Christos Tsiolkas's Style

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What kind of writer is Christos Tsiolkas? My purpose in this article is to take up a specific feature of Tsiolkas's writing, namely, his style. Tsiolkas's style has generally been understood as either incidental to what he is trying to achieve, or as one of his writing's least appealing qualities. Both are versions of the same argument, which Tsiolkas has encouraged from time to time: 'I'm not a stylist,' he said in an interview with Paul Somerville in 2002 (198). Andrew McCann comes to the same conclusion in *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity*, his assessment of Tsiolkas's fiction up until his 2013 novel, *Barracuda*. In the book's preface, McCann writes: 'No one should be reading Tsiolkas to experience the joys of stylistic refinement or just to be entertained' (xiv). For McCann, reading Tsiolkas 'just' for entertainment severs him from the political and intellectual contexts that give his writing resonance, a claim Ken Gelder queries when he notes McCann's indifference to 'amateur, ordinary readers' drawn to Tsiolkas's best-selling status (267). To my mind, what McCann says about style, that 'no one should be reading Tsiolkas to experience the joys of stylistic refinement,' is even more contentious and interesting. It is true that 'stylistic refinement' is not a quality many readers will associate with Tsiolkas. 'His fiction is plain and compelling, deliberately lacking poetics,' Rebecca Starford writes (171). For this reason, it is misguided to reclaim Tsiolkas as a practitioner of fine writing after all, as Peter Craven does in his review of the short story collection, *Merciless Gods*, because literary qualities like 'compositional grace' and the 'beautiful' remain largely alien to Tsiolkas's fiction. My reservation about McCann's comment is that 'stylistic refinement' is too limiting a category to account for Tsiolkas's relationship to style. By writing of 'the joys of stylistic refinement,' McCann treats both style and entertainment as detached from the real-world demands he believes Tsiolkas is making on his readers.

This article understands Tsiolkas's style as neither separate from nor incidental to his writing, but as a major component of his language, storytelling, aesthetics, and reception. I argue that Tsiolkas's style is an inarticulate style: a style that does not always use the right word at the right moment, that employs language for narrative utility rather than its own sake, and that sporadically departs from standard usage and correctness in ways that do not appear artistically motivated. Tsiolkas's inarticulate style shapes his thematic emphasis on the human body, his fiction's reporting of characters' psychological states, his formal pairing of narration and dialogue, and his ambivalence towards figurative language. Equally, style is an important consideration in understanding Tsiolkas's choice of the novel as his primary literary genre, and his reception as a prize-winning, best-selling fiction writer. My argument, which is as much about Tsiolkas's reception as Tsiolkas's writing, is also a contribution to recent debates about the purpose and vocabulary of Australian literary discussion: how critics debate the work of a culturally prominent author, how criticism and praise operate in critical judgements, and the significance of style in evaluations of literature.[1]

Style: Form, Scale, Reading

But what is style? Style refers to 'how a writer says things,' according to the Penguin *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* This includes:

> a writer's choice of words, his figures of speech, the devices (rhetorical and otherwise), the shape of his sentences (whether they be loose or periodic), the shape of his paragraphs—indeed . . . every conceivable aspect of his language and the way in which he uses it. (872)

Style is defined here as a quality of language, one that expresses a writer's skill and shaping intention. This formalist definition, gendered pronoun and all, presupposes the existence of a writer who is responsible for a text's style. This definition employs individualising metaphors to account for a writer's relationship to their style, such as the writer's signature or 'handwriting' (872). Appealing to style on these grounds serves a number of differentiating functions, separating literature from other uses of language and the literary writer from other users of language. Understanding a writer's style could proceed along these lines, which McCann partially suggests in his discussion of Tsiolkas's literary celebrity, focusing on how Tsiolkas's choice of fictional language has been tied to his individualisation as an author in the popular media (85).

