time you tell a story, like Scheherazade you would put aside time. Now that—mixed with the Chinese notion of sex which is the idea that time is erased—is a very potent one, I think, in relation to death. So sex and death, Freud, all come into it. All those connections are there in a very potent way, and I think *After China*, being my shortest book, is the most compressed.<sup>24</sup>

The novel starts quite boldly with the idea of sexual restraint and its connection with creativity or fertility of invention. This chapter is important not just as an example of the ability of story to seize the reader into a timeless state, but because it introduces the theme of restraint versus engagement, which is critical to the novel.

It is 'c. 499 BC', and 'the venerable philosopher' Lao-tzu, author of the *Tao Te Ching*, makes the bold assertion that 'During winter ... one should not ejaculate at all.' He is said to have had 1200 copulations without emission during that year, in order 'to build up *yang* essence'. The ancient Chinese belief<sup>25</sup> was apparently that by not ejaculating the man would absorb female *yin* essence and enhance his *yang* (masculine) essence

*thereby increasing and strengthening one's vitality ... man's yang essence will flow upwards along his spinal column, delivering an awesome power to his brain and to his entire system. This will render him immortal. Time will then be suspended and exorcised. Et cetera.*<sup>26</sup>

This is not an attempt to increase sexual prowess, but a philosophical quest to improve one's creativity and to suspend or conquer time. These are also the 'quests' of the characters in *After China*.

Lao-tzu has been trying to formulate 1,200 new aphorisms, which would not be 'stale and technical' like his earlier ones, but in withholding completion of intercourse he suddenly suffers a bad case of 'writer's block'.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview MD, 27 November 1997

<sup>25</sup> Castro acknowledges R.H. Van Gulik's scholarly work *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1961) as a primary source. Many of the practices described by Castro are accurate reflections of the ancient sex manuals translated by Van Gulik.

Castro points out his particular interest in sexual restraint as a way of achieving control over time in 'The Private and the Public: A Meditation on Noise', p. 16. 'The way that you can actually exorcise time through sex was of course of the greatest importance.'; 'The more time the man can with[h]old his *yang*, the longer he will live and the stronger he will become ... The man who never arrived became an immortal.' Castro comments that 'many Chinese people still hold to these beliefs'.

<sup>26</sup> *After China*, p. 1

His 1,199th partner, the cause of his block, relieves the block with her own occluded aphorism:

'I am the book you intend to write, the intention of which is jade resplendent. But writing is not jade.'

Lao-tzu blinked. He had not expected a woman to speak this way.

'What is it then?' he asked, irritated.

'It is transience, smallness, and the dying of many deaths.'<sup>27</sup>

Then:

Upon hearing these words, Lao-tzu ... entered her, experienced brevity, and died the first of many deaths. Two months later, after conceiving the ultimate aphorism ... one that was so brief it was completely silent ... Lao-tzu stopped eating and grew small.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to unravel the significance of these exchanges because they resonate throughout the novel, and the novel closes with You feeling that

the world had metamorphosed, had become small almost surreptitiously, in that brief, inconceivable moment of reflection.<sup>29</sup>

Lao-tzu is practising withholding to build up creative energy in order to write aphorisms. But this blocking of natural function results in a creative blocking: he cannot conceive new aphorisms, and in fact temporarily forgets the previous 1,198 which he is holding in memory. His mysterious 1,199th partner who causes the blockage (sexual impotence *and* creative impotence) gives a carefully worded rebuttal of his methodology: she apotheosises herself as the creation he wants to complete (sexual consummation and literary consummation), but warns that though the intention to complete a fine work is 'jade resplendent'—a thing of great beauty, rareness and endurance—the actual process of creating is not as perfect as the idea that it sets out to complete. Writing, like sexual congress, 'is not jade'. It is, like sex, 'transience, smallness, and the dying of many deaths'. (Jade is a repeated symbol of perfection and/or endurance throughout the novel.)

To write is in fact a more prosaic process, in which the writer must give him/herself up to transience, to making small achievements, and to experiencing loss (sexual parallels: 'dying', 'detumescence'). But unless one

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<sup>27</sup> *After China*, p. 3

<sup>28</sup> *After China*, p. 3

<sup>29</sup> *After China*, p. 144

is prepared to experience the prosaic and to endure the difficulties associated with imperfection, then nothing will be achieved. When Lao-tzu realises this, he abandons his withholding, couples with humanity, and recovers his creativity.

The same process is required in life. You and the Writer must face up to small and repeated failures, and ultimately to death—the final, silent aphorism—to achieve fecundity in their lives and to complete their process as human beings. They must learn to appreciate the achievements born of and achieved through loss. Again, it is Castro's notion of praxis being paramount.

In his research notes, which also record some of the stories of ancient Chinese sexual practice, Castro crystallises some of the points he is trying to make in *After China*. These will not always be immediately obvious to the reader, but the overall import becomes apparent and the reader will intuitively grasp some of the others without being able to say what it is he/she feels.

Castro thinks of cancer in terms of negative behaviour, a holding back or repression of energy, or in Sontag's terms, a 'refusal to consume or spend'.<sup>30</sup> This is apparently the Writer's ontological problem. She is scarred by her experiences with her illegitimate child and society's reaction to it. She is therefore (symbolically) refusing to engage with the world.<sup>31</sup> Writing is one outlet for this: she is able to 'write out' and thereby exorcise the pain of her relationship with the poet in her first novel. Of this she says 'I had this weight inside me then, and it was hurting and I carried it around, these words of his which broke open like shelled peas into sunlight much later.'<sup>32</sup>

Castro even suggests that cancer is a willed outcome. Me Liao explains it as a psychosomatic interaction.

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor, and AIDS and its Metaphors*, Penguin Books, 1991, p. 65. Sontag uses the metaphor in terms of capitalist economics: 'Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behaviour of twentieth-century *homo economicus*: abnormal growth; repression of energy, that is, refusal to consume or spend.' In other words, not participating in the (economic) community as one should.

<sup>31</sup> Her poet lover offers another formulation along these lines: 'Life is a renewal of its own secret, and dying is the final refusal to make, to join.', p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> *After China*, p. 78

‘You mean it is possible to will cancer upon oneself?’  
 ‘Exactly. You write the message into the DNA molecules ... the death wish. Under the electron microscope the death wish looks like a cluster of crystals.’<sup>33</sup>

In a conversation in which You explains that Taoist constriction theories had failed and had come up against ‘modern biophysics’, the Writer asks if that is how he will explain her, that she had ‘put off recognising modern science.’<sup>34</sup> This suggests she is aware of the possibilities of psychosomatic self-destructiveness.

Another persistent influence on the novel, Taoism focuses on control and rationality. But there are paradoxes in wanting to control everything, including time. The control of time is a prolongation of life. But it is also an anxiety about termination; therefore particular acts are prolonged in order to exorcise time. But what looks like it is empowering a person to control life is at the same time a withdrawal from or refusal to engage with life.

Castro has elsewhere made connections between Taoist philosophical approaches and ‘the Chinese mind’.

If the Chinese in Australia lacked a vision, it would very likely hinge on this element of resignation, this closing-off, this withdrawal into the temple of self. The difficulty of understanding the Chinese mind lies in this sacrosanct nature of the self.<sup>35</sup>

The struggle between restraint and engagement can also be framed in Freudian terms (the battle between super-ego/ego complex and the id), as suggested in the novel. You experiences this dilemma from both Eastern and Western perspectives. As an architect he is striving for rational control and building up; as a person he acknowledges the power of the id: ‘If only they knew what went on in my head. Hieronymous Bosch. Bodies. Fornication ... The West and its freedoms.’<sup>36</sup> In fact his architectural drawings are often spoiled by erotic doodles.<sup>37</sup> You is also caught between his Chineseness—restraint—and Westernness—engagement.

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<sup>33</sup> *After China*, p. 118

<sup>34</sup> *After China*, p. 124

<sup>35</sup> ‘Memoirs of a Displaced Person: Growing up as a Chinese in Australia’, *National Times*, 6-12 Jan 1984, p. 12

<sup>36</sup> *After China*, p. 9

<sup>37</sup> ‘I scan the drawings and run them through the computer. The building doesn’t hold up ... There’s the problem. I find an ecstatic couple caught *in flagrante delicto* where the central pillar is supposed to be.’ *After China*, p. 9



These notions of control and conflict are also suggested in the frequent references to Kafka, whose ideas of metamorphosis, unreality and the irreality of time are equated by Castro with id-impulses, the anti-rational aspects of life. Kafka was interested in Taoist teachings, and many of his own paradoxes read much like Zen koans.<sup>38</sup>

Rosemary Sorenson has argued that although some of the writing style seems to be Sterne-like—'jerky, chaotic, meandering ... playful'—'it is the tone and tension in Kafka that keeps forcing its way into Castro's writing.'

It's here again in *After China*. 'I came to think,' [Castro] explains, 'that there's a strong connection between Kafka and Taoism. When you read Kafka you have this impression of being sentenced, condemned. And he creates an unworldly time, which is what I find in ancient Chinese philosophy.'<sup>39</sup>

Kafka is invoked in *After China* as a catabolic influence, enzymic, digesting, metamorphosing. Me Liao, the enzyme biochemist, offers the following metaphoric view:

'Kafka ... He knew about enzymes ... He knew before much was known about them ... what was he doing? He was *metabolizing* ... he understood becoming ... the way stomachs metamorphose food into flesh ... What's more, he was filled with animal fear, and his heart was attempting to slow down time.'<sup>40</sup>

### **Asian/Australian connections**

As in *Birds of Passage*, cross-cultural connections have an important role in *After China*. Once again, Castro deals with the Asian background of his character in terms of ontological (*not* racial) identity and hybridity. You is a man who feels alien because firstly he does not fit into his own society, and then because he never quite comes to feel at home in his adopted Western culture. But for Castro, this is not a drawback; once You comes to terms with certain psychological problems he is able to use his 'Chineseness', his 'otherness', to advantage. His work benefits from his hybrid background,

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Joyce Carol Oates, 'Kafka's Paradise', *New Heaven, New Earth: the visionary experience in literature*, Vanguard Press, New York, 1974, pp. 267-298

<sup>39</sup> Rosemary Sorenson, 'Yearning for Diversion', *Australian Book Review*, No. 142, July 1992, p. 8

<sup>40</sup> *After China*, pp. 109-110

and he is a source of comfort (even 'wisdom'?) for the Writer. You does not speak to her from a position of superiority, but as a fellow traveller, who draws on his background to investigate life's possibilities.

Castro sees You's experience as related to his own, and sets out to portray a successful, hybrid, trans-boundary view of the Asian-Australian.

'My literary heritage is European so I see it [my writing] as a coalescing of the two things,' Castro said.

However, he said *After China* attempted to move on from the stylised perceptions of Asians in Australia.

'This time the immigrant is not the downtrodden refugee or the social outcast,' he said. 'He is a successful architect ...

'I think literature ... in the past has always dealt with the ...migrant experience and I think we are now past all that. People are now looking for more complexity and I hope *After China* explores that.'<sup>41</sup>

Peter Pierce congratulated Castro on achieving this 'complexity'.

*After China* constructs a man aware of all the emotions he has denied. Instead of adopting the familiar 'Asian' device of Australian novelists of introducing a mentor figure to give sententious, maddening instruction to uncouth Antipodeans, Castro has found a remarkable voice for an Asian expatriate in Australia.<sup>42</sup>

This voice is neither superior nor inferior to Australian voices, merely different. Asianness is investigated from a philosophical viewpoint: different ways of seeing between Eastern and Western traditions.

There are few hints of 'race' overtly entering this novel. Castro is realistic enough not to ignore the obvious superficial differences, and the way people react to them. You is said to speak in 'scissoring Shanghainese' and accented English,<sup>43</sup> and at one stage a woman in the street (quite understandably, in the circumstances) thinks him 'Mad. All mad, these foreigners.'<sup>44</sup> But, overall, You does not experience significant racial discrimination—his alienness is internal. His friends in the bar, for example, think of him avuncularly. 'They call me Uncle ... Uncle Ho. That gives you an idea of their generation ...'.<sup>45</sup> This is mild ribbing at the worst,

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<sup>41</sup> Michelle Gunn, 'Novelist's second win proves a literary first', *The Australian*, 13 September 1991, p. 3

<sup>42</sup> Peter Pierce, 'Uprooting a Life', *The Bulletin*, 1992, Vol. 114, No. 5830, 28 July p. 91

<sup>43</sup> 'Thank God she [the Writer] understood his English.' *After China*, p. 22

<sup>44</sup> *After China*, p. 5

<sup>45</sup> *After China*, p. 7

and 'Old China' is a term of mateship; You experiences none of the nasty intolerance encountered by Shan or Seamus in *Birds of Passage*.

Race problems are significant only when the Writer's baby, Serena, is born, to a Chinese (or Asian) father (the mysterious poet) and her family reject it. We are told little about the child, Serena, but she apparently has some Asian features and is attracted to You, presumably because of his appearance.<sup>46</sup>

The Writer's Chinese poet also suffers from racism, but his story is never filled in. Also, he is portrayed as someone who is failing generally at life. He is an outsider—'Some days I'm so alien I can't be spoken to.'<sup>47</sup>—who has resorted to drink.

Castro is also careful to balance any discrimination. When You tells his Chinese aunt (now living in Canada) that he is interested in the Writer, she becomes silent when she hears that the Writer is 'a foreign devil'.<sup>48</sup>

Castro also sees humorous/ironic possibilities with Asianness, such as the Pakistani family who are so eager to integrate themselves as Westerners that they want to change their name from Ramajimukherjee to McDonalds, 'like the hamburger'!<sup>49</sup>

### **Alienated characters**

You is an alienated person in the double sense of ontology and being a migrant. Early in the novel he is introduced performing Tai Chi and trying to find time to think, but 'Here, on the eastern seabord of Australia, he finds it difficult, this process of reflection.'<sup>50</sup> Castro links reflection and accomplishment using evocative sexual imagery as a metaphor for creativity, or more accurately, creative impotence. You

... watches the waves breaking again and again on the sand below. Impotent, erupting in froth at the end of a long and once-powerful swell before the mouth of the bay, they barely disrupt a wading child.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *After China*, p. 27

<sup>47</sup> *After China*, p. 77

<sup>48</sup> *After China*, p. 70

<sup>49</sup> *After China*, p. 23

<sup>50</sup> *After China*, p. 4

<sup>51</sup> *After China*, p. 4

Tai Chi is a form that relies on balance, and You is trying to find balance in his life:

He leans slightly over the railing, draws his arms back slowly [into a Tai Chi position] and feels a dizziness that will not allow him to determine the point where he is leaning out too far or keeping well within himself. *On the edge*, a woman<sup>52</sup> once told him with an ironic smile ... Only after several months, when he thought he knew her and had recounted his life briefly to her, had he recovered his balance.<sup>53</sup>

He perceives himself as alien—he feels ‘The loneliness of the long-distance migrant’—and is beginning to feel middle-aged: ‘I used to think I was exotic. Now I know I’m only foreign and middle-aged.’<sup>54</sup> However, the most important problem he must come to grips with is the existential problem of engaging with life.

This is first spelled out by the Writer. She has been making joking references about her imminent death, comparing finishing a book with finishing life. She admits that she has been ‘obsessed with production’, but she ribs You for his inability, or limited ability, to produce.

‘... I write books and you build buildings. But what you really want to do is to meditate on these things. The end [i.e. purpose] of meditation is not to do anything at all.’ ...

*You hate life because you don’t understand timeliness ...* It was true.

The past and the present confused him. *If you wait, things will take shape.*

He felt old. He didn’t want anything to happen, he was going to say. If only he could conquer time.<sup>55</sup>

You’s existential problem is to cope with the passing of time and the need to accomplish things, to create, during one’s life. His inability to decide what to do leaves him with difficulty in *acting*. He is left constantly

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<sup>52</sup> This is presumably the Writer, but we have yet to be introduced to her.

<sup>53</sup> *After China*, p. 5

<sup>54</sup> *After China*, p. 7. Castro mentions in an essay someone who could well have formed the model for You. This man, an artist ‘newly arrived from Hong Kong and recently from the People’s Republic of China’, was scared of Warragamba Dam because he ‘was looking for gun-towers and militiamen’. He had come to Australia because he sought artistic expression ... ‘I like the way there are laws here’. He had lived through the worst of the Cultural Revolution, where ‘Driven in upon themselves, they struggled harder than ever’. (p. 13). He is depressed that his qualifications are not recognised in Australia.

‘Memoirs of a Displaced Person: Growing up as a Chinese in Australia’, *National Times*, 6-12 Jan 1984, pp. 12-13

<sup>55</sup> *After China*, p. 6

meditating, and not *doing*: in Castro's terms, with mental theorising, and not getting around to doing anything (praxis).

You's internal state is mirrored by his work. The chief symbol—like the church spire in William Golding's novel *The Spire* or the floating opera in John Barth's *The Floating Opera*—is You's central coast hotel, which is consciously Postmodern. He had been reproached with his first designs.

His professor was livid. What will support your roof? Helicopters? *An architect is not an artist. He is an engineer, an organiser.*

How could he have explained then that although a building, like life, was ordered complexity, there was nevertheless always an element missing ... the desire for demolition?<sup>56</sup>

You's hotel is a hybrid construction, mixing paradigms. The Writer points this out:

she says how it reminds her of *islands of strange emotions*. Parts of the hotel collapsing into other genres.

The Bauhaus and the Aufbau had attracted him because they opposed the unification of history, nationalism and racial identity. He broke these things down into parts. Rearranged them.<sup>57</sup>

Castro cannot resist the amusing irony of situating the luxury hotel on a former garbage tip.<sup>58</sup> As well as being amusing, this has ramifications when You must confront the problem of the sewerage pipes, and it has resonances with the later story of Cec finding the baby in a garbage tip. Beautiful things are made over the top of the prosaic.

The Writer is also concerned with the past.

One never knew about the landscapes of the past, the continuous transformation of seashores, layered evocations ... She had said to him once: *Expecting to discover the past is a sort of paradox, isn't it?*<sup>59</sup>

You's task is to let her re-experience the past, which she does in her writing, and in being able to tell the story of her past to You (and, ironically, 'you', the reader). Thus for her the novel becomes a meditation on the interrelatedness of existence, time and memory.

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<sup>56</sup> *After China*, p. 21

<sup>57</sup> *After China*, p. 21

<sup>58</sup> *After China*, p. 8

<sup>59</sup> *After China*, p. 8

She said that one day everything would be gone, her childhood, her growth, even the discovery of the point at which memory mingled with the future, everything becoming oblique and borrowed.

But was there ever a pure origin? he asks himself ...

Both characters have a disconcerting past. For You it is his early life in China, firstly in the slums of Shanghai, then as a confused student in Paris, and later as a dissident intellectual in the early years of the Cultural Revolution under Mao Tse Tung.<sup>60</sup> For her it is the problem of her loss of her family, especially her father of whom she was fond, over her mixed race child, and the loss of her poet/lover.

For You, his background is presented in detail through several flashbacks, as boy in the slums, of his early realisation of being different (being made to 'jump' by his father), of his schooling, his university days, including overseas study in France, his wife and lost daughter Long Tsing, and his 're-education' at the hands of the Revolution before escaping to the West. The flashbacks are deftly interwoven with the main narrative of the novel's present, and they explain why You has lost faith in himself and society. They explain why he sees his life as being 'after China': everything must be seen against the background of China, a past which he cannot escape by processes of denial, and a past which leaves him inclined to meditation rather than action. He describes the bureaucracy and monism of the Cultural Revolution as *crushing* the individual spirit.

You is not totally defeatist or nihilistic in his outlook. He is, after all, trying to 'build', to create. His problem is to distinguish between the romantic and the pragmatic. This is illustrated by his recalling a Walter Benjamin story, *The Warning*,<sup>61</sup> in which a cafe owner manages to get around the problem of would-be suicides by roping off the cliff area near his cafe. According to You, this was a way of retaining the idea of Romanticism, but not giving in to it as a workable paradigm for life. He argues for the idea of Romanticism (in the sense of following impulse, moving towards id and

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<sup>60</sup> There are several sardonic references to Mao's 'Great Leap Forward', a program of industrialisation begun in 1958. Mao's Cultural Revolution nominally dates from 1966 to 1968. (Castro does not refer to any specific events or dates.) One of You's acts of defiance is to deface a monument '*To the glory of the People's Revolution*' in Shanghai (*After China*, p. 72).

<sup>61</sup> Not available in English: Castro read it in French.

away from ego), but the Writer is always quick to deflate him when she senses that things are drifting too far towards confusing Romanticism with pragmatism and reality.

‘We need signs, stories,’ he said, ‘to remind us about life. It’s a form of self-interest.’

‘Benjamin himself was a suicide.’

She was ruthless. She tore through his mystifications.

His refusal, he said, as they walked along the waterfront towards the hotel, to believe in a single reality. Two realities already: to create is also to be created. To have designed a building is also to have changed something in oneself. That’s the only sign he ever followed ... his intuition.<sup>62</sup>

The Writer at this stage does not know You well and argues that what he is lacking in his rather Romantic view of life is commitment.

‘What you feel about the land is like marks in the sand, endlessly erased. You have no commitment.’

‘After centuries of politics, commitment is a negative word. Ask any Chinese and you get a smile. Things change in time, then become the same.’<sup>63</sup>

His history compels him towards cynicism; nothing really changes, things go around in circles. You is able to defend his position by arguing that he does accomplish things, and that despite its *apparent* Postmodern aimlessness his hotel is designed to offer positive experiences to the people who visit it.

Timelessness and recovery. That was how he had felt when he first thought of designing the hotel. Starting from the roof. He had worked his way down into the foundations, his crowning achievement the Submarine Bar beneath the ocean. With piped whale music and a bar open at all hours, it was supposed to be a sanctuary, a place for repose and contemplation, amniotic, amnestic ... They said it couldn’t be done.<sup>64</sup>

The hotel is womb-like, and allows one to forget about life for a while. Of course although You does ‘do’ the undoable, and the hotel is built and works well in many respects, there are still the little drawbacks of real life: the Submarine Bar is plagued by sharks attacking the fish attracted to the window; sewage and jetsam turn the water brown, and so on.

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<sup>62</sup> *After China*, pp. 17-18. ‘Self-interest’ carries both pejorative connotations (‘selfishness’), and positive (‘care for the self’).

<sup>63</sup> *After China*, p. 18

<sup>64</sup> *After China*, p. 18

The hotel also stands, and works, as an enigma. You calls it his China Wall, and likens it to the enigmatic project of the Great Wall of China as described by Kafka.<sup>65</sup>

Although You is filled out as a character, the Writer, on the other hand, is kept sketchy, and most of what little we learn about her background comes mainly in the form of stories. In fact the *work* of the novel is accomplished through stories, and both You and the Writer develop their relationship and their psychological growth through their involvement in stories.

Story is seen as the bridge between reality and Romance, a medium that is able to represent the enigmas of existence, and most importantly, a way of experiencing the world and reality in an educating and transforming way. You likens the telling of stories to seduction, where the seduction is both a means of drawing two people into a closer relationship and a way of drawing people into an out-of-time experience, something which momentarily transcends reality but is not simply escapism because it produces a permanent effect. It is also something which teaches, but in some intuitive fashion as opposed to formal thinking ('ideas').

Ideas ruin intimacy. Don't be fooled. Kafka wasn't. He didn't want relationships, but he suffered terrible loneliness. He knew if he kept to opacity no one would ever find him. Infinite smallness was not an idea. It was a *transformation*. Seduction. I would like to put my hands on her, but a China Wall has sprung up. She thinks I'm transparent, but she cannot touch me.

Reading's the same. I would like to read with my penis ... a sort of electronic scanner of the humps and bumps of pleasure ... to be transformed without ideas!<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Kafka, Franz 'The Great Wall of China', in *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, Penguin Books, 1961; pp. 65–81

In this story the narrator 'inquires' into the building of what seemed an impossible piece of engineering. He puts forward reasons as to why the wall was constructed piece-meal: it was such a daunting task and so impossible to visualise as a complete project and so impossible to administer that it was dealt with in sections that seemed to proceed independently and without purpose. The story contains the sub-story 'The Emperor has sent you a message ...'

The Emperor as a real entity is unknowable; as a symbol he is all-powerful. The Emperor might be a real person, somewhere, in the flesh, but he is only known as an idea to the subjects at a remove, and no direct communication between them is possible. Indeed the idea of the Emperor is also outdated, at a remove, already replaced.

<sup>66</sup> *After China*, p. 19



For You, stories are the way to recreate himself. Retaining the sexual theme, You finds that he is losing interest in women, something which one could suggest Castro sees as being symptomatic with losing interest in life (cf. Seamus in *Birds of Passage* and his 'healing'). Stories recreate one's interest in life itself, and concomitantly, encourage engagement with others.

After China, it had been impossible. He could have said it was middle age, that he had lost his libido. Kafka was dead at forty-one. If only he [i.e. You] could have told stories. To learn, all over again, to express himself.<sup>67</sup>

The need to express himself is the need to overcome the restriction he feels has been socialised into him by his Chinese past.

I think she likes me because I'm Chinese. I can teach her about sex, since I understand *restriction*. Political, physical, ideological, material ... I think she likes me because I'm foreign, even to myself.<sup>68</sup>

But You understands something about his own potential. He feels that he has the capacity to experience love, and he always connects this with the idea of story-telling: it is his way of sharing, and of expressing himself.

Love. He thought he had known that too. It almost always began with stories. He had a store of these like lozenges.<sup>69</sup>

You's stories are a mixture of traditional Chinese tales (usually relating courtly sexual customs), stories of his own history (his father, in the tale of You Bao, or 'fishcake'; his own life in China and France), and confluences/mixtures of the two. The tales appear to be just *divertissements*, but on reconsideration have subliminal meaning. They are at various levels instructional for him (he works out what has happened in his life), explicative, instructional or exemplary to her, entertaining, and so on. But their power resides in their mystery. As Flannery O'Connor suggested:

The serious fiction writer will think that any story that can be entirely explained by the adequate motivation of the characters or by a believable imitation of a way of life or by a proper theology, will not be a large enough story for him to occupy himself with ... the meaning of his story does not begin except at a depth where these things have been exhausted ... there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *After China*, p. 36

<sup>68</sup> *After China*, p. 27

<sup>69</sup> *After China*, p. 25

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Flannery O'Connor, quoted by Robert Fitzgerald, Introduction to *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, pp. xxvii-iii

After he has finished one particular tale You asks more-or-less rhetorically what telling these stories of his past accomplishes. The Writer sees their purpose: ‘ “Sometimes it is in the telling that you understand things,” she said.’<sup>71</sup>

‘Some of your stories are mirroring the truth,’ she said.

‘I thought so.’

‘My mother wanted to dispose of Serena [by adoption] and my father had to carry it out.’...

‘With people you can’t wipe the slate clean; you can’t begin again.’<sup>72</sup>

The Writer also tells stories, but these are versions of the difficult things she faced in her youth. Specifically, she tells how she became a writer, after meeting another writer, a poet and outcast, who was tender with her, and she tells the story of her illegitimate child. The latter is the crucial problem of her life, and the only way she can confront the material is in story (‘With people you can’t wipe the slate clean.’). When her parents discovered that her child’s father was Chinese (the details are kept very sketchy), they rejected the child and tried to have it adopted out. The job was given to the father, and being made complicit in the rejection of his grandchild, he was not able to cope. Consequently he invented an elaborate story about finding the abandoned baby on a rubbish tip, taking it home and rearing it himself. Although the writer recovers her baby, the incident led to the loss of her relationship with her father, whom she was close to as a child. Eventually the father drowns, probably as a suicide.

The Writer also talks of her lover in very vague, story-like way. He is briefly sketched in as a sad, lost poetic figure, destroyed by his surroundings. She gives little concrete detail, and does not pass any judgement or opinion about him. Like hers, his is a sketchy existence.

The Writer appreciates that life and writing are closely connected, and that writing depends on tension and is driven by incompleteness. To have a ‘complete’ story would be to have one lacking dramatic tension. Similarly, she must come to terms with incompleteness/imperfection (‘The [W]riter had always lived with imperfection and untidiness. Her childhood was like

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<sup>71</sup> *After China*, p. 35

<sup>72</sup> *After China*, p. 128

a shredded rope, a multiplicity of loose ends.<sup>73</sup>), and must face the reality that life ends in extinction—death. Speaking of the drive for her writing she says: ‘You’ve always got to have something incomplete and because it cannot be completed it sustains you.’<sup>74</sup> This might be said to be her sustaining belief as she faces cancer.

The most important aspect of the story telling, aside from its didactic purpose, is the ability to suspend current reality, to suspend time. This is an important notion in Castro’s work. Story-telling allows the listener-reader to step outside of reality temporarily. Describing the process of being rapt into story, Sven Birkets says in *The Gutenberg Elegies*:

When I went to my room and opened a book, it was to seal myself off as fully as possible in another place. I was not reading, as now, with only one part of the self. I was there body and soul, *living vicariously*. ... There is something about the reading act that cuts through the sheath of distractedness that usually envelops me. It is as if I can suddenly feel the flow of pure time behind the stationary letters. Vertigo is not a comfortable sensation, but I keep seeking it out, taking it as an inoculation against what a Latin poet called *lacrimae rerum*, ‘the tears of things’.

I so clearly remember the shock I would feel whenever I looked up from the vortex of the page and faced the strangely immobile world around me. My room, the trees outside the window—everything seemed so dense, so saturated with itself. Never since have I known it so intensely, this colliding of realities, the current of mystery leaping the gap between them.<sup>75</sup>

This is not only therapeutic in the sense of taking a break from life—the escape-into-Romance view—but also constructive in allowing one to try alternative realities, to test hypotheses, to ‘experience’ or try out life.

In a recent essay<sup>76</sup> that argues for a biological basis to the efficacy of stories, Peter Goldsworthy suggests that two functions of story are as mnemonic devices and vehicles for experience.

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<sup>73</sup> *After China*, p. 56

<sup>74</sup> *After China*, p. 38

<sup>75</sup> Sven Birkets, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, Fawcett Columbine, New York, 1994. p. 37 [also Faber & Faber, 1996]

<sup>76</sup> Peter Goldsworthy, ‘The Biology of Literature’, in *Navel Gazing*, Penguin, 1998; pp. 141-167

If such [linguistic] *aides-memoire* are hard-wired into us, genetically and biologically, then so too is the telling of story. Stories might be seen as possessing the mnemonic power of rhythms, in a longer version—although the rhythms of story are not musical rhythms or the rhythmic cadences of language, but the rhythms of sense. Semantic rhythms.<sup>77</sup>

Rejecting the Structuralist approach to story, Goldsworthy suggests that what is required is emotional experience, that is, Castro's view that we must 'experience' the text.

Likewise the various structuralist approaches to story seem to ignore this side of the story—that it is an emotional, often cathartic experience; that it has evolved to act on a human mind and is *primarily a process of transport and rapture*. Its grammar is a grammar of emotions, its unit elements as much those of suspense, laughter, horror, satisfaction as stasis, closure, kernels, process.<sup>78</sup>

Story also schools us in the art of deferral, the ability to withhold or suspend the end of the story—even when it is a repeated story whose ending we know—in order to enjoy the deferral or incompleteness itself. The point is not just to build up the tension so that the climax is better (with obvious sexual parallels), but to learn to delay the end so that life does not rush headlong into climaxes without the sense of development or achievement, nor become an increasingly frustrating search for more 'climaxes' with no intervening 'living'. The concept is used by psychologists to explain the need to mature as adults.<sup>79</sup> It is what distinguishes mature behaviour from childish: the ability to survive without having every desire instantly gratified.

You and the Writer talk often about Kafka and his psychology, especially his relationship with his fiancée Felice. When the Writer suggests that Kafka's letters to her were 'like office memos', You counters:

'No, it was a prolongation of desire and the suspension of time. Like when you told your story of the baby, you lost yourself. ... An infinite deferral.'<sup>80</sup>

### The control of time

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<sup>77</sup> 'The Biology of Literature', p. 146

<sup>78</sup> 'The Biology of Literature', p. 151, my emphasis

<sup>79</sup> See for example Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled*, Arrow Books, London, 1990.

<sup>80</sup> *After China*, p. 63

In *After China* the telling of stories serves a similar purpose to sexual control: both are metaphors for, if not methods of, controlling time. In an interview with Peter Craven Castro explained the genesis of *After China*.

[*After China*] came about, like all my books, from reading someone else. I was reading Foucault's *Uses of Pleasure* and I was fascinated by what he says about Taoism and the way he equated it with the concept of time. The Taoist attitude to sexuality was a way in which time was exorcised and one became immortal. It seemed to me that story-telling does the same thing; one wilfully retains the story. Stories which are satisfying seem to me to be stories which fail to be resolved ... I thought that perhaps I should try to write something a little like a contrapuntal story. At least something in which the 'story' is constantly interrupted by other stories.<sup>81</sup>

You tells stories to the Writer to extract her from her surroundings, and her boundedness in time. One of his early stories is about the courtesan Yü Hsüan-chi, who falls in love with a poet, and uses story-telling as a way of prolonging the time she has with her lover. The process is seen as one of balancing the physical impulses of desire, which move towards completion and a gratification that is evanescent, with the intellectual ability to defer and prolong gratification.

... in doing so [Yü Hsüan-chi] was able to balance desire and the intellect so finely as to render infinite the brief time they had together.<sup>82</sup>

As the Writer listens to You's stories, she begins to feel the same sense.

'When I listen to your stories, time no longer seems to matter.'  
'Then we will tell each other more, whenever we can, and nothing will be terminated,' he says.<sup>83</sup>

You himself is aware of this ability to actively find a timeless place inside one's imagination.

The funny thing about time in a story is that it takes only a few seconds, he was thinking. But then time which takes no time is retrospectively and potentially infinite.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Peter Craven, 'Double Delights', *The Sunday Age* (Agenda), 12 September 1993, p. 8. Castro has elsewhere mentioned Scheherazade. Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* is a recent example of a similar project, stories/story fragments within a slight main story.

<sup>82</sup> *After China*, p. 80

<sup>83</sup> *After China*, p. 82

<sup>84</sup> *After China*, p. 95

The Writer describes this process as one of 'losing oneself', being outside of oneself (a phrase that is also used to describe sexual transport). But there is no sense of loss when she comes out of this altered state.

She says: 'Again a strange thing happened. When you were telling your story, I lost myself. But I took an immense pleasure in recovering time.'  
Time: It expands and contracts like a jellyfish.<sup>85</sup>

Tied in with the notion of deferral is the notion of withholding/revealing. It is important to know when to retain information or mask one's identity, and to know how, and more importantly *when*, to reveal. Secrets are a very powerful concept in the novel. The Writer's poet friend is also concerned with secrets:

He taught her how to go fast and then slow. He taught her that there were secret things, but that it was wrong to keep them secret forever.<sup>86</sup>

He, too, speaks in metaphors about the need to keep secret and to reveal, to defer and to engage:

Life is a renewal of its own secret, and dying is the final refusal to make, to join. Nothing lasts. Except jade. They used to make coffins out of jade.<sup>87</sup>

The story of Tang Yin is concerned with secrecy. He begins to paint 'pornographic' (erotic) sketches because they offer the viewer the chance to share in a secret. As he himself points out, the secret must be an open secret: if he were simply to paint his sketches and not make them available, they would have no power as secrets, and provide no pleasure from transgression and voyeurism.

