

LIARS VS THE NEW DIVERSITY: IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE TO 'POSTMODERNIST' LITERARY STUDIES?

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The contrasting approaches to Peter Carey's novel *Bliss* (1982) taken by Helen Daniel's *Liars* (1988) and Gelder & Salzman's *The New Diversity* (1989) exemplify in a number of ways two opposing postmodernist critical tendencies or strategies which have become increasingly influential in contemporary Australian literary studies. In *Liars*, Daniel applies a privileged and formal model of aesthetic play and standards to the study of recent Australian literature. In contrast, *The New Diversity* develops an explicitly pluralistic and implicitly 'oppositional' framework of criticism for interpreting how literary works reflect principles of difference, marginality and newness increasingly operating in Australian society and culture, as well as globally. By similarly opposing both modernist and nationalist canonical assumptions about the relations between Australian literary and popular cultural traditions, *Liars* and *The New Diversity* can be said to exemplify postmodernist critical tendencies to reduce questions of literary judgment and value to equations of engaging or deconstructing texts in terms of either mere form or content, or as mutually exclusive representations of either self or society.

These opposing tendencies have worked together to contribute to the obvious crisis of relevance which now informs 'Australian literary studies'. On one hand, *Liars* exemplifies a tendency of some critics to think that the study of Australian literature might only or mostly remain significant as an esoteric, metafictional language game for a privileged audience. On the other hand, this is complemented and not just opposed by a view associated with the influential Cultural Studies' assumption that literary relevance is simply a matter of how texts represent images of difference or are 'ideologically-sound' in reflecting cultural diversity and resisting perceived social hegemonies (i.e. a view that literary texts are a no more useful focus of study, indeed are probably less useful, than any other kind of 'media text'). The irony of these viewpoints, of course, is that at the very same time that they have been used often in recent years to justify the academic study of Australian literature, they may have served ultimately to undermine the perceived relevance of Australian literary studies.

This paper proposes to consider the idea that effective alternatives to these postmodernist readings of Australian literary texts and traditions are needed and, indeed, are possible. Comparing the similarities and differences of how *Liars* and *The New Diversity* interpret *Bliss* within opposing, often contradictory postmodernist frameworks, it will discuss ways in which alternative perspectives might be developed.

Two conflicting postmodernist interpretations of Carey's *Bliss*

Carey's novel *Bliss* finds a place in the different postmodernist canons of recent Australian literature represented by *Liars* and *The New Diversity*. Not surprisingly, then, it is also an ambivalent focus of critical suspicion for both

models in terms of how postmodernist criticism often uncritically alternates between referring to the pluralism of textual interpretations and the pluralism of social and cultural contexts. Just as a comparison can be made between how *Liars* and *The New Diversity* reflect different contexts for interpreting the strategy of authorship informing *Bliss*, so too a comparison can be made between different postmodernist models for focusing on, in particular, the oppositions of content vs. form, self vs. society, and critical strategy vs. contexts of interpretation.

Postmodernist models of textual criticism can also be distinguished in terms of different foci of interest for such shared notions as the autonomy of reception, the de-centred subject of knowledge, and discontinuous narratives: as an experimentalist or avant-gardist aesthetics of form; as an oppositional politics of difference; and as a populist imperative of cultural imagery (Docherty, 1-27). This distinction provides a useful basis for comparing *Liars* and *The New Diversity*, and their respective interpretations of *Bliss*. If Kay Daniel's main interest is in privileged or experimental language-games, and Gelder & Salzman emphasise a politics of difference above all else, then a most significant focus of comparison lies in their either explicit or implicit perceptions of the relation between literary works and contemporary Australian popular culture.

Daniel interprets *Bliss* primarily as a self-referential game played by authors who are calculating 'Liars'. The narrative and metaphorical representations of Liars are designed to promise hidden meaning - yet, are informed by a basic strategy to disorient, trick and disillusion the reader by manipulating their secret fears and desires. Likening such language games to the peeling of an onion, Daniel argues that *Bliss* provides a useful example of how the Australian 'New Novel' peels away the layers of self and world to ultimately 'reveal nothing... (but) an absurdists truth' (153). Focusing then on the 'metaleptic' reversals represented by *Bliss*¹, and its blurring of the distinction between fantasy and reality, Daniel concludes that this is a work 'with a splendid absurdity... (which) explores the existential horror lying just below the surface of the ordinary life of a Good Bloke' (166-167).