One complication introduced by the Penguin definition relates to scale. If style is how a writer uses language, what is the proper scale for understanding a writer's style? The Penguin definition has some difficulty answering this question, starting small (words, figures, devices), expanding (sentences and paragraphs), before taking in 'every conceivable aspect of language' and admitting that style 'defies complete analysis or definition' (872). Style is elusive in this definition because it is encompassing; even Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* contains entries for both 'style as criterion' and 'style as enigma' (539). Here Catherine Gallagher's essay 'Formalism and Time' is helpful because it offers an account of style that is not impaired by ambiguity. Like the Penguin definition, Gallagher understands style as a species of form, adding that a literary text's style and structure can be differentiated heuristically owing to their associated reading practices: 'Form as structure comes into view only from a distance; form as style requires unusually close proximity' (231). To put this another way, style is associated with a reading practice that values particular language features, especially those language features imagined to become legible through 'close proximity' with a text: 'features of its individual sentences' and 'details,' for example (231). While Gallagher is describing the spatial metaphors employed by the close reading tradition rather than endorsing its theoretical assumptions, she is nonetheless pointing to the kind of interpretive activities Tsiolkas's critics have engaged in when they have considered his style.

These observations can be summarised by stating that style involves more than how a writer does or does not write; style is also about how readers read, the values and methods that are brought to bear on literature, and the language features suggested to be most relevant to a text's appreciation and understanding. This makes a writer's reception a useful compendium of views on style, especially if critics have expressed different beliefs on the significance of style in a writer's body of work. A writer's reception involves a variety of 'culturally formalised ways of publicly sharing our pleasures and displeasures,' in Sianne Ngai's description (954). Ngai's phrasing is particularly relevant to Tsiolkas's reception, given that his commercial success has introduced his fiction to a range of audiences, with often conflicting assumptions about the kind of writer he is. In what follows, Tsiolkas's style will

be considered in light of the reception of his fourth novel, *The Slap*. My focus is mainly book reviews published between the release of *The Slap* in 2008 and the novel's long-listing for the Man Booker Prize in 2010, and more recent academic criticism. While Tsiolkas's reception has no doubt been shaped by cultural factors, book reviewers and academic critics largely agree that style is one of the least appealing qualities of *The Slap*.

Tsiolkas's Reception: Criticism, Praise, and *The Slap*

Tsiolkas's style has never been synonymous with good writing. In 1995, Sydney's *Sun Herald* ran a story with the headline 'The Grungy Australian Novel,' quoting Ivor Indyk's blunt response to Tsiolkas's recently published debut novel, *Loaded*: 'I thought it had no great style or complexity. It's got energy, that's all' (Bennett). This is still a standard formula in Tsiolkas criticism: where Tsiolkas succeeds as a writer, he succeeds in spite of his style. Paul Dawson has suggested that the Australian print media was always more interested in grunge fiction's marketing than its aesthetics, yet the idea that grunge writers 'can't write, or at least not in a "literary" sense,' has remained part of Tsiolkas's reception in one form or another to this day (122). Every one of his novels since *Loaded* has met with at least one version of the charge that Tsiolkas 'can't write,' at the same time as he has become one of Australia's most prominent fiction writers.[2]

Based on its reception, *The Slap*, even more than *Loaded*, most confirms the idea that style is not one of Tsiolkas's virtues. A number of *The Slap*'s reviewers qualified their praise for the novel with criticism of its language features: 'the narrative has a compulsive quality' but 'the writing is utilitarian' (Skidelsky); the novel excels in 'the amazingly wide range of its characters' though 'the prose is pedestrian at times' (Johnston); 'its multiple perspectives work together to illuminate the difficulties of the issues it raises,' even with 'some ragged writing' (Ley); '[Tsiolkas] lays down an open narrative and then has the artistic courtesy to step back from it . . . the occasional off-the-shelf phrase' notwithstanding (Free); the novel has 'wide scope' though 'the prose can be clunky in places' (Mukherjee); it succeeds at 'threshold moments,' like the slap of the title, but 'it's a pity the novel is so one-dimensional, everyone's responses so similar, the language so uniform' (Denes). Even praise for *The Slap* describes the novel's style as a kind of anti-style: 'Tsiolkas is . . . painting an Australia we can recognise in language so good you don't notice it' (Swinn).

