

Circling with Ghosts: The Search for Redemption

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This article explores the ways in which Michael Meehan's *The Salt of Broken Tears* (referred to hereafter as *Salt*) might be read as an allegorical quest for redemption. I refer also to Patrick White's *Voss*, to the extent that it provides an obvious antecedent, and an ironic archetype of the 'explorer' tale. *Voss* provides a useful juxtaposition to *Salt*, in that they both represent quests, and futile quests at that. Both are historical novels, using a distanced past to illuminate a particular (different) present. Both novels illustrate an Australian masculinity haunted by a lost sense of "rightness": not just of "right-doing", but also of fitness, comprehensibility, belonging. The masculine is presented as both mirrored and haunted by the feminine. There are two key elements in the construction of this masculinity: violence, and deprivation or "lack". I am interested in how these elements drive the masculine quest, and how this masculine quest mirrors the broader Australian longing for redemption, or perhaps absolution.

I confine the focus to *Salt* and *Voss* since these two novels lend themselves particularly well to an allegorical reading, and an illumination of current Australian concerns. However a number of other recent novels also take the form of quests: Andrew McGahan's *White Earth*, Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country*, and Peter Goldsworthy's *Three Dog Night*, for example. I would argue that the popularity of this trope is no coincidence. It is not surprising that the quest for lost honour, for redemption in some form, should recur in a culture of troubled masculinity, and troubled national identity, preoccupied with apportioning or resisting blame for damage done.

THE SALT OF BROKEN TEARS

Salt takes the form of an odyssey, a meandering, spiralling journey set during the 1930s depression in Victoria. The central character has no name. He is universalised as "the boy". This anonymity makes it clear that he is in search of himself, that a quest is involved. It also sets him up as everyman, and as a foil for the people that he meets along the way. The drought stricken,

degraded country is populated by a cavalcade of emblematic characters: miners and railway builders, returned soldiers, misfits, outcasts, the homeless and the unemployed. They often appear bizarrely juxtaposed with their surroundings, stranded in trees, or in the middle of salt pans, whirled along by dust and wind. They are flotsam and jetsam washed up in the country beyond, the unknowable country.

They tell the boy their stories, but very few of them find out anything at all about him. The boy is inarticulate and single-minded in his search for two pivotal characters: a girl called Eileen, and an Indian hawkker, Cabel Singh. He does not find either of them alive. They appear only in memory and anecdote. This absence, the missing central characters, allows Meehan to create the detached dream-like tone of fairy tale, time-honoured medium for the examination of the ugliest human behaviour. Despite its historical setting, *Salt* is informed by an end of twentieth century consciousness. The ghosts that haunt the novel are richly figurative in a way that is germane to present-day Australia. They draw our attention to the impact of small events on a delicately calibrated ecology of land and people. The distancing in time is a device that allows an elliptical view of the present; something for which the direct gaze does not always leave room.

Voss

Voss, published in 1957, was the culmination and subversion of a tradition of explorer novels that combined deeds of derring-do with the fascination of Australia's "dead centre". In *Subverting the Empire*, Paul Genoni provides a survey of the "Lemurian novels" of fictional exploration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and notes that in their encounters with "alien landscapes peopled by lost Aboriginal tribes in decline" these fictional explorers demonstrate "a measure of the disappointment felt by the supporters of the empire when they realised that their hopes for expanding into the Australian interior would not be fulfilled" (80). The Lemurian novels were succeeded by a period of social realism. A number of novels about "the bush" (*Coonardoo*, *Capricornia*, *The Battlers*) did not deny the uneasy relationship of settler Australians to the land, but they concentrated on the physical, and avoided direct analysis of "the metaphysical implications of the conflict" (Genoni 87). Into this spiritual void dropped *Voss*.