Daniel's book thus compares the canon of what she calls the Australian 'New Novel' to a South American tradition of magical realism. Also resembling the model of North American literary postmodernism, or its alternate guises of fabulism or metafiction, it is a canon defined by a protean model of self, and a picaresque subversion of both conventional reality and traditional plots (Scholes, 1980). In *Liars* the traditional Australian quest for identity in a bush landscape has rather been transported into a postmodernist world of chaos, absurdity, and indeterminacy. Daniel is fascinated by the sense of postmodernist play informing *Bliss* ('Lets relax and enjoy the show. We are in the hands of a Liar, and a showman, offering the best in entertainment...') (167). Yet she also recognises that this may be a strategy of escapism motivated by an underlying sense of individual alienation and the perception of a social and cultural vacuum. For her, the best Liars are those who are able to achieve and maintain a constant tension between aesthetic bliss and existential horror.

Similarly, in *The New Diversity* there is an uneasy connection between

poststructuralist perceptions of a play of binary oppositions on one hand, and ideological or political imperatives of contestation and resistance on the other. The evidence of how Gelder & Salzman are not immune to the very 'tacked-on' political criticism (and neo-conservatism) they accuse others of² is reflected in the implicitly privileged as well as ambivalent way they also approach Bliss³. Bliss is initially discussed as a work which represents an effective oppositional discourse about such topics as the decadence of capitalism and the importance of ecological awareness. Yet, Gelder & Salzman ultimately interpret *Bliss* primarily as work of postmodernist eroticism. Discussing the relationship between Harry and Honey Barbara, they conclude that *Bliss* is predicated by its male writer as the postmodernist and nostalgic desire for the figure of 'woman'.

Like Daniel, Gelder & Salzman apply to the author Peter Carey an arbitrary assumption which denies the possibility of distinguishing his strategy of an implied reader from that of other contemporary Australian authors writing within a postmodernist paradigm. This involves the assumption that, as Gelder (1989:53) has put it elsewhere, 'women can be represented in no other way [by male postmodernist writers]... except through the ever-reproduced Sameness of the Imaginary'. Gelder & Salzman thus dismiss the construction of the character Honey Barbara in *Bliss* as merely 'a male fantasy figure' (124). It also involves Salzman's (1987:515) ambivalent conception of postmodernist representation as 'the celebration of alienation'. In many ways a typical Australian male, the character Harry Joy does attempt to escape from the sense of disillusionment he is increasingly confronted with in the new Australia. But is this a sufficient description of either *Bliss*'s authorial strategy or its dominant context of reception?

In similar fashion to Daniel also, Gelder & Salzman are not so much interested in an Australian literary tradition or canon as such, but rather a local context of postmodernist reception. But whereas Daniel is mostly interested in aesthetic, experimental, and imaginary language-games, Gelder & Salzman's *The New Diversity* constructs a framework of critical reception which *radically* opposes an implied central tradition of nationalist realism by purporting to represent the pluralistic margins of Australian society. In contrasting their own project with that of *Liars*, Gelder & Salzman emphasise how *The New Diversity* 'is an attempt to retrieve heterogeneity' (9). Such an alternative canon thus involves, as the authors further assert, 'an attempt to speak for the "other"' (10). In short, *The New Diversity*'s classification of literary contents, based on such differences as race, gender, class, and of sexuality implies an oppositional relation to a traditional image of white, Anglo-Saxon males heroically confronting various aspects of the 'other' --the kind of images associated with both a monolithic literary tradition and populist new nationalism.