This synthesis does not encompass every reason that book reviewers have given for liking or disliking *The Slap*, as there was also praise for the novel's action and topicality, and criticism for its nearly 500-page length, frequent sex scenes, and sentimental ending (see Denes and Arditti for glosses on some of these topics). But what is noticeable in the reviews identified above is their subordination of *The Slap*'s style to its structure. This occurs often enough among reviewers to provide a general insight into the reading practices deemed most relevant to appreciating Tsiolkas's novel. Here is Catherine Gallagher's description of style once more: 'Form as structure comes into view only from a distance; form as style requires unusually close proximity' (231). Gallagher's distinction between structure and style is unwittingly echoed by reviewers who praise *The Slap*'s multi-perspectival structure but judge its style to be a liability. These reviewers imply that the ideal way to read *The Slap* is 'from a distance,' with the less tactful corollary that Tsiolkas can be a good writer, as long as you don't read his words too closely.

Another way of describing *The Slap*'s reception is to say that Tsiolkas's novel has a rudely paraphrasable quality, and so militates against the close reading tradition's insistence that a

novel's form and content should be inseparable. Reviewers made use of various metaphors when criticising the novel's style, with some reviewers likening the novel to an inexpertly made artefact: *The Slap* is 'ragged' instead of even (Ley), 'clunky' and not smooth (Mukherjee), 'off-the-shelf' when it could have been tailor-made (Free). Other metaphors praised the novel's 'wide scope' in representing Australian multiculturalism, in contrast to its 'one-dimensional' language. This suggests a tension in *The Slap*'s design, in that the novel emphasises diversity in its themes, structure, and character demographics, but not its style; 'everyone's responses [are] so similar, the language so uniform' (Denes), no matter which character is speaking or what their cultural background is.

Fredric Jameson once commented that style is more than the proverbial 'how a writer says things'; style makes the stronger claim that how a writer says something is identifiably 'characteristic' or 'typical' (viii). For some of *The Slap*'s reviewers, all of Tsiolkas is typical of Tsiolkas—Tsiolkasese—and this is the problem:

> *The Slap* is written in a more domesticated prose than the grippingly agitated *Dead Europe*, which leaves some of the more careless elements of his writing exposed (I lost track of how many times characters pointed their tongues out at one another). (Falconer)

Describing *The Slap* as 'domesticated' combines the novel's suburban setting with the sense that its language is unusually restrained, sensibly adding that there is a point at which a text's characteristic language features become predictable. In another review, some of Tsiolkas's linguistic mannerisms were singled out for puzzled attention:

> There are solecisms. One doesn't, for example, 'unsheaf' a condom. I'm not even sure you can *unsheathe* one. A condom *is* a sheath. Rappers don't 'sprout' bullshit, they spout it. And you don't 'tussle' a youngster's hair, you tousle it. (Free, italics in original)

Inarticulacy is the best word for what David Free and other reviewers have in mind when they write of *The Slap*'s lack of 'literary graces.' *The Slap*'s reviewers suggest that Tsiolkas's style is an inarticulate writing style, a style that sporadically but characteristically avoids using the right word at the right moment. Inarticulate style has been almost unanimously regarded as a negative quality in the reviews considered so far, reaffirming the idea that Tsiolkas's successes are in spite of his style. These partially negative reviews create a counter-blurb to the image of Tsiolkas as 'the prize-winning Australian author,' the latter cultivated by the fetishistic catalogue of his literary awards in some academic criticism. A different view of Tsiolkas's style is that his inarticulacy is not a shortcoming, but the result of conscious decisions about language: 'Refusing commercial slickness, sometimes to the point of feeling slapdash,' Tsiolkas's fiction appeals to '[readers] alienated by the tropes of an increasingly genteel literary fiction' (Falconer). In what follows, I look carefully at instances when inarticulate style contributes to *The Slap*'s overall design. I admit that it is counter-intuitive, if not downright bizarre, to imagine a novel being praised because it is inarticulate. Nonetheless, *The Slap* is notable among contemporary fiction in that what I consider to be Tsiolkas's worst sentences are the most revealing of his inclinations as a novelist.