Tang experiences something new to him in this field. He experiences *illicitness* ... a reaching over, a swelling of artistic borders, and finally, a subversion of codes and genres *that had real consequences*.<sup>88</sup>

In a typically Castroian irony, Tang is eventually executed for his actions: they *do* have real consequences. However, the final action that leads to his downfall is the stealing of the Emperor's plums, forbidden symbols of

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<sup>85</sup> *After China*, p. 103

<sup>86</sup> *After China*, p. 78

<sup>87</sup> *After China*, p. 78

<sup>88</sup> *After China*, p. 99

desire and sexuality ('an ambiguous sexual symbol'). Eating the plums provides a transcendental experience:

When he tasted it, he seemed to enter a space in which time, as duration, did not exist. He experienced a kind of enlightened fatalism. 'Everything,' he said to himself, 'is One.' He felt untouchable, divine. These experiences had been missing from his life.  
... Perhaps Tang Yin had found the open secret that simple feelings had to be recovered from guilt.<sup>89</sup>

The 'open secret' of simplicity applies directly to the Writer, with her background of guilt about her child, and to a lesser extent You, with his guilt about his Chinese background and his not fitting in. They must discover for themselves the idea that there are simple things that can be enjoyed in life. It is not easy to make straightforward 'sense' of these stories and the concepts they carry; they are typical Castro paradoxes, to be grasped in an act of faith.

### Ending and closure in *After China*

Although *After China* provides short interludes of 'timelessness' through the embedded stories, it maintains a forward movement and does not meander in the way some other Castro novels tend to.

*After China* is almost breathless with excitement at times ... and the speed with which this novel proceeds and ends is part of his wish, in this particular book, to pare down, to work against what he calls his 'natural inclination' for 'wave-like sentences'.<sup>90</sup>

Towards the end of the novel the pace picks up dramatically. While Castro's novels can often be absorbing, this is a rare case of the reader wanting to read quickly to find out 'what happens'.

the book's swift climax involves some daring on the part of the writer ... Is it possible? No, probably not [says Castro] ... He admits becoming involved towards the end with a kind of grand symbol of 'Rabelaisian renewal and fertilisation'.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *After China*, p. 102

<sup>90</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Yearning for Diversion', *Australian Book Review*, No. 142, July 1992, p. 8

<sup>91</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Yearning for Diversion', *Australian Book Review*, No. 142, July 1992, p. 9 In fact, Sorensen compares You's being expelled in a stream of shit with the 'shenanigans' visited upon Shelley Winters in the film *Poseidon Adventure*.

Finally the love story of *After China* takes over from the interpolated stories. A genuinely touching pathos is elicited as the Writer approaches death, and both she and You find the means of expressing their care for each other, and recover their confidence in themselves.

You 'hardly knew what he was saying, except that he wanted to strike a balance between brevity and duration' as she 'floats up' for him. As she dies he symbolically incorporates her into his flower boat story by placing her body on an 'elaborately carved wooden chest' floating in the wrecked hotel.

By the end of the novel You has achieved a degree of self-development. He has restored the Writer to her life, and then helped her to complete her life by dying. In respect of his own life, he is 'reborn'. In the final storm he is expelled with the shit from his hotel, but breaks into clear water

[He] found himself suddenly in sea water which was wonderfully transparent and light, and he wanted to sleep then, to follow her, his palms flat upon the observation glass of the Submarine Bar, outside his own conceit, wanted to smile upon all he had built in defiance of nature, and he knew he was about to join her now ...<sup>92</sup>

But he does not drown, he floats upwards. Although he doesn't join the Writer in death, he has reached a state of communion with her which is independent of physical existence. He also feels that he is 'outside his own conceit', a double metaphor for having been expelled from his own construction (or 'conceit'), and for having cathartically passed across a barrier from his former self, his limited and wounded conception of himself.

Some months later he has nearly rebuilt the hotel, and has reached a state of equanimity.

There was one thing that was certain: his fear had evaporated. It was as though he had come through a door and on the other side he no longer had anything to protect. There was no longer a future, no longer a possibility whose unknown had to be understood. So he had quite comfortably turned his back and settled for this self to which he had

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<sup>92</sup> *After China*, p. 141



finally come, from which he would constantly remake himself. No longer alone. This had been her gift to him: the present moment.<sup>93</sup>

While lyrical writing like this is not uncommon in Castro's novels, it is rare to find a Castro character develop to such a degree. While You will remain a Castro being, constantly remaking himself, he has escaped from his former debilitating state, into the *timelessness* of 'the present moment'. He and the Writer have helped each other, and he will take responsibility for her daughter, Serena, thus symbolically regaining his lost child Long Tsing. This is as close to a 'happy ending' as any of Castro's novels comes.

The Writer's successful development in *After China* paradoxically includes her own death. As her death approaches, she is able to face her *life*, which she has been blocking out and 'keeping secret', and to accept it. She has accused him thus: '*You hate life because you don't understand timeliness.*' But it is she who comes to understand timeliness, the 'ripeness' of time in Hamlet's words.<sup>94</sup>

Her work also 'comes to life'. She borrows from his stories and, through them, 'incorporates' him into her own stories and therefore her own life.

He remembered how she had noted his displays, and the more he read the more he understood how he had been incorporated into her writing, its resonances being carried downstream to him ...<sup>95</sup>

Touchingly, her book is dedicated 'To You', which for the two lovers is a secret acknowledgement, but for the general reader is a gesture of incorporation, acknowledging everyone.

Castro even closes the novel structurally. In the final words, the theme introduced in the first chapter is returned:

... the world had metamorphosed, had become small almost surreptitiously, in that brief, inconceivable moment of reflection.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *After China*, p. 143

<sup>94</sup> *Hamlet*, V.ii.9

<sup>95</sup> *After China*, p. 143

<sup>96</sup> *After China*, p. 144

This is, paradoxically, a life-affirming novel, which offers the lesson that we must assume that the only reality is to live life in uncertainty, but with the sure and certain prospect of death.

## Critical reaction to *After China*

*After China* won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award (the Vance Palmer Fiction Award) in 1993. Castro was the first novelist to win the same prize in consecutive years.

*After China* received a rather unusual reaction. According to Castro, it was generally liked, but reviewers did not understand why they liked it. This is his response in an interview:<sup>97</sup>

*Brian Castro:* *After China* was probably the least understood of my books amongst reviewers and critics.

*Maryanne Dever:* I think it's also the one that was most liked.

*Brian Castro:* It was the most liked in that people didn't know why they liked it. You know, it was very strange—several people said that to me when I won the Victorian Premier's [Award] for it. They didn't know *why* they liked it.

These are the major critical responses from reviews at the time of publication. The review by Janice Shaw<sup>98</sup> was generally favourable, though rather non-committal. It summarised the plot, pointed out that the sexual stories are 'presented as a means of approaching philosophical ideas', and warned readers that '*After China* is not a novel to be chosen for an afternoon's light reading'.

Normally an unqualified supporter of Brian Castro, Helen Daniel for once had reservations about *After China*.<sup>99</sup> She commended its ambition and scope, but found it ultimately not satisfying.

Open *After China* one way and it is apparently the narrative of the intimacy of a Chinese architect and a woman writer ... Open the novel the other way and it is a seductive work about the erotics of story-telling, literary contraception, seduction and the subversion of codes and genres. (p. 4)

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<sup>97</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997

<sup>98</sup> Janice Shaw, 'Intriguing Search for Sexuality', *The Newcastle Herald*, 14 November 1992, p. 4

<sup>99</sup> Helen Daniel, 'Breaking Conventions: a Double-Folding Fan', *Australian Book Review*; no.142, July 1992, pp.4-6

However

it also seems to me a lesser novel than *Double-Wolf*. It is in temper and mode more detached, more *ceremonial*, but it is also less polished in language and sometimes in movement. (p. 4)

Yet, in the early part, the narrative movement seems awkward and straining after wit ... As the novel unfolds, its movement becomes more delicate and poised. (p. 5)

Daniel admits that her slight disappointment must be judged 'by the standards of readerly desire the very notion of a new novel by Brian Castro awakens', and her review was otherwise positive.

David Gilbey<sup>100</sup> found many intriguing and enjoyable features in *After China*, especially the way 'The writing enacts the interplay between two versions of imagination and desire, the narrator intruding as a kind of courtesan both voyeuristically and proprietorially to arouse and entertain the reader'.

He drew attention to opposing viewpoints, citing Tang Yin's double-folding fan, the architect's and the Writer's opposing constructions of life, the multivalence and complementarity of *hsui* and *shu*, which mean 'embroider' and 'write' but also have feminine/masculine sexual connotations.

Gilbey queried some aspects—for example, he suggested that 'there is perhaps too much male construction of sexuality ("I would like to read with my penis") although this is often deconstructed ...'—but liked the overall achievement.

... the book is inventive and makes many spectacular gestures, grafting Australian vernaculars onto Taoist humour, delighting in the play of contrast between cultures, human fortunes, history and sex, preferring balance to resolution.

Perhaps in the end, *After China's* rejection of romanticism is inconclusive, even elegiac, its structures dominated by incompleteness, but reading it is a satisfying experience.

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<sup>100</sup> David Gilbey, 'When Hsiu Means Shu', *Australian Book Review*, No.142, July 1992, pp. 6-7

Writing in *National Library of Australia News*,<sup>101</sup> Nicholas Jose reviewed a bevy of Australian books with Chinese themes, such as Alex Miller's *The Ancestor Game* and David Foster's *Mates of Mars* (both favourably). Of *After China* Jose says:

... obscure intimations of profound wisdom coupled with highly intricate, highly indirect plotting, rich with the matter of China, characterise Brian Castro's *After China*. It is a work that seeks its ends in journeys backwards, in which the sought-after release comes in stepping away from the tidal pull of origins ...'

There were also some diametric readings of *After China*. In an assessment that directly contradicts Peter Fuller's (see below), Katharine England<sup>102</sup> found *After China* 'light and airy' in contrast to the 'dense complexity' of *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf*. She felt that Castro was in full control of his technique: 'In this book full of puns and metaphors, Castro maintains a tension between architecture, sex, writing and death'.

For a book which takes loneliness and death for its themes, *After China* has unexpected reserves of warmth, affection and humour. Insisting on the erotic, it is surprisingly delicate, restrained and chaste. And for a work of such diverse and eclectic reference it is rewardingly resonant and interconnected. The whole novel is thus a brilliant feat of balance.

*After China* is perhaps Castro's most immediately accessible and engaging work so far.

Normally a vocal and uninhibited supporter of Castro, Peter Fuller<sup>103</sup> had reservations about *After China*. While he was impressed by the way the architect is restored through his interaction with the Writer, Fuller felt the book somewhat disjointed.

... this novel's story emerges from a pattern of discontinuous anecdotes, recollections and legends ... Castro's attempt to escape linearity ... and by doing so to suggest the complexity of personality and perception. The product can be more psychologically truthful than that offered by conventional 'realistic' novels, but the method has its perils, too. ... a work constructed piece by piece can end up a book of bits.

Like guests in Mr You's hotel, we grope around trying to find out where we're going ...

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<sup>101</sup> Nicholas Jose, 'About Books : China Matters', *National Library of Australia News*, Vol. 2, No. 12, September 1992, pp. 8-10

<sup>102</sup> Katharine England, 'Brilliant, Erotic Balance of Affair Consummated in Stories', *The Advertiser Magazine*, 17 October 1992, p. 6

<sup>103</sup> Peter Fuller, 'Groping Around in the Text', *The Canberra Times*, 10 October 1992, p. C9. Fuller was particularly fulsome in his praise of *Pomeroy*.

For once, Fuller seems unable 'to go with the flow', to let these events wash around him. In fact he finds *After China*

comparatively static. It moves around less in time and place, and between narrators, than its predecessors. It's also too crowded with ideas. This might seem an odd objection, for Castro's last two books ... are similarly crowded.

Indeed, the objection *is* odd. Where *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf* were crowded with ideas, *After China* seems by comparison rather spare. In a novel narrated largely by a Tao-influenced narrator, it is hard to see why Fuller considers some of the philosophical pronouncements 'awkward and out of place. Others are too gnomic, or too trite'. Fuller regrets the lack of that playfulness that characterised *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf*. Summarising, Fuller thinks *After China* is marred by a quest for technical perfection.

... *After China* has an uneven, slightly cramped feel. Castro seems to want to make every word and phrase count. That quest for a perfect, intricate, interlocking text is praiseworthy, in a formal sense, but in practice it can end up making a book claustrophobic ...

Perhaps we should see this novel as a transitional book, one limited by formal problems, even though its lustrous central idea is often transmuted into moments of great power and beauty.

Perhaps this is just another example of a reader's own taste determining the way in which he/she responds to it. Fuller was ecstatic with the baroque overdrive of *Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf*, but was unable to find the rhythm and pace of *After China* that suited him.

Just before the announcement of the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards for 1993, Peter Craven reviewed the contenders.<sup>104</sup> Describing *After China* as 'wearing its marginality like a banner ... a self-consciously arty novel influenced by Tournier and perhaps Perec', he acknowledged 'Castro's artistry as well as his artfulness'.

Parts of *After China* are whimsical to the point of eccentricity but the language is that of a literary artist. If the book lacks a red-blooded narrative impulse, it has a consistent poignancy and charm. And it is at least a book that can be taken seriously as an act of *writing*.

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<sup>104</sup> Peter Craven, 'Premier contenders line up in the literary stakes', *The Sunday Age* (Agenda), 5 September 1993, p. 9

A week after the above review, Craven congratulated Castro for winning the Premier's Award, for the second time running.<sup>105</sup> Craven's favourable analysis has been used in the general discussion of *After China* above.

Jane Messer<sup>106</sup> was rather non-committal in her review. I have already quoted her comment that '*After China* doesn't so much tell a story as gesture with a rich and mysterious hand towards two lives.' Messer found the narrative at times uncertain:

[The Writer's] infrequent voice tries to match the profound Chineseness of the architect, but when she speaks it is often vacuous: 'You hate life because you don't understand timeliness'. The early part of *After China* is marred by such pronouncements and the uncertain changes in person from first to third.

Aside from the obvious retort that the Writer is meant to sound a little less sure with her philosophical statements, it once again seems that Messer is not used to the amount of involvement needed to read a Castro novel.

Michael Sharkey in his review<sup>107</sup> saw *After China* as primarily an exercise in novel writing, one with which he did not seem entirely in tune. He suggested that Castro's 'previous books were reasonably approachable by old school readers', but that *After China* is difficult to read.

I'm reasonably entertained by the stories that intermingle in *After China*. Not thrilled mind you. My first impulse was to consider the novel as disjointed for no obvious reason, or insufferably twee and over-contrived.

He pointed out the need for the reader to be involved in the constructing of the novel as a whole: 'if we can believe that a book of discontinuous fables or biographies ... holds together according to some principle of readerly as well as authorial construction, Castro's book is a lollipop.' The technique offers possibilities of participation:

The cut-up technique suggests everything in the novel operates in a sort of simultaneity: this is the 20th century, but you can mentally shop about in any century you like.

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<sup>105</sup> Peter Craven, 'Double Delights', *The Sunday Age* (Agenda), 12 September 1993, p. 8

<sup>106</sup> Jane Messer, 'After "Double Wolf"', *Australian Bookseller & Publisher*, 1992, Vol. 711, No. 1026, May p. 22

<sup>107</sup> Michael Sharkey, 'Half this Tale's in the Telling', *The Weekend Australian*, 22-23 August 1992, Review, p. 7

Castro makes his method conspicuous: 'He doesn't try to cover his tracks: he tells us what he's about while he's about it.' This allows the reader to be involved in the book: 'No matter, you can read the novel as a book of erotic bits, or a book of bits about a love story ...Or you can see it as a seamless account of the process of design in art. Up to you, really.' Sharkey's complaint is that book is overwrought: 'If it's possible to over-write a book of 145 pages, Castro's done it.'

Nevertheless, Sharkey finds some positives.

The book is cleverly written, though it may take some time to get into the swing of it. I found it heavy going at the outset, because the expected connections were absent. Upon reflection, it comes together in provoking ways, as an argument about the way we construct narrative.

Although Sharkey's tone is at times flippant, he does highlight many of the characteristics of a Castro novel: it is unsettling, with its confusing structures and its gaps, and it does require the reader to become involved with the novel.<sup>108</sup>

Despite conducting a sympathetic interview<sup>109</sup> with Castro at the time of publication of *After China*, Rosemary Sorensen's later review<sup>110</sup> misreads *After China* in terms of feminist theory in what amounts to a political polemic rather than a review of the novel. She makes an assumption that the Writer is dying of a blood-related cancer (leukemia?), and proceeds to find blood symbols in the novel and complete misogyny in *You*, neither of which is supported by the novel. This leads to her making the statement that *You* and the Writer's tender relationship corresponds to 'The noble sacrifice of the female to the self-awareness of the male', which again seems a curious interpretation of the novel and one that is not supported by other reviewers.

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<sup>108</sup> Sharkey mischievously asks 'was the last line on page 56 deliberately repeated at the top of page 57 so that I could draw a deconstructive line through one of them? I did so, and "corrected" the grammar of the sentence too. To emphasise the role of the reader.' This is a little unfair. The mistake itself appears to be a case of a typesetter's correction going wrong. The line ends with the word 'an' before 'fibro' which starts the next line. One can assume that a typesetter had meant to correct the line to 'a fibro', but compounded the error rather than rectifying it.

<sup>109</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Yearning for Diversion', *Australian Book Review*; no.142, July 1992; p.8-9. This has already been referred to in general discussion.

<sup>110</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Women in Water', *Meanjin*, Vol. 52, No. 4, Summer 1993, pp. 778-783



David Coad wrote the sort of non-review<sup>111</sup> that might be expected from someone who is totally biased against Postmodernism. (He was similarly scathing about *Drift*.) It is both ironic and (perversely) amusing.

Like a lot of apprentice writing, it has autobiographical elements, is unsuccessfully experimental, and is fraught with intellectual pretension.

If *postmodern* means to have a yo-yo narrative ... to write in a constantly elliptical and ungrammatical prose, to delight in excremental sillage, and to mention Kafka at least once, then the novel does succeed ...

This is hardly a reasonable attempt to come to grips with Castro's novel. For those who make a serious effort, the novel has much to offer. At the beginning of this section on critical reception I quoted Castro's remarks about the novel being well-liked, if the reasons for this were not able to be articulated. I would suggest that the underlying reason why the novel is liked is because there is a tender love story lurking beneath the surface complexities, and Castro has done a good job of conveying both this gentle tenderness and the complexities that life confronts us with. Peter Pierce's review<sup>112</sup> is a much more convincing view of the achievement of this paradoxical novel. Pierce considered *After China*

a supple and tantalising stream-of-consciousness narrative, which [Castro] employs to register unbidden memories, contingent surprises. He delivers less than a love story, less than a stylised comparison of two cultures and instead offers a retrospect on confounded hopes.

Pierce congratulated Castro on his portrait the 'maimed, haunted, fatalistic' You Bok Mun.

*After China* constructs a man aware of all the emotions he has denied. Instead of adopting the familiar 'Asian' device of Australian novelists of introducing a mentor figure to give sententious, maddening instruction to uncouth Antipodeans, Castro has found a remarkable voice for an Asian expatriate in Australia.

In a novel that ought to irritate with its obliquity, ought to be open to charges of pretension, Castro has managed a noteworthy meditation in rootlessness.

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<sup>111</sup> David Coad, Untitled Review, *World Literature Today*, Vol. 67, No. 3, Summer 1993, p. 667

<sup>112</sup> Peter Pierce, 'Uprooting a Life', *The Bulletin*, Vol. 114, No. 5830, 28 July 1992, p. 91

## Chapter 9

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### *Drift:* Fiction and History

I was told my writing was such that you couldn't see the wood for the trees. My reply is that there are only trees. You have to read the text from the inside. In that sense the text will be truly 'open'.<sup>1</sup>

*Drift* is a series of clues, mainly literary and historical, that will enable a reader to devise and create a suitable truth, or story.<sup>2</sup>

*Drift* is arguably Castro's most ambitious novel, and perhaps as a direct corollary, his most complex. The reader will almost certainly find it elusive; *Drift* lives up to its title. But it is also an engaging novel, suspenseful, colourful and intensely lyrical at times.

*Drift* pursues a nebulous approach to 'meaning' and 'reality', especially in the sense that these terms relate to 'history'. The boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred even by Castro's standards. Castro gives few clues as to when he is dealing with 'real' facts, especially history and the biography of real people, and when he is writing imaginatively.

Aside from the author's decision to try a more ambitious approach, the subject matter of *Drift* is also ambiguous. It is in dialogue with the work and the life of the British experimental novelist B.S. Johnson, himself a slippery customer who was trying to push back the boundaries of what the novel could do. Johnson felt that an author should take what his immediate predecessors achieved in developing the novel and use that as their own *starting* point. To move back to an earlier modality of novel

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<sup>1</sup> A note written in one of Brian Castro's journals, ML 1933/96, Box 7

<sup>2</sup> Helen Elliott, 'Brilliant Display of Style', *The Canberra Times*, 9 July 1994, p. C11

writing was, for Johnson, inauthentic, the perpetuation of an exhausted form. Johnson also set himself the task of writing ‘only the truth’—which sounds both vague and fraught with impossibilities—a concept that Castro investigates in his novel. He points out where such logic will take Bryan Johnson (and his own author, Byron Johnson):

having made such a provocative statement [that no writing should lie], if at any stage he lapses into what is obviously fiction he would have to pursue that in his life to redress the balance ... if one uses storytelling and fictive devices, then you have to redress that somehow by living it. Obviously in that way lies madness and putting yourself at the point of danger, to the point of suicide.<sup>3</sup>

Castro explained his fascination with Bryan Johnson to Michael Shmith.

‘He quite mysteriously committed suicide ... There was nothing on him except a one-paragraph obituary in *The Times*. Aha! I thought. I can use something here. I had read Johnson’s books but very little about his life. In fact, I invented his life almost entirely. I hope nobody gets offended. I took great liberties with his life.’

And his death: ‘For me it seemed like the quintessential literary suicide, because of the way he was treated by critics and reviewers. And the way he was serious about what he called writing the truth. Nowadays we don’t debate that term any more ... But he was evangelical about the truth. If someone is so serious about it, one could take it to exaggerated ends. If he wrote what he calls the truth, then he would have to have carried out his most fictional moments in order to justify standing by the truth.’

‘I have him coming to Tasmania to try to bring justice to the Aborigines ... All this is a kind of serious playfulness. At the same time, this is about remorse, a lament of history.’<sup>4</sup>

It has been a common criticism of Castro’s work that it does not go out of its way to accommodate the reader, and *Drift* pushes these tendencies to extremes.

[Like B.S. Johnson] Castro set out to write ‘only the truth’.

In doing so he set himself an unobtainable, if honourable, goal. He wanted to write perfectly. He wanted the book to shine. It was taxing. It nearly killed him, but he believes it’s his best writing to date.

‘... At one stage I thought that if I could not write this book truthfully, then I did not want to live any more. It’s the first time I didn’t want to intellectualise ... I just wanted the voice to take me ... I didn’t have control ...’

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<sup>3</sup> Helen Daniel, ‘Outside the Prison of Logic’, *Island Magazine*, No. 59, Winter 1994, p. 22

<sup>4</sup> Michael Shmith, ‘Castro’s Lament’, *The Age Saturday Extra*, 1994, 20 August p. 8

To counter increasing depression and uncertainty over the novel ... Castro said that eventually he had to abandon the idea of the reader entirely.

'I had to say to myself, I don't care if this book is going to be read. I don't care if it's not going to be published ... I'm going to be totally and utterly honest about my writing ...'<sup>5</sup>

Thematically, *Drift* is concerned with the need to restore balance. The metaphor of drifting is invoked and implied throughout the novel. Byron's life has been drifting, and he comes to Tasmania partly as a means of making something positive out of his life. 'It was up to me to make the correction, find the drift, the current of change, to remedy the condition.'<sup>6</sup> Byron acts as the symbolic protagonist for the restoration of balance at many levels: personal psychology, Aboriginal/colonial history, the writer.

### Structure

The conceit on which *Drift* is built is the work, and indeed the life, of the British experimental novelist Bryan Stanley Johnson, 1933–1973, who 'campaign[ed] vigorously through his short writing life (he committed suicide at the age of 39) for a renaissance of technical innovation and experimentation in the English novel'.<sup>7</sup>

While there are many clues in *Drift* about the importance of Johnson's work to the novel's structure, Castro is open to the charge that 'He assumes immense sophistication of language and thought and *at the very least an undergraduate degree in English literature*'.<sup>8</sup> The reader will need to be familiar with decoding complex novels. In Riemer's review of *Drift* he suggests that:

Some familiarity with B[ryan] S[tanley] Johnson is required for a full appreciation of *Drift*. In my case, a crash course in between two readings of Castro's novel resolved several puzzles, or at least revealed the inclusion of some curious episodes.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Katrina Iffland, 'Castro's Call for Cultural Revolution', *The Canberra Times*, 1995, 12 August p. C13

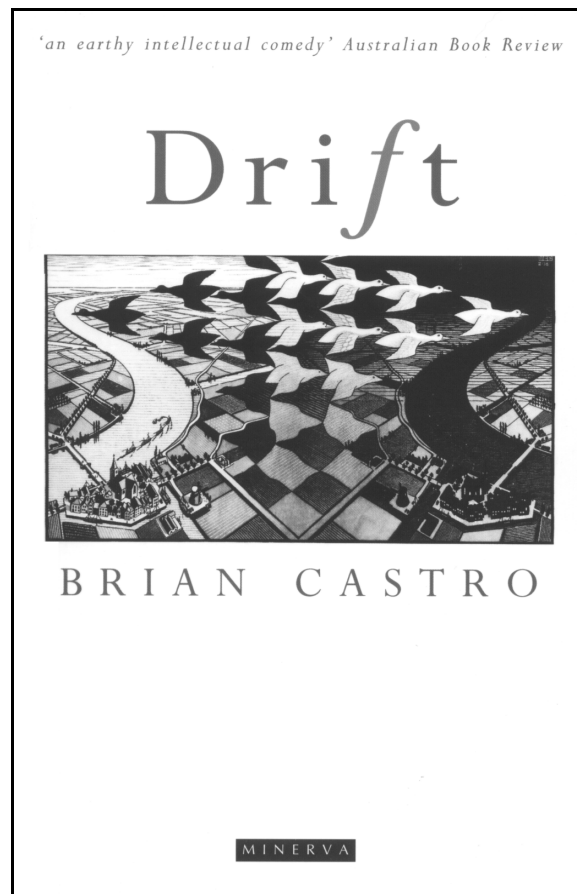
<sup>6</sup> *Drift*, p. 57. As early as page 7 the idea of correction is suggested by 'clinamen, a corrective movement, a swerve from the original'.

<sup>7</sup> *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, ed. Ian Ousby, Cambridge University Press, 1993; p. 489. Biographical information on Johnson is scarce. In this thesis I will refer to the real person as 'Bryan Johnson' and Castro's character as 'Byron Johnson'. References to 'B.S. Johnson' will refer ambiguously to both.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Elliott, 'Brilliant Display of Style', *The Canberra Times*, 9 July 1994, C11, (emphasis added)

<sup>9</sup> A.P. Riemer, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July 1994, p. 10A

*Drift* is structured as a recessive puzzle, like Russian dolls within Russian dolls. It is more than just the reasonably familiar ‘novel within a novel’; it has several levels of authorship and therefore several possible viewing points within the different framing perspectives. The multivalence starts with the cover, which features M.C. Escher’s engraving *Dag en Hacht* (*Day and Night*) which can be read from left to right or right to left.<sup>10</sup>



Katharine England pointed out the significance of the cover to the novel as a whole:

It is a brilliant trick [Escher’s *Day and Night*], a triumphant sleight of hand that Castro reproduces and builds on magnificently, infuriatingly, in the novel. Paradoxically, perhaps, if you like things in black and white—fixed premises, unequivocal answers—this is not the book for you. As on its cover, so within: everything moves and shifts and comes round again in subtly altered focus; trying finally to pin down meaning can lead to madness.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Admittedly Escher’s work is a straightforward binary mirroring, whereas Castro’s novel has a much more complex structure.

<sup>11</sup> Katharine England, *Australian Book Review*, No. 162, July 1994, pp. 12-13

Opening the novel, the reader is first introduced, in a Preface, to B.S. Johnson and the importance of his work, including the fact that his 'matrix trilogy' was not completed. This at first seems like a very useful introduction, except that it is signed 'Thomas James McGann/Arthur River, 1993'. This dissembling (the factual material of the Preface is accurate<sup>12</sup> and written in the style of a literary preface, passionate and tendentious) is immediately destabilising. (Later in the novel Thomas McGann is introduced as a *character* who is a writer who claims to be writing this book.) The place and date accord with the action of the novel and the approximate time of writing of *Drift* (1993). Why did *Castro* not sign this Preface, the reader may well ask?<sup>13</sup> What is fact in this novel, and what fiction?

The narrative proper begins with a part-opening, 'Part I', which introduces a very short 'chapter' of a few hundred words. These brief paragraphs are extracted from Bryan Johnson's actual book *See the Old Lady Decently*,<sup>14</sup> and explain the conceit on which *Castro* is working. They describe an unnamed part of the British Empire which on older maps is 'filled in with vague descriptions', and which might be any English-like country except for the compelling sentence 'There are no aborigines now left on the island.' It is hard to disagree with the assumption that Johnson was referring to Tasmania, though this remains an assumption.

So Part I of *Drift* is meant to be read as a 'condensation' of Johnson's first book in his trilogy. It also serves as a tribute to Johnson and an acknowledgement that this continues an experimental writer's project. The next page (p. 5) in *Drift* is another part-opening entitled

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<sup>12</sup> The Preface (p. vii) quotes directly from Bryan Stanley Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, pp. 13-14

<sup>13</sup> Consider, for example, Katharine England's reactions to the 'Preface'.

'Given that the Preface is assigned to the character Thomas McGann, what credence can the reader give anyway to these so-called facts? ...

See how Escher-esquely convoluted, how Möbian we are already, and we're only up to the Preface! The discovery at this stage of an entry in the current *Oxford Companion to English Literature* for B(ryan) S(tanley William) Johnson (1933-1973), experimental novelist, was for this reader the ultimate in dislocation: that I found myself doubting the *Oxford Companion* rather than the novel is an odd but effective measure of the power of *Castro's* invention.' *Australian Book Review*, No. 162, July 1994, pp. 12-13

<sup>14</sup> *See the Old Lady Decently*, pp. 115-116

## II

*Buried Although ...*

It is apparent to anyone familiar with Johnson's trilogy that Castro is here 'writing' the second book of Johnson's trilogy. Later, at page 167 we encounter a third part-opening

## III

*Among Those Left Are You ...*

which was the intended title of Johnson's planned third book. Thus *Drift* is books two and three of the 'matrix trilogy'.<sup>15</sup> But the question of who is writing the novel is a vexed one; on page 172 McGann makes a claim for authorship, at least of Part III,<sup>16</sup> but it is difficult throughout the novel to separate the competing claims of Brian Castro, Thomas McGann and the symbolically named Byron Shelley Johnson, and to disentangle what is 'accurate' quotation of 'factual' history (Bryan Johnson, G.A. Robinson) and what is 'fiction', or 'made up' (Sperm McGann, Orville Pennington-James). It is not simply a case of finding the narrator/author; McGann is not narrating directly to us an existing story, but *his story of* Byron Shelley Johnson, which is related to the 'real story' of Bryan Stanley Johnson,<sup>17</sup> and which is interspersed with competing narratives which do not seem to be in his voice. (Aside from the Preface, Thomas McGann does not even appear as a participant until Part III of the novel.)

Thus the structure is complex and dissembling, and there is an implied direction to the reader to read Parts II and III as 'books' in a trilogy.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Matrix' was to suggest 'that which gives origin or form to a thing, or which serves to enclose it' (*Macquarie Dictionary*), and thus the generative and supportive aspects of motherhood. The trilogy's title could be read across the spines of the component parts, with the last hinting at the theme of regeneration. Nabokov also jokingly suggested such an idea in his 1947 novel *Bend Sinister*; his trilogy consists of 'Straight Flush' 'When the Train Passes' 'Through Towns and Villages'.

<sup>16</sup> 'I began writing the last part of Johnson's trilogy'; *Drift*, p. 172. It is unclear to the reader whether McGann had perhaps already completed Part II, or whether he is only claiming Part III.

<sup>17</sup> And for Castro, there is the added playfulness of Brian/Bryan/Byron. The given names of Castro's character are not only sound-alikes but are taken from romantic figures, adding an ironic and poignant counterpoint to Bryan Johnson's own life.

Part II of *Drift* opens with a first person narrator talking about the imminence of his own death. The writing is in the world-weary, cynical, wise-cracking style found at the start of *Pomeroy*, but it is obvious that this is not just a parody, mocking a genre, but an erudite, literary person tired of the world ('Life isn't a book, take my advice.' p. 7) and contemplating suicide ('When suicide is thumping at the gate you know the heart is seeking final repose.' p. 7). But this narrator makes it clear that we will not find a clear picture in his recountings:

Yes, the writing of this tale will literally kill me ... fragmented misreadings floating out into the universe, never to return. Take your pick. Some will bend it to their own purposes; others ... well, who knows? ... will keep it behind the cistern.<sup>18</sup>

This is a reasonable description of Bryan Johnson's life; disappointed in his reception as a writer and the mixed critical response to his efforts, he eventually committed suicide. But it is also accurately predictive of the course of *Drift*, which also turns into fragments and threatens to disintegrate as the narrator appears to commit suicide.

The 'plot' of Part II is based around Byron Shelley Johnson as a fictitious version of Bryan Stanley Johnson, and his journey to Tasmania, interwoven with stories of the early history of Tasmania. The connection is made via Emma McGann, an absent focus for most of the novel, whose existence contradicts Bryan Johnson's claim that 'There are now no aborigines left on the island'.<sup>19</sup> Emma proves to be the descendant of Sperm McGann, a whaler/sealer who came to the waters of Tasmania in the 1820s, and an Aboriginal woman, WORÉ.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Drift*, p. 7. Castro plays with 'toilet humour'.

<sup>19</sup> *Drift*, p. 3 This is a critical point. As late as 1977, the historian/anthropologist N.J.B. Plomley was still making statements such as 'The Tasmanian aborigines are an extinct people'. (*The Tasmanian Aborigines*, p. 1) He was not denying that mixed descendants exist, because on page 65 of the same book he talks of the 'Hybrids': 'It is not unlikely that the first Tasmanian-European hybrids were conceived in 1793 in intercourse between the seamen of D'Entrecasteaux's expedition and the aboriginal women they met in south-eastern Tasmania. If not, then less than ten years later the unions between the sealers ... and Tasmanian native women were producing hybrids ...' The problem, taken up in *Drift* (and also by Cassandra Pybus in *Community of Thieves*; see 'The Genetic Fallacy', p. 175 ff.) is that stating that the Tasmanian Aborigines were 'extinct' denied the modern descendants their genealogical and cultural heritage.

<sup>20</sup> The name means simply 'woman', making her an archetype figure. The full name, WORÉ.MER.NER. (p. 80), is based on Tasmanian Aboriginal names as reported by G.A. Robinson (see N.J.B. Plomley, *The Tasmanian Journals*). WORÉ herself says 'I am WORÉ. WORÉ is woman' (p. 88), and Thomas McGann tells the British Museum curator 'we didn't name the dead. WORÉ simply meant woman' (p. 188).