Voss is based loosely on the mid-nineteenth century explorations of Ludwig Leichhardt, who never returned from an attempt to cross Australia from east to west. White took the tradition and wrought from it a nightmare vision of the European mind overthrown by an alien land. It was "a brilliant

demonstration of the potential of the journey into the emptiness of the interior as the basis for an examination of the interior life of a character” (Genoni 93). White balances the story of Voss’s journey with a parallel feminine equivalent, the story of Laura, who stays in Sydney, but follows Voss psychically. The gender division is apparently conventional, but the two experience a phantom marriage that is far from that, and accentuates the chimerical nature of the central journey.

Genoni observes that the impact of *Voss* was so great that it virtually precluded further explorer/quest novels; or at least made it difficult “to draw upon the explorer type in such an unambiguous manner” (94). In the current spate of quest novels mentioned above, the journeys are geographical, but the exploration is primarily metaphorical, ironic or spiritual.

BELONGING

Settler Australia is still searching for a way of belonging in an alien land. This is demonstrated in some cases by a desire for reconciliation with the Indigenous population; in other cases by a desire to return the land itself, and its flora and fauna, to their pre-European condition. On the other side of the debate are those who argue that evidence of massacres of Aboriginal people, for example, has been fabricated, or at least exaggerated. The repudiators protest loudly that the Australian conscience is clear, but the very fact that such repudiations are attempted, and the heat of the ensuing debate, together indicate a continuing uneasiness. The confidence of rightful possession is absent.

Antjie Krog, in her account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, describes the “big South African tongue of consciousness groping down towards a broken tooth” (313). The indigenous population of Australia is relatively small, so there is not the same demographic imperative that the overwhelming black majority provides in South Africa. Further, the process is hampered by a conservative government. Nevertheless, the “groping down” is happening in Australia too. As Susan Martin has written:

much recent Australian historical fiction is engaged with ‘dealing with’ or revisiting—often in an uncanny, repetitive, return-of-the-repressed manner—Australia’s abysmal history of race relations and the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples. (24)

This is true not only in relation to harm done to the Indigenous population. Damage done to the land also figures, though to a lesser extent, in much of the same fiction. Once again this reflects a more general consciousness. Only the most defiant can now fail to notice the long-term damage caused

by settler farming practices. Admissions of culpability on either count are infrequent and covert. Raimond Gaita points out that “certain political and business interests” are working to avoid the possible consequences of a “nation seriously stricken by shame” (50). Nevertheless, guilt and shame have become uncomfortable items on the national agenda.

It is not clear who is to provide resolution, reconciliation, or absolution. Indigenous Australia? The land itself? Or can settler Australia achieve self-forgiveness? A great deal of the debate turns on the question of acknowledgement of earlier mistakes. Redemption, in the literal sense of deliverance from sin, first requires self-awareness—awareness that there has been wrong-doing. But the idea of acknowledging damage is contentious and politically unpopular. There is a parallel with the feminist challenges of the last forty years to the ways in which masculinity is constructed. That struggle is also yet to be fully resolved. In such a cultural context the allegorical tale comes into its own. Allegory is a way of telling a story in code, slipping it past the gatekeepers, providing a safely distanced examination of the collective conscience.

QUESTS

The boy’s quest in *Salt*, literally, is to find Eileen and Cabel. In a way that is opaque to him, but obvious to the reader, he is also seeking manhood. Voss’s quest is similarly multi-layered. In a literal sense he has the geographic goals of a white explorer, but even before he leaves Sydney it is becoming apparent, to the reader at least, that he may be seeking a glorious oblivion, the ultimate merging with the land.

I suggest that both quests represent, metaphorically, the desire of settler Australia to make peace with the country, to belong at last. Part of this, whether explicit or not, must be an attempt to arrive at an understanding of and with the Indigenous population. “The bush people” are elusively present in *Salt*. They see the boy long before he sees them: “the people from the tall trees watched in silence” (164). Similarly, in *Voss*, the Aboriginal inhabitants occupy the reader’s peripheral vision, moving almost parallel to the expedition, raiding at night, unseen, just out of sight. Voss believes himself to have a special understanding with the two Aboriginal members of the expedition, but one of them deserts him, and the other finally kills him. The people still inhabiting the land do not assume centre stage until the end of the novel, when they might almost be part of Voss’ delirium.