Inarticulate Style: Psychological Representation, Figurative Language, and Patrick White

The Slap is a novel that can be most inarticulate when readers might most want clarity. On the last night of their disastrous Indonesian holiday, Aisha sits across from Hector at dinner and ponders the state of their marriage. The reader's understanding of this scene, with its Tsiolkasian insight that a successful marriage involves both partners amicably sublimating their distaste for one another, depends on the novel's ability to communicate Aisha's emotional state, which the following sentence can only do by fumbling its way from noun to noun to adjective: 'It was this distance between her intentions and her desire that was making her so weary' (405). Even the introduction of Hector on the novel's first page, as he wakes up from a dream on the fateful day of the slap, establishes his character very awkwardly: 'Afloat, still half-entrapped in sleep's tender clutch, he twisted onto his back and shifted the sheet off his body' (1). This sentence is overwritten, almost self-parodically inarticulate in its juxtaposition of lofty vocabulary ('afloat,' 'entrapped,' 'tender clutch') with domestic routine ('he shifted the sheet off his body'). This is one of several sentences on the first page introducing the reader's selective access to Hector's psychological state. Yet the way the literal and figurative energies of this sentence strain against each other frustrates the reader's sense of transparent entry into Hector's mind as he wakes up. Already on the first page, we start to see the difficulty Tsiolkas's novel has, sometimes sentence by sentence and word by word, making good on its premise of representing characters' psychological states, even as this premise is one of the enabling conditions of the novel's storytelling.

The sentence introducing Hector on the first page is significant because it contains in miniature the basic problem of *The Slap*'s multi-perspectival structure: what happens to a story when it attempts to give readers access to several characters' minds? *The Slap* is structured into eight sections, with each section titled with the first name of a character present at the backyard barbecue where four-year-old Hugo is slapped by Harry, Hector's adult cousin. Each of the eight named characters becomes the novel's physical, sensory, and psychological centre during his or her section. There are moments in the novel when inarticulate style works against its psychological representation, when the prospect of revealing a character's state of mind compels its language into greater obscurity: 'Her calmness assuaged the danger of his own impulsiveness' (11); 'He was still scowling heavily at her, she could sense it behind her back' (380); 'she and Harry would be forever partners in a strained dance of pretence and evasion' (406). The reader's knowledge of *The Slap*'s eight named characters is possible through a form of literary telepathy of the type Nicholas Royle discusses in his book on this topic, though in these examples Tsiolkas never allows the medium of language to disappear from view.

This is something of an exaggeration, since readers still learn a great deal about Tsiolkas's characters' psychological states over the course of the novel. Indeed, it is the characters rather than the reader who are uncertain of what those closest to them are thinking, forming partial impressions of each other through the external markers of speech, action, and facial expressions—Rosie's fury toward Harry is as much about the look on his face when he slaps Hugo as the slap itself (277). This gives rise to a strange phenomenon, in moments when the novel's characters exhibit a curiosity about reading each other's minds. For example, a remark about private schools makes Hector feel 'as if Gary had read his thoughts' (23), and he later wonders the same about Connie and their secret relationship (44). Over drinks with Aisha, Anouk remembers the day of the slap and is 'suddenly convinced that her friend was thinking exactly the same thoughts' as she is (71). Consistent with her characterisation, Rosie