These current McGanns have until recently been regarded as ‘non-people’. After the native clearances of the mid 1800s, Tasmania was considered to have no surviving Aborigines, and great political emphasis, striving for closure, was made of the death of Truganini, ‘the last of her race’.<sup>21</sup> For many years afterwards mixed-race descendants of the Aborigines were denied their racial background, because of their light skin. One of the concerns of *Drift* is Tom and Emma McGann’s fight to have their hybrid ‘history’ restored to them. And it is ironic that Castro’s favoured term ‘hybrid’ is also the word used by Plomley to describe the mixed-race descendants.

In the novel, Emma has been impressed by B.S. Johnson’s novels (one of the few to be so!), and writes to him from Tasmania. Johnson goes to Tasmania to discover the history and background surrounding such powerful historical events as Cape Grim, where Aborigines were massacred by being driven off a cliff. Byron Johnson is world-weary (Castro seems to be drawing his portrait from Bryan Johnson towards the end of his life: ‘I’m stuck in Hammersmith, London, SW13. I’m dying in Hammersmith, London, SW13, pretending my life was something else ...’<sup>22</sup>), and mysteriously attracted to Emma, who is named for Bryan Johnson’s mother (‘Em’, ‘Emily’) and therefore the mother in *See the Old Lady Decently*.

Emma has goaded Byron towards accepting responsibility, as a writer, for influencing the world in a positive way, rather than just writing about it. (His wife Ainslie has already upbraided him for being passionless: ‘Oh fuck, she said, are all writers the same? Words and nothing but words?’<sup>23</sup> ) But Emma manages to stir him into action.

Those letters from Emma ... They were full of admiration at first, but she soon began to admonish me for not taking action against injustice. A coward at the best of times, I could nevertheless be roused ...

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<sup>21</sup> Truganini died in 1876; notoriously her skeleton was displayed at intervals in museums for some years. Her remains were ceremonially cremated in 1976. However, another Aboriginal woman, Suke, is now considered to have been the last full-blood, dying in 1888. See Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, UQP, St Lucia, 1981, pp. 218-220.

<sup>22</sup> *Drift*, p. 17

<sup>23</sup> *Drift*, p. 41

Masquerading as myself, I had made the mistake of assuming my readers would at least subscribe to one tiny part of the idea that work and author were separate. Yet now I discovered that I'd been pushed back to a literalness, to what Voltaire meant when he wrote: *I raise the quill, therefore I am responsible*.

The challenge disturbed me. I wrote back explaining that I would never do the things I wrote about, but I certainly did contemplate them. Was I therefore guilty?

Emma struck at the very paradox of my existence. In denouncing fraudulence, how could I not act? <sup>24</sup>

At this stage of his life Byron Johnson is subject to mental instability, experiencing fugal states (long lapses of conscious memory in which the patient *drifts*) and hallucinations like his 'Captain Ahab' scene before being washed overboard at sea, and his imaginary rescue by Emma.<sup>25</sup> This makes Byron both an unreliable narrator and a type of visionary, able to 'see' metaphysical aspects that others cannot:

I'm told amnesiacs discover whole new worlds, unknown galaxies, possibilities forever unaccounted and unaccountable ... No wholes, no gelatinous presence, but sometimes profound sensitivity.<sup>26</sup>

Castro interweaves the stories of these various characters to explore the interactions of history with the present, and especially to explore how the events and people of the past affect the lives of people today. Cape Grim acts as a focal event which is imprinted on the consciousness of present-day characters.<sup>27</sup> A personal involvement in the story is maintained via the mixed race descendants of Sperm McGann.

Byron Johnson does not make contact with Emma when he arrives in Tasmania, but takes a tourist cruise on a sailing boat which we later learn is

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<sup>24</sup> *Drift*, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> It is not possible to decide what is hallucination and what 'really happens'. Helen Daniel enjoyed this uncertainty: 'And the same sort of hallucinatory glaze [as occurs when Byron is washed overboard], ... hovers over the period with Emma and the story of the helicopter apparently rescuing him from the ledge. At that point, it was not entirely clear to me what was real and what was not—and not knowing was splendid'; to which Castro replied: 'That's exactly the effect I wanted.' Helen Daniel, 'Outside the Prison of Logic,' *Island Magazine*, No. 59, Winter 1994, pp. 20-29

<sup>26</sup> *Drift*, p. 19

<sup>27</sup> Castro indirectly asks questions about guilt and whether such crimes against humanity can be expiated or atoned for, a matter still very much to the forefront with the current debate about reconciliation and the need for white Australia to apologise to Aboriginal Australia.

called *Nora*.<sup>28</sup> On this cruise he meets Julia Dickenson, who owns property at Northmere, near Cape Grim. We also learn of his aristocratic wife Ainslie Cracklewood, who may or may not bear some resemblance to Bryan Johnson's wife. Ainslie is a member of the rich, art-loving set, with whom Bryan Johnson as an experimental writer had an ambivalent relationship. She represents both the old motherland of traditional England, patronising rather than matronising, and someone who espouses good causes simply because she is rich. She 'adopts' Byron as another needy cause; 'She has a strange zeal, as aristocrats sometimes do, for saving the world'.<sup>29</sup> (This concept is further discussed later in this chapter under 'potlatch'.)

She also acts as a focus for the sexuality of the novel, which includes elements of voyeurism, soul-less passion, and eventually ambiguity. These elements play thematically in the background of the novel, without being developed into an argument.

Throughout Part II this contemporary narrative is interspersed the parallel historical narrative of Sperm McGann, an outcast from English society. McGann is brought to Australia in the 1820s on the brig *Nora*, captained by Orville Pennington-James, an ineffectual American trying to 'prove' himself by gathering experience so that he can write 'the great whaling book'. He is, quite predictably, beaten by Melville's *Moby-Dick*.<sup>30</sup> When McGann leads a mutiny and dumps Pennington-James on a deserted island, Pennington-James is, to use Michael McGirr's words 'faced with the task of remaking himself on his own'; when he is later rescued and returned to civilisation, 'the effort of writing a simple explanation is beyond him'.<sup>31</sup> As a similar thing happens to Byron Johnson later in the novel—he is nearly drowned, and then 'cannot form a basic sentence'—the theme of writing as the means of 'writing oneself' is once again invoked by Castro.

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<sup>28</sup> Although connections are not as overwhelming as in some of Castro's other novels, they and unlikely coincidences still have a part to play. An obvious connection/coincidence complex is the shared name of the sailing boat and Pennington-James's brig (the name itself suggests James Joyce's wife, Nora Barnacle), and the master of the latter day *Nora* being Morris McGann.

<sup>29</sup> *Drift*, p. 21

<sup>30</sup> *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851. The atmosphere of that novel pervades *Drift*. Castro says of his research: 'I read a lot about whaling, reading *Moby-Dick* first, and toured museums in Tasmania and on the mainland. You can't get away from the whaling history of this country. It's horrible.' Michael Shmith, 'Castro's Lament', *The Age Saturday Extra*, 1994, 20 August p. 8

<sup>31</sup> Michael McGirr, 'Three's Company', *Eureka Street*, vol. 4, no. 8, October 1994, p 41

Pennington-James wants to make his own life story without having to go through the actual experiencing of this history,<sup>32</sup> and Byron Johnson is someone who is used to writing stories, but who experiences the dilemma of the fact/fiction divide.

The fact/fiction divide is kept blurred by Castro. While Sperm himself is a fictional character, his story is based on historical events of the time. And a real historical character, George Augustus Robinson, 'Administrator of the Aborigines in the 1830s', whose diaries Byron Johnson discovers in the library in Tasmania, is fictively blended into Sperm's story.<sup>33</sup>

The novel, broadly speaking, is an examination of the ways people attempt to define their existence. Sperm McGann attempts (after the mutiny) to set up a new race of half-breeds, the Intercostals. He will 'author' his posterity. The descendants, twins Emma and Tom, are faced with recovering their origins, which have been 'whited out' from the pages of history. Thomas is an albino half-caste ('white') whose alienation in terms of 'not-belonging' leads to increasing identification with the black cause (he goes to London to retrieve the mummified head of his ancestral mother, WORÉ).

Byron Johnson becomes involved with Emma and Tom because he is in his own way a misfit, 'banished' by a nasty review in the *London Review of Books*, which suggests 'He really should get out of Britain'.<sup>34</sup> As both Byron Johnson and Thomas McGann are writers, along with would-be writer Pennington-James, their lives are bound up with their writing. The (spurious) *London Review of Books* review warns B.S. Johnson that 'in the final analysis, writing is writing, life is life ... and the former is always subordinate to the latter'.<sup>35</sup> Castro's novel challenges the notion that there

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<sup>32</sup> Helen Daniel described Pennington-James as a 'curio', and Castro explained that 'Pennington-James represents the *ambition* of art, of writing.' 'Outside the Prison of Logic', p. 25

<sup>33</sup> He presumably consults the same reference as Castro: N.J.B. Plomley's *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829-1834*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Hobart, 1966. Robert Drewe also acknowledges (Author's Note) *Friendly Mission* as the source for his novel, *The Savage Crows*, which deals with the morality of the 'extinction' of the Aborigines.

<sup>34</sup> *Drift*, p. 28. This review is manufactured. The *London Review of Books* did not start publication until 1979: Bryan Stanley Johnson died in 1973. Castro is not averse to inventing 'real' sources when necessary; see the half-true, half-invented bibliography supplied in *Double-Wolf*, for example.

<sup>35</sup> *Drift*, p. 28

is such a distinct divide between art and life, just as it challenges the distinction between past and present.

Part II therefore consists of two principal narratives, Byron Johnson coming to contemporary<sup>36</sup> Tasmania and Sperm McGann's whaling exploits of the 1820s. We learn some of Byron Johnson's history, which is closely related to Bryan Johnson's, and hear of his (fictional) exploits in Tasmania. There are some curious episodes that do not seem to fit into his story (the Ypres episode), but which are clarified by reference to *See the Old Lady Decently*.<sup>37</sup>

Part II is rounded off in structural terms—it is almost a 'complete' book, as *Buried Although* would have been—with Byron Johnson washed overboard and presumably drowned, and Sperm McGann speared by Aborigines and presumably killed. However, in a manner somewhere between the serial novel and the discontinuous narrative, the characters of Part II resurface in Part III.

In retrospect, it is possible to read Part II as a book 'about' Byron Johnson, in which we hear his voice 'directly' (interior monologue) in a nominal present, and that he can be considered to have died at the end of Part II. In Part III, although we continue to hear the rest of Johnson's story, it is now mediated to us via Thomas McGann, who is *recollecting* the events, and trying to make sense of them in some sort of narrative 'history'.

In Part III, Thomas McGann takes up the challenge of 'completing' Byron Johnson's work. He does this both as supposed writer or recorder of Johnson's actions, and as an active participant in what Johnson calls his 'grand folly'. Tom McGann takes his cue from the invitation in Bryan Johnson's *See the Old Lady Decently*, and calls it a *tessera* left to him by B.S. Johnson, 'A piece of broken tile which completed a puzzle'.<sup>38</sup> On the one hand Tom tells us that Johnson wrote his challenge 'a few months before committing suicide', and yet we are asked to follow the exploits of Byron not as a whimsical fabrication named after a real person, but *as if he were*

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas McGann's Preface is dated 1993, the time Castro was writing the novel; the real Bryan Johnson died in 1973. Byron Johnson therefore inhabits some fictive time frame between these dates that is not directly specified.

<sup>37</sup> Bryan Johnson's grandfather, Peter Lambird was killed in World War 1 and buried 'outside Ypres'. *See the Old Lady Decently*, p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> *Drift*, p. 171

the real Bryan Johnson. With its many philosophical musings and abstruse internal monologues, the narrative of Part III is deliberately hard to pin down.

For his part Byron Johnson sees Tom as his amanuensis: 'No longer an author. What a relief. That McGann came running along. An amanuensis; a port-parole; a vicarious vox.'<sup>39</sup> In a sense he devolves his story/life to Tom, and he figuratively 'passes the baton' to him in the form of a gold pen.<sup>40</sup>

Essentially, Part III follows the exploits of Byron Johnson and his devotee Tom McGann as they seek to construct and then realise a 'grand folly' that will perform an act of 'equalisation'. The themes of equalisation or balancing out are various. Tom will lay to rest the spirit of his maternal ancestor WORÉ by reclaiming her mummified head from the British Museum. This act of conciliation will to some extent balance out the previous denial of the continued existence of the Aboriginal Tasmanians, as the genealogical link is publicly re-established. Like an Escherian reversal of process, it also symbolically balances out the violence that was meted out in the 1800s, not just to the Aborigines, but to the convicts and settlers such as Sperm McGann, and perhaps even Orville Pennington-James. With WORÉ laid to rest, the theme of violence and the guilt attaching to it are ended.

For Byron Johnson the equalisation is much more metaphysical and ontological. At several junctures Castro invokes Bryan Johnson's novel *Christy Malry's Own Double-Entry*.<sup>41</sup> In this novel the eponymous protagonist keeps a double-entry accounting book, in which he tries to balance the ills inflicted by and to him with the felicities he receives and enacts. His aim is to produce a book, and thus a life, that is balanced in terms of karma. Byron Johnson and Tom McGann refer several times to Bryan Johnson's formulation of this aim in terms of death.

*An exemplary life is one that prepares for the perfection of its own death.*

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<sup>39</sup> *Drift*, p. 208

<sup>40</sup> *Drift*, p. 219. The incident echoes Bryan Johnson's father giving (the same?) pen and enjoining him to 'Write honestly with it'. (p. 31)

<sup>41</sup> For example: 'Why do we seek love upon death ...? Why, to balance the books of course; fill the emptiness of the final hours with an illusion we were still capable of a goal at the final whistle.' *Drift*, pp. 209-120

That was the last thing Byron Johnson ever wrote.<sup>42</sup>

This question of death is in turn intimately linked with the problem of truth and fiction. Part III is concerned with Byron Johnson's preparation for his 'perfected' death. Johnson muses: 'We are not yet fixed in our deadly purpose of grand folly. How therefore to construct the work? Bring about the act itself?'<sup>43</sup>

There are several philosophical conversations between Johnson and McGann, as well as many philosophical internal monologues from Johnson in which his mind wanders and even hallucinates. Johnson increasingly rejects his Western background and his 'profession' of writer, and identifies with the McGanns and with outcasts in general by injecting himself with a melanin-enhancing agent so that his skin becomes blacker than that of the blacks themselves. This act of injecting also poisons him, so he is rejecting his physical existence at the same time.

The Sperm McGann narrative also returns in Part III, with Sperm finding WORÉ's grave, the body decapitated. His last act is to attempt to kill Cavalho, but he is killed himself, ironically harpooned by one of the black women. (Ainslie is given a diverging sub-plot in which she moves out into the clean bushland and becomes lesbian.)

In Part III, Emma is finally introduced as an active, but somewhat sketchy, character. Her past is characterised by abuse—rape(?) by her foster father and by a group of young men—which echoes the violations of the past. She has withdrawn from society. Emma disappears mysteriously, presumably into the sea, on 13 November 1993. She leaves behind 'her handbag filled with smooth pebbles. Counting stones'.<sup>44</sup>

The end of the novel becomes increasingly elusive. Some of the chapters are presented in the form of testimony at a coronial enquiry after Byron blows up the petrol tanker, but we are never sure what happens, as Tom writes several possible endings to the story in the fashion of John Fowles's *The*

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<sup>42</sup> *Drift*, p. 155. A perpetual Castro concern: balance and perfection of form.

<sup>43</sup> *Drift*, p. 208

<sup>44</sup> *Drift*, p. 263. An apparent reference to Beckett's protagonist in *Molloy*, who uses stones as counting devices and to suck as comforters; Tom McGann explains that Emma's stones were 'hieratic and positive things'. The date is significant as the anniversary of Bryan Johnson's suicide.

*French Lieutenant's Woman*. We can only assume that Byron somehow immolates himself. Confusingly, a rival myth is suggested, in which Byron, burned, goes to Emma who tends him (bringing to mind Byron's hallucinations about being rescued by Emma after nearly drowning), and small boats ferry him out to the *Nora* and Byron sails off into the mythological ocean. We cannot even be certain of Byron's purpose in firing the countryside with the petrol. One possibility is that he fires the cliffs and the caves used by the birders, as some sort of ritual cleansing of the past; another is that he fires the countryside of Julia Dickenson's Northmere property, cleansing the connection with the violence of the past.

Tom McGann admits that 'These are of course conjectures, and nowadays, probably myths'.<sup>45</sup> But he is obsessively committed to B.S. Johnson.

Whatever the case, it is incumbent upon me to put things in order, to relieve the myth of its importance. And so I am going to Hammersmith to set the record straight, to defend him against accusations of insularity or puritanism or of being a minor participant in the great adventure of the novel. I am doing it not because I believe there will be a true reason for his death, nor because I see it as a deliverance from what I can understand, but because I feel a responsibility for the asking of the question. *What aileth thee?* It would have been enough for him to let the cup pass, renew himself, redeem himself from that horrendous quest for absolute integrity.<sup>46</sup>

Castro cleverly asserts connections between Byron and Bryan. While Byron can be considered 'a minor participant' in a *particular* novel, *Drift*, the focus is directed eventually to Bryan Johnson and the part he played in the development of the novel as a form. And it is his suicide, not sufficiently explained, that causes Castro to ponder what it is that drives a man towards making his own end. Castro said of Bryan Johnson:

the fact of the suicide was fascinating. I didn't want to go into the psychological reasons for his suicide. Rather, it seemed to me to be the quintessential literary suicide. That, having made the great experiments in form, there was nowhere else for him to go and I think writing itself became a challenge, a challenge to him not only to live but to die.<sup>47</sup>

In Castro's formulation, Bryan Johnson had 'perfected' himself.

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<sup>45</sup> *Drift*, p. 264. Johnson thus becomes a mythic figure.

<sup>46</sup> *Drift*, p. 265. Hammersmith was Bryan Johnson's home.

<sup>47</sup> Helen Daniel, 'Outside the Prison of Logic', *Island Magazine*, No. 59, Winter 1994, p. 22



It is Tom's duty to 'recuperate for B.S. Johnson the startling, dazzling and blinding originality hidden in his suicide', forcing Tom to retrace his steps, 'working back to tell the story before this one'.<sup>48</sup> In other words, Tom is compelled to work backwards, through the story of Byron Shelley Johnson, to the story of Bryan Stanley Johnson, and perhaps further back, *ad infinitum*—and, perpetually, to rewrite the story.

While the above analysis shows the physical structure of the novel, it is useful to keep in mind Castro's explanation of the *tone* of the novel, as he explained it to Michael Shmith.

Castro sees the form of *Drift* as a jeremiad: a lamentation, list of woes or complaints; and, as he is careful to add, redemption. 'My conscious motive was to redeem the ancestry—paradox ancestry, perhaps—of people descended from the Aborigines and the whalers, and show the contradictions that are there.

They are kind of shunted aside. People always think in black and white, and the complications are never quite revealed. Of course the jeremiad has the notion of earthly time and heavenly time. Shifting time is that lineal motion to a kind of icy, prophetic infinity.<sup>49</sup>

### The relationship of *Drift* to Bryan Stanley Johnson

Castro says that his novels usually have some other work as their inspiration or genesis. In an interview he told the critic Peter Craven:

'[*Drift* is] based on this novel *Trawl* by B.S. Johnson. He tended to equate motherland and motherhood and because he talked about Tasmania in relation to Britain's imperial past I've presented a B.S. Johnson figure in Tasmania.

'In spite of myself I found I couldn't imitate his spareness. My book *Drift* is far more playful.'

At the same time *Drift*, with its Tasmanian setting has as its subtext the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines ...

'The ultimate idea is that we all invent ourselves,' Castro says.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Drift*, p. 265

<sup>49</sup> Michael Shmith, 'Castro's Lament', *The Age Saturday Extra*, 1994, 20 August p. 8

<sup>50</sup> Peter Craven, 'Double Delights', *The Sunday Age (Agenda)*, 12 September 1993, p. 8. Castro's one-word title also echoes Johnson's.

*Trawl* is a meditation by the narrator—on board a fishing trawler on which he has enlisted as a passenger to give himself some 'thinking time'—about the problems of his life, and specifically, his relationship with his girlfriend. He 'trawls' his past—principally his life as an evacuated child in World War 2 and his early sexual experiences—in order to make connections. The novel ends with the sense that he has made forward progress, although this is not spelled out.

In retrospect it seems to me that *Drift* is more closely related to Johnson's *See the Old Lady Decently* than to *Trawl*, but there is an obvious debt to all Johnson's novels as an *oeuvre* and to his aims as a novelist. The *Trawl* connection seems most evident in terms of the importance of the sea in *Drift*. Johnson says of his novel:

*Trawl* (1966) is all interior monologue, a representation of my mind at one stage removed; the closest one can come in writing. The only real technical problem was the representation of breaks in the mind's workings; I finally decided on a scheme of 3 em, 6 em and 9 em spaces ... To make up for the absence of those paragraph breaks which give the reader's eye rest and location on the page, the line length was deliberately shortened; this gave the book a long narrow format.

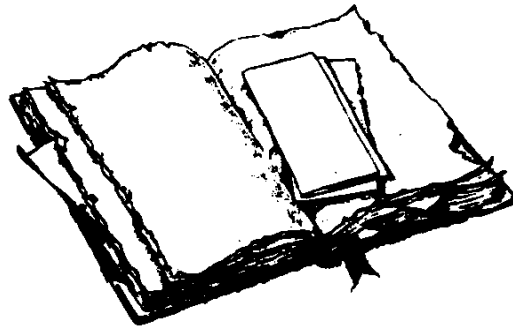
The rhythms of the language of *Trawl* attempted to parallel those of the sea, while much use was made of the trawl itself as a metaphor for the way the subconscious mind may appear to work.<sup>51</sup>

While Castro has not used the typographical devices described by Johnson (Johnson's in fact now seem rather passé), he has certainly used interior monologue, variation in sentence rhythm and sustained metaphors in constructing *Drift*. But Castro does use some devices modelled on Johnson's other books, and on the work of that progenitor of devices, Laurence Sterne. *Drift* reproduces pictures and mock facsimile announcements. On page 14 Castro shows us a drawing of a sea-log marked with Emma McGann's letters.

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<sup>51</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, p. 23. Johnson was very fond of using these long breaks in place of the usual word spaces. They occur in *See the Old Lady Decently* and his short stories, inter alia. (Ems were the traditional measure for typesetters. Three ems is approximately 12.5 mm.)

Here it is, damp, expanding pages like a doughy concertina, edges lacy, fried with eggwhite. Open.



Page 183 shows in facsimile the newspaper report ('*Northwestern News*') of Byron Johnson being washed up. The report contains typical provincial newspaper typographical mistakes: Johnson is an 'avongard' author, suffering from 'hyperhernia' from his exposure to the sea.

Page 208 has a long line drawn across the page for anyone who is prepared to assist in helping to construct the work of (Byron) Johnson's 'deadly purpose of grand folly'.

Let whosoever dare sign here:

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In his other novels Castro has not used such pictorial devices,<sup>52</sup> only typesetting to draw attention to, say, a letter or report (for example, the doctors' reports in *Birds of Passage*). The drawing of the log book can be equated with *Albert Angelo's* reproduction of the fortune teller's card which Albert finds in the street. *See the Old Lady Decently* includes photographs of the War Office's notification of Gunner Lambird's death.<sup>53</sup>

One of the continuing metaphors in both *See the Old Lady Decently* and *Drift* is mother's milk, and therewith the female breast. Johnson uses two shape poems to illustrate this point. One transforms the letter 'M' (a homophone for 'Em', short for 'Emily', the mother in the novel) via

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<sup>52</sup> *Birds of Passage* does, however, reproduce the Chinese character for Shan's name on page 62.

<sup>53</sup> *See the Old Lady Decently*, pp. 42-43

'mama' and 'mammary' to 'tit'; the other repeats the word 'breast' in different line lengths to typographically draw a breast. Although Castro does not use similar devices, his character Emma has tattooed across her breasts the words 'Whitey sucks'.

At a metaphoric level, Castro has used Bryan Johnson's layout devices as a way into imagining his novel.

B.S. Johnson wrote many books in an experimental typography, where there were actual gaps, blackouts and holes cut in the pages. He left metaphorical gaps and spaces, which were something he said future readers could fill in. This act of generosity, this aperture as it were, allowed me then to do this in a very obvious way. But in many other ways, these gaps allowed me to invent the idea that you slip into them, imaginatively into the past, so my character has a kind of narcolepsy where he collapses now and again and he falls into the black hole of the past, which is pure imagination.<sup>54</sup>

If *Drift* is a continuation of *See the Old Lady Decently*, then we would expect some carryover of themes and perhaps settings. *See the Old Lady Decently* is a meditation on the loss of Bryan Stanley Johnson's mother, via cancer; on the forces that shaped her life; and of England as a 'mother country', in decline. Johnson was strongly attached to his mother, but repelled by the conditions of her life and the indignities she suffered while dying. He was also very critical of England as a military-industrial power, and uses Field Marshall Lord Haig as a focus for his disgust with the way innocent men went to their slaughter, especially in World War I, at the whim of the generals and the military/industrial complex. His maternal grandfather, Gunner Peter Lambird became cannon fodder at Ypres.

In the Preface to *See the Old Lady Decently* Michael Bakewell explained this background.

Bryan Stanley Johnson's mother died of cancer in 1971, 'The debt one owes to one's parents, which I thought one paid by having children oneself,' he wrote, 'I now see is more nearly paid by having to watch the mother die.' He was greatly affected by her death and found himself involved in a total re-appraisal of her life and his own ... He felt a need to examine her life in detail and to explore the whole concept of motherhood.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Helen Daniel, 'Outside the Prison of Logic', *Island Magazine*, No. 59, Winter 1994, p. 21

<sup>55</sup> Introduction, *See the Old Lady Decently*, p. 7

Allied to this need was a desire to examine the way in which memory shaped a person's 'objective reality'. Whereas his earlier novels had drawn on his own life, *See the Old Lady Decently* had to be shaped from memories and meagre mementos, such as photographs.

... there were areas of his mother's childhood and youth of which he could know nothing ... He had therefore to draw the distinction between what was to be of necessity fiction, what was to be half fiction and half truth, and what, in the final book, was to be All Truth.<sup>56</sup>

Hence in *See the Old Lady Decently* 'Such letters and documents that were to hand were introduced into the text without amendment.'<sup>57</sup>

What Johnson finally produced was a highly complex novel, relying on several devices: visual effects; a highly complicated system of words, letters and numbers to act in place of chapter headings; typographical poems, which gradually introduced the letters C A N C E R; and many other symbolic devices. Thus Bryan Stanley Johnson's novel inspired not only many of the concerns of *Drift*, but also its self-conscious structure.

Bryan Johnson's novel is also haphazard and non-linear. He said of it:

Something for everybody! If you do not like this part, or that part, or the other, then skip ahead or back to a part you did enjoy. It is no part of my intention to provide a continuous narrative ... No, my purpose is to reflect with humility the reality of chaos, what life really seems to be like.<sup>58</sup>

Castro has also produced a structurally experimental novel. He has carried over some of the 'facts' of Bryan Johnson's life to Byron Johnson: he lives in Hammersmith, his mother is dying of cancer, and so on. Some of Johnson's symbols are carried over, as well: these are discussed below in the section on metaphor. But the main connection between Castro's and Johnson's novels

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<sup>56</sup> Introduction, *See the Old Lady Decently*, p. 7. *See the Old Lady Decently* covered the period from his mother's birth in 1908 to his birth in 1933 (it includes a reworking of *Tristram Shandy's* imagining of his own conception), and, as planned, *Buried Although* would have covered the years to the end of the Second World War, and *Among Those Left Are You* would have taken the story to the present day. Only the last book could have been non-fiction.

Bakewell also notes: 'One alarming note suggests that the third was to run backwards against the other two.' (p. 13)

<sup>57</sup> Introduction, *See the Old Lady Decently*, p. 10

<sup>58</sup> *See the Old Lady Decently*, p. 13

lies in the investigation of the recreation of history, the concern with the hazy boundary between fact and fiction.

### History

*Drift's* concern with making our own identity is also a concern with the idea of history, as a writing of lives and 'what happened'.

In the novel history is seen as a gigantic hole, an uncertainty, which sucks people backwards into it.<sup>59</sup> Byron Johnson feels dizzy when he looks back into the past suggested by Emma's letters—'The hole into the past gaped.'<sup>60</sup>—and has the sense that he will be sucked into it and lost. As Castro points out, what he 'sees' in these fugal states is imagined.

The construction of history is, for Castro and Bryan Johnson, the construction of various *possible* histories (or stories, remembering the etymological kinship of the two words), just as the Robert Coover epigraph used at the start of *Double-Wolf* suggests: many people, many histories. For the historian, the reconstruction of history is a redigesting of existing stories and synthesising them into a new, syncretic story. In the process lives, too, are reviewed, restored, elided. This process is fraught with indeterminism and randomness.

I have always celebrated the intermittent, appended indiscretion and forgetfulness. That's how stories are formed. Ask the anthropologists. They mostly go backwards, as I once intimated as honestly as possible, but I guess we'll never know the truth, which lies in contradictory fragments. Put them together one way, like a jigsaw: make a story. Put them together differently: make another.<sup>61</sup>

For Byron Johnson and Emma McGann the problem is one of restoring history and enacting a catharsis. It is a matter of cleansing or exorcising the past, without papering over it.

I remember how we tried to rid ourselves of the stench of death by saying there would have been no funeral rites at Cape Grim, no morbid odour of coffinwood, just blood and bone leached back into the sea and the odour

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<sup>59</sup> Castro's conception derives from Walter Benjamin. The metaphor of history exploding or gaping is used to explain Pomeroy's death (see Chapter 6), and occurs again in *Double-Wolf*: 'At these moments the past reeled out before me as though the Angel of History had unfolded his wings and bore me aloft on his buttocks, and we were flying backwards into the face of events.' (p. 65)

<sup>60</sup> *Drift*, p. 17

<sup>61</sup> *Drift*, p. 13

of dogs on heat. We invested the place with views, health, fresh-air monitoring stations, and cleaned up the stains of the past.<sup>62</sup>

This past is of course the story of the Aborigines of Tasmania, and the catharsis is to acknowledge the brutality of their extinction and to reconnect with the present—the McGanns (and others)—by overcoming the silence.

I could well have imagined what had happened at Cape Grim; the massacres, the violation of our mothers, the shoals of execrating silence.<sup>63</sup>

The silence that was maintained after the massacres denied both the history of the Aborigines, and the connection of their descendants with their past.

### Truth

Bryan Johnson was concerned very much with the idea of truth. In *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* he made a claim for the novel to present fact, not fiction (or 'lies' as he preferred to call it). He argued that the novel had been replaced as the best means of storytelling (that role going to film and television), but that the novel still had important work to do.

Recognising that 'Literary forms do become exhausted, clapped out'<sup>64</sup> he argued for novelists to continually remake the novel, which is 'a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel.'<sup>65</sup> This requires a little clarification, especially in the light of the fact that he admits that in *See the Old Lady Decently* he has *had to make up* material. He draws a distinction between what he calls 'stories', which are extracted from life to form a coherent piece. But 'Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily ... Telling stories really is telling lies.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Drift*, p. 13

<sup>63</sup> *Drift*, p. 175

<sup>64</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, p. 13

<sup>65</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, p. 14

<sup>66</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, p. 14

To convey 'truth' novels must include the chaotic, riotous and unmanageable material that life is composed of. A novel, or at least a literary novel, 'teaches one something true about life'.<sup>67</sup> Selecting the coherent to make a story is tampering with truth, or 'telling lies'. Both in his work and in his life—and by extension his death—Castro sees Bryan Stanley Johnson as committed to 'that horrendous quest for absolute integrity', which accepts and includes chaos.<sup>68</sup>

As I indicated earlier, Castro also is committed to a search for truth. His novels are never 'stories' as neat fabrications. Castro's elaborate constructions also provide a means of assembling as many ideas and asking as many questions as possible within a given number of pages. He uses known history—or at least the versions of history that have come down to us—and blends these with known biographical 'facts' to produce an enquiry into a particular complex of questions. This is akin to Johnson's technique of collaging facts with suppositions or recreations, as done in *See the Old Lady Decently*. What Castro produces is a variable narrative that tries to convey the truth, but does not pretend to resort to 'facts' to prove its own validity.

When asked about his bending of the literal truth, Castro made this comment.

Well *Double-Wolf* was the same; the bibliography at the back is a whole lot of fictional material mixed in with real material ... I am playing with the idea of searching for what is real and what isn't in a novel, and I have always specifically stated this, that I'm not writing fact. Fact is not something I deal with ... I'm not saying to the reader 'Please respect this because it's validated'. That has never been my intention. And I think some people get me wrong in that respect. In the past I've been attacked for that and people say 'Oh gosh, historically this is incorrect ...'<sup>69</sup>

Continuing:

I have always in my fiction not used particular historical fact as a validation, but simply as a stepping stone to the next narratological line. People say you travesty history or are mis-using your data ... I'm writing *fiction* and I think that if I claimed to be a historian that would be very different. These 'historical fictions', I can't stand them because they're so

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<sup>67</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, p. 14

<sup>68</sup> *Drift*, p. 265

<sup>69</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997



boring, and do you know why?—because the facts actually constrain them. They can't actually get away from them. They become *so boring!*<sup>70</sup>

Castro believes that a writer can do *too much* research:

You become totally restrained [if] you say to yourself 'I can't possibly do this here because the facts say such-and-such'. I think the less you know about some things the better ... I've always believed that you have got to look on a piece of writing as a kind of hologram. There are angles that you look at that you see as you have never seen before. And suddenly when you see those angles you are somehow liberated—hopefully anyway—liberated from the one point of view. *It's the notion that fiction can do anything, apart from the expected.* So that's one motivation for writing fiction, I think: the liberation of oneself from the way you were trained. In a way it's paradoxical ...<sup>71</sup>

### Metaphors

One of the architectonic metaphor complexes carried over from Bryan Johnson is the mother complex. Johnson was mourning the loss of his mother in *See the Old Lady Decently*, but also the decay of England as *mother-land*. He considered this complex as three themes, namely:

1. the death of my mother
2. the decay of the mother country
3. the renewal aspect of motherhood.<sup>72</sup>

Castro takes up the first two themes explicitly.

The physical death of the mother is paralleled by Thomas McGann's (step)mother dying of cancer, in unpropitious surroundings echoing the Hammersmith setting. These themes are only background themes in *Drift*, probably to suggest the parallelism between the two characters. Cancer itself is a general symbol of decay and failure of will (see below).

A more worked out metaphor is the abandonment by the mother country (or by society in general). Bryan Johnson not only sensed the decay of post-war England, but felt himself an outcast from literary society. Tom McGann is also outcast, into no-man's land, by his own society, and ultimately by England, the imperial power which colonised Tasmania.

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<sup>70</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997

<sup>71</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997; my italics.