In *Salt*, the boy does engage with the “bush people”. Their country, “the last of the wild country . . . all that was theirs when the last of the maps

were laid out” (165), has been invaded by a token white man in red striped pyjamas, a drowned corpse. They feel responsible, and cannot move on while the corpse remains. This is pragmatism, not superstition. They fear that they will be blamed, and so they are marooned, unable to travel as they must do, for food: “now they waited each day for punishment of some kind to come down upon them, on the river which had provided all they needed and now cursed them in this way” (170). The boy offers to free them by taking the corpse away to the nearest town. In fact he buries it under a pile of branches as soon as he is well away. His offer and subsequent actions are ambiguous, generous but deceitful, a paternalistic “what they don’t know won’t hurt them”.

The land itself is elusive in both novels. It defies the settler. It dries up, blows away, hides its waterholes and inland seas. The white characters in *Salt* are engaged, to differing degrees, in a struggle to tame it, to bring it under control, to farm it. In a powerful, despairing soliloquy the father compares the damaged country with the trenches of the Great War:

in this place which is worse than the Somme, the Somme where we turned green land into the country of the dead, where rotting limbs and long forgotten bones rode back to greet us with each upturning of the earth. And so we set again to work each day to turn the sea of woodlands into black and knotted roots. (200-01)

During a raging dust storm the boy meets a family that has abandoned its drought stricken farm.

‘My husband,’ the woman told him . . . ‘was a surveyor . . . Before he came, all that you see around you here was empty. Just a wilderness . . . He marked out the land and put everything in its place. Small thanks he’s had for it, I can tell you.’ (83)

The family disappears again into the dust: “the very earth to which they held deed and title and had followed from the north” (84).

This inability to keep the land in its place is surely part of what haunts settler Australia. Is this why, ironically, we pay most attention to the failed quests, the disappeared explorers? In disappearing they have become part of the land in some way.

Leichhardt’s absence is the thing that guarantees white male presence and belonging in the place . . . His disembodiment—uncertain traces, bodies of his companions, accounts of him scattered over the desert like Voss’s letters—makes him ineffaceable. (Martin 27)

The land itself becomes one of the ghosts in *Salt*, secondary perhaps to the human ghosts, but haunting, nevertheless.

MASCULINITY

If *Salt*, in particular, is to be read as an allegorical search by white Australia for redemption, then an understanding of its central masculine constructs is essential. There is a particular Australian masculinity that is both fed by settler *angst*, and also serves to perpetuate it. I want to consider two parts of it: firstly the lack of warmth, softness, the “feminine”; and secondly, violence.

Absence, one form of lack, is a motif in *Salt*, as already suggested. Lack in the sense of deprivation is also ubiquitous. The central characters, the family members, fail to engage warmly, or at all, with each other. As in any coming-of-age tale, almost everything is just beyond the boy’s grasp. His mother is awake but does not speak to him as he leaves the house forever. Eileen, the young stranger who arouses his interest, lives her life just beyond his gaze: she laughs and cries with Joe in the nights near the dog yard, but she only ever teases the boy. He is baffled. He yearns for adult understanding, for inclusion in the adult world. It is this yearning that launches him on his journey.

The boy has been modelling himself on Joe, a farm worker in his early twenties, watching the older man in innocent veneration of Joe’s sensuality. In a meditative passage Meehan describes the details of Joe’s body, as seen through the boy’s eyes:

the white skin tight across Joe’s chest, the thick curly hair that was beginning to appear there, and the thin line of hair that grew from his loins and his navel upwards, the sharp acidic odour of stale filth and oil and mansweat . . . (31)

Joe is aware of the boy’s scrutiny and does not discourage it.