power as well as obscurity, has a well-known critical history. Before Tsiolkas, Patrick White was of course the most high-profile Australian writer accused of not being able to write. The difference is that White's style is best understood as excessive rather than simply inarticulate; White 'doesn't know when to stop,' in Peter Wolfe's phrasing, his sentences often going to elaborate lengths to overwhelm language's narrative and explanatory functions (23). Carolyn Bliss suggests that White 'appears convinced that his medium will always be inadequate to his message,' and on these terms one of the paradoxes of White's exquisitely overwritten sentences is their foregrounding of language's communicative limitations (12). This is why White's *Riders in the Chariot*, for example, assigns an almost transcendental significance to characters' non-verbal experiences, as represented by Alf Dubbo's abstract paintings and the four riders' shared vision of a chariot in the sky. Unexpectedly, then, Tsiolkas's and White's manifestly different writing styles nonetheless involve some of the same assumptions about language. While no reader would confuse one of Tsiolkas's overwritten sentences or figures with one of White's, both writers are 'hobbled by words,' to use an observation that White made of himself in 1973 (34). To put this metaphor another way, both Tsiolkas and White are drawn to crossings between material and immaterial states that are not always containable within the language of the novel.

Tsiolkas's Reception: Repetition and Free Indirect Discourse

The danger in reinterpreting features of *The Slap* more typically regarded as shortcomings is that there is potentially no limit on what can be rationalised as part of the novel's design after all. In this respect, Wayne Booth's warning about unreliable narrators also applies to recuperative readings of style: a writer 'can get away with murder in this regard, providing himself with a pat excuse if we find weaknesses' (147). Recuperative readings may be a particular temptation in single author criticism, given the author's 'concentrated influence' on the critic, as Gelder writes in his largely negative review of McCann's book on Tsiolkas (264). This tendency is also sometimes present in Jessica Gildersleeve's study, *Christos Tsiolkas: The Utopian Vision*. In the chapter on *The Slap*, Gildersleeve responds to Melissa Denes's criticism that 'everyone seems to get angry in exactly the same way, in exactly the same words,' in Tsiolkas's novel. Gildersleeve agrees with this observation, but argues that it serves a legitimate purpose for Tsiolkas, since 'it is precisely this mindless, and mindlessly identical, rage and violence with which the novel is concerned' and 'which the novel criticises' (91). For Gildersleeve, the novel's 'notably repetitive aggression' draws attention to the myth of multicultural harmony (91), moving readers away from characters' reflexive antagonisms and toward 'an improved ethics of cultural understanding,' the utopian vision of her book's title (84). This is an original assessment of Tsiolkas's literary project, though Gildersleeve's argument would not account for most instances of inarticulate style I have discussed so far. Moreover, even if we accept that there is a reason for the repetitiveness of *The Slap*'s angry thoughts and words, this does not address Denes's original criticism, which is not about anger per se, but inarticulacy: 'everyone's responses [are] so similar, the language so uniform.' At most, Gildersleeve's account of *The Slap*'s repetitiveness applies to only one aspect of the novel's language, which in effect reaffirms what book reviewers have said about Tsiolkas's style being incidental to his writing.

In contrast, Kerryn Goldsworthy treats inarticulacy as central to *The Slap*, accounting for the novel's 'often rough and clichéd prose style' as a consequence of its use of free indirect discourse. The benefit of Goldsworthy's argument is that it takes into account more of *The Slap*'s language than characters' direct discourse, compared to Gildersleeve, whose examples are mainly drawn from dialogue and interior monologue. Goldsworthy offers a suggestive

explanation for what she calls the 'platitudes and obscenities' of Tsiolkas's language, which can often be attributed to both a narrator and a character. For example, Hector's section uses the phrase 'they fucked for ages' when describing his lovemaking with Aisha (49) and 'the weather was perfect' when introducing the day of the slap (17). As examples of free indirect discourse, both phrases are written in the third-person but are consistent with how Hector thinks and speaks about weather and sex. Goldsworthy agrees with Susan Lever that phrasings like these have a non-satirical function, or as Lever puts it: '[Tsiolkas] holds to a discipline of sympathy with his characters, no matter how repellent they may be, and restricts his own verbal range to the limits of their vocabularies.' The same argument could be used to account for the solecisms identified by David Free. It is not implausible that Connie might wonder how to 'unsheaf' a condom, considering she is about to have sex for the first time (208), or for Harry to describe a rapper 'sprouting some bullshit' (116), based on what the novel suggests elsewhere of his limited education and linguistic facility.