<sup>72</sup> Introduction, *See the Old Lady Decently*, p. 8

In Tasmania, the best minds of my generation were failing the heritage test, for we were half-castes, destined to be hated by all; not of one mind; caught, as they say, between the devil and the deep blue sea; patronised by some and regarded as curiosities by others.<sup>73</sup>

Thus Tom and Byron become doppelgängers, at once antitheses—Tom is an albino ‘black’, Byron, a ‘white’, injects himself to darken his skin—and soul brothers—their stories merge as the novel progresses, and Tom ‘writes’ Byron. The two characters increasingly coalesce (as in *Birds of Passage*), and by the end of the novel are hard to differentiate.

Bryan Johnson’s third component is harder to see mirrored in *Drift*. Johnson ended *See the Old Lady Decently* with his own birth.<sup>74</sup> Birth in *Drift* is much more difficult: the Aboriginal women abort or kill their babies. The surviving baby of WORÉ’s twins founds an eventual line, but the sense of renewal is hardly celebratory.

Karen Barker has suggested that Julia Dickenson is pregnant to Byron Johnson.<sup>75</sup> While *Drift* is an open text on which the reader may ‘write’, there is little evidence for Barker’s suggestion. Although Byron lusts after Julia, the only chance for sexual congress seems to be while they are on the ghost tour in Port Arthur, and the text does not indicate that this occurs.<sup>76</sup> Barker highlights a fleeting reference to Julia ‘turn[ing] to go back inside, her swollen silhouette framed in the doorway’.<sup>77</sup> At this stage of the novel, Tom McGann is writing Byron’s imagined last moments, and is ‘seeing’ back into the past, not only Byron’s, but Sperm’s. There are several references to ‘a child’, ‘his child’,<sup>78</sup> but the narration is so fluid and malleable that the ‘he’ could be Sperm (and Tom *is* Sperm’s descendant) or Byron. As Tom realises that he cannot complete Byron’s story he

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<sup>73</sup> *Drift*, p. 174

<sup>74</sup> There is a mystical tone: ‘it began with the Great Round [birth, death and regeneration], and everything had to follow’. Johnson’s final words are one of his characteristic word play poems: ‘from/embryo/to embryo/from Em/Me’. *See the Old Lady Decently*, p. 139

<sup>75</sup> Karen Barker, ‘The Milk of Mother’s Kindness in Brian Castro’s *Drift*’, in Sharyn Pearce and Philip Nielsen (eds), *Current Tensions: Proceedings of the 18th Annual Conference*, 6–11 July 1996, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Brisbane, pp. 228–235

<sup>76</sup> *Drift*, p. 143. The action is suggestive and ambiguous, and it is not possible to make a definitive reading.

<sup>77</sup> *Drift*, p. 255

<sup>78</sup> ‘There must have been a child, but after love there will always be silence. His child.’ *Drift*, p. 256, also p. 255

pronounces: 'The future belonged not to the imagination, but to biology. Simple cells. There must have been a son which Cavalho raised in his hut', a baby which is eventually taken by a 'government nurse who duly recorded the name ... McGann ... and who promptly despatched the baby to an orphanage'.<sup>79</sup> In *Drift*, the only regeneration is a retrospective acceptance of the McGann bloodline.

The mother metaphor is extended into the metaphor of mother's milk. When Ed. Curr of the Tasman Wool Company writes to the Governor concerning the native problem, he suggests that the best method of 'dealing with them' (eradicating them) is by encouraging the spread of tuberculosis—'The coughing sickness, George, will be far more effective than musket-balls'.<sup>80</sup> He ties this to Pennington-James, who is dying of TB in hospital having contracted the disease from being suckled by native women when he was marooned by the mutinous Sperm McGann.

(Karen Barker<sup>81</sup> reads this incident as Curr suggesting that cows be *deliberately* used to spread TB, but the reference seems to be to milk generically. Curr uses the phrase the 'milk of human kindness', which suggests milk as a sustaining source that humans rely on.<sup>82</sup>)

TB was rife in the Tasmania of the 1820s, killing not only Aborigines, but white settlers. Sperm McGann and WORÉ are both afflicted, and TB becomes an emblem throughout *Drift*, predating cancer as the symbol of ontological debilitation (see below). Even in the novel's 'present', Byron Johnson and Tom both suffer from respiratory problems.

Another image of maternal corruption is the whore. Ainslie is figuratively a whore<sup>83</sup>, and WORÉ, whose name is translated as 'woman' but almost forms

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<sup>79</sup> *Drift*, p. 257

<sup>80</sup> *Drift*, pp. 162-163

<sup>81</sup> Karen Barker, 'The Milk of Mother's Kindness in Brian Castro's *Drift*', in Sharyn Pearce and Philip Nielsen (eds), *Current Tensions: Proceedings of the 18th Annual Conference*, 6-11 July 1996, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Brisbane, pp. 228-235

<sup>82</sup> Medical knowledge at the time did not know the source of TB, but cows were implicated. Castro acknowledges this: 'the Aborigines were being killed off specifically through tuberculosis ... There was an awareness that the sickness could have come from cow's milk.' Helen Daniel, 'Outside the Prison of Logic', *Island Magazine*, No. 59, Winter 1994, p. 25

<sup>83</sup> 'Ainslie had other men. Sex is not possession, she said.' *Drift*, p. 41

'whore', is forced into a form of whoredom. Similarly, other apparently random and trivial events in the novel can be explained by this obsession with the whore/mother complex. One of Byron Johnson's girlfriends, Linka, the Czech, is escaping a boyfriend, Jimmy Jeans, who 'killed prostitutes. And Linka was his only love, provided she was Mother.'<sup>84</sup>

But there are more important links with the corruption of maternal care as an ideal rather than an embodied concept. This provides the explanation to an otherwise opaque scene early in the novel. At the age of 17 Byron Johnson diverts a trip to Paris to visit the battlefields of World War I. The direct connection is with Bryan Johnson, whose maternal grandfather was killed and buried near Ypres. Byron collapses in a fit on one of the battlefields, and when he comes to his senses sees a girl in a purple silk dress. He remarks confusingly that 'she did not remind me of a covered statue like those shrouded eminences I'd found in the cathedrals'.<sup>85</sup> They visit a cathedral, which has been shelled during the War. Byron makes the following cryptic speech.

Targeted finally, the meanpoint of impact discovered, there was the final destruction of time, the killing of the Mother. Guilt.

I was always guilty leaving my mother, guilty of writing because she hated it, guilty of social mobility ... and that destruction of all the Notre-Dames relieved me of it. It wasn't hatred, but relief from the burden of her centralisation, from the melancholy of her prison for the penury of her time ... relief from the Mother that was Britain.<sup>86</sup>

These facts accord with Bryan Johnson's position: he both cared for and was disgusted by his mother's position; she did not like his writing; he felt cut off from England. He felt guilty about his mother. Castro has translocated a piece of Johnson into his novel, where it will remain cryptically symbolic.

At the cathedral, while standing near a statue of the Virgin and Child, Byron's warm, religious feeling is disturbed by

an old man, possible a veteran of that war to end all wars, [who] suddenly shouted, screamed PUTAIN! PUTAIN!, his eyes fixed on the statue, so I didn't know whether he meant the girl beside me or the Virgin ...<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Drift*, p. 38

<sup>85</sup> *Drift*, p. 64

<sup>86</sup> *Drift*, p. 65

<sup>87</sup> *Drift*, p. 65

We assume that the veteran is shouting 'Whore!' at the Virgin as a symbol of religious and state endorsement of the War, but the Byron story continues. He and girl have sex on a battlefield called Plaine d'Amour (Field of Love). Byron is revolted when he finds that it is a burial ground, which he reconstrues as Pleine d'amour, or 'full of love', although it is full of bodies. He then reels off a tirade at the girl. 'No, I said. They were tears of rage, rage against all motherlands who sent us to asylums, morgues, to these fields of evil.'<sup>88</sup> In this spirit of revenge, as he is leaving the cathedral he has formed the resolve 'for one moment, to witness just once in my life a cathedral destroyed again.'<sup>89</sup>

This last cryptic comment resurfaces much later in the novel, with Byron's resolve to destroy Ainslie's 'cathedral', the house she is building in the Tasmanian bushland, and which is a focus for lesbians (deviants from motherhood?). As Tom envisages the scene on Byron's behalf, as the petrol tanker hits 'the nave' he rages: '*Putains!* he screams, his mind thick with smoke; *putains!* he spits. He was through with bloodlines, lineages, heritage, motherlands, cathedrals.'<sup>90</sup> This rage does not seem to be directed at Ainslie specifically, but at Western culture and its myths. As he envisages the conflagration, he also sees forward to 'the reconstruction of Nature and the return of wildflowers and muttonbirds, the sigh of the sea.'<sup>91</sup> (Perhaps this is the real instance of regeneration in *Drift* that accords with Bryan Johnson's theme of regeneration.)

### **Illness: tuberculosis and cancer**

These two archetypal illnesses pervade *Drift*. Cancer has already featured in *After China*. Both illnesses have symbolic connotations appropriate to their times. Susan Sontag has explained in *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* that each illness represented for its time the mystical despoiler of human life. (Once a disease is understood and treatable/curable it loses its cachet, though its effect may still be grievous.) In the nineteenth century tuberculosis was the great despoiler, and was accorded a romantic status

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<sup>88</sup> *Drift*, p. 67-68

<sup>89</sup> *Drift* p. 66. One of Johnson's short stories describes a cathedral being targeted and about to be destroyed by an artillery battery. Its title, 'Mean Point of Impact' (*Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, pp. 45-50) is alluded to in the passage I have quoted on page 268.

<sup>90</sup> *Drift*, p. 254

<sup>91</sup> *Drift*, p. 254

(Keats is the romantic archetype, but Kafka is more apposite for Castro<sup>92</sup>). Now that tuberculosis is no longer a threat in the late twentieth century, cancer has taken its place.

Early capitalism assumes the necessity of regulated spending, saving, accounting, discipline—an economy that depends on the rational limitation of desire. TB is described in terms that sum up the negative behaviour of nineteenth-century *homo economicus*: consumption; wasting; squandering of vitality. Advanced capitalism requires expansion, speculation, the creation of new needs ... buying on credit; mobility—an economy that depends on the irrational indulgence of desire. Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behaviour of twentieth-century *homo economicus*: abnormal growth; repression of energy, that is, refusal to consume or spend.<sup>93</sup>

Repositing the metaphor in terms of ontology rather than economics, tuberculosis is a profligate *wasting* of one's life resources, and cancer is a wasting by refusal to make use of one's life resources (withholding, meanness). Sperm McGann, Pennington-James and Byron Johnson—who exhibits tubercular symptoms, if not the disease—are wasters of their potential. The Aboriginals are wasted. The cancer-stricken mothers—Byron/Bryan's, Tom's—are failures of engagement, in the same way that the Writer in *After China* is portrayed as withholding herself from life.

### Potlatch

Another architectonic metaphor in *Drift* is the concept of potlatch. The word derives from the custom of certain Northwestern American Indians, who practised ceremonies at which elaborate and costly gifts were given (and sometime destroyed) as a sign of conspicuous wealth, with the expectation that the favour would be returned, more lavishly, at some future date. The concept has been extended by anthropologists to include transactions between families or lines in which marriage arrangements made in one generation are expected to be 'repaid' in another.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> 'Kafka wrote to Max Brod in October 1917 that he had "come to think that tuberculosis ... is no special disease ... but only the germ of death itself, intensified".'

Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*, Penguin, 1991, p. 19

<sup>93</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*, Penguin, 1991, pp. 64-65.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. Ian Cunnison, Cohen & West, London, 1969. First describing 'prestations [gifts] which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested' (p. 1), Mauss calls the 'agonistic prestation'

Ainslie represents the negative side of potlatch. She gives money—apparently generously—to Byron, and offers him her apartment to write in, but he is aware that these gifts bind him in an exchange.

I knew deep in my heart that Ainslie's motives were never clear; if she gave, she also took away. Her gifts obligated the recipient, and such expenditure by the wealthy was really a need to destroy, to squander, to subjugate ...<sup>95</sup>

Ainslie feels some genuine care for Byron, but he also realises that her patronage of him allows her to masquerade as a patron of the arts, enhancing her position in society. And there is the destructive side to potlatch, the implication that 'You are inferior to me, and reliant upon me'.

In the extended version of this concept, Sperm McGann presents himself to the native women in the guise of 'Great Provider', in return for which he expects that they will bear him children and found a new racial line.<sup>96</sup> Of course, Sperm is not distributing largesse, but violence, and this unrequited violence will carry down through the generations the requirement that restitution be made. This is the karmic balancing that is suggested by the double ledger of *Christy Malry*.

On a larger scale the concepts of potlatch and restitution apply to England as a colonial power. The so-called maternal largesse was expected to be repaid with colonial devotion, as indeed occurred at such times as the World Wars. But the violence visited on the Aborigines of Tasmania, and Australia at large, and the usurious conditions applied to Australia itself in commerce and other fields, carry a stain which needs to be removed or balanced out.

George Augustus Robinson is another manifestation of potlatch. An equivocal figure in history, he was on the surface attempting to do good—by the lights of his time—by saving the Aboriginal population, but

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*potlatch*. It includes the 'purely sumptuous destruction of accumulated wealth in order to eclipse a rival chief'. 'Essentially usurious and extravagant, it is above all a struggle among nobles to determine their position in the hierarchy.' (p. 4)

<sup>95</sup> *Drift*, pp. 55-56

<sup>96</sup> While his name is meant to come from his whaling background, the suggestion of being the provider of seed is obvious.

was unwittingly implicated in their destruction. However, he also used the Aborigines to further his own cause. Robinson was perpetually dismayed that the Aborigines were not grateful to him: his 'help' was in fact conditional, expecting the appropriate degree of indebtedness. He is presented by Castro as a figure of fun, suffering from gonorrhoea and pricked by his ostentatious penis gourd.

### Balance

At a psychological or spiritual level, Byron Johnson is also seeking balance in his life. He considers himself a failure; he has been accused of lacking commitment and passion (by Emma and Ainslie), and is outcast from his own society. For Byron, life becomes one big question of equation.

By the end of the novel he has moved away from conventional society, identifying with the outcast (the Aborigine), and seeking to make some nebulously defined act of reconciliation with the past or cleansing movement. Tom McGann spurs him on in this quest.

I encourage Byron Johnson to fulfil his unfriendly mission. I wouldn't have done it if he hadn't pointed it out first: that death was exactly equal to life.<sup>97</sup>

For Byron Johnson, his quest involves a need for absolute truth, resulting in the paradox that, somehow, death becomes equal to life (the necessary complement? the act of completion?). Byron, as 'writer', is also by now equated by Castro with Bryan Johnson, whose suicide Castro feels it is necessary to understand, if not explain. Castro's conclusion to the novel is a gesture towards Bryan Stanley Johnson, heroic experimenter with writing and with life:

By imagining us, he lit a fire in which he perished. In dying, he pushed the truth beyond its own limit, turning the challenge of supreme honesty upon itself:

... what I am really doing is challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing.

The equation is balanced. It made it impossible to live.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *Drift*, p. 234. 'Unfriendly mission' is an ironising pun on Plomley's *Friendly Mission*.



It is this acting of balancing that ties *Drift* together as a whole. There are no neat conclusions to make about the novel, but some powerful questions to exercise the mind. Overall, how to achieve balance in human endeavours; specifically, how far can any writer go towards ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’—is ultimate commitment suicidal?

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<sup>98</sup> *Drift*, p. 266 The internal quotation (‘what I am really doing ...’) is direct from Bryan Stanley Johnson.

## Critical reaction to *Drift*

Among Castro's novels *Drift* remains the great enigma, for readers and Castro alike. *Drift*'s convoluted plot and abstract concerns make it probably the most elusive of his novels, and there is less light humour in it.<sup>99</sup> Castro took the writing of the novel very seriously (as indicated in the Katrina Iffland interview<sup>100</sup>), and felt it was 'his best writing to date'. He remains puzzled that what he considers to be possibly his best book is the only one not to have garnered a literary award.<sup>101</sup>

Critics have found *Drift* a very complex novel to come to grips with, and interpretations and assessments have varied widely. While most of the reviews are largely complimentary, most seem to add a caveat, usually a *caveat lector*.

Helen Daniel was one of the few critics to be completely convinced by *Drift*. She interviewed Castro just before its release.<sup>102</sup>

*Drift* seems to me a brilliant novel, disturbing, elegant, playful, witty and highly innovative. In fact it makes much of Australian fiction look mundane and narrow, locked into a cramped narrative space without any awareness of the vast narrative reaches beyond it.

Castro explained the destructive impulses that perfuse his writing in general, and *Drift* in particular. He explained that

[Tasmania's] historical background is very haunting and I presume guilt-ridden to a certain extent. However, that wasn't the immediate thing that was apparent to me. I think that, wherever you are in Tasmania, you are not very far from a very wild and dangerous sea ... And I think that's how my fiction works: no matter how beautiful the landscape, the anxiety from within destroys whatever is aesthetically beautiful'. (p. 20)

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<sup>99</sup> The mock list of prisoners' notes (pp. 144-146) is one of the few light diversions in the novel, though this is quite 'black' comedy. When Byron is saved by Julia's bloomers, this is an amusingly irreverent picture (he had been trying to 'get into her knickers'), as well as an allusion to Pomeroy being saved by an esky covered with quotations from *Finnegan's Wake*, which could be further stretched to include a pun on Bloom/bloomers. (*Pomeroy*, p. 183)

<sup>100</sup> 'Castro's Call for Cultural Revolution' *Canberra Times*, 12 August 1995, p. C13

<sup>101</sup> At the least, *Drift* was short-listed for the Victorian Premier's Award (Vance Palmer Fiction Award) which was won by Kate Grenville for *Dark Places* in 1996.

<sup>102</sup> Helen Daniel, 'Outside the Prison of Logic', *Island Magazine*, No. 59, Winter 1994, pp. 20-29. This interview focussed on *Drift*, but ranged widely over Castro's writing.

The destructive tendency is in tension with the constructive impulse of writing.

With the Aboriginal people, I was interested in the sense of anxiety and the idea of self-destruction, but also in the sense that all writing is a kind of movement between collaboration and dissidence. This is the book where I tried to really work that one out, whereby nothing is as simple as redressing history or re-imagining history or even taking history in itself as an idea that is fixed and static ... the so-called extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines was also a process of self-destruction caused by the repression and so on.

Destruction in *Drift* includes the destruction (by suicide) of the 'author'. Castro admits it is a technical problem.

When you're writing in the first person, once the author commits suicide ... you have to move from that point onwards. So what I have is the actual author passing the baton of the pen onto the next author. This is my comment ... on the idea of writing history or writing one's identity ... obviously all origins and identities are becoming, they are not static, but also they are all constantly being re-invented. Anybody who talks about their past is using words and inventing it, rather than stating it. However, the emphasis is always on the statement, not on the invention, so the artist himself is kind of erased.

Susan Chenery<sup>103</sup> was impressed with the technique of *Drift*:

There is absolute clarity in Castro's writing, something clean in his way of thinking. He has found, and held, a tone in *Drift* that must have put him in strange headspace while he was writing. 'That took a bit of doing let me tell you. It took me about a year to find that headspace.'

Sentences meander, dance, change direction, shimmy, shock, but never get bogged down. The work bristles with ideas—odd ideas, quirky little things; point, counter-point. How does someone who cocoons himself in the mountains know these things?

'I don't know,' says Castro. 'That's just the way I write. I am just sitting there and they come. I do a lot of reading. I have always had bad eyesight, so I am a great eavesdropper—I have excellent hearing. I go to cafes and listen. It leads to things.'

Once again Castro drew attention to the serious effort involved in writing *Drift*.

'It was a difficult book to write,' Castro says. 'The idea of death and the obsession with death in this book obsessed me a great deal, mainly because of the idea of suicide.'

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<sup>103</sup> Susan Chenery, 'On the Inside of an Outsider', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July 1994, Spectrum p. 9A

Andrew Riemer, a consistent supporter of Castro, pointed out the difficulties of *Drift*.<sup>104</sup>

It is often difficult to know 'what is going on' in one of Castro's books, though in the best of them that hardly seems to matter. He is not interested in linear narratives, in clearly defined characters or, indeed, in any of the usual trappings of conventional fiction. *Drift* raises such tendencies to an unprecedented level of elaboration ... [the novel's] characters, stories, memories and dreams continually drift or slide over each other. Castro's wit, inventiveness and agility of mind keep the novel buoyant and fascinating even where parts of it prove all but impenetrable.

... Some of the episodes set on board whaling ships reveal powers of evocation new, it seems to me, to this writer. His rendering of land and seascapes, though almost always oblique, is wonderfully memorable. The flickering glimpses of violence—slaughter, abduction, torture—gain power from their restraint. Castro knows that hinting is far more effective than trumpeting.

There is much to admire here. *Drift* represents an important step in Castro's career, confirming him as one of the boldest and perhaps most imaginative of a generation of writers who have come into prominence in the past 10 years.

Riemer nevertheless found *Drift* structurally difficult. He felt that it does not share 'the colour, the excitement, or the vividness of *Double-Wolf*, or even the structural harmony of *After China*.' Part of the reason is 'the considerable inconvenience of Castro's fascination with B.S. Johnson'. As Riemer pointed out, Castro's 'curious collage of references and allusions' to Johnson will be hard for readers to follow, with Johnson's books being out of print.

Some familiarity with B.S. Johnson is required for a full appreciation of *Drift*. In my case, a crash course in between two readings of Castro's novel resolved several puzzles, or at least revealed the inclusion of some curious episodes.

Riemer felt that B.S. Johnson was not a sufficiently interesting person ('when all is said and done, just another experimental writer') to carry Castro's intertextual conceit (as opposed to Freud in *Double-Wolf*).

As a novel, *Drift* may well sag at times under its portmanteau obligations, but if one takes up the challenge of reading out into B.S. Johnson and his ideas, then *Drift* is a wonderful entrée into a world of literary ideas.

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<sup>104</sup> Andrew Riemer, 'Brian's Life of Byron, or Should that Be Bryan?', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July 1994, Spectrum p. 9A

Rosemary Sorensen 'praised' *Drift* in a rather backhanded way, indicating the mixture of responses the book evokes.<sup>105</sup>

Wily and inventive as Brian Castro's new novel is, it is mostly windy air, which not to say that it isn't successful in doing what it sets out to do. Indeed *Drift* seems to be saying that windy air is all there is; how it forms and reforms into clouds of the imagination is what must interest the writer. The reader is, then, offered a ride on a cloud.

The sentences whisk along, buffeting and exhilarating. With one hand to hold down your hat and one to keep the flaps of your jacket wrapped close, the reader's position is precarious. There's not much chance to signal if you need help staying on the Castro cloud. And given the current status of this writer, it will be a brave reader who hold up a hand, finger or fist, to this pushy book. The finger is likely to be pointed right back at you, blaming your lack of sophistication or unwillingness to find density in clouds.

Nevertheless, however much literary fashion may bully me everafter and accuse me of unwarranted scepticism, I must say I find *Drift* stylish, often fun, occasionally surprising—but I think it's puffery.

... In this sort of summary, the 'story' sounds ridiculous, which is as it should be. The story is *about* story, and it should indeed be impossible to paraphrase or summarise it without falling away from the truth. This is familiar Brian Castro territory, and no one does it better.

I have already quoted in the general discussion Katharine England's comments on the novel's cover and Preface. Her review<sup>106</sup> compared Castro's working method with Escher's.

Castro's great strength, like Escher's, lies in his shaping of the shades between the illusory simplicity of black and white.

Dichotomies abound, and it is Castro's delight to explore, exploit, explode their duality, whether they be black/white, male/female, north/south, writer/reader, fact/fiction, truth/lies, life/death or the contradictory/complementary meanings of his one-word title. Castro defines his polarities and then plays in the grey area between them. Very little, in the long run, is as it seems ...

This is a funny, fascinating, fabulous book—a quirky celebration of unsung genius, an earthy intellectual comedy, a swag of vividly picaresque adventures, a tragedy of licence and waste, rape and slaughter, challengingly real. In a dazzling pyrotechnic display of often irreverent erudition Castro has borrowed from everywhere: there is scarcely a phrase which doesn't call up echoes across the novel itself and into literature,

<sup>105</sup> Rosemary Sorensen, 'Story upon a story is mainly sleight of hand', *Sunday Age*, 24 July 1994, Agenda p. 8

<sup>106</sup> Katharine England, 'White drifts towards black and becomes technicolour grey', *Australian Book Review*, No. 162, July 1994, pp. 12-13

history, Christianity, so that a relatively small book explodes into a vast network of shared reference and experience. Much of this reference is necessarily grounded in the English-speaking West, but it may not be far-fetched to suggest that the novel in its entirety (as distinct from its variously entertaining and thought-provoking parts) takes its significance from the East and represents a Zen-like search for enlightenment which attempts to transcend dualism, to step outside of logic and to divorce truth from the words which so equivocally convey it.

Peter Pierce<sup>107</sup> commented on the moral impulse behind *Drift*.

Not for the inattentive, nor the impatient, Castro's *Drift* is the most intellectually demanding of his five novels.

Robert Drewe, among others, has wrestled with the technical problem of how and with what purpose to combine an anatomy of contemporary society with a reconstruction of the terrible first decades of Van Diemen's Land. In his endeavour, Castro has scant satirical purpose—by contrast with Drewe in *The Savage Crows*. Rather he is concerned ('If you get my drift') to pass on 'To what has always mattered' (as the novel's riddling last words have it).

For Castro this means in part an understanding of how lonely and separate are the lives which fiction and history conveniently connect as the mainstay of their narrative processes. He is fascinated by the self-serving formation of life stories and by people's fabrication of their origins. *Drift* can be regarded as a witty, if sombre, admonition of those attempts by so many recent Australian novels to answer the question 'Who am I?' by laboriously exploring a different one, 'Long ago, where did I come from?'. Not roots, but marooning is what interests Castro. Few of our contemporary writers are so idiosyncratically gifted, eclectically educated, so ready to venture a radically different novel every time. His audience, as a result, is always likely to be 'fit though few', but his adherents have reason to anticipate more dark laughter and moral probing in his fiction.

Ken Goodwin, noted that '[m]any reviewers have commented on the cleverness and wit of Castro's writing', but ended his review by concluding:

Delight in the texture of the work is almost inescapable. But there remains the question of whether process is all, or whether there is some tangible and lasting outcome of Castro's fiction-making.<sup>108</sup>

Rob Johnson opened his review<sup>109</sup> by highlighting the role of the reader in a Castro novel. 'Brian Castro is a novelist who writes for literary readers—

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Pierce, 'Marooned and loving it', *The Bulletin*, Vol. 116, No. 5933, 16 August 1994, pp. 104-105

<sup>108</sup> Ken Goodwin, 'Fiction and Life Coalesce', *The Courier-Mail*, 9 July 1994 Weekend p. 6

<sup>109</sup> Rob Johnson, 'Novel Twist from Fiction to Reality', *The Advertiser Magazine*, 27 August 1994, p. 11

meaning those with an active interest in nuances of language, an openness to the unexpected and a capacity to make connections that are not obviously dictated by the story.’ He concluded:

I greatly admired ... *Double-Wolf* (1991) but was less impressed by *After China* (1992). I still wonder about the direction in which he is taking the literary novel. The experimental novelist may end up becoming as locked into his reader’s expectations as the commercial novelist.

What remains impressive is the combination in Castro’s writing of elegance, economy and force.

Helen Elliott<sup>110</sup> praised the novel, but was not wholly convinced.

Brian Castro is an alarmingly gifted writer. He is engaging, fluid, restless, imaginative. His prose races across the pages obsessively, drunkenly in love with its own beauty and power. His novels reach a reader as some gift from outer space.

That said, anyone who wants to read a ‘straight’ novel, a thriller or romance had better not even contemplate picking up the barge pole with which to haul in *Drift*, which is more than adequately served by the Escher drawing on the cover.

As Escher devotees know, there are a thousand things to be found in one small drawing, and a thousand things to be interpreted in one small detail. It all depends on the line of vision, the squint of the eye, the training of the mind.

*Drift* is a myriad of fact, fiction, suggestion, interpretation, jokes and history as it plunges into a chaotic search for a few ‘truths’.

... *Drift* is a series of clues, mainly literary and historical, that will enable a reader to devise and create a suitable truth, or story.

Elliott also pointed out the ‘elitism’ of the novel.

There is certainly a joke in the title of *Drift*—who catches the drift of this text? Is there anything more to catch than a ‘drift’, an approach to anything?

My real reservation with such an exhibitionist text is that Castro is writing for an extremely elite audience. He assumes immense sophistication of language and thought and at the very least an undergraduate degree in English literature.

There is desire, exhilaration and wonder in *Drift*, much intellectual nourishment, but who, ultimately, will find the emotional nourishment in it that great literature always so generously offers?

*Drift* is certainly a brilliant, even a shameless display of literary style, but—like a handsome man without a heart—ultimately devastatingly unrewarding.

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<sup>110</sup> Helen Elliott, ‘Brilliant Display of Style’, *The Canberra Times*, 9 July 1994, p. C11

A year after the publication of *Drift* Katrina Iffland interviewed Castro.<sup>111</sup> (I have quoted from this review in the body of this Chapter.) Castro had just returned from a year as writer-in-residence at Hong Kong University, and was working on *Stepper*.

'To me [Johnson] had left a gap in his text and I thought the hole had to be filled ... I thought this [Tasmania] would have been a great place for Johnson to visit.'

*Drift* was the most difficult book Castro has written. Not because, he says, it took two-and-a-half years to complete ... It was because Castro became possessed by Johnson, and in that sense, absorbed many of the dead scribe's predispositions.

... 'Johnson went out on a limb in a rather puritanical way, saying that you can only write what is the truth; that there is no such thing as fiction in the sense that everything you write obviously comes from some sort of personal experience.

Likewise, Castro set out to write 'only the truth'.

In doing so he set himself an unobtainable, if honourable, goal. He wanted to write perfectly. He wanted the book to shine. It was taxing. It nearly killed him, but he believes it's his best writing to date.

He adds, though, that he 'would never hope to put the gun to his head like that again'.

'I get into a trance,' he muses. 'I live my characters: in this book more so than any other. I mean you take *Double-Wolf* or *Pomeroy*, they have a slightly cynical voice to them, but not this book.

'... At one stage I thought that if I could not write this book truthfully, then I did not want to live any more. It's the first time I didn't want to intellectualise ... I just wanted the voice to take me, take me into the islands, the past, inside B.S. Johnson's life.

'I didn't have control ...'

To counter increasing depression and uncertainty over the novel ... Castro said that eventually he had to abandon the idea of the reader entirely.

'I had to say to myself, I don't care if this book is going to be read. I don't care if it's not going to be published ... I'm going to be totally and utterly honest about my writing ...'

Iffland also pointed out another salient point of identification between Castro and Johnson.

One suspects another reason Castro was drawn to Johnson was because the British writer was largely snubbed by the general public and denounced by the critics despite having been regaled as brilliant by the likes of Samuel Beckett and Auberon Waugh.

Similarly, Castro feels many critics have misunderstood his writings, and that the public are no longer interested in the beauty of words, but are more concerned with marketability and image.

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<sup>111</sup> Katrina Iffland, 'Castro's Call for Cultural Revolution', *The Canberra Times*, 1995, 12 August p. C13



... 'What is the state of this country's cultural imagination? I feel let down by it. I think it's time for a bit of a revolution culture-wise.'

Sally Clarke began her review<sup>112</sup> by recounting Castro's story about someone buying B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* and throwing away the pages because they only wanted the box.

Whether or not that is the way it happened, the image of an unbound book, with someone other than the author deciding how to order the pages, is a good starting place for an understanding of B.S. Johnson and of Castro's *Drift*.

She also drew attention to the novel being *about* writing.

Castro concurs with Johnson's belief that the writing of the novel itself must be one element of the story ...

Castro is fascinated with what may have gone on in the real Johnson's mind prior to his suicide ... As the story progresses, every encounter presents a situation that may drive the sensitive, obsessed Byron Shelley to consider taking his own life.

In the end, the division between the three authors, the real and fictional Johnsons and Brian Castro, remains undefined. A final quotation ... may well apply to all three ...

Michael McGirr<sup>113</sup> (who also repeated the story about *The Unfortunates*) commented on the 'silence' of *Drift*.

The core of *Drift* is its quest for a way of speaking the unspeakable ... [*Drift*] treads ... some of the same ground as Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* ... But Clarke turns this [convict] nightmare into melodrama ... Clarke shares with his time a belief that, whatever experiences may befall, words will be found. Castro undermines this belief. He reduces his characters to silence. He believes in their capacity to remember the past and live their own lives beyond easy words.

McGirr comments on Tom McGann showing tourists expecting a 'convict experience' that 'there's absolutely nothing here'. He wants them to stumble upon loss.

David Coad provided his usual haughty dismissal of Postmodernism.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Sally Clarke, 'Drift', *Redoubt*, Vol. 22, June 1996, pp. 137-139

<sup>113</sup> Michael McGirr, 'Three's Company', *Eureka Street*, Vol. 4, No. 8, October 1994, pp. 41-42

<sup>114</sup> David Coad, Untitled review, *World Literature Today*, Vol. 69, No. 3, 1995, p. 641-642

For some time Brian Castro has been cashing in on a fad, bent on experiment, trying to come up with a new and exciting postmodern product, the menu of which is part or most of the following: put in as many chopped-up, amputated, agrammatical 'sentences' as possible; lightly blur fiction and history ... do not use punctuation for speech; switch constantly from first- to third-person narration; avoid a narration wholly in the past tense (the present is to be preferred); avoid any logical plot line. Finally, add a pinch of Kafka and as much self-reflexivity as is easily available.

Castro's fifth novel, *Drift*, follows the postmodern recipe religiously. A more apt title would have been *Split*, given the split diegesis and double narrative ... the plot of which is impossible to summarise.

One wonders what interest there could be in *Drift* for the 'general reader' not prepared by a baggage of poststructuralist theory.

This of course does not give a sympathetic reading of the novel, but there were readers prepared to grapple with Castro's difficult but compelling work.

Matthew Condon spent some effort coming to grips with *Drift*,<sup>115</sup> and likened a new Castro novel to a gift to be treated with caution.

... a delicious sort of caution that you would reserve, say, for a gift from a magician. You see the alluring wrapping, but you know that when it's opened the fun and games begin—boxes within boxes within boxes, illusions, the glittering dust of the conjurer.

He then 'unwrapped' *Drift*: first, the cover with its Escher print; then the dust jacket, which gives the information that Byron Shelley Johnson 'disappeared, presumed drowned' on 13 November 1993;<sup>116</sup> then the Preface; and finally the three parts of the novel. As Condon suggests, 'Already, in the space of eight pages, Castro has set the stage for his magic show. For the next 266 pages he pulls a veritable hutch of rabbits from his hat.'

Condon acknowledged the debt of inspiration that *Drift* owes to Bryan Johnson in terms of experimental technique.

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<sup>115</sup> Matthew Condon, 'Set Adrift in the Life of Bryan', *The Weekend Australian*, 16-17 July 1994, Weekend p. 6

<sup>116</sup> The novel itself does not give a date for Byron's disappearance, only Emma's, which is the same, 13 November 1993. This *implies* that the two vanish together. The date is the twentieth anniversary of Bryan Johnson's suicide in Islington. I have been unable to confirm Condon's dust jacket claim: the information is not included in the paperback editions, and the only library copy of the hardback I have been able to locate did not have its dust jacket.