One key focus for how postmodernist models of criticism might be challenged with an alternative is thus of social and cultural context. The self-conceived task of Salzman and Gelder in *The New Diversity* to outline a 'contextual history' for receiving contemporary Australian fiction (9), is ultimately contradicted by how this is framed as merely a pluralistic set of classifications reflecting a diversity of *contents*. Ironically then, they themselves conclude that *Bliss*, in

contrast to Carey's historical novels *Ilywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda*, represents a denial of history (124). But just as a connection can be made between *Bliss* and other works by Carey as an engagement with the 'contextual history' of Australian society and culture, so too Gelder & Salzman's insistence that a contextual history of individual reader-response can be separated from that of Australian society and culture (i.e. that *The New Diversity* can not be interpreted to represent an 'implicit ethnography')⁴ rings hollow and might be challenged. In other words, by framing their study of 'the new diversity' in a binary opposition with a fixed and hegemonic centre of Australian culture and literary canons, they not only reinforce the very perception they propose to challenge. They also privilege their own critical perspective in relation to the newer and larger audiences of readers they also explicitly refer to in their opening chapter.

In contrast, although Daniel does not emphasise the contexts of Australian social and cultural life in her critique of contemporary Australian 'Liars', she does make interesting references and connections which are never developed. For instance, she does not develop her own suggestion, in one of the 'dialogues' between the Liar and Reader which connect the chapters of her book, that 'underlying what you call games is an attempt to re-examine the processes and components of our whole culture' (40). Neither does she take up the interesting connections she makes in passing between the Australia tradition of the New Novel and a South American tradition of magical realism (22) with their common backdrops of colonialism. A postcolonial reading of both traditions not only offers the possible explanation of a cultural imagination attempting to escape its historical past or transform a future destiny (Richards, 1993). Such a reading also provides a basis for challenging the view that a postmodern framework of criticism necessarily subsumes all other contexts—including that of postcolonialism (During, 1988).

As Graeme Turner (1986:439) has identified (noting Carey's intense ambivalence to 'American' forms and strategies): in drawing upon popular and familiar cultural forms Carey's authorial strategy potentially becomes part of popular as well as literary culture. As well as selling very well for a 'literary' work, *Bliss* was also made into a moderately successful, if somewhat controversial, film⁵. An alternative to postmodernist contexts of textual reception are models which recognise that various conceptions of individual reader-response (including those framed as an avant-gardist aesthetics or a politics of difference) are ever transformed by various 'filters' of public expectation and social convention—including that of popular culture (Jauss, 1982).

Beyond a 'postmodernist' interpretation of Bliss?

Both *Liars* and *The New Diversity* represent conflicting contexts of reception which also imply judgments about Peter Carey's strategy as a writer—a second focus for challenging these distinct postmodernist readings of *Bliss* and models of Australian literary criticism. The distinct postmodernist strategies ascribed to Carey's authorship by Daniel and Gelder/Salzman respectively reflect very different interpretations of how the final chapters in *Bliss* inform the text as a whole.

Although approving the ideological soundness of *Bliss*'s diversity, Gelder &

Salzman come to the conclusion with reference to the final chapters that '*Bliss*, finally, is more sentimental than speculative' (124). They thus view the authorial strategy in this novel as ultimately an exercise in escapism or romanticism which contradicts the initial pluralism. In contrast, Daniel finds the last chapter (part 6) of *Bliss* a disappointment and aberration because 'the idyllic existence of the community at Bog Onion road does not stand up against the earlier black absurdity' (166). She thus makes the following reference to the narrative device in *Bliss* of role-swapping between the characters of Alex and Harry as follows: '[This relation] is the climactic pitch of the double vision on which the entire novel is built, but unfortunately the novel now begins to falter and frail as Carey relaxes the doubleness' (165). In short, both critical models attempt to assess Carey's strategy in terms of different approaches to the common yardstick of postmodernist irony.

Peter Carey has indicated the importance of the last section of *Bliss* for judging the whole. He is on record as insisting that the 'whole book stands or falls' with the last chapter⁶. The very connections between *Bliss* and Carey's own biography, as well as his recurring thematic interests, suggest some basis for considering the importance of the writer's own strategy—although explicitly dismissed by Daniel and implicitly so by Gelder & Salzman. But if biography is indeed ultimately irrelevant to aspects of literary content and form or style in terms of 'intentionality', this is not necessarily also the case with questions of an author's or text's organising rhetorical strategy (Ricoeur, 1985). In this sense, judgments might be made about the kinds of irony which ultimately inform Carey's ambivalent fascinations with the new and exotic on one hand, and issues of justice and community on the other.