Who is Speaking? Narration and Character

The question of 'who is speaking?' is not nearly as ambiguous in Tsiolkas's novels before *The Slap*, all of which centre on a male protagonist telling a story about himself in his own words. For example, narration in *Loaded* is limited to Ari's first-person report and essayistic generalisations. *The Jesus Man* is a more mobile novel in its ability to narrate multiple characters' thoughts and speech, in the first person and the third person, though the frame chapters at the beginning and end of *The Jesus Man* nonetheless associate the novel with Louie Stefano, as he retrospectively interprets his family's tragic history. *Dead Europe* is similar in combining Isaac's first-person account of his travels with third-person narration in the parallel chapters that detail his mother's family curse. The presence of a third-person narrator differentiates *The Jesus Man* and *Dead Europe* from *Loaded* by introducing new contexts for understanding the protagonist beyond their direct experience. In both *The Jesus Man* and *Dead Europe*, third-person narration reveals how traumatic events that occurred before the protagonist's birth have shaped his self-understanding.

The Slap introduces two changes to Tsiolkas's storytelling. Firstly, no single character can claim substantial ownership over *The Slap*'s language, as is the case for Ari, Louie, and Isaac in their respective novels, and Danny in Tsiolkas's later novel, *Barracuda.* In *The Slap*, structuring the novel around eight characters gives the reader sympathetic access to different points of view, without one character being allowed to dominate (though Tsiolkas's perspectivalism is not limitless; 29 characters are present at the backyard barbecue that begins the novel but only eight characters receive their own section). Secondly, *The Slap* is unique among all of Tsiolkas's novels to date in that there is no first-person narrator. All eight sections are told from the perspective of a third-person narrator, whose stabilising presence allows the novel's narration to mostly elide differences in its eight principal characters' speech patterns, education levels, and English proficiency. These differences would surely have been a more inescapable feature of the novel's language had each section been narrated in the first person. Tsiolkas has said that he sees *The Slap* differently to his three previous novels, which 'form a trilogy . . . to do with the loss of faith' (Meyer). *The Slap*'s uncharacteristically exclusive use of a third-person narrator should be equally emphasised when accounting for the novel's place in Tsiolkas's writing. This formal decision allows *The Slap* to take an interest in a demographically broader range of principal characters than Tsiolkas's previous novels, all of which focus on a gay, Greek-Australian, adult man.

The Slap's choice of a third-person narrator complicates the novel's style for additional reasons. Goldsworthy and Lever argue that free indirect discourse blurs the relationship between third-person narration and a character's speech and thoughts, though *The Slap* also displays the opposite tendency, in moments when the novel sharply differentiates between the language of a narrator and that of its characters. This applies above all to Harry, whose profane, sexualised dialogue and interior monologue are selectively juxtaposed with a third-person narrator who clearly does not use language as he does:

> [Harry] placed an arm around his cousin's shoulder. 'Don't think about all that shit, global warming and terrorism and the war and the fucking Arabs and the fucking septics. Fuck them all. Fuck them up the arse.' Harry nodded out to the dazzling sea, the brazen, endless sky. 'We got it good. Just think about how fucking good we've got it.' (124)