He laughed at this splinter of a boy who was his skinny echo, and ruffled his hair and teased him, but always with rough kindness, and he showed the boy that he understood, every time he twisted his arm or knocked his hat off and ruffled his hair and cupped his hand behind the boy’s neck and sent him twirling in the dust. (34)

Meehan invokes the ambiguous masculine sexuality that haunts the Australian psyche and, at least in part, fuels the violence of the culture. At a turning point in the novel the boy comes across Joe and his mates attacking Old Sally, one of the Indian hawkers. Joe, drunk, is dancing “stark naked and heavily painted in mud and horse’s blood” (232), and wearing a woman’s hat. In his study of White’s work, Simon During suggests that “the hermeneutics of the closet operates most powerfully in *Voss*” (qtd. in Martin 29), and that Laura is introduced as an alibi. Something similar might be said of masculine

sexuality in *Salt*. The boy is at least as much in love with Joe and with Cabel Singh as he is with Eileen.

There are two strands to the violence Meehan explores in *Salt*, and they weave a counterpoint through the novel. The first is female, deeply personal, and secret, never completely explicit, even by the novel's end, but sharply focused. It arises from the mother's fear and distrust of Eileen, a sensuous disturbing addition to the family. It is represented by a shocking image: Eileen's blood-stained clothes laid out in the stable in the shape of her body. The second strand is male. It is explicit, though not always overt, and communal rather than private. It is initiated at the very beginning by Joe's response to the discovery of Eileen's clothes.

"What do you think, Joe? What are you going to do about it?"

"I reckon we ought to talk to the Indian, for one thing. That's one thing we gunna do. That's one thing we need to do."

"Why Cabel Singh, Joe? Why talk with Cabel Singh?"

"I reckon he knows something. He told her something, when they were on the track. Give her funny ideas."

"What sort of ides?"

"Just stupid bloody ideas. That's all."

And Joe Spencer's shoulders began to square again with the growth of an idea that might mean some kind of doing. (28)

It is this idea, the idea of "some kind of doing", that gathers momentum and inevitability and culminates in the murder of Cabel Singh. This is what might be described as intrinsic or generic violence. It is the violence of young men. It is unfocused and impersonal, easily ignited and easily directed against any available scapegoat, in this case Cabel, the one who knows too much and yet is "other".

Joe's world will not provide what the boy seeks. When he witnesses the attack on Old Sally, Joe tries to coax him into complicity. For the first time the boy challenges him:

"Is this how you find out things, Joe? This what you got in mind for Cabel too? 'Cause maybe he knows something about you? Maybe he knows something about you as you don't want him to know? . . . Why did you hit her, Joe?" (235)

The white Australian male subject, as represented by Joe, has found no solution but alcohol and violence.

Cabel Singh is the boy's second role model and the object of his interest and admiration. Cabel is other, very different from Joe. Where Joe is blunt and direct, Cabel speaks in riddling stories and does not move in straight lines.

“Cabel did not use the maps that were written by others, but had maps of his own that were written in his head, or that were marked out in the land” (77). He is a complete outsider, neither white nor Indigenous, and he offers a very different model of masculinity. He is not driven by sex, and in fact he has no apparent sexual relationships. He travels and observes, and he listens. His interactions with people and places are only ever shown as benign. In seeking Cabel the boy begins to understand that the restricted life of the farm is not all there is, that other ways of existing might be possible.

After hours of moving straight but seemingly in a circle, or moving in a circle while seeking a straight line, you would begin to fling your name and all your familiar achievements in challenge at the cruelty of the mute blue above and at the dumb and repeating seas of flaking bark and listless eucalypt . . . And Cabel told him that until you began to bend your understanding to the forest, until you learned to move amid the forest like the water in the sea or as a wave across the stream, you would answer to its menace with thin curses and in such feeble incantations as would just run out like spilt water into the thickness of the sand. (52-3)

It is this understanding, that there are other ways, that finally enables the boy to set himself apart from Joe, and the violence that Joe represents.

MASCULINE AND FEMININE

Masculinity, in both *Voss* and *Salt*, can be best understood in association with its concomitant feminine. Voss’s only self-aware communication is with Laura, or rather with his illusion of Laura. He both desires, and is repelled by, the possibility of warmth, of human intimacy. In *Salt*, though the active drive of the narrative is masculine, it is the actions of the women, Eileen and the mother in particular, that prompt the masculine reaction. Eileen has shown the boy the possibility of warmth and companionship, and perhaps sex, during their day at the tank. This possibility starts him on his journey after her disappearance.