[Byron] Johnson's playful, witty, often bitter voice is juxtaposed with haunting descriptions of life at sea, killing whales, mutiny, rape and death ... The effect, as the past washes into the present and back again, is dreamlike. The narrative viewpoints shift. The voices change. There are lists and log extracts, meditations and interior monologues. It is a pastiche that the real Johnson would have been pleased with, reflecting how, as he insisted, the mind, and life itself, worked.

Castro, on the strength of *Drift*, has to be classed as one of our most interesting stylists. This is a novel of daring, of enormous originality of ideas, of our history seen through a kaleidoscopic imagination dizzying in its range. It is a demanding story, but at the same time tense with surprise.

Johnson, too, has probably earned the obituary he deserved ...

This review not only brought out the pleasures to be found amongst Castro's complexities, but made the association with one of Castro's underlying concerns, to pay some belated tribute to the confronting genius of Bryan Johnson.

Finally, it is always pleasing to find someone who was in sympathy with the work that the artist assayed. John Hanrahan was obviously alive to the 'local pleasures' of reading Castro's novel, and while he has gone some way to interpreting the purposes of the novel, it is also apparent that he was also able to sit back and read the novel *with enjoyment*. He wrote his eulogistic review<sup>117</sup> in the form of a letter.

I congratulate you, Brian, on a book that is multifaceted, many-voiced, many peopled. You have created people who matter and written scenes that disturb the anatomy, making the heart scramble for safety or the belly rumble with laughter.

I finished reading *Drift* on Bloomsday. I think Joyce would have approved of this novel ... one of the preoccupations of the novel is the absurdity of pre-fab literary fame and the struggle a writer has between trying to imply meaning and choosing silence. I am glad you have not opted for silence for you are one of those rare writers to whom words do matter ...

All art disappoints, but good art disappoints pointedly. And here you have done yourself proud.

Your narrative folding in on itself and then blossoming out, your language, rich, witty, with a controlled turbulence, that throws up sprays of translucent surprise, these combine to make an important novel ...

Congratulations, Brian Castro. You are too intelligent a writer to be merely clever. You walk a fine line, and too many compliments from ageing hacks like me could push you over the line. But then that is partly what *Drift* is powerfully about.

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<sup>117</sup> John Hanrahan, 'Enjoying the View', *The Age Saturday Extra*, 20 August 1994, p. 8

This review would serve as a good summary of the spirit of Castro's novels. They are alive with ideas and intelligence, but too sophisticated to opt for facile pronouncements.

## Chapter 10

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### *Stepper:* Identity—‘The Double-Jeopardy of Biographical Lies and Fictional Truths’

I spy you ... That means I see you ... <sup>1</sup>

So what is it to Stepper if I rewrite his texts? Collaborate with them ... to send multiple transmissions ... open the double-jeopardy of biographical lies and fictional truths?<sup>2</sup>

Castro’s sixth novel *Stepper* is an inquiry into spying as a way of seeing, and thus composing, the world. It is predicated on dichotomy: whose side is the spy on? what is true and what false? does love have a place in such a world of duplicity? As we have come to expect from Castro, there are no straightforward answers to these questions; how you look at things will determine what sort of conclusions you reach. The simplicity of binaries—good/bad, East/West, honourable/dishonourable—is also shown to be inadequate, and we are obliged to work in the grey areas and spaces between the categories we seek to apply to the world. Once again we are in the world of Escher, looking first from one viewpoint, then switching to the other side to see everything mirrored and prismatically split. As well as investigating the spy world of pre-War Tokyo, Castro poses another question: how do we record the history of these people and events in a way that is stable? Writing, once again, proves inadequate and duplicitous, as subjective as the shifting persona of the writer.

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<sup>1</sup> *Stepper*, p. 181

*Stepper* is an ambiguous and poetic novel, in which Castro often describes the action metaphorically and incompletely. Typically for Castro, this action takes place in the minds of the protagonists. The structure of the novel is non-linear: the main narrator is speaking about events that happened fifty years ago, and he occasionally shifts between eras to tell part of the story. Castro's justification for this methodology (aside from its being his preferred mode) is that the narrative is a spy story, in which the reader is a 'player', with no privileged access to the events of the narrative, such as might be provided by an omniscient narrator. Readers must work out for themselves what is happening in this convoluted game of deception, dissembling and doubleness. Therefore it is not surprising that the reader will feel as if he/she is stumbling around in dark labyrinthine alleys, scared of missing a vital ('fatal') clue. We may assume that the real world of spying works something like this, where the participants never know the 'full' story or the 'true' story, as they do not have access to an overview or master viewpoint from which to judge, and where missing or misinterpreting a clue may be a matter of life or death.

As with his other novels, Castro has based *Stepper* on a real story, that of Richard Sorge, Russian master spy. However, the reader of *Stepper* is unlikely to be aware of this parallel story, and it is not essential to an enjoyment of the novel. The fact that the word *Sorge* is not revealed as a critical clue to understanding the novel's themes until very late in the novel means that it becomes a *retrospective* key (as is the case with others of Castro's novels, such as *After China* where the key to the Writer's history is withheld till late in the novel). For this reason I will initially limit references to the Richard Sorge story and treat the novel as the first-time reader would interpret it. Later in this chapter I will discuss the added significance the Sorge story brings to *Stepper*.

The story of how Castro became interested in the subject of his novel is as romantic as the novel itself. Castro relates that at some stage (presumably in the early 1990s)

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<sup>2</sup> *Stepper*, p. 281

I had a character in search of a novel. He was a hard drinker and a risk-taker. His life was going to pieces, but he had this great ambition. I didn't know what this was, so as usual, I'd ask another character. Bounce off that one. But this time I was stuck. No one came forward. I stirred my drink, wrote another book and waited a couple of years.<sup>3</sup>

Some time later Castro was discussing with Jim Sharman<sup>4</sup> the possibility of writing a screenplay of one of his novels.

Then one day ... he mentioned in passing that when he was directing the musical *Hair* in Tokyo in the early seventies ... After one of the performances a beautiful Japanese woman, who must have been in her early sixties, approached and confided to the director that she was once the lover of a Soviet spy. Sharman suggested that I should make something of this story. Could I be trusted with it?<sup>5</sup>

Realising that the story had potential, Castro and Sharman set about tracking down the woman in Tokyo in 1994, to no avail. However, Castro was fascinated by these mysterious events, and found himself 'looking for models' to flesh out the story of spy-lover, and, in the process, himself 'spying'.

Graham Greene once said that writing novels was like espionage—violations of faith and trust. Spying was a familiar sensation. As a writer, one is a voyeur, an eavesdropper or gloriously, both. But while writing aims to sustain that imagined split between public and private, its very practice publicizes the private. So to be a writer was simultaneously to conceal and reveal; to deny and to confess.<sup>6</sup>

All this set Castro to thinking about the connections between spying and writing, and the nature of spying itself. Voyeurism and custodianship of another's story are familiar concerns of Castro's novels. Seamus is a custodian of Shan's life-story in *Birds of Passage*, Catacomb a custodian of Wespe's and Freud's in *Double-Wolf*. Castro's characters often voyeuristically observe others, and 'expose' them, as Pomeroy does Stella Wang and the Van Ecks.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Brian Castro discusses *Stepper*' *Australian Humanities Review*, [www.australis.org/castro/s.extract.html](http://www.australis.org/castro/s.extract.html). This story has resonances with Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*.

<sup>4</sup> The Australian theatre director, to whom the novel is co-dedicated.

<sup>5</sup> 'Brian Castro discusses *Stepper*' *Australian Humanities Review*. Castro's 'Could I be trusted with it?' is one of the concerns of *Stepper*, the custodianship of Stepper's story/history which Isaku undertakes.

While Castro was researching *Stepper* he was emulating the role of a spy, living in cheap hotels in a foreign environment.

Japan became familiar and then at the same time, even stranger.<sup>7</sup> Anyone existing between several cultures was always a spy, a migrant in a space which could not exist, except as memory and as fiction. I was interested in the migrant-as-spy, in how this position simultaneously privileged the seer while it dispensed an indescribable loss. I was interested in characters who dissimulated their identity when faced with the impositions of loyalty and the crude practices of politics and nationalism. This counterfeit was a form of spying. It supplied and elicited information through complicity and collaboration, but its role is never entirely believable. The clearest path to living authentically then, as a double-agent between cultures, was to extinguish all love of place.

The writer's role has always been to question, ironize, demythologize these issues. I wanted to place this notion of writing as dissimulation and authenticity alongside questions of patriotism, questions about the individual in relation to culture, questions of the public and the private. To write creatively you have to be convincing about an elaborate fantasy. I saw the parallels. I became obsessed with the life of a spy who had to be convincing about what was basically a lie; a Method actor shedding real tears for an imagined role. One who crossed the borders between emotional states, between cultures, between the mundane and the uncanny.<sup>8</sup>

Thus on the surface level *Stepper* deals with the unreal world of the spy, who inhabits the interstices between competing 'truths', and only loosely occupies his/her mutable 'identity/ies'; at the same time this world provides an allegory for the writer, who inhabits a similarly interstitial world between the 'truths' of factual reality and the pseudo-truths of fiction. At a more abstract level, the novel questions ideas of place and belonging (especially nationality and allegiance), and the dilemmas of combining public and private existence.

### Structure

*Stepper* is, like all Castro's novels, non-linear. Although virtually all of the action takes place in the past, in Europe and Japan from around 1914 to

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<sup>6</sup> 'Brian Castro discusses *Stepper*' *Australian Humanities Review*

<sup>7</sup> The familiar Castro paradox of strangeness in familiarity, the uncanny.



1944, the story is being recollected by a present-day narrator, Isaku Ishigo,<sup>9</sup> who was involved in the events that he is recalling in 1994. However Isaku's recollections extend well past events in which he was directly involved. Isaku's recollections are an attempt to allay ghosts from the past and to atone for his failure as a person, and particularly as one who is of honourable Japanese descent.

As with all Castro's writing, it is important to understand the 'voices' in *Stepper* in order to navigate through the novel. Typically for Castro, the novel opens without any explanation *in media res*. Victor Stepper is on a ship sailing towards Tokyo, in 1933, making love to a woman with one leg shorter than the other. The narration appears to be in Stepper's voice, talking to himself in the second person. 'You've got one shot. Now make it count, Victor.'<sup>10</sup> Stepper introduces the theme of the novel—the existential uncertainty of the spy—and some of the symbols that will permeate the novel—yellow chrysanthemums (which also featured in the Flower Boat story within *After China*), and the great Tokyo earthquake of 1923.<sup>11</sup> The narrative is very tangled and it is not easy to distinguish the voices speaking, or the events. The fact that Castro eschews quotation marks for direct speech also serves to destabilise the reader. It is often hard to distinguish between reported speech, internal thoughts, and narrative comment on the proceedings. At times, lines work on several of these levels, in the complex Bakhtinian dialogic sense.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Brian Castro discusses *Stepper*' *Australian Humanities Review*

<sup>9</sup> In the Japanese convention, family name precedes given name.

<sup>10</sup> *Stepper*, p. 1. The use of the second person *should* indicate to us that this is Isaku speaking for Stepper, even though he has not yet appeared in the novel. But the tone does not sound right; it *sounds* like Stepper talking to himself. (In fact, Castro often uses the second person when talking about himself in everyday speech and essays. Rather than saying 'One does such-and-such ...' he tends to say 'You do such-and-such ...'. It may be that he carries over speech idiosyncrasies into this writing. See for example, his interview with Ramona Koval cited later in this chapter.)

<sup>11</sup> The purpose of the chrysanthemums is not explained directly. (They are/were symbols of imperial Japan.) The Sorge story does here provide extramural explanation: we may assume that Stepper arrives in Japan (Yokohama) on the same day as Richard Sorge did (6 September 1933), only days after the tenth anniversary of the Great Earthquake of 1923. The chrysanthemums are presumably part of remembrance ceremonies. This also explains Castro's references to death, fire and geishas, which are

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When Stepper reports his conversation with the woman, the lines seem rather implausibly philosophical (a regular feature for Castro's characters), and are laced with ambivalence and suggestiveness.

The deception of letting her take control. She had that disability.  
 Can I touch you?  
 Yes.  
 How does it feel ... to be a man ... who's leaving everything behind,  
 not having a past?  
 I have ... this moment.  
 No.<sup>12</sup>

The first line quoted is Stepper's comment, with the quizzical remark about her 'disability'; she is disabled, but is she also 'disabling' him by taking control?<sup>13</sup> It would seem plausible to attribute the first line of direct speech ('Can I touch you?') to Stepper, but it is in fact the woman's. Her next line is rather implausible as a remark during foreplay, but it is appropriate to Stepper's internal state. His lie that he has the present in which to live is rejected by the woman.

What Stepper 'reports' is his philosophical reconstruction of the events, rather than a 'straight' retelling of the conversation. This pattern will remain through the novel; Victor Stepper recalls, in Isaku's imagination, what he was thinking and feeling at the time, as he listens to 'the rhythm of the whole universal farce'.<sup>14</sup>

This prologue sets the tone of the novel. The novel is then divided into three parts—'Dissidence', 'Collaboration', 'Solitude'—which correspond with 'eras' in Stepper's life as a spy. The fact that Castro divides his novel up into parts, with a prologue and an 'Acknowledgements' section at the

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recurring symbols throughout the novel but rarely have obvious contextual significance. The earthquake is a symbol of upheaval in twentieth-century Japan.

<sup>12</sup> *Stepper*, p. 2

<sup>13</sup> Her disability ('one leg shorter than the other') is a Castro red herring (as is her name, Anneliese Gott!). There is no obvious reason for her to be disabled, but it adds to the sexual frisson (taking advantage of someone disabled), and it symbolically suggests damaged characters. It is in fact Stepper who has been wounded, seriously and in both legs, during World War 1. (Richard Sorge had similarly been seriously wounded, and walked with a limp and pain for the rest of his life. (See Prange's *Target Tokyo*))

<sup>14</sup> *Stepper*, p. 3

end, and provides a contents page, adds to the sense that this novel is crossing genres and paralleling a 'real history'.

'Part 1: Dissidence' introduces Isaku as a character and the narrator of this story. Isaku has returned to Japan having lived in Australia for many years. (He remembers the breakout at Cowra during the Second World War.) Now seventy-five, he has returned to face something in his past. He is a tortured soul, at odds with his traditional background. Isaku speaks of needing to find a 'rare woman who is capable of saving me', and it seems that if she cannot be found he is prepared to die: he 'lay[s] out [his] plans for dying' and has his father's ritual sword with him. As a means of disburdening himself, he offers to 'open this file which has been so assiduously preserved' and tell the story of Stepper. He only hints at the reason for his unease. Although he uses the emotive word 'betrayed'—'I betrayed them, you see. Betrayed their trust'—he does not explain whether he has physically betrayed his own spy ring, or emotionally betrayed his Japanese birthright by becoming 'a Westerner before the term was fashionable'.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the course of the novel much of Isaku's problem will become clear, but, like Stepper, everything will remain slightly ambiguous, and the reader will never be absolutely sure of what is 'real' and what is imaginatively experienced at an emotional level.

Isaku also introduces the theme of writing early in the novel. He is equivocal about writing, but Stepper is a master: '... but he, oh, *he* loved to write. Lived for it and knew he was living dangerously.'<sup>16</sup> Writing will continue as a metaphor throughout the novel. It is linked with the notions of recording things that have happened, often in code, of making stories out of what is going on around (summarising, ordering, contextualising, narrativising), and of the danger of committing oneself to paper, where others may discover the hidden self. Isaku possesses Stepper's 'memoirs or

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<sup>15</sup> *Stepper*, p. 9

<sup>16</sup> *Stepper*, p. 9

confession', but otherwise must rely on his own confused memories.<sup>17</sup> Stepper, however, is an excellent journalist (it is how he makes his public living), able to interpret world events and set them down in persuasive prose, and able to encode and decipher messages. Stepper is, at least initially, sure of his interpretations of the world (his 'stories'), but Isaku is never comfortable with his own attempts to interpret life.

Part 1 relates Stepper's background up to the time he meets Murasaki Reiko. He begins the novel as a German war hero from a mixed racial background (German father/Russian mother). He finds his loyalties split by the irony of the situation: 'already this schism of fighting his mother's people in his father's army'.<sup>18</sup> After the War Stepper is converted to Communism and becomes a spy for Russia. He eventually finds himself in Japan, now, ironically, working *for* the Russians *against* the Germans, who are building up towards World War 2 and deciding whether to side with the expansionary Japanese. As a member of Stepper's spy ring, Isaku is close to Stepper, although he proves to be at times a bumbling spy.

Part 1 contains most of the 'action' of the novel, and establishes the characters. Stepper is painted as a dashing but heartless man, prepared to sacrifice anyone to maintain his position as a master spy. He only changes when, against his inclination, he falls in love with the beautiful Japanese woman, Reiko.

Isaku is an insecure character, who has been unable to follow in his father's culturally traditional and publicly admired footsteps. (His father and mother ritually suicide on hearing of the death of the Emperor.<sup>19</sup>) He is an artist, at times effete and at times iron-hard and passionless, and a cross-

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<sup>17</sup> 'I wrote some notes. These are but pasty words, a crumbling vellum, degenerating cerebellum. I'd made a practice of never writing.' *Stepper*, p. 9. Isaku had been given the document by Shimamura when the Americans invaded (p. 305).

<sup>18</sup> *Stepper*, p. 11

<sup>19</sup> '[H]is father, Prince Isaku, Admiral and victor over the Russians at Tsushima, committed *seppuku* [*harakiri*] upon the death of the Meiji Emperor. His wife followed half an hour later ...' *Stepper*, p. 16. This is modelled on a real event. When the Meiji Emperor died in July, 1912, General Nogi and his wife famously committed suicide.

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dresser with homosexual tendencies (these are never elaborated). He is, in short, 'Westernised', preferring the 'corrupt' values of the modern West to the traditional Japanese.

'Part 2: Collaboration' describes Stepper's vacillation as he falters in his resolve to remain singular, dissident and heartless. By beginning to care for someone, he begins to 'collaborate'. His iconoclastic position as spy is compromised. 'Collaborate' has, of course, both positive and pejorative connotations.

'Part 3: Solitude' provides a very brief denouement as the spy ring crumbles and Stepper moves towards his eventual execution. Isaku appears to drown in the Sumida River at the very end of the novel.

### **Spying as metaphor**

The architectonic metaphor that propels *Stepper* is spying. As already suggested, Castro sees the term as a metaphor for writing, and he probes the effects of spying on the existential make-up of his eponymous character. When Caroline Baum asked Castro about the connection, he replied:

I think because writing is spying, to a certain degree. I think being a writer is not being a talker. I think a writer is someone who is observing, who is listening and you are constantly putting these things down for a kind of manipulation of a new world that you might want to create within yourself. So I see a lot of similarities between spying and writing.<sup>20</sup>

An author 'spies' on the world around him/her, and gathers information that is worked into a story. As Castro sees things the author has an ambivalent role in this process; at times he will use information that has come from his friends and acquaintances, perhaps 'betraying' their ingenuous trust in him, and at times he will 'covertly spy' on people in his

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Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City: Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake*, Allen Lane, 1983, p. 255

<sup>20</sup> Caroline Baum interviews Brian Castro, *Between the Lines*, ABC TV, 4 June 1997. See Appendix 7.

surroundings, listening to conversations, watching behaviour, imputing motives.

This information then becomes a story, in which the author controls the master narrative; only he determines how his information will be presented (though not necessarily how it is read/decoded). The author 'codes' his information into a system of symbols, not just the words he chooses but the tone and register of the prose, the amount of 'poetry' or connotative information that the work is imbued with. The final 'message' will invariably contain traces of the author, a characteristic signature.

This is Castro's fascination with spying as an equivalent of writing. But he is also fascinated by the psychology of the spy, who must deny his inner being, by concealing it and by adopting false personas.

To understand the psychology of the double-agent, the one who pushes the ineffability of language to the extent that it cannot be owned, way beyond reasonable limits, one must understand the psychology of spying. Because a spy cannot reveal himself or herself, the consciousness and understanding of a hidden *Being* is vital. After all, revelation usually means death. It is not an understanding of who one is, or where one comes from, but how one cares for the self. As a purveyor of inauthenticity, such a measure of authentic being is one of the serious projects of the spy as well as of the postmodernist. For a real dilemma exists between rhetoric and consequence and as such it must remain, if novelty and parody are not to exhaust this era.<sup>21</sup>

I will return to the examination of 'care of the self' in more detail in the discussion of Richard Sorge, below.

Castro is also interested in the world of the spy, which is linked inextricably with the always-imminent possibility of death, and that other primal drive, sex. The spy not only (traditionally) relies on sex as a means of gaining information (and an escape from pent up stress), but sex acts as a metaphor or analogue of the processes of spying, in terms of desire, voyeurism and seduction—obtaining the forbidden. Sex here is ritual playing at spying.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Just Flirting' *Australian Book Review*, No.171, June 1995, pp. 39-40

Brian Castro has managed to infuse all these elements into the character and world of Victor Stepper. Stepper is a homeless person, who abandons his (paternal) Germany for his (maternal) Russia, not out of love for nation, but from ideological need. Having been through the horrors of World War 1, he is converted to Communism as a way of bringing enlightenment to the world.

Stepper proves adept at his chosen vocation, to which he is suited by his statelessness and his multilingualism.<sup>22</sup> After a boring marriage to Katya Rushkov, he abandons the possibility of close human attachment. Without attachments, he becomes a detached ideologue, sustained only by his own ability in his job.

*The work. Only the work is important. Everything depends on the whole; the organic pleasure. World Communism.*<sup>23</sup>

Stepper's exploits are characterised by both his competence and his callousness. As he moves from assignment to assignment he uses anyone who suits his purposes. Women, especially, fall prey to his sexual charms, are used, and abandoned without compunction. He abandons, among others, his wife (even though she bears him a child after they have separated), her sister Christa who suicides, Celia Ramsay, Anneliese Gott, Fatiminha da Costa, Clara Biedermann, and Silke von Strohm (whom he has bigamously married). His male friendships, despite a tone of bonhomie, tend towards the functional.

The portrait painted is of the dashing spy, charming but callous. But as Castro probes his character's psyche, we see a man who is not fulfilled. He suffers from existential emptiness. In a symbolic move, the Comintern at one point has Stepper's Berlin police files erased. With this act, 'He has become a man of the moment. Without a past, without a future.'<sup>24</sup> He

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<sup>22</sup> Stepper is said to have 'lingual facility', with obvious sexual innuendo.

<sup>23</sup> *Stepper*, p. 107

<sup>24</sup> *Stepper*, p. 33

becomes ontologically stateless, mobile, but '*Keine Heimat*',<sup>25</sup> 'without a home'.

He was the most brilliant of his generation of journalists, walking the line between derision and divination. But he had not thought it would have been this hard, feeling this loneliness deep in the flush of those vaporous evenings, alcoholic sunsets, backslapping and the choir of false adulation, feeling this emptiness of deception and self-deception.<sup>26</sup>

At times he feels an irrational urge to break out:

Betrayal is always stepping out from the ranks of boredom, he told someone at a party ... Discipline and routine made him invisible. But there was always the overreaching which importuned him to break cover. Not carelessness, but intention.<sup>27</sup>

There is also a self-destructive element to Stepper's psychology.

... there are moments when I can think of nothing else but doing some damage to myself ... Because, he said, I am driven.<sup>28</sup>

When Stepper is given a chance to see Katya and his child he rejects it.

I have my work and that is all.

Once upon a time she ... shielded him from inquiry; cooked his meals; protected their privacy; managed their budget; bought him presents; consoled him; debated with him; forged the future together; waited all night for him to return. He had his work and that was all.

No! ... Everyone is responsible for himself. Nobody is answerable to conscience.<sup>29</sup>

But after being involved in so many conquests and witnessing so much damage, Stepper begins to have the merest inklings of doubt. This is first suggested through the story of Celia Ramsay, a fated individual from the beginning. When they meet in Shanghai Stepper passes her over for Silke von Strohm. She mentions that she is getting old, and makes a cryptic remark about people waltzing in the Shanghai Club: 'a silent waltz is my shorthand for suicide. Everyone's doing it.'<sup>30</sup> Celia later goes to stay with Reiko, after which she intends to 'take ship from Nagasaki, home to New

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<sup>25</sup> *Stepper*, p. 101

<sup>26</sup> *Stepper*, p. 73

<sup>27</sup> *Stepper*, p. 72

<sup>28</sup> *Stepper*, p. 127

<sup>29</sup> *Stepper*, p. 123

<sup>30</sup> *Stepper*, p. 29



York'.<sup>31</sup> Celia explains to Stepper that her life has been unhappy, and gives him a glass marble as a 'jewel', in what appears to be a parting gift.<sup>32</sup> Celia is shot by Stepper's co-spy Toso because, according to him, she has betrayed Stepper to Berlin and dumped Isaku's radio transmitter in the sea. It takes Stepper a long time to retrospectively piece together what in fact happened. Celia does not 'betray' Stepper but saves him from walking into a trap.

Now he realised why Celia Ramsay had prevented him from going to Berlin. But why had she saved him if she wanted to scuttle their transmissions? ... There was a piece missing. Maybe Toso had made a terrible mistake. He pushed aside the article he was writing, put his face in his hands.<sup>33</sup>

This is as close as Stepper comes to feeling regret or responsibility. Much later in the novel he comes across the 'missing piece': Reiko innocently tells him that it was *she* who dumped the transmitter in the sea.

Stepper is, according to the other characters, a complex person. Not long before his arrest, Isaku, the controller of Stepper's story, sums him up as

a man in bits and pieces. What do I mean? A mass of anxieties. One minute he was this, another minute something else. Unlocalised ... He was difficult to understand, like pieces of a jigsaw you could never put together because some bits were always missing. We were the bits.<sup>34</sup>

This view is both perceptive and poignant: Stepper is viewed as the head or father-figure of the spy ring, requiring the others to complete him.

Much of the time the other participants want Stepper to slip up. Even his accomplice Hausen watches him with *Schadenfreude*:

A highly dangerous task. Hausen couldn't help rubbing his hands with a kind of joy. Let's see how the maestro handles this one, he said to himself ...

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<sup>31</sup> *Stepper*, p. 75

<sup>32</sup> In fact Reiko later determines that it is a poison vial filled with cyanide, the spy's ultimate escape measure.

<sup>33</sup> *Stepper*, p. 105

<sup>34</sup> *Stepper*, p. 248

Oh yes, they all had it in for Stepper. They simply overlooked the fact that he was holding it all together and that if he let go for one moment they were all lost.<sup>35</sup>

Stepper feels the weight of these expectations. He wins praise from Moscow for his efforts in copying the Trial Treaty in the German Embassy (though ironically we learn towards the end of the novel that the Japanese Tokkō (secret service) has intercepted the information), but immediately instructions for a new assignment arrive. 'They never let up, Stepper exclaimed. Wasn't what I've done enough for a while?'<sup>36</sup> As this pressure begins to wear him down, he unexpectedly finds support and comfort from Reiko; he has never before allowed himself to rely on others.

[He t]hinks only of his work now, the sharpness he would need for it. Felt for the first time the dreadful importance weigh down upon him ... some grand notion of history ... the direction of Soviet foreign policy resting on his shoulders ... Felt for the first time the woman next to him was no longer a stranger, was part of him, so how could he possibly work indifferently again?<sup>37</sup>

As the novel moves into Part 2 Stepper begins to change from his mode of 'dissidence' (standing apart) to one of 'collaboration' (loving Reiko). He begins to realise that 'He has failed ... Russia will continue to look to her eastern borders and he will never convince Stalin that the Germans are the real danger', and 'for the first time ever he [feels] heartsick'.<sup>38</sup>

But Stepper does not dramatically alter, and continues to prevaricate with respect to Reiko. His self-destructive tendencies are demonstrated when he crashes his motorbike: although it is unintentional, he seems driven by subconscious reckless impulses. Castro writes this section of the novel in a metaphysical style, suggesting Stepper's internal desire for breaking free.

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<sup>35</sup> *Stepper*, p. 121

<sup>36</sup> *Stepper*, p. 132

<sup>37</sup> *Stepper*, p. 139

<sup>38</sup> *Stepper*, p. 164

Trying to rev out of the dream, as if he could outpace tomorrow and all the yesterdays that have constricted his heart ... looks at his speedometer and throttles up, triumphantly released from the future ...<sup>39</sup>

As a consequence of his injuries, he receives a 'new face', symbolically suggesting the possibility of a new start, but this is not to be. 'Something inside of him [is] destroyed forever.'<sup>40</sup> As Stepper looks towards a relationship with Reiko in which they can both be a 'Japanese sandman' to each other—'Trading new days for old' and renewing each other<sup>41</sup>—yet he cannot settle. He burns her notes to him, which seems callous, even if we accept the argument that he is just being careful. (It doesn't work; Shimamura will find a note on which Reiko has written the incriminating words 'I know you are a spy'<sup>42</sup>). Shortly afterwards Stepper attempts suicide.

Although by the time of his arrest Stepper is more-or-less a worn out spy, capture releases him from his burdens and allows him to regain his composure and sureness. By the time of his execution he has won the admiration of his captors, and he goes to his death firmly convinced of the

<sup>39</sup> *Stepper*, p. 166. This brings to mind Pomeroy's death scene: floating back, 'into' the future.

<sup>40</sup> *Stepper*, p. 175. The real life Richard Sorge experienced a similar accident. A history of the Sorge case suggests that the changes were both physical and emotional. 'After cosmetic surgery, Sorge's features took on a fiercer, almost demoniac appearance. Still more alarming, some friends would later notice symptoms of an emotional imbalance and severe psychological disturbances. They decided these could only be attributable to ... that dreadful motorcycle crash.' Robert Whyman, *Stalin's Spy: Richard Sorge and the Tokyo Espionage Ring*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London, 1996.

<sup>41</sup> *Stepper*, p. 178. The words of two stanzas of this song of yearning for renewal are given on pages 178 and 308:

Here's the Japanese sandman  
Trade him silver for gold  
Just an old secondhand man  
Trading new days for old.

Here's the Japanese sandman  
Sneaking on with the dew  
Just an old secondhand man  
He'll buy your old day for new.

<sup>42</sup> *Stepper*, p. 203. Reiko has been learning English (from a Portuguese priest named Guittierrez, recalling Guittierrez in *Pomeroy*), and comes across 'spy' as a word for 'see'. She innocently brings it up in conversation (p. 181). (This is based on a true incident in the Sorge story.) Later she guesses Stepper's vocation and uses the word teasingly.

rightness of his actions. As the noose is fitted over his head, he calmly sings the 'Internationale' and finds repose.<sup>43</sup>

### Isaku

While Victor Stepper is the focus of the novel, the point of view is Isaku Ishigo's, Stepper's double in the novel and Castroian doppelgänger. Isaku is an intentionally problematic character in terms of our reading of the novel. *Stepper* would be just a complicated-plot spy thriller like many others in the genre if it were not for Isaku's further complicating the story by being an unreliable narrator, in two different senses.

Firstly, Isaku is unreliable in the sense that he is narrating events to which he was not a direct party, so he assumes a degree of limited omniscience as a vehicle for Castro to tell his story. Isaku is a typical Castro meta-narrator, not very firmly attached to the character in the novel and free to roam beyond the text. When he does take part directly in the action of the novel, he is often working as a rival to Stepper: he is jealous of Stepper's prowess, and he is also romantically(?) interested in Reiko. (This is the 'Iago' characterisation.) At this level, Isaku is still a conventional 'unreliable narrator', someone whose word must always be weighed up by the reader and not taken as 'true'.

But Castro has taken Isaku a step further. He is a Postmodern interpreter of events, who is himself ontologically insecure and potentially unstable, and who views life around him as unstable. Specifically, Isaku sets himself the task—nominally on Castro's behalf—of telling us Stepper's story, but he admits early in the novel that he is aware of the impossibility of doing this in an impartial manner. He is also, like Seamus, aware of the limitations of

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Sorge managed to win over the Japanese, who respected his commitment and admired his bravery, honour and personal warmth. At the time of his death his last words were:

<i>Sakigun!</i>	(The Red Army!)
<i>Kokusai Kyosanto!</i>	(The International Communist Party!)
<i>Soviet Kyosanto!</i>	(The Soviet Communist Party!)

As Sorge's Japanese was never fluent, his captors were moved by this display of unabated and defiant conviction expressly for their benefit. Gordon Prange, *Target Tokyo: The Story of the Sorge Spy Ring*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1984, p. 510

language: how can one recreate another's life, from another era? As the novel progresses it is increasingly apparent that Isaku is *actively* writing/rewriting the Stepper story in ways that suit his needs.

We first meet Isaku as an old man of seventy-five, recalling the story of Stepper and the spy ring of which he was a part. He is troubled by the story he is about to recount ('in the corridor between my head and my heart there is chaos'<sup>44</sup>), and admits that as a writer or narrator his material will be unreliable.

I wrote some notes. These are but pasty words, a crumbling vellum, a degenerating cerebellum. I'd made a practice of never writing. Dirty business really. Difficult to destroy once down. I thought I'd coded it ... but he, oh, *he* loved to write ... I pencilled some notes in the margins ...<sup>45</sup>

On the one hand Isaku's contribution is mere 'pencilled notes in the margins' of Stepper's authoritative text, which he has carefully guarded—'Let me open this file which has been so assiduously preserved.'<sup>46</sup> He is clearly ambivalent about his task, but, like the Ancient Mariner, he is obsessed by the need to tell it. Of course in telling this narrative he also gets to relate the sub-text—or 'antiphon'—his own story which, he says at this juncture, will be 'pallid' besides Stepper's.

As the action of the recalled story begins Isaku is a young man. He is the scion of an honourable Japanese family, but has rejected crippling Japanese tradition to become a Westernised art student and sometime radical. This becomes an ontological problem for Isaku, as his personality is split into competing halves and he is denied a home in the spiritual sense. Isaku sees this problem in terms of 'betrayal': he betrays the spy ring, but more importantly he betrays his heritage.

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<sup>44</sup> *Stepper*, p. 8

<sup>45</sup> *Stepper*, p. 9

<sup>46</sup> *Stepper*, p. 9

As a spy Isaku is, generally, incompetent. He loses the radio transmitter while staying at Reiko's inn, he transmits jumbled messages, he is inclined to blab to friends, and he is often referred to by the others as 'the kid'.<sup>47</sup>

But the reader can never get much purchase on the character of Isaku. Although he is narrating the story, he tells us very little of his own actions, and almost nothing of his thoughts (though he is happy to insinuate himself into Stepper's mind). He occasionally pauses to meditate, but his ruminations usually centre on problems relating to existence or language (honesty of existence, honesty of representation).

As the novel progresses he makes it increasingly apparent that he sees all narratives as problematic, and that he is actively involved in interpreting the life of Stepper, to the point that he is mythologising it and thereby fictionalising it. He is a Postmodern narrator, aware of his position. In this way Isaku opens up the novel to a discussion of linguistic concerns, which are tied into the spy theme: how can we rely on words, interpret codes, piece together consistent information/narratives?

When Stepper signs his newspaper articles 'Meissner', Isaku connects his 'doubleness' of personalities—which he uses to change his perceived identity—with the doubleness of language. He notes that Stepper is

Quick-stepping. Found himself slipping back and forth across the borders more and more easily. Words did that to you; but not action. No. Action never betrays.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Stepper complains to Hausen 'you send a boy on a man's errand', (p. 89), and Hausen calls him 'the kid' (p. 169). The novel gives conflicting ages for Isaku: page 8 says that he is 75 in 1994 (b. 1919), page 16 that he is 22 in 1927 (b. 1905). In 1936 he would either be 17 or 31.