Would Harry describe the sky as 'brazen' or call the sea 'dazzling' given how he speaks to Hector? Perhaps Tsiolkas's verbal range is not so restricted to his characters' vocabularies after all. Passages such as this one demonstrate a third-person presence that selects, arranges, and contextualises the story's events, distinct from the direct discourse of characters and the novel's free indirect discourse. The contrast here between a narrator preoccupied with 'the brazen, endless sky' and Harry's repeated obscenities is almost comical in its lack of symmetry, and this contrast is present elsewhere in his section. Harry is introduced to the reader as he presses his erection against the glass of his balcony while watching a group of young girls. 'Come on, bitch, [Harry] mouthed to himself,' the text says, followed by the narrator's considerably more nuanced account of the scene: 'The setting sun painted the horizon in swirls of red and orange' (83). The same contrast appears a few pages later, in the description of the feature wall behind Harry's new plasma screen television: 'On either side of the screen sat granite stone slabs, lit by faint orange light, the water a constant softly burbling sheet down the surface of the stone' (85).

What is happening here? It does not seem a coincidence that these examples occur in Harry's section of the novel. Gerald Prince's definition of the 'well-spoken narrator' is relevant: 'A narrator whose mode of expression is a standard (or even elegant) one and functions as a norm in terms of which the characters' modes of expression are situated' (103). Applied to *The Slap*, it is tempting to argue that Tsiolkas offsets Harry's verbal and physical brutality by announcing the presence of a more articulate narrator, whose use of language draws the reader's attention toward other aspects of the story. Considered this way, we have to ask how much Tsiolkas really does '[have] the artistic courtesy to step back from' his characters, and, consequently, how much the novel's narration permits readers to make up their own minds about the story (Free). Nonetheless, while some readers may take comfort in the idea that Tsiolkas's novel uses narration to distance itself from Harry's sexism and racism, the appearance of a well-spoken third-person narrator is not unique to Harry's section. There are instances of the same phenomenon in the sections of the novel featuring Connie (200), Rosie (263), and Manolis (303), the three principal characters with the least in common. A more modest explanation is that description is a special feature of Tsiolkas's style. In the examples above, the function of the well-spoken narrator is descriptive, temporarily suspending the narrative's forward momentum to point out a feature of Harry's spatial surroundings. The major interest of these brief descriptions is that they are detachable from *The Slap*'s storytelling and characterisation, two of the qualities that the novel's reviewers praised most. Even more than figurative language, Tsiolkas saves his fanciest sentences of all for his descriptions: 'The moon's borrowed light was beginning to cleave a rippled silver path along

the darkening surface of the sea' (404). This sentence, which describes the outdoor setting of Aisha and Hector's last dinner in Indonesia, can't be accounted for on expositional grounds alone, nor can it plausibly be understood as an expression of either character's psychological state. This is language that exists only for a reader, language indicating that delineations of colour and sensation are important at some level when reading a novel. Description in *The Slap* gives readers an occasional break from the often overbearing lives and minds of Tsiolkas's characters, as if there was some pleasure after all in style as language for its own sake.

Conclusion

As this article was being completed, Tsiolkas's sixth novel, *Damascus*, was published. In the words of one reviewer, *Damascus* shows that 'Tsiolkas is no stylist—in 400 pages there's hardly a sentence worth lingering over,' an assessment that could have appeared in a review of *The Slap* or any of Tsiolkas's previous novels (Doyle). I have argued that lingering over Tsiolkas's sentences is a more valuable interpretive activity than many of his reviewers and academic critics have assumed, as a way of answering the question: 'What kind of writer is Tsiolkas?' We should first think of Tsiolkas as a writer who wants to represent the human body in language. *The Slap* affirms and even celebrates the body as the inescapable context of human life and sociability, at the same time (and sometimes in the same sentence) as the novel struggles to find words capable of communicating physical experience. This is fitting in a novel titled *The Slap*, a novel where characters tend to have their most formative experiences through their bodies rather than through their words. Tsiolkas's inarticulate style, his habit of avoiding the right word at the right moment, comes out of his writing's earnest attempt to represent the body in language, and this is as central to his fiction as his characters and themes.