The quest, at least in its public outward form, is a masculine pursuit. Since Gilgamesh killed Inanna’s bull, and Enki told her to stay at home and “tend sheep, observe his wars, and twist thread” (Sjoo and Mor 246), women have had only secondary parts to play, usually in someone else’s quest, some male hero. They remain, however, essential to precipitate or enable the quest. One role for women is to keep the hearth warm, more or less as outlined by Enki, in the tradition of Penelope. Another is to be fought over, wrested from the dragon’s mouth, to become the prize. In *Salt*, these two roles are filled by the boy’s mother and Eileen, respectively, and they dovetail neatly with the

god's police and damned whores (Summers) dichotomy: the termagant and the temptress; the repressive and the sensuous. Neither of these two women is immediately present in the narrative, though we do hear the mother's voice, a bitter diatribe of disappointment. Eileen has no voice at all, though she emerges vividly from other people's stories. She comes from nowhere owning nothing, and disappears again, leaving everyone changed forever. For the boy, she is a travesty of the prize. He will never find her and will be left only with the memory of her bloodstained clothes.

The rivalry between these two women holds the key to the novel and to the story of Eileen's disappearance. The fact that neither of them is present lends a mythic quality to the story, but it also underlines the futility of the boy's search. It is as though the drama acted out by the women, and the quest undertaken by the boy, take place in separate theatres. This illustrates something of a truism about the masculine quest. By relegating woman to secondary status, the masculine hero scuttles his own attempt to find her. The world of women becomes incomprehensible to him, even as he searches for something that might well lie hidden there. The same is true of the settler hero's failure to understand the Indigenous world, or the natural world. His own ignorance, his moral and imaginative failure, his inability to see beyond the conventional, ensures the failure of his quest. This dilemma is apparent in *Voss*. Laura is a most inadequate tender of sheep and twister of thread, but she fulfils her womanly role by experiencing what amounts to a phantom birth, and by raising the child within a phantom marriage to Voss. He, in his turn, is led on in his quest by a fantasy of Laura, the fantasy of a marriage of true minds, the antithesis of the more earthy and problematic relationships that he has with the other men. Voss and Laura are linked by fantasy, but, when they do inhabit the same physical space, they are incapable of sustaining a real connection.

A third woman in *Salt*, the bank manager's wife, plays another possible female role. She is part temptress, part kindly goddess, and it seems that she might initiate the boy into the mysteries of sex. Her touch allows him to confide in her, draws words and tears from him. But the boy must prove, if he is to achieve full-blown masculinity, that he is more powerful than the woman. He withholds from her the knowledge of her husband's death, and leaves her to dance alone. This is partly compassion, the "gentle heart" (Campbell 118), but partly fear. If he stays with her he will become soft, or dependent. He must leave "before the wanting and the long deep sleep grew too far upon him" (Meehan 196). He sees her terrible frailty and "grows up" a little more. This process of growing up, of taking on manhood, is a process of

hardening, of denying fear. The “gentle heart” must be deeply hidden. The boy sees his escape from the possibility of closeness and nurturing as a choice between a life lived in houses and a life on the road.

He now knew why it was that Cabel never entered houses, because they were too fragile for the knowledge that he carried on the roads, and he decided that he would now live always in the time of doubt and within the ready sway of dreams. (197)