This was clarified by Castro: '[Isaku] was born in 1905, but looks perpetually young, and in 1936 he would have been 31. I toyed with the idea of the Dorian Grey theme, but again this was edited out for being "too complicated". I'm afraid I was too complacent with editors, and was under some pressure to make the book "accessible".'

In the second (Vintage Books) printing, the line on p. 8 was *meant* to have been corrected to 'Is it my seventy-fifth birthday?' 'thus making Isaku's state of mind even more uncertain at the beginning. The effect was to emphasise the compression of memory and time and his futile will to forget.' Letter to MD, 5 October 1999

<sup>48</sup> *Stepper*, p. 104

While the world of the spy relies at times on actions, it also relies critically on words, and their potential for dissembling. Stepper ‘changes identity’ at will by changing a word, his (pen-)name.

Isaku draws attention to the similarities between spying and writing. He tries to rationalise Stepper’s callousness, and in doing so draws parallels between the two activities:

They said he would use anyone providing they served his purpose. That, I know for sure. It’s the writer’s motive. And the writer’s callousness. Shoot the muse when it doesn’t come across. But he loved her. Isn’t that enough? Not for a writer ... love is never enough. Not for a spy ... love is always too much. At least that’s the way I saw it.<sup>49</sup>

Isaku’s position here is ironic: he wants to love and be loved, he is jealous of Stepper, and he ultimately betrays the spy ring because it does not fit into his Japanese world. And he is himself *writing* this history.

Isaku also acts as a voice for Castro on aspects of literary theory.

Isaku ... finds that he understands the new [spy] codes first up. It’s a matter of difference and deferral. Putting off the message indefinitely as in a chess game while pushing forward a protocol which signifies, but never resembles, intention, depending on whether or not one had the knowledge. He likes this process. It is very Japanese.<sup>50</sup>

It is difficult to untangle the meaning of this passage, coming as it does unannounced and without obvious context to support it. It is a typically suggestive Castro passage, invoking terms redolent of Deconstruction theory (‘difference’, ‘deferral’; key terms in *différance*), but not quite offering an ‘explanation’. It draws attention to spy codes as symbols, as used in writing, in which the symbols can never *contain* meaning or intention, but nevertheless work towards conveying meaning or intention, if always at a remove. The poignancy/frisson in the case of the spy is that the messages involve matters of life and death, in a way that writing rarely does.

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<sup>49</sup> Stepper, p. 180

<sup>50</sup> Stepper, p. 197

As a consequence of his ambivalent attitude to his surroundings—his country's involvement in war, his spy colleagues—and to his own psychological position, Isaku takes an aleatory approach, and is soon disinterestedly transmitting nonsense.

He decides at random what he will send. Skims the information Stepper has so resolutely and assiduously gathered which warns of an imminent German invasion of Russia. Rewrites it as though it were a fire-drill. So what. Condenses forty pages into half a paragraph. Good editing practice ... And so he taps out the least amount of information, infusing it with sub-texts, innuendoes, metaphors to liven it up.<sup>51</sup>

Castro is working with several ideas here. There is Isaku's 'betrayal', intentional or otherwise (i.e. simple abnegation), of Stepper, who has risked his life to gather the information, and also of Isaku's own causes (he is/was a Communist). At a metaphorical level Castro implies that language is potentially 'betraying' us at all times: it is hard to assemble meaning in a text; it is always open to corruption or slippage in the transfer into codes and transmission of this information. It is a concern of the novel as a whole that 'betrayal', even when it is only in terms of being 'let down', is a natural part of the human world.

Isaku talks of betrayal in a 'positive' destructive sense. He is unable to come to terms with his national identity, his 'Japaneseness', and his country. He 'yearns' for it, but 'in a way which removes it like a country in the future'.<sup>52</sup> Unable to accept his country, he defers it into a future (one that is 'acceptable', or just perpetually deferred?) where the problem may be solved. In the meantime, the Japan-at-hand

seduces one with the power of the sword in one hand and the vulnerability of sadness in the other ... Was not Greece thus for Socrates, Prussia thus for Nietzsche? Betrayal. That is the only cure for such nostalgia.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Stepper*, p. 198-199

<sup>52</sup> *Stepper*, p. 217

<sup>53</sup> *Stepper*, p. 218



Thus alienated, Isaku decides on betrayal as his form of striking out at the ineluctable. His method of betrayal, corrupting the coded messages, he sees in terms of collaboration (the title of Part 2 of the novel).

So what is it to Stepper if I rewrite his texts? Collaborate with them in a way which defuses and diffuses their meaning to spread multiple transmissions across the airwaves, render secret knowledge public, open the double-jeopardy of biographical lies and fictional truths?<sup>54</sup>

Isaku's troubled relationship with art leads him to express himself in poetic—and psychologically revealing—coded 'messages' to Russia. '*I fear I am possessed by space, I fear the dark. And then I myself am the dark.*'<sup>55</sup>

Literature itself becomes implicated when the Russian spymasters insist on being given photographic evidence because their field spies by nature turn 'literary', and start encoding their reports in literary language:

no matter how learned and trained and politicised, they soon returned narcissistic reports, couched in *literary* language, sometimes playing with codes, the first four notes of *Madama Butterfly*, for example, which you then had to decode, and after four hours realise you were the butt of some ciphered foreplay.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, Castro uses lines from Modernist poets like Eliot and Pound as examples of the coded messages. For example, 'The gilded phaloi of the crocuses/Are thrusting at the spring air' form the opening lines of Pound's 'Coitus',<sup>57</sup> and 'I read much of the night, and go south in the winter' is taken from *The Waste Land* (line 18). Other phrasings echo these poets' work: 'There will be time enough for the commotion to begin' sounds as if it has been taken from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.

<sup>54</sup> *Stepper*, p. 218. Castro himself is deliberately playing with the biography/fact/fiction divide: see discussion later in this chapter.

<sup>55</sup> *Stepper*, p. 219. Isaku when he is later captured and tortured again resorts to (mis)quoted allusions: he is 'half in love with easy death' parodically misquoting Keats's 'half in love with easeful death' ('Ode to a Nightingale'), and 'Oh ye of little fate!' parodies the Bible's 'Oh ye of little faith!', words Jesus uses in exasperation several times in the Gospels (for example, Matthew 8:26). The misquotations are appropriate to his situation at the time.

<sup>56</sup> *Stepper*, p. 124

<sup>57</sup> *Stepper*, p. 280 / Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1975, p. 53; the Japanese secret police find a *Selected Poems* in Hausen's apartment (p. 280).

Stepper and Toso use Magritte's painting 'This is not a pipe' ('Ceci n'est pas une pipe') as a code of recognition. They enjoy the jokey allusion to their code of dissemblance. Hokusai's '36 Views of Mount Fuji' is also used as a code; this set of paintings provides an ironic contrast of Hokusai's fecundity with Isaku's lack of success as a painter.<sup>58</sup>

Chief Inspector Shimamura, a bastion of correct 'Japaneseness' and set in opposition to the spy ring, associates such literary tendencies with Western corruption.

I know all about Sade and Joyce James ... Western perverts. I've read them. They don't understand understatement and brevity, and that's when they lose the secret of their art.<sup>59</sup>

Once again Castro draws attention to the inability of words and art to provide viewpoints on the world. Isaku, the artist, and Stepper, the writer, both float in a miasma of clever dialogue without a stable anchorage.

### Other themes

A constant throughout *Stepper* is the death/mutilation/suicide complex. At times there is no obvious connection to the surrounding action, but these themes add a darkness and morbidity to the tone of the novel. It is not surprising that death should be invoked, but there are a surprising number of suicides. The Hausens witness a suicide in Shanghai, Stepper's sister-in-law Christa suicides (having had an affair with Stepper), and Celia Ramsay draws attention to it as a pervading theme. Late in the novel Stepper attempts suicide, but is ironically saved. It is also possible to see his self-

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<sup>58</sup> Castro also uses music references throughout the novel. Stepper buys Reiko *Tosca* then *Madama Butterfly*, he plays jazz (sax), he likes Mozart/Beethoven and says he hates Wagner and its Germanicness. (p. 142) Stalin listens to Shostakovitch. Significantly, Isaku listens to Strauss's *Metamorphosen*. Katya listens to Smetana. All these allusions provide symbolic clues to characters' personalities.

Still another level of signification is provided throughout the novel with Stepper's cocktail recipes: the Razzberry, Rising Sun, Maiden's Bush, Knock Out, and of course, High Stepper.

<sup>59</sup> *Stepper*, p. 227. Joyce is chosen here by Shimamura for his prolixity, and by Castro because he is one of Castro's touchstones. Castro suggests to the reader that Shimamura gets Joyce's name around the wrong way, but the joke is double-edged: in Japanese the family name comes before the given name, and Shimamura is speaking to a fellow Japanese (Reiko) at the time; if we laugh at his 'mistake' we are ourselves

*continued over page*

sacrifice to his cause as a kind of suicide. (Late in the novel Isaku speaks of this in terms of ‘transcendence ... his concern for the inert freedom of *knowing how to die*<sup>60</sup>—a perpetual concern of Castro.)

Suicide seems to indicate a generalised nihilistic or deterministic tone for the events and times in which Stepper moves. Castro’s protagonist is rendered in terms suggested by the epigraph to the book.

We do not collide with our destiny all of a sudden. The man who later in his life is to be executed is constantly—every time that he sees a telegraph pole on his way to work, every time that he passes a railway crossing—drawing an image in his mind of the execution site, and is becoming familiar with that image.

This quotation is taken from *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Yukio Mishima, who ritually suicided.<sup>61</sup> It explains why throughout the novel Stepper sees mysterious portents of his end.<sup>62</sup> Castro explains his epigraph as follows

it’s that kind of fatalism that your life is not predetermined so much as it will follow certain paths because of your character, because of your nature. You can’t really change that to a great degree.<sup>63</sup>

Along similar lines, Isaku is trying to escape his ‘inheritance’: his parents have ritually suicided, providing him with a nihilistic role model, and he is heir to the samurai tradition,<sup>64</sup> where failure should be admitted with suicide. Isaku tries to escape this pre-ordained Japanese ‘destiny’, but feels guilty at avoiding it.

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falling into a cultural trap. (‘Sade’ is presumably the Marquis de Sade, another example of excess.)

<sup>60</sup> *Stepper*, p. 298. This strongly echoes B.S. Johnson’s concern with ‘perfecting his death’; see Chapter 9.

<sup>61</sup> *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1956) is based on the story of the burning down of the ancient Zen temple of Kinkakuji in Kyoto by a neurotic student. Mishima ritually suicided in 1970, aged 45.

<sup>62</sup> For example, Stepper sees a *shime-nawa* rope for holding votive offerings and calls it a ‘hangman’s noose’ (p. 149); Stepper dreams of ‘Reiko wearing a white mask gliding slowly towards the scaffold’, (p. 223).

<sup>63</sup> Ramona Koval, ‘Ramona Koval interviews Brian Castro about his new novel, *Stepper*’, *Australian Book Review*, No. 190, May 1997, pp. 8-10

<sup>64</sup> Isaku has brought his ritual sword with him to Tokyo. During the novel he reclaims this sword from a *sensei* (Zen master), to whom he has pawned it.

This negative, fatalistic impulse resurfaces in many places within the novel. Early in the novel a plane crashes in the garden of Stepper's flat. His wife, Katya, alone at the time, gently closes the shutters.<sup>65</sup> This is echoed a few pages later when a Chinese woman distracted by the death of her husband (a political killing?) jumps to her death as Stepper and the Hausens watch, almost disinterestedly.

He misses the sound of the thump, but it must have occurred.  
Excruciating savagery of animal noise ... Anna Hausen goes to the  
balcony, slaps the shutters closed.<sup>66</sup>

The people in the street are also indifferent to the political killings that are taking place in the streets around them.

Late in the novel, Hans Hausen is accosted by the brother of the captured Fatiminha da Costa, who is threatened with torture and execution, but Hausen feigns no knowledge of the events and pushes him out the door. Characters seem resigned to this incipient sense of death and doom, and lack the necessary will and care for others to intervene. It is a care-less society, and this failure of empathy pervades the characters.

The theme of nationalism crops up only rarely, though the novel as a whole is an indictment of competing Japanese, German, and to a lesser extent Russian nationalism. Nationalism is mentioned in *open* terms of racism when Shimamura wishes to revert to the old days of Japanese isolationism. 'We are unique. We don't rely on others. Especially not on big, stinking busybodies who have no place in our small and perfect society.'<sup>67</sup> While this is the only overt mention of racism in a text that otherwise celebrates national diversity and multilingualism, there is an undertone of cultural separativeness. Both Shimamura and Isaku are obsessed with the chauvinistic ideals of Japanism, (for example, Isaku: 'I absorb the space of my captors, break through my skin, dissolve my body. I

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<sup>65</sup> Stepper, p. 23

<sup>66</sup> Stepper, p. 31

<sup>67</sup> Stepper, p. 227

*am* Japan.<sup>68</sup>) and Reiko is constantly warned by others for becoming 'corruptly' Western.

When he is captured Isaku is, ironically, taken for a double agent, because he is a Japanese prince and has killed a Communist (Prospero da Costa,<sup>69</sup> in order to save Stepper), and the Japanese *prefer to believe* that one of their own could not go so astray.

### Stepper and Sorge

Like Castro's novels *Double-Wolf* and *Drift*, *Stepper* was written as an interpretation of another story. In this case, *Stepper* consciously interprets the story of the real life spy, Richard Sorge, and more particularly that story as it is formulated in *Target Tokyo: The Story of the Sorge Spy Ring*.<sup>70</sup>

However, unlike *Double-Wolf* and *Drift*, it is not *necessary* for the reader to be aware of the real-life counterpart. *Stepper* can be read purely as a fictional spy story, along the lines of the psychological thriller made popular by Le Carre, but with more 'literary' intentions.

But *Stepper* occupies an interesting position on the fact/fiction divide. *Double-Wolf* and *Drift* draw attention to the works they are counter-writing: *Stepper* does not. At face value *Stepper* could be seen to be relying on the base material of Richard Sorge's life in the way that *Birds of Passage* used the history of the Australian gold rush era to provide its setting. This is true at a straightforward level, but Castro is prepared to blur the lines between art and history. His retelling of the Sorge story is, for him, as valid an interpretation of the real events as the historical chronicles.

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<sup>68</sup> *Stepper*, p. 247

<sup>69</sup> Prospero da Costa is also the name of the Portuguese pirate in the story 'Carried Away on a Flower Boat' in *After China* (p. 116)

<sup>70</sup> Gordon W. Prange, *Target Tokyo: The Story of the Sorge Spy Ring*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1984. At the time Castro was researching, this appears to have been the only commercially available publication on Sorge's exploits ('This book is the first thoroughly documented study of the subject available in English', Introduction, *Target Tokyo*, p. ix), though another has since appeared. Certainly Castro acknowledges this as his direct source; his other acknowledgements are to background books on Japan and Tokyo.

The Sorge case offers a temptingly open paradigm with which to work. As a real character, Richard Sorge left his mark on the public record: he was a talented journalist, and as a bureaucrat of sorts left his imprint in many official files. When he was captured, his interrogation was recorded at length, over a period of three years, and included his own 'confession'. Normally this would provide plenty of source material. But Sorge was a spy, who promulgated several identities over his career, and who effaced identities as and when required. None of the bureaucratic files on him can be trusted. Towards the end of the War, much of the Japanese case material on Sorge was destroyed in the American fire bombings of Tokyo, and this last direct record of his career is also now incomplete. (In *Stepper*, Isaku loses Stepper's memoir/confession into the Sumida River.)

The Sorge case was reconstructed by Gordon Prange during the 1960s, using both traditional history research methods and interviews with survivors of the period. Ironically, Prange died before *Target Tokyo* was published, and the book was posthumously completed by colleagues. As if this does not already offer enough leeway for Castro to re-interpret the case, *Target Tokyo*, which is essentially a history, is written in a curious style that often deviates across genres into 'thriller' mode. (The writers obviously had some pretensions towards the literary.)

As the full heat of midsummer blazed over Tokyo, Clausen was acutely aware of the interest of Shigeru Aoyama ...<sup>71</sup>

But even granting Castro this room to manoeuvre, what he has not done is set out to relate 'the Sorge story'. His *Stepper* is a spy thriller than runs at many times parallel to the Sorge story, but *is not that story*. As his career has progressed, Castro has moved closer towards the use of biography in his writing.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Target Tokyo*, p. 378. Prange first became interested in the Sorge case when commissioned to write an article by *Reader's Digest*. This may help to explain the 'down-home', 'freshman' thriller style that occasionally permeates *Target Tokyo*.

<sup>72</sup> His planned next 'novel', *Shanghai-Dancing*, is being described as an 'autobiography': 'Brian Castro is currently working on a fictional autobiography, *Shanghai-Dancing*, based on his family's life in China during the 1930s.' *Australian Humanities Review*, March 1999, <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-December-1998/castro.html>

The reason for this is given in his essay, 'Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance'.<sup>73</sup> In this essay he speaks of moving away from the novel form as it is traditionally construed, and adapting it to deal with real events. The result is a hybrid of fact and fiction. This is the form he is using for *Shanghai-Dancing*, but it has also been apparent in his other novels. He explains in his essay:

I began to write what I called an 'autobiography'. I didn't call it that to impress anyone. I wasn't making any claims about truth and lies and real events. I knew that the word *autobiography* carried a freight of meaning it didn't really deserve: real life; true stories; family secrets ... why not write a novel instead?

I think I would have ... if it hadn't been for one thing ... the element of risk. A novel usually risks one thing: its form ... An 'autobiography' however, does make some claims. Claims about oneself, one's family, lineage, history.<sup>74</sup>

What Castro is elaborating is his ongoing argument with the novel, that it is only a form and needs constant re-imagining and risk-taking. In his novel(?) -in-progress, the risk comes by combining 'real' life—his family predecessor's history—with his own imaginative interpretation of it. He becomes open to the charges of 'falsifying history', 'misrepresenting people', and so on. But these charges can in some ways be laid against any novelist (they are 'falsifying reality'), and so Castro sees no reason not to go the extra step. He notes that 'autobiography' 'is usually done within the "grammar" of an accepted system, a cultural norm imposed by families, societies, nations',<sup>75</sup> but being merely norms, or conventions, they are not sacrosanct and inviolable. In the same way, *Stepper* is a novel that rewrites history, but which veers between recording accurately the facts of a given story and adding to them, via imaginative fictionalising, whenever it suits Castro's purpose. Critics have not always been able to accept this.

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<sup>73</sup> 'Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance', *Australian Humanities Review*, March 1999, <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-December-1998/castro.html>

<sup>74</sup> 'Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance', *Australian Humanities Review*, March 1999

<sup>75</sup> 'Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance', *Australian Humanities Review*, March 1999

Thus *Stepper* follows the Sorge story in great detail at times, and creates entirely new lines of action at others. In most respects Victor Stepper is an accurate portrayal of Richard Sorge.<sup>76</sup> Nearly all the details of the two characters' narratives coincide, and Castro has not needed to do much to flesh out his character. Stepper is slightly romanticised for narrative purposes: he is six feet tall and ruggedly attractive; Sorge was five feet ten inches, and while not described as handsome, women apparently found him attractive. In any case, in the thirties a man of his height would have been considered tall, so Castro's portrait is essentially that of Sorge.

The character Reiko is not filled out in great detail: she remains a figure of erotic allure, slightly naive honesty combined with honour, and mystery. This suits Castro's purposes, but it is not far from the picture of Sorge's girlfriend Hanako Ishii that is portrayed in *Target Tokyo*. Both heroines speak about their spy lover, but rarely about themselves or their feelings. Reiko may be slightly more attractive, but the exaggeration is apparently minimal.

Castro's master stroke is to invent the character of Ishigo Isaku, who is only loosely based on the real Miyagi Yotoku. In the Sorge story, Miyagi remains loyal to the end, and is a valuable member of the intelligence gathering mechanism. But Castro's figure is a rival for, and eventually antagonistic

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<sup>76</sup> Many of Castro's characters and much of the action are modelled on the *Target Tokyo* versions. Nevertheless, Castro has imaginatively coalesced some of the characters and embellished the action to suit his purposes.

Yoshio Toso closely approximates Ozaki Hotzumi. Castro has turned Max Clausen into Hans Hausen, and retained the wife's name, Anna. However, Clausen was the key figure who let down the spy ring as he became disillusioned with the progress of the war and the ideals of Communism, whereas Castro's Hausen remains an honest, likable, plodder.

The German ambassador Major General Eugen Ott and his wife, Helma, are fairly accurately portrayed by Helmut and Clara Biedermann.

Sorge's unknown but considerable number of lovers are represented by Silke von Stroh and Annaliese Gott. The Celia Ramsay figure is similar to Agnes Smedley. Wojek Petrovitch is a loose approximation of Branko de Voukelitch.

The Japanese counterintelligence police are represented by Shimamura, who most closely resembles Aoyama Shigeru. (Aoyama is knocked down when he surprises Sorge in his home, and leaves with a pair of shoes as a conciliation to honour.) But Shimamura is a more romantic construction. Isaku Ishigo, loosely based on the real Miyagi Yotoku, is Castro's prime 'invention'.



towards, Stepper. His betrayal is born out of jealousies and psychological insecurities.

Although on the surface *Stepper* relies dramatically on the attraction, and tensions, between Stepper and Reiko, it is the subliminal tension between Stepper and Isaku, or, to invoke the literary level, their competing narratives, that drives the deeper drama.

As is usual, Castro's characters have symbolic names. 'Victor' and 'Stepper' are obvious to English speakers— a 'winner' who is able to step around problems, a side-stepper, a quick-stepper, a good dancer, emotionally descended from the Russian steppes<sup>77</sup>—but the Japanese names also carry significance. While these will not necessarily be apparent to English readers<sup>78</sup> Castro does 'translate' some of the names in the text. However, he has said in correspondence that 'As far as the Japanese names are concerned, I have not been so rigorous [as in other novels]. In *Stepper* I didn't want too many name-symbols to distract from the concealed, absent nomenclature "Sorge" or "care" (in German).'<sup>79</sup>

The two names on which he does concentrate are Murasaki Reiko and Isaku Ishigo. According to Castro-as-novelist, 'Reiko' has the following implications:

*Reiko*: strict enforcement; to observe to the letter.

*Reikoku*: cruel, cold-hearted.

*Reika*: extremely cold; below zero.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> There are further levels of reference in 'Stepper'. On p. 171 Stepper 'makes a sound in his throat like the howl of a wolf', invoking not only Steppenwolf, but *Double-Wolf*. The German word '*steppen*' is also the verb 'to quilt', and Stepper is a patchworker in his job, and someone who is emotionally patchworked. (It seems at times as if Castro's allusiveness is inexhaustible, and one wonders when one has become entangled in unintended meanings.)

<sup>78</sup> The names will be obvious to Japanese speakers, as names derive from common words, and can have various meanings depending on intonation and context. However, Japanese and Chinese are closely related at the written level, so there is an implied exchange of understanding. While this is not significant in terms of reading an English novel, it is another example of Castro's delight in multiple codings and flirtation with one of his mother tongues.

<sup>79</sup> Letter to MD, 16 February 1999. In fact, the German word *Sorge* is the root of the English word 'sorrow' (ME 'sorg'), giving another possible level of significance.

<sup>80</sup> *Stepper*, p. 107

In a letter explaining his names, Castro translates 'Reiko' as deriving from *rei*, the word for zero.<sup>81</sup> This accords with the simple dictionary definition.<sup>82</sup> Castro's symbolic translation, as given in the novel, suggests that we are to see Reiko as strict in her approach to life (her Japaneseness, her observation of forms, her attitude to Stepper), and, if not exactly icy or 'cold-hearted', then certainly not a soft 'push-over'. According to Castro 'she becomes even tougher than [Stepper] ... so she actually survives'.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, she is 'cruel' only in an ironic sense, in that Stepper suffers from his love for her in a way that he has never suffered for any other woman.

Her family name, Murasaki, is that of the author of the eleventh-century classic *The Tale of Genji*, which Stepper reads in the course of the novel. (He is of course a type of Genji figure, romantic, and an inheritor of the true samurai tradition.) Murasaki, is a reference to both the author and one of the characters in her novel, the (second) wife of Genji. That the author and character share a name, and that the name is a 'court-name' (a sobriquet, not the person's real name, and therefore a kind of mask), would have particular resonance for Castro. It is also cheeky, rather like naming a character Mrs Shakespeare without most readers realising it.<sup>84</sup>

Isaku is the critical symbol. He tells us in the novel

I am Isaku, Ishigo  
Call me Ishi for short. I stand for ... well, individualism. Iron will.  
Intention, purpose.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> 'Reiko, as in the text, = icy cold. Rei = zero, freezing.' Letter to MD, 16 February 1999

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, *Basic Japanese-English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press/Bonjinsha Co. Ltd, 1992

<sup>83</sup> Ramona Koval, 'Ramona Koval interviews Brian Castro about his new novel, *Stepper*', *Australian Book Review*, No. 190, May 1997, p. 9

<sup>84</sup> 'In Heian Japan it was bad manners to record the names of well-born ladies ... Of the sobriquet by which she is known today, the second half, Shikibu, designates an office held by her father. Murasaki may derive either from the name of [Genji's second wife] or from the fact that it means 'purple' and *fuji*, the first half of her family name, means 'wisteria'. Edward Seidensticker, Translator's introduction, *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu, Secker and Warburg, London, 1976

<sup>85</sup> *Stepper*, p. 245. Later (p. 299) Isaku also tells us:

*Isaku*: posthumous works  
*Ishi*: the will of a dying person.

The name offers multiple possibilities. While one facet of this complex character hangs on the translation of *ishi*, which in Japanese means ‘iron-willed’, Castro has covertly built other facets into Isaku’s names. Castro explains the names as follows:

Isaku [is] a play on *issakujitsu*, which means ‘the day before yesterday’. He’s a sort of Johnny-come-lately, a greenhorn, a foolish Japanese version of Mr You [in *After China*].

However, ‘Ishi’ [= *ishi*] = strong will; stone; pebble. He is also an irritation; a strong-headed, dangerous, wilful person.<sup>86</sup>

Hence one name hints at his immaturity, and the other at his underlying Japanese determination. He is a double character. Furthermore, Castro also states that ‘It is very important that one makes the connection between “Ishigo” and Shakespeare’s “Iago”.’<sup>87</sup> This may not be obvious to readers, but if the connection *is* made, it strengthens the reader’s view of Isaku as someone jealous of his master’s position, and using Reiko as a means of bringing him down. This comparison should not be taken too far, however. Isaku is ambivalent about Stepper, and does not want to directly supplant him, as does Iago.

Another character whose name is invoked is Yoshio Toso. The barmaid Mitsusuki puns on his given name; *yosho*, she says, means ‘foreign book’.<sup>88</sup> This is appropriate for a spy.

The critical word in *Stepper* is, however, concealed. It will not be obvious to the average reader that Stepper is modelled on Richard Sorge. The only hint is given on page 298 where the word’s significance is revealed by Castro. It is a deliberate ploy on Castro’s part to withhold this information.

Isaku has asked Reiko

whether [Stepper] wrestled with his existence, whether he had a concern for it, for surely it was care which made existence meaningful? *Care?* he

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<sup>86</sup> Letter to MD, 16 February 1999. The dictionary includes meanings such as ‘intent, purpose, intention’, ‘will’, ‘stone, rock, pebble’.

<sup>87</sup> Letter to MD, 16 February 1999

<sup>88</sup> *Stepper*, p. 46. Castro says of his other name: ‘Toso = fight, struggle. A play upon *toso suru*, to escape or flee.’ Letter to MD, 16 February 1999

had said to her, using the German word ... *Sorge* ... which also meant anxiety ... and he flicked his thumbnail at the sky. He never did take care, always standing at the blind spot between delusion and ambition.<sup>89</sup>

Even having made this connection, which makes manifest the inherent purpose of the novel—an investigation of existential care—the reader will still need to know that *Sorge* was given a specific, philosophical/psychological meaning by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In Heidegger's ontology, *Sorge* is explained as follows.

What is the organic relation between the necessary inauthenticity of being-in-the-world and the equally necessary striving for authentic *Dasein*? The answer, given in the last chapter of the first part of *Sein und Zeit*, is *Sorge*.

This arch-Kierkegaardian term is translated by 'care', 'concern', 'apprehension'. Heidegger invests it with great positive value and range.

... As we flail about emptily, the familiarity of the everyday shatters. It is as if we had been caught, all of a sudden, in the interstices of the busy mesh of being, and stood face to face with the ontological, with *Daseinsfrage*. It is striking how closely Heidegger's evocation of the uncanny resembles Freud's famous use of the term.<sup>90</sup>

Hence this key word evokes for Castro a nexus of favourite concerns. Castro has read Steiner's work on Heidegger, and would be well aware of the connections between *Dasein*, *Sorge* and the uncanny (*Unheimlich*).<sup>91</sup> Hence his spy Stepper is a vehicle for investigating a character who does not take 'care' of his 'being'. Steiner's exposition of Heidegger continues:

Uncanniness triggers those key moments in which *Angst* brings *Dasein* face to face with its terrible freedom to be or not to be, to dwell in inauthenticity or strive for self-possession. ... Under stress of the uncanny, *Dasein* comes to realize that beyond being *Dasein*-with and *Dasein*-in—which are the ineluctable modes of the everyday—it must become *Dasein*-for. *Sorge*, signifying 'care-for', 'concern-for and -with', is the means of this transcendence. It can and must take myriad forms: care for the ready-to-hand, for the tools and materials of our practice; a concern for others which can be defined as 'solicitude'. But principally, and in a sense yet to be expounded [at this point in the book], *Sorge* is a concern with, a caring for, an answerability to, the presentness and mystery of Being itself, of Being as it transfigures beings. And it is from

<sup>89</sup> *Stepper*, p. 298

<sup>90</sup> George Steiner, *Heidegger*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1978; pp. 96-98

<sup>91</sup> Early in the novel Stepper is described as being *Keine Heimat*, 'without home', but with suggestions of *unheimlich*, 'unhoused', 'a stranger', 'not native'. *Stepper*, p. 101

this existential ethic of concernedness that derives Heidegger's subsequent definition of man as the shepherd and custodian of Being.<sup>92</sup>

This passage has been quoted at some length because it provides the key for an understanding of *Stepper*. It is not just co-incidence that Stepper is modelled on Richard Sorge. The real German's surname provides the clue to Castro's underlying 'message' in his novel.

The interesting thing about *Stepper* is of course—and all these [reviewers] have missed it—... the fact that George Steiner [in *Heidegger*] talks about Heidegger talking about 'the care of being'. He said that we can only understand our notion of being when we take care of it, in other words, we are conscious of it. In our day-to-day affairs, our day-to-day lives, we are so busy we don't even notice our being. He says when you step back a little bit—this whole Existentialist thing—when you step back a bit and take care, have some consciousness of your being, it's quite an uncanny notion: 'I'm alive. Why am I here? I'm alive.' This notion for which Heidegger used the German word '*Sorge*'—I mean, that's the spy's name! And this whole play on the idea of the word *Sorge* meaning 'care, of your being' and a spy who has to completely and utterly travesty that word by taking on different identities ...<sup>93</sup>

I do not want to attempt an analysis of Heidegger's philosophy, but to point out how the Heideggerian view of existence is being explored in *Stepper* and how so many other points tie in with Castro's work.

To simplify Heidegger's ontology, the crux of our living comfortably with ourselves and operating successfully is to live 'authentically', that is to be aware of what is happening in our own being and in the world around us and to respond openly and honestly. Any blocking of our expression of ourselves, or any dishonest approach to living (such as 'living a lie'), results in 'inauthentic' existence, which is unfulfilling and potentially pathological. (Heidegger's work was used as a basis for a model of clinical psychology.)

Of course it is impossible to live continuously in a state of 'authenticity': we must perpetually strive to be aware of our existence and how we are responding to the world, and we inevitably fall backwards at regular

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<sup>92</sup> George Steiner, *Heidegger*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1978; pp. 96-98

intervals. In this flux of striving and falling backwards, we enter states of uncanniness, heightened periods of self-consciousness in which we and/or things feel bizarre.

So on the level of the book, *Stepper* is 'about' the protagonist's inability to lead an authentic life because his vocation—his *chosen* or natural vocation—is that of being a spy: a dissimulator, a shifter inhabiting multiple existences that he changes at the slightest outside cue. Unable to inhabit a stable 'authenticity', or in everyday terms 'identity', Stepper is doomed to lead an unloving, uncaring existence. He becomes increasingly unhinged in the course of the novel, until he meets Reiko, who begins the changes that might, given time, lead him to stabilise his ontological being.

But Castro is also working on a self-referential level, equating the business of spying with the business of writing. Writing is the vocation of dissimulation, and Castro is quietly questioning his own position as a writer. Is he being authentic? Once again, Castro has written a novel that not only investigates the existential possibilities available to its central characters, but reflexively questions the processes of writing (and reading) that author and reader are involved in.

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<sup>93</sup> Interview MD, 29 November 1997

### Critical Reaction to *Stepper*

*Stepper* won the 1997 National Book Council 'Banjo' Award

Helen Daniel,<sup>94</sup> as one might by now expect, considered *Stepper* a great success: 'for once, the [book's] cover claim is true' ('a dazzling and haunting novel', etc.). She described *Stepper* as 'a change in direction', but does not specify in what sense, other than saying that *Drift* was 'a tour de force, but demanding'. (Castro himself suggested that *Stepper* was a move back to a plainer style.)

Daniel found *Stepper* 'an intriguing figure, attractive, witty, reflective, solitary, at once shadowy and immediate ... a master-spy whose moral and intellectual deliberations are as fascinating as any in John Le Carre's work'. This is an interesting reaction to *Stepper*-as-ladies'-man, especially coming from a woman, as Owen Richardson considered *Stepper* unconvincing (see below).

Daniel felt that 'Time and place are vividly portrayed' and that 'the narrative has a sense of Japanese ceremonial formality'. She also admired the pacing: 'Although it begins in a leisurely way ... the novel quickens its step and becomes a gripping espionage thriller'. Again, she is in disagreement with Owen Richardson on this matter.

Daniel concluded: 'Castro takes the espionage genre and subverts it. The writer himself plays spy and, like *Stepper*, masks his intentions with a seductive surface narrative.'

It is interesting to compare Owen Richardson's review<sup>95</sup> with Daniel's. Richardson obviously wanted to like *Stepper*, but he concluded that, for

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<sup>94</sup> Helen Daniel, 'Double Trouble', *The Age*, Saturday, 22 March 1997 [Extra, Arts and Books, no page]

<sup>95</sup> Owen Richardson, 'Fuzzing it with feeling', *The Republican*, 28 March 1997, p. 25

him, it ultimately does not work. The difference seems to be in reading technique/expectations.

Richardson larded praise on Castro as a writer.

Brian Castro is one of Australia's most gifted and adventurous writers ... a writer who extends Australian literature's contacts with the further reaches of the imagination, and is always worth reading, even if his books aren't always successful ...