Most of Tsiolkas's published writing has appeared in his novels, and his inarticulate style is specifically related to how he approaches the novel form. The first edition of *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* was published in 2009, one year after *The Slap*, with Susan Lever's chapter arguing that 'the novel remains the pre-eminent literary form for an aspiring writer' in Australia (500). There is no doubt that Tsiolkas's cultural capital is tied to the novel, as a fictional genre of a certain length, and a commodity bound up with local and international publishing channels, bestseller lists, literary prizes, book reviews, academic criticism, and film and television adaptation. Tsiolkas's reputation has benefited from a set of institutional arrangements that confer success and status through the novel, yet I can think of no other contemporary Australian writer whose abilities as a novelist have been so routinely questioned. I have suggested that inarticulate style is a consequence of how Tsiolkas writes novels, and the tension between narration and dialogue in Harry's section of *The Slap* is more than a formalist's canard in this respect. Tsiolkas has justified the language of *The Slap* on the grounds that he is capturing 'the way we express ourselves now,' but this explanation mostly accounts for his characters' dialogue (Shone). There is more to Tsiolkas's novels than dialogue, and in *The Slap* especially there is a noticeable tension between how characters express themselves and how the novel otherwise uses language.

On this point, Tsiolkas again has more in common with Patrick White than some readers may have thought. When White's *The Tree of Man* was published in 1955, a review in *Time* magazine contrasted the 'simple, inarticulate' protagonist Stan Parker with some of the novel's more exhibitionistic language. 'White is overfond of the eye-stopping metaphor,' this mostly negative review suggests, quoting the narrator's catachrestic description of Stan's

daughter, Thelma Forsdyke, as she listens to a violin concerto: 'She was brushed in sad gusts by the branches of the music' (470). We know from his letters that White did not appreciate this review, though what the reviewer says about language is relevant to both *The Tree of Man* and *The Slap* (99). The narrators of both novels use language very differently to the characters they are depicting, and this is a major cause of the unexpected verbal combinations that critics of White and Tsiolkas have commented on. When these critics characterise the style of *The Tree of Man* or *The Slap* as uncongenial, they are often responding to the depiction of an inarticulate protagonist (male and uneducated in both cases) using the significantly more varied language conventions available to the novel.

For Tsiolkas, this is another way of saying that his style arises out of the problems he has set for himself as a writer of novels. This is also why, as for many of his protagonists, Tsiolkas's successes are never entirely separable from his failures.

NOTES

[1] See Emmett Stinson and Ben Etherington for an overview. Stinson dates the beginning of this debate to 2010, initially over the question of 'whether Australian book reviewing is "too nice"' when formulating critical judgements' (108). At issue more broadly are the personal, aesthetic, commercial, and institutional dynamics of the book review genre in the contemporary literary and publishing fields. My focus here is the nature of critical judgements of Tsiolkas's style, in book reviews and academic criticism both inside and outside Australia, and how the tradition of Tsiolkas's negative reception sits in relation to his recent successes.

[2] '[*Loaded*] had no great style or complexity. It's got energy, that's all' (Indyk, quoted in Bennett); 'Perhaps Tsiolkas was aspiring to be ineloquent [in *The Jesus Man*]. If so he has succeeded, but to me it seems more a flaw born of sloppiness and inadequate editing than a sustained piece of deliberate stylism' (Woodhead); 'A stylistic clunkiness afflicts [*Barracuda*], particularly at key moments . . . Its sincere intentions cannot mask its clumsiness as a novel' (Blacker); 'Tsiolkas's deliberate confining of himself to the inarticulate, frequently obscene language of his characters [in *Merciless Gods*] often renders his writing banal and dangerously close to self-parody' (Lever); 'Tsiolkas is no stylist [in *Damascus*]—in 400 pages there's hardly a sentence worth lingering over' (Doyle). *Dead Europe* has fared somewhat better: 'Tsiolkas is guilty of some overwriting, but, on the whole, most of the flourishes of language and indulgences of plotting are effective' (Williams).

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