FUTILE QUESTS

The futile quest forms a sub-genre of the quest story. No doubt there are perfectly good quests that fail for reasons beyond the hero’s control. I am more interested here, however, in quests that are doomed from the outset because the goal, or the plan, is ill-conceived or unachievable. This sub-genre is not unique to Australia, but certainly occupies a familiar niche in the culture. As a child, I misread that most Tennysonian, most British, epitaph: “to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”. I thought that “not to yield” meant not to produce anything useful—a failure of the wheat crop, for example. This reading, “to strive, to seek, to find, and all for nothing”, seemed entirely normal and reasonable at the time. It was the 1960s, and white Australian education was still littered with dead explorers, lost gold reefs, remittance men, and soldiers dying in glorious futility on foreign shores (especially Gallipoli). The failed quest was an honourable trope of white masculine narratives, which is what narratives were, on the whole. There is an old-fashioned poignancy about these tales. The white male colonisers set off, yet again. They leave the hearth-fire and the home-acre, wave goodbye to the womenfolk, swallow a manly gulp or two, and off they go, looking for . . . what? A war? An inland sea? The breast? Courage?

A swelling of voices from the margins now rules out the idea of a “dead centre”, uninhabited and available for questing. Indigenous voices inform us that Burke and Wills and others died needlessly, surrounded by food and water, too ignorant, prejudiced or fearful to learn from the locals. The same voices also question the assumption that the country needed exploring. In the last fifty years, partly as a result of *Voss*, partly because of those previously inaudible and marginalised voices, the trope of the futile quest has gathered to itself new layers of ambiguity and significance. It has become an even more fertile, if self-referential, literary device. The perverse appeal of the failed quest lingers. The idea is flourishing, apparently without irony, in the popular imagination, if pilgrimages to Gallipoli are any measure.

The quest in *Salt*, however, has not been entirely futile. The novel moves beyond the nihilism of *Voss*. The boy’s search has failed in a literal sense,

but the outcome is ambiguous. It is possible that he is still deluding himself, still hoping, and has not given up the search. There might be “someone who would know something, who might have heard the still voice of Eileen” (297). However he has “grown up”, achieved his manhood. Earlier in the novel he only ever slouches, hidden in oversized clothes. But now, naked, “he crossed over the saltbush beaches and strode fast and tall towards those waiting on the cliffs” (297). In an allegorical reading this might represent a new Australian self-consciousness, a preparedness to stride head-on towards painful but necessary truths. But does this constitute redemption? Throughout the novel, at moments of crisis, the boy has struggled not to cry. In this final scene his tears seem to have disappeared. Whether this represents successful manhood, or emotional shutdown, depends of course on the reader. I would argue that, as an emblem of redemption, it is ambiguous at best.

CONCLUSION

Historical fiction, particularly in the form of allegory, provides a distance, a relative safety, from which to explore the perennial question of national identity, to examine a past that is otherwise too painful to admit, and to frame a quest for resolution, if not redemption. Salt makes space for the ghosts of what is lost, or never found: a land benignly inhabited, pinned down and owned; manhood as a simple matter of sweat and toil.

But it becomes obvious that although settler Australia may see the ghosts, it cannot recover an unambiguous sense of belonging, anymore than it can recover a mythical pre-Fall innocence. The boy can go forward, but not backward. He can never un-know the violent reality of Cabel’s death. There will be no simple solution.

The novel is made up of many tales, but they are all unreliable, if not surreal. As the boy travels he hears snatches of the accounts that underlie Cabel’s stories. He hears people’s experiences and realises that he has already heard them echoed, taken up by Cabel and woven into his ongoing narrative. Meehan subverts, subtly and repeatedly, the idea of truth or knowing. Cabel Singh is the most sought after storyteller of all. And yet “mostly Cabel Singh would talk to you of anything except what he had done himself [. . .] everyone he met upon the roads knew Cabel’s stories, but none could ever really say that they knew Cabel Singh” (75-76).

The inconclusiveness of these narrated lives, in the way of folk tales and fairy stories, is sometimes tragic, sometimes cheerfully quotidian. Meehan’s rolling, repetitive cadences, his almost biblical language, enhance the effect

of fable or allegory. The novel removes the reader from reality and provides an allegory for troubled times. A masculine quest, driven by lack and yearning, represents settler Australia's search for belonging. The novel allows us a keyhole view of such current and real preoccupations as damaged land, dispossessed people and haunted, difficult masculinities.

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