The main problem of interpreting Peter Carey's rhetorical strategy in *Bliss* is deciding which of the various conflicting modes of irony ultimately dominates: the ironic perceptions of either a sense of personal alienation or social marginalisation and difference; the ironic fascination with a borrowed, piecemeal culture of diversity, newness, and the exotic; or even a self-deprecatory Australian popular cultural irony reflecting a local historical condition. In contrast to how modernist and postmodernist senses of irony sustain the tension of what Daniel refers to as 'doubleness' as a perpetual condition, it may be argued that the self-ironies of Australian popular culture, informed rather by a sense of deferred optimism, ultimately tend to involve a reversible transformation in perspective—that is, a 'consubstantial' irony (Burke, 1969).

In other words, the final chapters of *Bliss* (and the ambivalent representation of the central character Harry Joy) do make sense if we view Carey's strategy in this novel to be ultimately directed as an engagement with a local social and cultural context. As A.J. Hassell (1989:644) has surmised, '(Carey) plays elegant metafictional games with his reader... but he does not, in the postmodernist manner of David Malouf's *Child's Play*, abandon the referential world that appals and terrifies him for its textual, self-referential and finally hermetic alternative'.

The need for an 'exemplary' rather than 'privileged' criteria of literary relevance
The focus above on Carey's rhetorical strategy in *Bliss* can actually be

redirected at these postmodernist critical strategies of identifying implicit contexts of reception. Daniel's preference to read *Bliss* as a statement about the absurdity of life is not unrelated to Gelder & Salzman's conclusion that the novel represents a kind of tacked-on romantic utopianism. Just as Daniel's conception of the Australian 'New Novel' focuses on a picaro figure who 'tends to be cynical and disillusioned' (25), Gelder & Salzman identify a common denominator in their treatment of pluralism in current Australian writing—a fundamental transition from utopian images to dystopian images since the early 'seventies' (262). Hence, Gelder & Salzman continue to perceive political radicalism, various modes of avant-gardism and other aspects of 'diversity' in an implicit binary oppositional relation to a fixed, hegemonic cultural centre (243). Likewise, they also recognise that the picaresque anti-hero of much contemporary Australian fiction (whether as character or narrator) is a paradoxical figure: on one hand, reflecting a retreat into 'solipsism'; yet, on the other, converging with a 'literature of engagement' (149/243).

Both Daniel and Gelder & Salzman arbitrarily refuse to consider that Carey's 'utopian' theme in *Bliss* might be a genuine strategy as distinct from merely escapist fantasy—that is, a strategy to engage and represent actual or potential transformations in the cultural imagination of Australian society. This might be turned back on these critics and their own selective purposes. Might it not be the case that their judgments about Carey's strategy of authorship in *Bliss* represent a projection of their own preconceptions or prejudices—a disillusioned 'seventies radicalism, perhaps? As well as having possibly underestimated the implicit influence and transformational effects of cultural pluralism within Australian society over the last couple of decades (and even earlier), both sets of critics seem to have either ignored or denied the exemplary function of literary works to anticipate and provoke, and not just reflect, these changes, these transformations in social norms.

Where *Liars* and *The New Diversity* ostensibly take contradictory positions, they also paradoxically share a common strategy which may be loosely characterised as 'deconstructive'. Daniel's notion that a text is fundamentally autonomous, recursive, and circular is not unrelated to Gelder & Salzman's conception that any margin-centre relation is a fixed binary oppositional relation. Both *Liars* and *The New Diversity* envisage a reader (or privileged community of readers) passively and permanently determined by the text's context of production, be it conceived as an author's self-reference or in material terms. Both models remain referenced by avant-gardist norms—whether in the experimental or radicalist sense—and reinforce a view of the literary text as a *privileged* commodity.