However, Richardson felt that *Stepper* doesn't work because *he* is comparing the novel with 'the Warner Brothers' political thrillers of the '30s and '40s'. In fact, 'Victor Stepper could be Bogart, though in one of his more intellectual incarnations: not Rick from *Casablanca*, but the doomed screenwriter from *In a Lonely Place*.' It seems that Richardson has read *Stepper* primarily in terms of spy thriller, and finds it wanting. '*Stepper* simply doesn't work as a thriller: not enough happens, and the pacing and construction aren't defined enough to provide the sort of involvement any good thriller does'. In particular, the characterisation is wrong: 'Stepper for instance I simply found unreal: his charisma doesn't emerge from the page, it is told more often than shown.'

These are indeed valid criticisms of a thriller, and if read primarily or solely as a thriller, *Stepper* is too conceited and intellectual to work. Daniel is more accurate in viewing *Stepper* as an intellectual exercise with a concealed agenda (the examination of the spy's psychology and the similarities with writing); the thriller is a secondary concern, and one that is, in the end, subverted. Castro would be displeased for his novel to be read *as genre*.

Richardson also criticises the unevenness of the writing. 'There are many ... subjectless sentences and verbless sentences in these books, and they're a pain: apart from being an ugly and self-conscious way of writing in itself—at least when overused like this—it's also such a contemporary mannerism that it distances the reader from the period...'. The charge of overwriting is not an easy one to defend against: one can only say that such things are, ultimately, a matter of the reader's taste, and that many people find Castro's poetic prose in full flight absolutely compelling.



The charge of anachronism is easier to deal with: Castro does not set his novel in the '1930s and 1940s', but in an imaginative time-space that incorporates accurately observed atmosphere but combines it with contemporary sensibility. The reader may inhabit all mind-spaces in a Castro novel, and is not locked into period.<sup>96</sup>

Richardson also objects that characters use lines from *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound as codewords—'a gratuitous wink at the reader'. Well of course: this is *Castro*.

In a review that concentrates more on Castro and his oeuvre than on *Stepper* itself,<sup>97</sup> Evelyn Juers characterised Castro's writing as 'male' writing, replete with 'sex, murder and intrigue', and at times 'phallogocentric'.

Castro is calling upon a daunting tradition of men's writing which is forever exploring the dialectics of credulity, the exotic dance between truth and deception. High on a brew—a cock tale—of self-admiration and self-loathing, *Stepper's* forerunners are detectives and spies and self-obsessed protagonists tripping up their hairy doppelgängers, testing correlatives, charting coincidence. Between what? Between history and imagination, truth and fiction, focus and abstraction, but most earnestly ... the divided self.

Juers noted that *Stepper's* style is 'in keeping with this writer's urge towards labyrinthine elaboration', offering complex plotting and highly allusive language, 'as if the writer is challenging us to stay afloat within the often cryptic associationism of the text. (Juers demonstrates the infectious character of this with her extension of *Stepper's* love of cocktails into 'cock tales', with loops and loupes, with BC and 'be sea'.) However, despite this playfulness, she notes that 'Below the wit, the verbal and historical and literary agility, there is in all Castro's work a deep sense of "atavistic sadness" '. This is as true of *Stepper* as of the other novels, and Castro acknowledges his melancholic bent. Juers also noted that Castro's novels

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<sup>96</sup> Bernadette Brennan analyses Castro's use of place and setting in a forthcoming paper ('Brian Castro's Tokyo: Schizophrenic Semiotic', *Proceedings of the 1999 ASAL Conference*, forthcoming 2000). She particularly comments on Tokyo as an absence in terms of setting, an absence that mirrors the psychological setting of the characters.

<sup>97</sup> Evelyn Juers, 'A Rich Cocktail', *The Australian's Review of Books*, April 1997, pp. 3–4

deal with the same themes, over and over. (This point is taken up in Chapter 11.)

Ultimately Juers was puzzled by *Stepper*, though she is impressed by the originality of the writing.

With his multi-ethnicity, his multiple displacement, his plea for writer-reader reciprocity—‘if you get my drift’ he jokes at the end of *Drift*—and his play with literary authority, with prototypes and classics and patterns of correspondence, Castro is a quintessentially Australian author.

Katharine England<sup>98</sup> contrasted the position of the average spy thriller—the ‘rattling good yarn’—with Castro’s realisation of it.

Brian Castro seems to have a completely different agenda for the genre. In *Pomeroy* ... he used it as a vehicle for a fiendishly complicated comedy of post-modern manners which explored the frontier between language and life. In *Stepper*, a novel which is no less difficult but offers far greater and more accessible rewards, he canvasses the concept of the samurai, and complex relationships of information and intimacy, love and loneliness, existence and nothingness, along with the ineluctable attraction of authenticity, the bio-genesis of betrayal and treachery of written words.

She found the allusiveness infectious: the text brought to her mind not only Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, but *The Glass Bead Game* (when Celia Ramsay gives Stepper a ‘jewel’), but paused to ask herself ‘or is this too far-fetched’. It is an admission that Castro’s allusions can take over and set the reader off into labyrinthine regressions of connectivity. It effectively highlights the palimpsestic openness of Castro’s novels.

England found the writing literally dazzling:

Stepper’s story is told in an occasionally confusing variety of first-and-third-person narrations so that the reader is provided with a multiplicity of viewpoints and opinions, and more information than is available to any one of the characters. Time and place are rendered with wonderful conviction, an accumulation of visual and cultural details which scrolls across the imagination like film. ...

Castro’s intractable narrative style, his magpie eclecticism and his catherine-wheeling perceptions are demanding, but they leave the brain energised and fizzing.

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<sup>98</sup> Katharine England, ‘Deconstructing Castro’, *The Advertiser*, 12 April 1997, Review, p. 12

David Matthews<sup>99</sup> described the opening of *Stepper* as ‘allusively cryptic’, and suggested that ‘The narrator seems less concerned to give us the solid, past-tense fact, than to suggest that the reader is helping to construct the story, by being asked, in effect, to think up the appropriate background’. This bestows an imaginative richness on the novel. The novel can be different things to different readers: ‘As in [Peter Carey’s] *Oscar and Lucinda*, history in the traditional sense has become a compromised term and the role of invention in it is stressed.’

Matthews approved of the narratorial tone. ‘What I like in this novel is the understated way these meditations on art are threaded through the spy story and the way the spy genre is revived in some luminous descriptive writing. ... it is not in-your-face metafiction ... but a balanced and lyrical meditation on art, eroticism and writing.’

Curiously, Matthews complained at the end of his review ‘Why can’t phrases in foreign languages be rendered accurately, exotic words spelled properly?’<sup>100</sup> *Stepper* is littered with Japanese and German, inter alia, and only one other critic has complained about ‘mistakes’. In a review<sup>101</sup> that was otherwise very positive, Alison Broinowski ended with what seems mere carping:

Why, then, does Castro misspell place names such Shinagawa, Hibiya and Nanzenji, and common words such as *shoji* and *ginko*, and misinvent several Japanese personal names ... What does he mean by such solecisms as having a bedstead in a *tatami* room; giving Stepper, who he stresses is a big man, a (miniscule) 12-mat house, and putting him in a Japanese bath *with the soap*?

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<sup>99</sup> David Matthews, ‘Spy who stayed out in the cold’, *The Weekend Australian*, Review, 12–13 April 1997, p. 9

<sup>100</sup> Did Matthews perhaps miss the Japanese/Latin pun: ‘O tempura, O Mori’? In Latin, the motto is ‘Oh the times, oh the customs’ (‘O tempora, O mores’). The judge who tries Stepper and sentences him to death is named ‘Mori’; it is also the infinitive of the Latin verb ‘to die’. (In Japanese *mori* means ‘woods’.)

<sup>101</sup> Alison Broinowski, ‘Tokyo Secrets’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 1997, Spectrum, p. 10s

These are hardly fatal mistakes, and may well be either variant transliterations or typesetter's typographical mistakes.<sup>102</sup> As Broinowski also did not like the cover, it is hard to take such criticism to heart. Her comment 'Or have some of Japan's subtleties eluded the *gaijin* ['foreigner'], again?' suggests that this is mainly a case of an Asianist's game of one-upmanship. (Matthews did not detail his complaints: perhaps he was following Broinowski's lead?)

Ivor Indyk<sup>103</sup> noted that Castro is often described as a 'literary' writer, where 'literary' has the sense 'hard to sell'. He suggests that *Stepper* is not an impossible book to read, and that although Castro is a complex writer, 'forever striking out in different directions at the same time', the book is highly readable. (He notes in passing that Umberto Eco manages to sell large numbers of novels.)

Indyk concluded that Castro does not 'head into the arid territory of writerly self-consciousness, of writing concerned with the process of writing', but that his fiction 'goes looking for truth in a world of shifting allegiances, where the stable points of reference—identity, language, human relationships—are themselves complex and often contradictory in their assurances', just like the world of the spy.

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<sup>102</sup> Castro has clarified some of these. In what looks like a pointed 'reply', the second printing (Vintage Books) of *Stepper* contains an 'Author's Note' as follows:

The maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) is variously spelt *gingko*, *gingo* or *ginko*. In this and some other romanisations, I have retained the contemporary rather than the modern spelling.

The size of a Japanese room is measured by the number of mats. The present size of the tatami mat is somewhat smaller than what it used to be. Traditionally, a mat was six feet long and three feet wide. This twelve-matted room would have measured six yards by four. A fifteen-matted room would have been considered to be quite large.

If nothing else, this demonstrates that, whether or not mistakes have occurred, Castro is not cavalier in his research. In fact, the typesetters made a mistake in this 'clarification'; instead of 'twelve-matted', they have set 'velve-matted, which mistake was perpetuated by the Books for the Blind reader'. (Letter to MD, 5 October 1999)

<sup>103</sup> Ivor Indyk, 'Castro's Spymaster Novel', *Australian Book Review*, No. 190, May 1997, pp. 6-7

Tessa Morris-Suzuki headed her review<sup>104</sup> 'A Novel for the Nineties', and concluded that 'this compelling, beautifully written evocation of lost vision, fragmented selves, inevitable betrayal ... is a novel much more about 1990s Australia than about 1930s Japan'. (p. 262) She pointed out that the characters in *Stepper* show little real involvement in the ideology of the events in which they enmesh themselves, but are united in 'the pain of always decentring' (p. 260) Like contemporary Australians, they have lost much of the conviction that could shore up their lives, and are struggling to find workable values in an ethical and ontological vacuum.

Morris-Suzuki quibbled at times with historical accuracy, though she was prepared to concede that these are Castro's imaginings and not a reconstruction of 'history'. She thought the characters somewhat nebulous (they *all* seem to be multi-lingual; 'the impression is of people who are not only individually fragmented but threaten at any moment to flow into one another' (p. 261)), but this is surely a point of the novel: his characters are unstable.

In an extended interview<sup>105</sup> Ramona Koval quizzed Brian Castro about *Stepper* in some depth. She remarked on Castro's ability to create a sense of time and place. Castro elaborated:

It's a kind of dreaming, an attempt to artificially create an atmosphere. I think it's really the language that I use. This particular [novel] almost feels as though it's behind glass ... I was trying to actually codify a lot of the human behaviour in this novel by relying on mirrors and mirroring ... so that you get that impression of it being fairly muted rather than immediate.

Asked how he uses language to get this muted effect, he replied that *Stepper* relies on two distinct types of language.

Well this being a spy story gave me the idea to use something that's rather brief and clipped, but at the same time I didn't relinquish what I call my oceanic writing, which is the long sentence and the long breath. I

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<sup>104</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 'A Novel for the Nineties', *Meanjin*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 1997, pp. 256-262

<sup>105</sup> Ramona Koval, 'Ramona Koval interviews Brian Castro about his new novel, *Stepper*', *Australian Book Review*, No. 190, May 1997, pp. 8-10

mean Allan Ginsberg ... he's a great influence. So ... I looked at the lyrical element of the story as well as the spy element of the story and tried to balance the two.

The 'brief and clipped' sentences (sentences that are often not grammatical sentences) represent the dissimulation of the spy world. According to Castro, these sentences conceal as much as they reveal. They do not give 'the whole story' or 'the straight story', but a tangled, truncated version.

The text can thus become quite cryptic at times, requiring the reader to work to extract 'the story'. Castro admits 'I don't expect readers to dig these things out', and admits that he put the key concept of '*Sorge*' towards the end of the novel.

Koval points out that some of the puzzles are also games<sup>106</sup> and that Castro makes his reader 'play a part in the code-breaking'. Castro replies that the book can be read on several levels, and the reader can choose to what extent he/she wants to become involved in the extraction of layers of meaning.

Castro suggests that Japan provided a particular example of the dangers of nationalism. Although Stepper can be seen as perhaps breaking under the strain of love, as he loses faith in ideological ideals, it is Isaku whom Castro sees as the 'failure' of the novel:

he falls for that kind of patriotic myth at the end, because ... he— having looked into the chasm of nothingness—wants to seek majority approval, wants to be brought back into the fold. In Japan in the '30s and '40s there was that very big thing of the Emperor being the father of the family, so if you confessed your foreign influences and said that you won't be influenced any more, you could be brought back into the family.

There is a strong sense of destiny throughout the novel, suggested in the novel's epigraph from Mishima. Castro refers to this as a sort of fatalism, which he thinks he himself possesses:

it's that kind of fatalism that your life is not predetermined so much as it will follow certain paths because of your character, because of your nature.

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<sup>106</sup> For example, Clara Biedermann's phone number, 71144, is the date of Stepper's execution 7 November 1944, itself the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

You can't really change that to a great degree. This epigraph deals with the fact that a person who knows that he will be executed in later life will see things coming in his life that will remind him of it. I think the idea that Stepper has in his subconscious the constant reminder that the gallows really awaits him makes him a tragic figure. At the same time I think it also makes him a rather supersensitive figure.

Foong Ling Kong<sup>107</sup> pointed to the elusiveness of *Stepper*: 'Like Castro's Tokyo, "the empty centre, the *mu*", Stepper is an empty vessel waiting to be filled with readerly projections and aspirations.' She noted the irony that Stepper's capture brings a release, and a kind of healing.

Always 'something else entirely' to the characters in the book, only after he has been captured—and revealed as a spy—can Stepper exist, and write, 'without ideology, without blame, without flourish ... because he now has the words and the meanings ... no longer that split between what words he could have used and what he represented; no longer the separation between being and word; no need for codes'.

She found Castro's style 'often elliptical, allusive, playful', and commented on the effect that the style generates:

the double life and double bind of Stepper's life and times are conveyed in short, often fractured, sentences that simulate the spy's dislocation and the condition of being slightly out of step with the rest of the world.

Peter Pierce's somewhat equivocating review<sup>108</sup> acknowledged the difficulty of categorising Castro. 'Each of Castro's books seems to belong with and within all those of his that have gone before, and yet each is distractingly different.'

He was one of the few commentators to note that 'at the edges of the adventurous action of the story is a faint, unmistakable whiff of parody.' Although not entirely satisfied with the characterisation ('Castro tries valiantly, but not altogether successfully, to animate his hero ...'), the novel seems to have achieved Castro's purpose of 'unsettling' him. 'At the end of all this ambitious, carefully regulated play, one may be left disquietened (as Castro possibly intends).'

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<sup>107</sup> Foong Ling Kong, 'Interest in the Amoral', *Overland*, No. 151, Winter 1998, pp. 106-107

<sup>108</sup> Peter Pierce, 'The Precarious Business of Owning the Self', *Canberra Times*, 29 March 1997, p. C11

Robin Gerster was both seduced and baffled by the style.<sup>109</sup> Of the opening prologue he says: 'It is a calculatedly dramatic and perverse opening to a conceptually ingenious but also disorienting and demanding novel.' Of the novel as a whole he says: 'It is a profoundly moving and more than fleetingly erotic dramatisation of the relationship of private public commitment and of the failure of political ideology as an alternative to human love ...'

Japan is praised as a setting that defies simple East-West classifications.

Castro sets his novel in the country—ambiguous, ineffable Japan—that is most difficult to classify along those lines. With its self-destructive nationalism, its culture of ritualised suicide, its obsessions and paradoxes, and its natural and political cycles of destruction and renewal, Japan is a register of the earth-shaking catastrophes that have rent the 20th century. The dreaded Tokyo fault line is used by Castro as a signifier of the turbulence that unites the private lives of the individuals with the history of their times.

Nevertheless, his final judgement carried a double-edged caveat:

A reviewer of *Pomeroy* ... wrote that the novel 'starts out like a more cerebral Peter Corris and finishes something like Kafka'. It is both the strength and perhaps the occasional weakness of *Stepper* that it reads like nobody other than Brian Castro.

In a final irony fitting to close this section on critical reception, the most negative review<sup>110</sup> came from Peter Craven, the critic whose praise of Castro's style I used in my opening Chapter to set a context for discussing Castro.

Craven forthrightly asserted that '*Stepper* is a Castro book that doesn't work at all.'

The material would appear to require a certain narrative propulsion but Castro is not remotely interested in his own thriller material except as the pretext for self-consciously 'literary' meditation. Nor is he interested in

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<sup>109</sup> Robin Gerster, 'A Border Crosser's Secret Service', *Bulletin*, vol. 116, No. 6064, 29 March 1997, pp. 74-75

<sup>110</sup> Peter Craven, 'Drifting Away from the Thrill of it All', *Sunday Age*, 6 April 1997, Agenda p. 8



his characters as any sort of simulacra of human beings. The upshot is a book that is maddeningly half-baked at the level of action and representation, the style of which—and it displays elegance on elegance like so many layers of varnish—come to seem, quite early on, like an insult to the reader's intelligence.

Craven applauds 'the glorious Virginia-Woolf-eat-your-heart-out Castro style', but likens it to 'the icing on a non-existent cake'. Apparently there is not enough base story for Craven, and the writing style is too heavy-handedly pretentious for the insubstantial tale it relates. 'Castro, however, disappears up his own artifice. *Stepper* is an appallingly inept high-brow thriller that adds insult to injury by being rank with the smell of prose poetry'.

This curious apparent reversal of his earlier judgements of Castro's ability—which unfortunately smacks of some sort of *ad hominem* vituperation—provides an interesting paradox on which to end this survey of Castro's novels. If nothing else, Craven's assessment typifies the broad reaction to Castro's writing, which certainly succeeds in arousing its readers, whether to raptures of enjoyment or frustration. Castro's writing is *never* anodyne!

It is a shame to see much of the above criticism focussing on the reviewers' particular hobbyhorses (such as 'historical accuracy'), and failing to recognise the cocktail of possibilities provided by *Stepper*. While the intellectual concerns provide one way of approaching the novel, they do not abolish the more straightforward readings that are also constituents of the novel: *Stepper* is, among other things, a love story, a tragedy, and as Helen Daniel noted, a gripping espionage thriller. For those whose sympathies are in tune with Castro's, *Stepper* has much to offer, and subsequent re-readings only increase the recognition that Castro has once again achieved a novel of rich complexity that repays detailed engagement on the reader's part.

## Chapter 11

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# Making Life Strange: Themes and Concluding Remarks

The virtue of uncertainty ... is the beauty of eschewing absolutes.<sup>1</sup>

Brian Castro has written six novels on vastly different subjects, and yet each is distinctively a 'Castro' novel. While the writing style is obviously one factor in identifying Castro's writing—in Chapter 10 I drew attention to Robin Gerster's remark about *Stepper* that 'it reads like nobody other than Brian Castro'—it is more his central concerns that consolidate his corpus. Castro himself has admitted that he focusses on the same major concerns, and Evelyn Juers commented on this:

Isn't it curious how novelists write the same story over again? How the best ones discover for themselves, for us, the most uncanny variations of their Ur-narrative? ... Despite changes of style and subject—and Castro has been more adventurous than many Australian writers in both these fields—like totems and taboos, like sites of perpetual irresolution, the underlying concerns have stuck.<sup>2</sup>

This is not meant as a criticism—Juers praises his creativeness in discovering the 'most uncanny variations' of his 'Ur-narrative'—but it does indicate Castro's serious concern with issues that he thinks worthy of investigation in the novel.

When comparing the six novels it is noticeable that *Birds of Passage* and *After China* are linked by their lyricism and generally controlled tone, and by the relative degree of closure. The characters show some degree of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Writing Asia', p. 18

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Juers, 'A Rich Cocktail', *The Australian's Review of Books*, April 1997, pp. 3–4

development, and are more 'rounded out' in E.M. Forster's terminology. Character development is always limited in a Castro novel, but *You Bok Mun* and *Shan* are more believable as characters than most of Castro's inventions, who often provide agency for their author rather than impressing us as totally believable 'people'. (Pomeroy is at times identifiably 'human', but the novel undermines any sense of character development.)

*Pomeroy* and *Double-Wolf* can also be coupled as the 'novels in overdrive', where the linguistic tricks, compulsive punning and self-undermining plot turn these novels inwards on themselves.

In contrast, *Drift* is perhaps a lone entity, extremely dense and philosophical, weighted with melancholy and unrelieved by lighthearted joking (the abundant wit is sardonic), while *Stepper* is in many ways a return to the style of *Birds of Passage* and *After China*, lyric and elegiac at times, with a jokey sense of humour, but more detached and cerebral.

The conclusion, however, is that the novels have more in common than they have points of difference, and the shared core is the central ideas driving the narratives.

### **Mutation and change**

Much of Castro's oeuvre is concerned with multiplicity and mutation. All is in flux, as 'reality' flows around us and our conception of the world changes momentarily. The germ of this concept is at least as old as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Expressed in contemporary terms:

By mid-century, many came to see truth as [William] James had described it, as a workable relationship in time with no knowable *a priori* of absolute status. The only reality that can be known is a contingent synthesis rescued by sheer force of human will from a Heraclitean ocean of flux.<sup>3</sup>

Castro's position is to embrace change. Bemoaning the arrested state of cultural identity in Australia, he argues that its cause is the attempt to block change and hold to a static position:

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1991, p. 372

Australia, of course, has always been in transition, as far back as Aboriginal memory, European history, mankind in transit between one state of mind and the next, moving between totalising and differentiating. Countries are always in transition, societies are always changing; continents drift, policies realign. The mistake, I think, has been to believe too much in the static notion of culture ... What stops transition? ... Cultural defensiveness, unemployable myths drawn from the past and projected into the future, cultural discourse which draws up boundaries about what a national literature is or should be ... all these things ensure tradition without acknowledging a blind spot: that it took a form of transition to bring them into being. Essentially, of course, art is praxis, but we often tend to put the cart before the horse, by placing ideas above the work itself.<sup>4</sup>

Castro's novels explore multiple possibilities, disrupting received notions to see whether there is a better way of looking at or explaining the world around us.

So the writer's task is to nail down the paradox. *Para-doxa*. Contrary to received opinion. In a book on the Belgian painter René Magritte, Michel Foucault speaks of the *heteroclite*, which he defines as things 'laid, placed or arranged in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a common place beneath them all'.<sup>5</sup> The common place, of course, is chimerical. Religious, ideological and tragic wars have been fought in the name of such Utopias, when the role of politics was to cast the illusion that life could be easy and the future untroubled. In heterotopias, on the other hand, things are cast adrift. Old hierarchical models are discarded for lateral provocation in which the imagination is allowed to roam. It is the valuation of this disparity that is common. *This* has become the common value: a kind of lateral thinking which is not a prescription for anarchy but is a catalyst for regional and international connectiveness. Not a prescription for *dislocation* but a *location* for the unfamiliar.<sup>6</sup>

A 'heterotopia' is the kind of world or world-system that Castro aspires to. A heterotopia is a system that allows multiple values and disbelieves the possibility of a uniform, dominant system. By inference to believe in unitary systems is a kind of existential torpor, and it is the duty of the writer to disturb any complacency in slack thinkers. 'So,' Castro says, 'I am quick to identify what drags like seaweed on the moving keel of culture.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 'Heterotopias', pp. 178-179

<sup>5</sup> The word 'heteroclite' was common in 17th- and 18th-century English, meaning 'Deviating from the ordinary rule or standard; irregular, exceptional, abnormal, anomalous, eccentric' (OED). Sterne uses it in *Tristram Shandy*. (Magritte and his pipe appear in *Stepper* where the spies use them as part of their code. Foucault's study of Magritte is titled *This is not a Pipe*.)

<sup>6</sup> 'Heterotopias', p. 179

<sup>7</sup> 'Heterotopias', p. 179

Another of Castro's key terms is hybridity,<sup>8</sup> which is related to mutation. All forms are changing and interacting; all forms are hybrids. For Castro this is not a negative concept (the loss of the 'pure'), but offers possibilities of acting and interacting from different viewpoints.

Brian Castro sees himself as a hybrid character, racially as well as by temperament and philosophy. He regularly draws attention to his mixed nationality and sides with others of mixed construction.

Hybridity was the sort of crossing or chiasmus I had to make even before I began to write. And my ancestors had made these before me. People were transported across and arranged in sites totally alien to the surface familiarity of the world. I wanted to evoke that diversity.<sup>9</sup>

Hence hybridity is a common theme in all Castro's writing, from his characters (from Seamus O'Young to Victor Stepper), to his eclectic writing style and genre transgression, to his miscegenation of fact and fiction.

### **Repetition**

Castro uses repetition as a variant of non-linearity (see Chapter 3). Not only do events often loop back on themselves, but elements of the novel often repeat or echo other elements. This happens both at the level of words and the level of narrative. Castro admits that, when reduced to the basics, all his novels are about death and he is, in a sense, repeating the underlying theme in each novel. Within a novel there are often parallelisms in the narrative; *Birds of Passage* is the most obvious, but in *Drift* the two B.S. Johnson narratives inform each other, and Stepper and Isaku parallel each other.

But repetition also operates at a linguistic level in Castro's fiction. Some thematic elements are repeated throughout novels—ships, drownings, and seedy decay crop up regularly—and certain character types seem at times to recur, sometimes with similar names.

The technique is used powerfully in *Birds of Passage* to link the two narratives. At first it is subtle, and the reader overlooks it; suddenly one

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<sup>8</sup> I have dealt with hybridity in a separate paper. See Michael Deves, 'Brian Castro: Hybridity and Identity', in *Land and Identity. Proceedings of the 1997 Conference*, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1998, pp. 220-225

<sup>9</sup> 'Heterotopias', p. 180

becomes aware that there seem to be two characters called 'Clancy/Fitzgerald'. The reader thinks he/she is confusing the storyline. But soon it becomes obvious that this repetition is deliberate, and Castro is making the repetition obsessive, until it seems as if everyone is doubled. The effect moves from subliminal, to uncanny, to over-determined. It is apparent that Castro is reinforcing the idea of repetition and cycles; nothing is new, everything is interconnected.

Castro also carries over names or character types from novel to novel. This is partly his need to deal with the same character type—for example, the unattainable woman, Estrellita and Reiko, perhaps even Mary from *Birds of Passage*—and partly an authorial device—the name Fatima/Fatiminha is carried from *Birds of Passage* to *Pomeroy*.

Repetition also carries with it a sense of compulsion. Castro acknowledges this link with Freudian repetition compulsion.

I am more in tune with Freud when he puts forward the notion of 'repetition-compulsion'. The ritualisation of a suppressed feeling is in my view a means of working it out by 'placing' oneself in the path of the uncanny; and it is through the uncanny that Freud, and ultimately others like Heidegger, can derive the angst which provides a choice between inauthenticity and self-possession. This is the 'terrible freedom' Sartre and others have spoken about.<sup>10</sup>

Repetition is ritualisation, moving the ordinary out of the ordinary by giving it uncharacteristic significance, and thus new 'meaning'.

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to MD, 11 November 1997

## Intertextuality

Castro [has] suggested that good writing should be in dialogue with other, already existing literature.<sup>11</sup>

Intertextuality can be seen as an extension of hybridity. The characters in the novels are hybrids, but so are the novels themselves as artworks. They often have a very disjointed structure, with little attempt at continuity of narrative, and can even look ‘pieced together’. Several stories or several layers of narrative may run together throughout the novel, occasionally ‘crossing over’ to influence the others. The most obvious case is the parallel structure of *Birds of Passage*, in which the two narratives gradually begin to influence each other. While it is to be expected that Shan’s historical narrative would influence his descendant Seamus—a traditional literary convention—Castro’s point of departure, and stroke of genius, is to have Seamus retroactively ‘influence’ Shan, so that his narrative becomes partially proleptic.

Similar influences can be found at work in *Drift*, where the stories of early whalers, Aborigines, their descendants, and a fictional version of a historical British writer work their influence on each other. The multi-racial descendants—Thomas and Emma McGann—identify with their Aboriginal ancestors, Thomas doing so physically. The outsider B.S. Johnson becomes involved with their story, and feels the haunting influence of history. But, perhaps just as interestingly, the novel is a combination of these historical inputs—early colonial Tasmania, B.S. Johnson the novelist—and Castro’s fictional narratives.

Many of the novels invoke other writing or literary criticism and theory. *Birds of Passage* and *Pomeroy* are rich in their references to literary debates, and Castro often parodies literary styles (genre such as detective fiction, historical fiction) or views (Guitierrez arguing literary theory and philosophy in a bar). At times this seems related to the action of the novel, but quite often it seems that Castro is simply enjoying himself as a writer, entertaining us with asides. Castro enjoys the novel as ‘game’, as when in *Stepper* he quotes lines from Modernist poets in out-of-context situations.

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<sup>11</sup> Libby O’Loughlin, ‘Talking to Writers’, *Redoubt*, No. 21, 1995, p. 114

Fact and fiction also work intertextually. Castro combines the two (in *Stepper* and *Double-Wolf*) in ways that blur the distinction and subvert the traditional 'authority' of fact over fiction.

### **Alienation and Identity**

Castro is concerned with being (or existence) as this is manifested in everyday life in terms of identity and alienation. All his novels revolve around this theme, whether it is the self-examination of Seamus in *Birds of Passage*, Pomeroy in *Pomeroy* or Victor Stepper in *Stepper*. In Castro's novels there is usually little sense of his characters developing, and this is perhaps best explained in terms of the Existentialist notion that life is a continuous act of choice, and that there is no reference point from which to measure 'development'. The concept ties in with mutation, mentioned above. Everything constantly changes; new choices are required at every minute.

At the end of *Birds of Passage* Shan is shown as understanding better his position in the universe, and of having learned to combine some of the lessons he has learned in Australia with his Chinese nature.

Preparing to resume the life he had led in China, he was also conscious of the immense changes in himself. He was on a different path now, in control of his destiny, and he brought with him something of the void he had experienced in Australia, the silence and the stillness that helped him to accept his microscopic role in the eternal recurrences of nature. Pursued by ghosts threatening to overwhelm him, he willed the ship to fly ...<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that Shan has not 'overcome his problems'; he is still 'pursued by ghosts threatening to overwhelm him', but aware of the need to go forward.

### **Myth – life as story**

In Castro's thinking another important element is the notion that we interpret our world around us by 'writing narratives' about it, that is, constructing myths or stories that connect events around us in 'meaningful' ways. Writing itself is an important metaphor in each of the novels.

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<sup>12</sup> *Birds of Passage*, 153-4



Castro makes similar claims for the power of story as the Structuralist anthropologists do,<sup>13</sup> namely, that story appeals to something primal or primary in our brains, and can work at a sub-rational level to explain the non-rational aspects of the world around us. Castro also makes powerful use of story as a way of transcending ‘reality’ (as, for example, in *After China*). Myth is a way of transcending the limits of language.

Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells. Myth is language functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling.<sup>14</sup>

This quote is taken from Lévi-Strauss’s *Structural Anthropology*, and there is a strong resonance in this quote with Castro’s notion of myth-as-story, where language is functioning at a level where meaning ‘takes off’ and transcends the reality of the world, in the sense suggested in Chapter 2.

Castro suggests that myth is a means of organising information about our world, but he argues that myths must never be allowed to be static, but must be continuously interrogated and re-thought. Myth may arise from many types of discourse, such as history, legend, cultural identification, images, art forms and even advertising.

Myth is a kind of narrative story that can be used as a model—for example, many Australian men model themselves on the Australian cultural myth of the ‘bronzed Aussie’, a type that has come down through the stories of Lawson, Paterson and others. The point is that these men are more or less living inside a story that they write to fit their life into the world around them. They are playing a part, in a narrative, not just modelling themselves on an abstract typology. And of course we all do this to some extent, relying on fictions to give us ways of interpreting the world and reacting to it.

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<sup>13</sup> Some of Castro’s ideas can be traced through Structuralist thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, who is formally acknowledged in the credits for *Drift* (Castro acknowledges Lévi-Strauss’s chapter on ‘Myth and Forgetfulness’ in *The View from Afar*). (But he also features as running joke in *Pomeroy*!)

<sup>14</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, p. 210, quoted in Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Routledge, London, 1983, p. 43

There are problems with such myths. They may not be constructive conceptions. Is the 'bronzed Aussie' a suitable role model? Is it a suitable role model today, allowing that it may once have been in the past? Should a Japanese (for example, Isaku Ishigo) aspire to being a Samurai? And is it possible to enact a myth if those around you do not share that myth? It would be difficult for an Australian man to live out a Japanese Samurai myth, which is exogenous to Australian culture.

Myths are not just 'stories' in the fairytale sense. They are also the developed systems we construct to explain our world to ourselves 'rationally'. Thus science, philosophy, even religion, represent 'myths' we construct to explain the world and provide us with reasoned ways in which we might respond to the world. Unfortunately these 'rational myths' are closer to fairytales than we would usually like to admit. While it is obvious that institutional religion is obviously a myth—with competing versions which can never produce the 'ultimate truth' that is their stated aim—it is becoming increasingly apparent that 'hard-headed science' is also susceptible to myth-making. While science can make limited claims to disinterested cause-and-effect utility, it has never been able to achieve the rock-solid dependability that its proponents want to claim for it. So it has been the case that different versions of science—different 'myths'—have fought with each other over the centuries, trying to claim the right to explain the physical world to us reliably.

But one myth gives way to another as it proves to have been inadequate. The Ptolemaic universe was replaced by the Galilean, which eventually developed into the Newtonian. This universe served us well, until Einstein revolutionised our world view with his Relativistic universe. Einstein's universe is a very strange one indeed. When time is relative and can be stretched or compressed, and when space curves, our reliance on rationality is undermined completely. It is not possible for the lay person to comprehend or 'picture' the Einsteinian cosmos intellectually. The concepts just do not work in our minds, which have been trained to believe that a straight line is straight, and that time is invariant. The concepts have a bizarre character that is anti-rational or anti-logical, although they can be mathematically 'proved' to be 'rational' and 'logical'. The Einsteinian cosmos is a 'myth' that need not affect us in most of our daily life. It has important consequences for astronauts, astronomers and particle

physicists, but for most of us Newton's 'superseded' system is still the adequate 'myth' that explains most of our physical world to us.

In what Ruland and Bradbury suggest is 'an age of cultural glut that has been called an age of no style', the need for rediscovery and recovery is as powerful as it ever was.

All our stories have changed, but the fundamental task of stories—to help us discover for us the meanings we need and the tracks of the imagination down which we might reach them—remains, but anxiously, the same.<sup>15</sup>

And so Castro interrogates cultural myths, such as 'race' (*Birds of Passage*), 'psychoanalysis' (*Double-Wolf*), and 'history' (*Drift*).

Myths are not bad things in themselves. We use them to explain our world to ourselves, to make 'stories' of the apparently random facts and occurrences around us. In philosophy this is termed our *Weltanschauung*, our 'view-of-the-world'. But just as the philosophers and psychologists have shown that our *Weltanschauung* is a construct, so have philosophers of science shown that science itself is a construct, which varies over time as generations come and go. The philosopher T.S. Kuhn argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*<sup>16</sup> that science myths/paradigms are not dispassionate and absolute, but are constructed by people to explain the world around us, and then challenged by other paradigms which claim to work better. No paradigm is absolute, stable and lasting (though some serve very well for a very long period of time).

Castro argues that myths are important, but they are, *always*, constructs and are never immutable. It is not dangerous using myths to explain the world around us, but it *is* dangerous to leave myths unchallenged. Like the Kuhnian model of science, myths must be constantly reviewed and challenged, not *necessarily* to displace them, though this will sometimes be the case, but to test the current validity of prevailing myths.<sup>17</sup> This is why

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1991, p. 392

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962. Kuhn uses 'paradigms' rather than 'myths'. See also footnote 17.

<sup>17</sup> The epistemologist Karl Popper defined the 'truth' of scientific theories in terms of their being robust to exactly the sorts of questions that might disprove them. The 'best' science is that which tests itself against counter-claims, and which withstands constant 'reviews'. A weak theory is not only one that fails its tests, but also one that

Castro describes himself as a 'destroyer of myths', pushing at the boundaries of accepted thought. Castro quotes with relish the Japanese novelist Oe Kenzaburo:

It is the second job of literature to create myth. But its first job is to destroy myth.<sup>18</sup>

This is not, according to Castro, a negative function; myth is destroyed by replacing it with a new one. The novelist, therefore, generates the new and more potent myths. A novelist is therefore a creator, with a generative function like Shelley's 'foreseer'.

However, we should not see Castro as some sort of crusading white knight. He is careful not to be too optimistic. This is Castro's reply to a suggestion that he sees myth analysis as a positive impulse:

I would probably take issue with you over the statement that my aim is to regenerate myth. I think you invest me with more positivity than my natural pessimism allows. However, you may be seeing things I have not noticed. But this is worth developing. I have a rather ambiguous relationship with myth in any form because of my distrust of its mass-potential (cf Canetti on *Crowds and Power*). Also its popularism rubs against my demands for (anarchic) or democratic individualism. However, I don't deny that there is a kind of righteousness about myth which holds societies together, but this seems to offend against any 'morality of insight' seeking to arbitrate between a powerful and positive imagination not welded to a nation-state and a necessity to feel forever an exile. Perhaps this is where I part company with many Australian writers. My relationship to Australia is problematic; my relationship to literature isn't. Where to set the experience then? Well, in an allegorical realm ... perilously close to the mythical. You see the approaching paradox.<sup>19</sup>

One of our most pervasive myths is 'history'. Like other theorists who have argued for the contingency of history, Castro considers history to be a result of our myth-making: we tell stories to make the past intelligible to us. History is a fluid commodity, and Castro feels at liberty to re-interpret history as if it were a story to retell in new forms. Thus any 'history' is a variant 'reading'; there is no one history. *Double-Wolf* has the following as one of its epigraphs.

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has no testable outcomes or predictions; if it cannot be subjected to test, then it is by definition suspect.

<sup>18</sup> *The South China Morning Post*, Saturday, 29 April 1995; quoted in 'Writing Asia', p. 7

<sup>19</sup> Letter to MD, 22 September 1997

Only for the egoist and the dogmatist ... is there one 'history' only. The rest of us live with the suspicion that there are as many histories as there are people and maybe a few more ...<sup>20</sup>

Castro re-tells the Wolf-Man case history and the Richard Sorge story, and works his historical backgrounds into his novels imaginatively rather than slavishly.

### **The great drives: sex and death**

As outlined in Chapter 2, death is in a sense the fundamental question behind all Castro's writing. Characters are facing the eventuality of their death, which may be imminent (as in *After China*) or indeterminate; 'yet it will come', as Hamlet realised. At all stages death is the 'problem' that must be faced in life. Our only means of transcending death—however briefly—are through story and sex.

Sex in Castro's novels is a primal driving force. On a physical level it is the passion that moves us to act, and on the metaphysical/ontological level it is what allows us to transcend our circumstances. In *After China* Castro invokes the Chinese theories of sexual practice as a way of stepping outside time (although Castro does not take up the possibility of immortality via procreation<sup>21</sup>), and in *Pomeroy* he describes Pomeroy's couplings with Estrellita as transcendental experiences.

Sex is also a powerful healing force. In *Birds of Passage* both Shan and Seamus are 'saved' by sexual healing. Reiko in *Stepper* nearly 'saves' Stepper. In these cases the restorative power is ontological, in that it gets the characters to act against the torpor into which they have fallen, and to re-experience their life.

But there is also in Castro's novels a dark side to sex, the obsessive drive. It is a representation of unfulfillable desire, and it can also become a perverted drive, leading to lust and corrupted relationships. In *Double-Wolf* sex is a psychic drive which has a powerful influence on Wespe and his sister, but rarely blossoms out into wholesome relationships. In *Birds of*

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<sup>20</sup> Preliminary pages, *Double-Wolf*. The quotation is from Robert Coover, *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?*

<sup>21</sup> Shan's offspring seems necessary only to provide a line of descent for Seamus. The 'immortality' provided by Sperm McGann's lineage is a compromised one. Pomeroy is forbidden a child by Estrellita.

*Passage* sex can be a healing force (for Shan and Seamus), but it is never far from brothel lust and can result in curious manifestations when blocked (Fatiminha). In *Drift* sex is more often than not perverted (Johnson's wife Ainslie), and at times violent (McGann and WORÉ). In *Stepper* we are presented with a mechanical protagonist unable to respond to the warmth offered by Reiko, or any other of his conquests.

Thus sex in Castro's novels is multivalent. As well as conventional sex with its redeeming powers there are suggestions of anal sex, cunnilingus,<sup>22</sup> masturbation, and compromised sexualities such as Fatiminha in *Birds of Passage* and Stella Wang in *Pomeroy*.

Not surprisingly, love is also problematic in Castro's novels. It is something that cannot be understood, and which tends to be experienced as a loss or an aching. There is only one instance where love could be said to be a transcending experience and that is the relationship of You Bok Mun and the Woman Writer in *After China*.

On the other occasions when love is shown as a redeeming quality it is hard to disentangle love as the relational commitment from the sexual aspects. Thus in *Stepper* an important theme is Reiko's love for Stepper, but the relationship is a highly sexualised one, and there is little development of Reiko's position as someone who *loves* her lover. This is not to say it is not there, or not strong, only that it is not developed directly from Reiko's point of view.<sup>23</sup> Rather it is seen through Victor Stepper, who although he feels the pull of love, cannot respond to it humanly because he is such an internal blank, unable to commit himself. Thus the love which Reiko genuinely offers to Stepper—along with sexual love and fulfilment—becomes another example of love as the unsatisfied yearning that permeates most of the novels.

Love is an important theme in *Birds of Passage*, but the main relationships are again inextricably associated with sexual commitment. Both Mary and

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<sup>22</sup> This is not only suggested in the sex scenes (for example, *Pomeroy*), but used in jokes, for example, the stutterer in *Stepper* (p. 115), and *Double-Wolf*, 'Herr Truth and Herr Cunninglingus' (p. 87)

<sup>23</sup> Castro is sometimes labelled a blokish writer; see, for example, Moha Melham, 'Who's Afraid ...', Marion Campbell, 'Double Writing/Bracketing Women'; Evelyn Juers, 'A Rich Cocktail', David Gilbey, 'When Hsui Means Shu'.

Anna 'redeem' Shan and Seamus through their love and generosity, but it is a generosity described in sexual terms: both give their bodies. Anna Bernhard is patently the instrument of Seamus's 'redemption'; it is her commitment of her body that finally awakens Seamus out of his psychological torpor.

*Pomeroy* more precisely captures the flavour of love as seen by Castro. The focus of the whole novel is the unattainability of love, embodied by the desirable person of Estrellita. Love is seen in terms of unfulfillable desire. In answer to a question about the significance of Estrellita Castro has written: 'Estrellita has become a symbol or emblem of the way writing can never approach the desire for completion/consummation'.<sup>24</sup>

While *Pomeroy* and Estrellita are shown as soul-mates in *Pomeroy*, two people with an intuitive appreciation of each other, their love is a kind of obsession that cannot be completed. And *Pomeroy* is permeated by unsuccessful love: Stella Wang (another incarnation of 'Estrellita', the star) and Rory Harrigan are as unsuccessful as *Pomeroy*.

To sum up the thematic concerns of Castro's novels, they all relate to the central concern—the great 'Ur-narrative'—which is the struggle with existence. The novels therefore examine the same thematic concerns in different settings. Castro's characters are *bound* to feel adrift in a strange and uncanny universe, with rare and limited experiences of transcendence, and without the possibility of answers supplied by their author and progenitor, there will be no means of resolution in a Castro novel.

### Central impetus in Castro's novels

Castro's work can be seen as an attempt to engage with the contradictions inherent in his world-view, to investigate through a world-in-the-novel the strange world around us. While he does not believe in a fixed reality, he does believe that there is a world to which we relate, and he approaches his task with the only means at his disposal, by experimenting through his writing. David Lodge has described the problem in these words:

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<sup>24</sup> Letter to MD, 15/9/97. However, in Castro's pregnantly titled recent collection of essays he admits that there is a person behind the symbol. When he came to Australia aged eleven, he left behind 'Estrellita, a twelve-year-old cousin who knew a lot more than I did and who ... told me love always ended with proximity.' 'Arrivals', *Looking for Estrellita*, pp. 11-12.

We 'know' that there is a reality outside language, but we have no means of describing it except through language: language, as someone succinctly put it, is an experiment without a control.<sup>25</sup>

This fits well with Castro's belief that writing is a way of experimenting with life (or 'reality'). But as Lodge reminds us, although the experiment might not be *out of* control, we have no absolute reference point that allows us to judge our position. This does not mean we are lost in solipsism or meaninglessness, just that no-one can ever give us the 'correct' answer. As one of John Barth's characters points out, the lack of an absolute standard does not mean we should not make the effort.

What I'm trying to say is that you shouldn't consider a value less real just because it isn't absolute, since less-than-absolutes are all we've got.<sup>26</sup>

If there are no absolutes, then there is no possibility of stasis, and to regard life as having static constructs is to delude oneself. What we need to do, according to Castro, is to continuously break out of static and moribund viewpoints, and recover the *strangeness* of life.

### Strangeness

Castro's sense of the world being a strange place originates from the Modernists' reaction to the Realism of the late nineteenth century. It began as anti-Realism (a reaction) and has developed during the course of this century into a more positive concept, irrealism, which does not argue simplistically that Realism is 'false', but that there is a role for non-real elements in our thinking, the position which Castro supports.

One of the basic tenets of early Structuralist studies was the concept of 'making language strange'. The idea surfaces early in the work of Viktor Shklovsky, with his concept of *ostranenie*, 'making strange', and can be traced through other related movements such as Brechtian theatre, with its notion of *verfremdung* or alienation (making the viewer of theatre feel that he/she is not simply watching harmless 'entertainment') and psychoanalysis, with the Freudian concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), which has a similar role in Existentialist philosophy.

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<sup>25</sup> David Lodge, 'Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach through Language', in *The Novelist at the Crossroads and other essays on fiction and criticism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971; p. 60

<sup>26</sup> Jake Horner in Barth's *The End of the Road*, p. 293



Castro's methods of recovering strangeness are various, and can perhaps best be viewed in terms of his oblique stance towards his art and towards his readership, the 'misrepresentation' of 'reality' that the Australian critic Helen Daniel has termed 'lying'.

In her 1998 critical analysis of Australian fiction Daniel coined the term 'Liars' for the contemporary Australian novelists who were working in this mode and 'celebrating the artifice of fiction'.<sup>27</sup> Daniel's 'Liars' were Peter Mathers, Nicholas Hasluck, Peter Carey, Murray Bail, Gerald Murnane, Elizabeth Jolley, David Foster and David Ireland.

Castro had only published one book, *Birds of Passage*, at the time, but he would no doubt be included if a new edition of *Liars* were to be prepared. In an *Australian Book Review* editorial published at the time of the launch of *Stepper* (Daniel launched the book), Daniel says:

Let me say straightaway Castro is both a double agent and a Liar (with a capital L), that is, a writer who plays with contradictions and ambiguities, lies and doubleness.<sup>28</sup>

Daniel begins her discussion with the observation that it is very easy to create logical/grammatical paradoxes, such as 'All Cretans are liars.' A more 'literary' paradox, which might well have been constructed by Borges or Carey, is the pair of sentences:

The following sentence is false.  
The preceding sentence is true.

While each of the two sentences on its own is linguistically harmless, their deliberate juxtaposition creates a paradox. This is precisely the sort of construction that a novelist like Castro is fond of introducing in his novels, much to the confusion and at times vexation of the reader. In his novels characters such as Shan and Seamus can contradictorily co-exist at a remove of 120 years. *Drift* is based on the confused co-existences of 'B.S. Johnson', a fictional character being 'written' by both Castro and another fictional character, Thomas McGann, and a real person, a dead novelist. We know we are being led a merry dance, but the novelist does not allow us to rely

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<sup>27</sup> Helen Daniel, *Liars: Australian New Novelists*, Penguin, 1988; p. 4

<sup>28</sup> *Australian Book Review*, No. 190, May 1997, p. 2

on logic and we cannot directly refute the novel's logic. Moreover, the paradox bears a striking resemblance to what happens in the 'real world' at times; people's behaviour does not always follow what we would logically expect.

I also have a stubborn belief that somehow what is going on in the *Liars'* work is just closer to the truth of things, the way things are now. It is of course a paradox that my sense of this 'truth' comes from the work of *Liars*. For me, the paradox is that, in the end, the *Liars* are more truthful, because they tell things the way they really are, the way they are in reality.

And in the end the lies we tell define us.

So do the lies we believe.<sup>29</sup>

Another example of paradox is the work of the Dutch artist M.C. Escher. His illustrations often employ visual paradoxes—water flowing uphill, steps running upwards and downwards at the same time—created by exploiting perspective.<sup>30</sup> Other illustrations show ambiguity, such as two hands drawing each other (and, implicitly, being drawn by the unseen 'real' artist). While Escher can be said to be employing artifice to produce these paradoxes, he does demonstrate convincingly that we cannot rely on our perceptions to give us the 'logical truth'. And there are plenty of instances in science—the so-called real world—where we cannot rely on our logic: quantum physics and Einsteinian Relativity are ready examples.

As pointed out in Chapter 9, Castro's novel *Drift* uses an Escher etching as its cover illustration to show a scene that can be read from left to right or right to left with equal intelligibility. The cover illustration obviously reflects the concerns of the novel which it frames. The use of paradoxes such as a drawing of a hand drawing a hand is at the centre of Postmodernism: the blurring of the distinction between the art and the artist. It is a technique freely used by Castro to disturb the comfortable 'normal' position of the reader with respect to the novel and its artistic creator, the author. Castro does not maintain a consistent stance of reflexivity as does say the narrator of Mark Henshaw's *Out of the Line of Fire*, but moves in and out of his novels in a way that defies consistent

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<sup>29</sup> *Liars*, p. 5

<sup>30</sup> Escher *enjoyed* setting up these paradoxes. 'I cannot help mocking all our unwavering certainties. It is, for example, great fun deliberately to confuse two and three dimensions, the plane and space, to poke fun at gravity.' Quote on calendar of Escher etchings, unattributed.

interpretation from the reader. Like Borges he asks us to accept unrealistic possibilities, such as dead narrators. Of course the novelist is not just setting up narrative paradoxes, but implying paradoxes of character or 'reality'.

Daniel spells out the problem in writing from the point of view of the reader, and shows why the writer might feel obliged to take up a 'contradictory' style to prosecute his/her aims. She imagines a dialogue between Reader and Writer/Liar. This extract is from her 'First Dialogue'.

- Reader* ... Let's stick to your job [writing]. You're supposed to work it all out beforehand, with beginnings and ends. And how about the endings [of contemporary novels]? They're like a loop that takes you right back to the start. Where does it all end? The self becomes an elaborate fiction, a strategy and an artifice. And all I see is chaos. I think it's all a distortion. Reality's not like that.
- Liar* You mean reality's not chaotic?
- Reader* Of course, but it's not supposed to be like that in art. If we can't order our experience through art, where then?
- Liar* You want us to pretend? Tell lies?<sup>31</sup>

The central problem for the contemporary novelist is whether to 'tell lies'. Are 'lies', paradoxically, the best way of representing the world? Are 'lies' the *only* way of breaking out of the constraining logic inherited from Western philosophy—linear, causal, deterministic?

This shift in the centre of gravity [the changed relationship between author and reader in the contemporary novel] represents a change of the old notion of man as a self-determining being at the centre of things, a notion which is premised on a logic of cause and effect. Our literary logic has tended to be linear. The mechanistic plots of the traditional novel are built on a causal logic in which events are decisive, bringing about direct consequences and leading to a conclusion. The logic of fiction has changed. Instead of the principles of integrity and unity, within which movement and dynamics take place, the New novel has a logic of contradiction and antagonism, of the dynamic contraries of experience that can cope with uncertainties, inconsistencies, double premises, paradoxes. Only by accepting the contradictions can we get outside the limits of our old imperialistic *sic et non* logic, which tries to impose a specious consistency on reality.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Liars*, p. 12

<sup>32</sup> *Liars*, p. 15

Daniel cites David Foster's *Moonlite*, a novel concerned with philosophical considerations, as an example of a new 'logic'. In this novel a character, Ar Wat, offers his notion of the 'truth of contradiction', which he calls 'Tlute'. 'Ah the Tlute the Tlute, who know what the tlute leally is my son? Gotta hold two views at once. The Tlute is not this, is not that, is a combination.'<sup>33</sup> As a scientist-turned-writer, Foster is concerned with the insufficiency of binary 'either/or' logic.

Ar Wat's 'Tlute' is the quantum logic of Niels Bohr's 'principle of complementarity', which accepts two mutually exclusive terms ('waves' and 'particles') as complementary, like two faces of an object which can never be seen at the same time but which must be visualised in turn to describe the object completely ... The corollary to Bohr's quantum principle is a new 'tolerance of ambiguity', breaking down the old antithesis of subject and object and closing the artificial gap between the knower and the known.<sup>34</sup>

The argument here is not so much that Western knowledge systems (science, logic, epistemology) are somehow wrong, but that they are inadequate and do not always tell us the whole story. Until we have something that equates with the grand 'Theory of Everything'—which many scientists argue is a quixotic impossibility—we need to accept that not everything is logically understandable.

Another way of phrasing the problem is Peter Carey's admission that 'truth' cannot be pinned down.

The minute I think of an answer to something I can always think of ten different things that contradict it. So, as meanings become more layered, more complex, and even self-contradictory, I feel like I'm getting closer to the truth.<sup>35</sup>

Another 'Liar', and one in many ways similar to Castro, is Vladimir Nabokov.

'Reality', says Nabokov, is a word that means nothing without quotation marks; fiction is a place where words do not simply attach themselves referentially to things; any literary type or structure can be open to

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<sup>33</sup> *Moonlite* p. 190. The word 'tlute' is a mock-Chinese pronunciation. This gives a comic-parodic effect, but Foster presents Ar Wat as a serious character, who is wise and not just parodic. His name is an ironic challenge to the laconic Australian terms 'Ah, what ...' and 'So what'.

<sup>34</sup> *Liars*, p. 17

<sup>35</sup> Giulia Giuffrè, 'Peter Carey Speaking', *Weekend Australian*, Magazine, 6-7 July 1985, p. 3

mockery, parody or 'intertextuality', a distorting intersection with some prior text. So Nabokov's narrators often emerge as liars or madmen, characters' names may be puns, anagrams or emblems, and art becomes a form of game-playing where an artist chases transcendent butterflies with a verbal net, seeking some fleeting imprint of the real.<sup>36</sup>

If traditional conventions between the reader and the writer are abandoned, the reader is left in a tenuous and often perplexing position. The *authority* of the author has disappeared. Daniel notes that:

Sarraute describes this as the 'Age of Suspicion', where reader and writer regard each other with distrust, confronting each other across empty ground, once the place of honour occupied by character. She suggests readers and writers have practically ceased to believe in character, with the result that

characters, having lost the two-fold support that the novelist's and the reader's faith afforded them, and which permitted them to stand upright with the burden of the entire story resting on their broad shoulders, may now be seen to vacillate and fall apart.

... The writer plots to dispossess the reader and entice him, at all costs, into the author's territory ... Suddenly the reader is on the inside, exactly where the author is, at a depth where nothing remains of the convenient landmarks with which he constructs the characters. He is immersed and held under the surface until the end ...<sup>37</sup>

Daniel suggests links between the New Australian novel and South American *nouveau roman* of writers such as Garcia Marquez, Borges, Carpentier, Fuentes, Asurias, Amado and Donoso. The connection between Borges and Castro is appealing, as he often writes of the

man caught in a trap of his own construction. Borges often uses the detective mode, with the detective pitting reason, scheme and plan against existence ... [sometimes] unwittingly constructing his own death-trap. In the work of the Liars, often the end loops back to the beginning, spiralling through the contrary workings of a 'secret plot'—the central notion of Borges' *ficciones*.<sup>38</sup>

This notion of looping back is one that Castro has used to describe his own writing, and the detective 'constructing his own death-trap' has immediate resonance with Jaime Pomeroy and Victor Stepper.

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1991, p. 388

<sup>37</sup> *Liars*, p. 21. Daniel is quoting Nathalie Sarraute, *Tropisms in The Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas, John Calder, London, 1973; pp. 84, 93-4

<sup>38</sup> *Liars*, p. 29

Daniel's metaphor of novelist-as-Liar provides a way of conceptualising the central impulse of Castro's writing. It suggests a view of him as an investigator and celebrator of strangeness.

### Summary: Brian Castro and Australian literature

At the beginning of this thesis I drew attention to Brian Castro's position as an experimental writer, and quoted Peter Craven's assessment that Castro stood out from contemporary Australian novelists. In the ensuing chapters I have outlined Castro's technique and analysed his novels, showing that he is a highly skilled and original writer. I would now briefly like to situate Castro in the context of Australian novel writing, and suggest that he does occupy a distinctive and distinguished position, especially in terms of his experiments in widening the scope of the contemporary novel.

In the tradition of Australian experimental writing, *Such is Life*, published in *The Bulletin* in 1903 and in book form in 1917, stands apart as a forerunner. In its complex structure, the book can seem quite contemporary: the novelist, Joseph Furphy, writes under an assumed persona ('Tom Collins'); Collins is a self-aware author, but at other times reveals things to the reader that he himself does not grasp; the novel jumps around in chronology. Collins even breaks off from his narrative to deliver a short lecture (for example, on Rory O'Halloran's religious background<sup>39</sup>) when it suits him, just as Castro does in *Birds of Passage*. In its tone, a gently self-deprecating irony, it stands out confidently from the Victorian realist novels of the time and the Lawsonian sentimental, bush-realism.

Furphy objected to the type of colonial romance made popular by 'Rolf Boldrewood' and Henry Kingsley ... As a result he made *Such is Life* as little in form like a conventional novel as possible and as much like the 'jumble of incident, dialogue, reflection, etc.' that he described life to be ...<sup>40</sup>

In this sense, *Such is Life* anticipates Modernism and Postmodernism.

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph Furphy ['Tom Collins'], *Such is Life*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1975, pp. 71-74

<sup>40</sup> William Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, 2nd edition, OUP, Melbourne, 1994; p. 728

Ironically, despite its intention of bringing to life the everyday life of Australian bush folk, the book is not easy to read. Indeed, it has been described as a book 'difficult to read, if increasingly enjoyable to reread',<sup>41</sup> again bringing to mind Castro's novels. Like Sterne's even more idiosyncratic *Tristram Shandy*, *Such is Life* stands apart in its context. Castro is very much a spiritual successor to Furphy.

After Furphy, there is little else in terms of experimental Australian novel writing until the experimental novelists of the 1970s started to overturn the received notions of literature. In Chapter 1 I briefly (and somewhat dismissively) passed over the first two-thirds of twentieth-century Australian fiction on the basis that there was not a vibrant Modernist tradition. (There was, on the other hand, a fairly vigorous anti-Modernist campaign, culminating in the notorious Ern Malley hoax.) Without wishing to trivialise the achievements of the novelists of this period, it is arguable that the experimental tradition in Australia did not gain significant momentum until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Transitional figures such as Patrick White and Christina Stead provide the prelude to this bold renaissance of Australian writing, but these two writers are not usually considered to be 'experimental'. Patrick White's later novels certainly established him as a distinctive and progressive writer, but did not offer the exuberant and confrontational experimentation that first appeared in the short story writing of the authors of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

### **The 1970s new writers**

As the 1970s brought into effect the social changes begun in the 1960s, younger avant-garde writers felt encouraged to break away from the traditions of the past and 'do their own thing'. They took as influences not just their English and American contemporaries, but Continental European influences (the French *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet, among others; Günter Grass, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Italo Calvino, the carnivalesque Russians) and the newly available/fashionable South American writers, such as Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

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<sup>41</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, p. 305

The public focus centred on the provocative *Tabloid Story* group (centred on Michael Wilding and Frank Moorhouse, but including Peter Carey, Morris Lurie and Barry Oakley), who set about being controversial as a means of breaking the grip of prudery and censorship that remained from the 1950s and 1960s. Peter Carey and Frank Moorhouse, in particular, emerged as experimentally creative forces. Carey's short stories that eventually formed the *Fat Man in History* were artfully and consciously Postmodern in a way that was new to Australia. In a quieter way, Moorhouse's discontinuous narratives helped break away from the connected, linear storytelling mode.

At the same time novelists such as David Ireland introduced bleak fictions that suggested the dream worlds of Kafka. Elizabeth Jolley began publishing her quirky, unrealistic novels. Murray Bail produced visions of Australia that looked at the realist position self-consciously and slightly askance.

While these novelists demonstrated idiosyncratic voices, they were not radically experimental in the sense that they moved away from the essential connection of storytelling with its readership. Even Peter Carey, who brought larrikin stories like *Illywhacker* and symbolic excursions like *Oscar and Lucinda* to the public, did not repeat the experimentalism of his short stories. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* goes closest, with its invented worlds and languages, but it is still essentially a narrative parable.

Brian Castro has produced novels that do not sit directly in this emerging Australian tradition. His one acknowledged Australian model is the later, high Modernist incarnation of Patrick White, whose ability to re-imagine a twentieth-century Australian consciousness Castro has taken on as a mantle. However, most of Castro's influences are overseas writers. Whilst it is possible to readily identify elements that derive from Kafka, Beckett and Bernhard, or an interest in lyrical inner consciousness writing that brings to mind Woolf and Faulkner, or elliptical tendencies that remind one of Eliot, Castro does not seem to fit a mould belonging to any one of these. The most useful comparisons are Joyce and Nabokov, partly because *they* do not fit well with any tradition. Castro shares with both a powerfully intellectual sense of play, which allows him to take up ideas and issues and



other works, and constructively *play* with them. He also enjoys jokes and puzzles, and shares with both writers a desire to hide and conceal from his readers, which occasionally borders on smug superiority. But at the same time he is a deep thinker about the concerns of existence, which he expresses bleakly and powerfully through his writing. Like Joyce and Nabokov, Castro is a misfit, at once too sad and sardonic to fit comfortably in his surroundings, and at the same time conscious of his failure, despite his undoubted intellectual abilities, to make 'sense' of the world around him.

Castro is often forthright in his stance—this can be seen in his provocative and occasionally combative essays—and in this sense can be compared with David Foster. Both authors are disdainful of their readers in the sense that they expect their readers to work at their novels, and neither suffers fools gladly. Both are confident of the merits of their own work. Curiously, they are not lofty about their position: in fact, both are engaging persons. It is just that they take their art seriously, and do not see it as a 'commodity' to be 'marketed'.

In this respect the reader of a Castro or a Foster novel can expect to have to follow the author through *his* way of making a novel. Typically, these authors will not follow 'conventions' of writing, such as beginning–middle–end, linear construction, consistent characterisation, or background setting. They introduce allusions that will not be familiar to readers; in Foster's case these are often arcane, and in Castro's they can become a minefield when the reader tries to untangle them.

Notwithstanding this, it is hard to consider Foster an 'experimental' novelist. *Moonlite* showed an experimental promise, especially in terms of language, that has not been carried through in most later work. *The Glade Within the Grove* is a bolder experiment, purporting to comment on a fictive text (*The Ballad of Erinungerah*, published separately, after *The Glade Within the Grove*.) In this regard it is like Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. But *The Glade Within the Grove* becomes a long digression of stories, asides and glosses

that do little to illuminate the ballad, and the stories themselves are basically conventional social satires.

In fact, Susan Lever has placed both Carey and Foster more or less outside the scope of Postmodernism.

Carey rewrites the work of Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Trollope and George Eliot into an Australian context, openly manipulating his characters for effect. Foster's writing is driven by the passionate contrariness of the satirist; if it is postmodern, it is so by the accident that satire feeds off any material that comes to hand.<sup>42</sup>

A writer with more claim to the title 'experimental' is Gerald Murnane, whose fictions have been genuinely out of the mainstream. Like a Jeffrey Smart painting, they look askance at what is happening in (somewhere like) Australia, but they are pared down and flat. A novel like *The Plains* has a looping Borgesian design, though without the quirky imaginings of the Borges short story. The atmosphere is flattened and contained, like a Beckettian universe. Murnane's prose also tends towards the laconic.

Looking at writers who have an intense linguistic style, Robert Drewe and Janette Turner Hospital provide examples of writers with a lyrical poetic style coupled with vivid imagination. Drewe's *Our Sunshine* provides a 'poetic' consideration of the Kelly legend, which gives the reader a sense of emotional participation similar to that which Castro provides. *The Drowner* combines myths from different sides of the world. But Drewe's work is not disruptively challenging in the way that Castro's is. Hospital's novels share with Castro's a linguistic facility and Postmodern techniques such as reflexivity, compromised linearity, complex plotting and extended metaphor, but they ultimately cohere as narratives, and rely on conventions of reading that make them approachable. Newer writers such as Richard Flanagan, James Bradley and Michael Meehan might also find a place somewhere in this company.

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Lever, 'Fiction: Innovation and Ideology', *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, eds. Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 328

In terms of avant-garde writers, Australia can offer few consistent practitioners. Mark Henshaw has written one self-consciously Postmodern novel, *Out of the Line of Fire*, but like Hospital's work, or Sue Woolfe's *Leaning Towards Infinity*, the text (ultimately) coheres. In another direction, John Kinsella produced an experimental piece, *Genre*, but this is hard to classify as a novel.

Two writers who *are* reminiscent of Castro are Tom Flood and Marion Campbell. Flood's *Oceana Fine* could almost have been written by Castro. It shares the complex, dislocated narrative, the poetic language, the querying psychology, the disregard for easy reading. However, one novel does not offer enough evidence for general comparison. A similar judgment might be made about Marion Campbell, whose *Lines of Flight* certainly offers some reason for her to be considered as avant-garde, with its hermetic narrative and poetic style, and its 'grappling with the problems for the feminine artist of a dominant masculine system and theory'.<sup>43</sup>

To conclude, although it is not possible to prove a case by dismissing instances that do not fit the criterion, there does not seem to be any Australian writer who closely matches Castro as a novelist. The affinities with international writers are more apparent, but it seems reasonable to argue that Castro is one-of-a-kind in Australian novel writing. His six novels are highly imaginative structurally, daring in their experimentation and linguistically brilliant. They are also confident enough to revel in their show. Castro tackles difficult themes from intellectually challenging viewpoints, aiming to bring these ideas to the reader in an experiential way. He takes bold risks, believing that his art will justify those risks, whether or not the novels meet with immediate critical approval. And overall, he has provided Australians with new ways of looking at their world, ones that break the stereotype of 'traditional', inward-looking

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<sup>43</sup> Susan Lever, 'Fiction: Innovation and Ideology', *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, eds. Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 318. Her second novel, *Prowler*, confirms that she is heading in this direction.

modes, and combine European, Asian and outward-looking modes, providing a fresh and forward-looking impetus in Australian literature.

In 1993, with four of Castro's novels in print, Andrew Riemer summarised his achievement to that time. His thoughts provide an appropriate summing up of Castro's achievement.<sup>44</sup> Recalling the award ceremony at which Castro was presented with the Victorian Premier's Literary Prize for *Double-Wolf*, Riemer concluded:

His achievement would have been unthinkable 25 years ago, when I doubt whether any publisher would have taken on board anything as quirky, oblique and demanding ... The formal recognition of Castro's work ... was an emblem of how thoroughly irrelevant the old certainties of what used to be regarded as 'Australian Literature' have become.

He is not the first 'multicultural' writer to have made a mark on the literary scene. He is, however, among the first of whom it may be said that such a label is entirely inappropriate. Castro is an Australian writer in the most important and fundamental sense ...<sup>45</sup>

It is rare to find an author whose novels repay repeated study. Brian Castro may be a difficult writer to approach for the first time, but like other complex and 'difficult' writers—such as Joyce, Nabokov, Faulkner, DeLillo or Pynchon—once the reader makes the effort to grapple with the novel *in a sympathetic frame of mind*, he/she finds a new world of writing opening up. Castro succeeds both at the level of the complete novel as a constructive work of art and the local level of the writing on the page. Castro is not afraid to tackle large themes: the mystery and the quandary of existence are fundamental. Castro approaches his themes with a candid honesty: there are no trivial solutions in his novels.

In a recent public lecture on the purposes of art in the community, Peter Sellars argued that it is the 'big problems' that art should be tackling, even though there will be no 'completion' of the task.

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<sup>44</sup> Riemer later wrote a favourable review of *Drift*, so unless he changed his mind when *Stepper* was published his views here can be considered a review of Castro's whole oeuvre.

<sup>45</sup> A.P. Riemer, 'Castro's Worlds' *The Independent Monthly*, 1993, Vol. 4, No. 7, February p. 27-28

Anything worth doing in life we will not complete in our lifetimes. Something valuable is defined by the fact that it is unattainable. That you don't know how to get there. The things that you understand and the things that are within reach are therefore by definition of less value, and it's when we are trying to do the things that are beyond our reach ... that something important is touched.<sup>46</sup>

Castro has been prepared to take on these impossible tasks, and to open them up to our perception. If the problems still seem baffling, it is only because they are too big to 'solve'. The Australian artist Albert Tucker said of his relationship to art:

For me, art stops with that moment of poised tension which remains just before the solution of an enigma, the sense of an impending encounter with the final truth. It does not attempt the blasphemy of reducing it to our human scale in order to possess it and glorify our ego.<sup>47</sup>

Castro is too intelligent to believe in the solution of enigmas, but brave enough to tackle them.

And as well providing continuing and significant thinking matter, there is always the 'local pleasure' of the writing itself. Castro is one of those rare writers whose work you can dip into, more or less at random, to enjoy the sheer pleasure of the text. The writing is witty, brilliant, allusive, and highly experiential. Earlier I quoted David Foster's preference for 'intensive' reading, where a text is studied over and over. Brian Castro seems to me the Australian writer, *par excellence*, whose work both repays and *deserves* repeated reading.

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Sellars, the Professor of World Arts and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles and Director of the Adelaide Festival of Arts, 2002, was delivering the 1999 Flinders University Investigator Lecture, 'Cultural Activism in the New Century'.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted by Susan McCulloch-Uehlin, 'The Final Word', *Weekend Australian*, 30-31 October 1999, Review p. 8