Yet, both *Liars* and *The New Diversity* imply a local and historical context of reception which appropriates their respective avant-gardist preoccupations with radical *contents* and experimental, recursive *forms*; that is, their 'strategic' interests in the esoteric pleasures of solitary readers on one hand, and in the radical contestation of an imagined cultural hegemony or centre on the other. For instance, both recognise the ambivalence of how different narrative models of an Australian picaro alternate between a populist image of an 'ocker' and a disillusioned

radicalist, between sentimentality and ever-hopeful innocence. Both describe a figure ambivalently confronting a new world of chaos and uncertainty, neighbouring Asian countries, the contradictions of the Australian historical past and, above all, a plurality of voices refusing to conform to traditional stereotypes and relations. Both are thus 'useful' in their complementary focuses upon the problematic reception of formally experimental narratives on one hand, and a diversity of contents reflecting a pluralistic society on the other.

An 'exemplary' rather than privileged criteria of literary relevance might thus reframe and reconstruct various aspects of criticism discussed in both *Liars* and *The New Diversity*. Such an alternative framework would need to reconcile the critical oppositions discussed above (i.e. content vs form, self vs society, and strategy vs context). The suggestion here is that literary works potentially exemplify popular cultural contexts more effectively than other kinds of text (especially those constructed or interpreted as a rhetoric of the image) through the *exemplifying* function of language to mediate strategies of discourse or authorship and contexts of reception (Goodman, 1978). In other words, the language games described in *Liars* might be interpreted as intrinsically diverse and playful representations of local or global community, as well as of Self. Likewise, the centre-margin or self-other relations discussed in *The New Diversity* might be productively reframed also in terms of recognising that such binary oppositional representations are ever informed by a lacunae of implicit dialogues, potential reversals and constant transformations.

The problem of interpreting *Bliss* exemplifies the need of Australian literary studies generally to embrace such a framework. A novel like *Bliss* is more obviously open to different and even opposing interpretations, representing as it does a powerfully effective rhetorical strategy of authorship able to transform a wide range of 'personal' as well as critical and socio-cultural contexts of reception. As discussed here, a text with such rhetorical efficacy more obviously resists the contradictory and reductionist readings of the two basic kind of postmodernist models described in this paper which tend to operate mostly at the levels of mere content and form or style—at the very same time such a text ostensibly exemplifies the preferred traits of both models.

What this means is that an alternative framework is needed which embraces what is useful in the methods and perspectives of both these opposing postmodernist strategies. As discussed in this paper, the limitations of these models for interpreting a text such as Carey's *Bliss* further suggests that a framework is required which restores the concept of literary value in terms of the interaction between an author's rhetorical strategy and actual contexts of reception. Such a framework or approach might recognise that texts potentially exemplify models of self, society and reality just as much in terms of their reader-response as their informing strategy of representation, and just as much in terms of their literary/aesthetic form or rhetorical substance as their representational content. More than this, such a framework might also provide a basis for discussing perhaps the most pressing absence in postmodernist Australian literary criticism—effective reference to the on-going 'historical' contexts which inform an

intrinsically diverse and changing Australian society and culture (that is, a postcolonialism that is not swallowed up by postmodernism frameworks of criticism).

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Endnotes

1. Metalepsis refers to the play of narrative discourse framing the chronology of any written or told story, and includes the impression of either flashback (analepsis) or anticipation (prolepsis).
2. Gelder (1988) used the Habermasian concept of 'neo-conservatism' to accuse critics and writers like Helen Daniels, Don Anderson and Gerald Murnane of having emptied their critical and literary projects of 'historical and political content'.
3. Gelder wrote the particular chapter which specifically discussed *Bliss*. While acknowledging there are some significant differences in the approaches of Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, this paper takes the view that *The New*

Diversity represents a fairly consistent framework of criticism nevertheless.

4. Ken Gelder argued this point strongly in response to the presentation of this paper at the 1996 ASAL conference.
5. Carey's following novels, *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Illywhacker*, were even more successful—with unprecedented sales for a 'literary' work. The irony of this is twofold. These two works are perhaps less accessible than *Bliss* (which is directly situated in contemporary Australian culture) to a popular audience. On the other hand, much of the impetus for the sale of Carey's later works seems to have come from the critical acclaim for his work overseas.
6. In an interview with Philip Nielsen, "Waiting for the Barbarians: and interview with Peter Carey", *Literature in North Queensland* 15.3 1987: pp. 66-73, quoted by Hassell 1989:650.