

## The Road to Babi Yar: Anti-historicism in Recent Australian Fiction

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In Australian fiction, history has become a curiously contentious literary topic. Where once the historical novel was regarded as an anachronistic absurdity generally evaluated for its accuracy and attention to period detail (criteria it inevitably fell short of), it is now common for novelists to treat history as a theme in itself. Only now the novel doesn't seek to replicate the past by fleshing out research or adopting the literary style of its era. Instead it ironises history, interrogates it, and highlights that the very possibility of communicating anything concrete about it is problematic.

Of course, this isn't true of all recent Australian fiction, but a surprising number of novels attach some doubt to the depiction of the past. The anxiety that used to surround the act of representation in fiction and which led to technical innovations which foregrounded the impossibility of fiction ever managing to capture reality has been transferred to history. Tired of flogging the dead horse of literary realism, serious Australian writers have moved away from being intensely conscious of technique and the limitations of their representation, and instead focussed on the distortions of history. Self-consciousness hasn't vanished, but it has become almost conventional: self referentiality has taken its place beside omniscient third person narration and unreliable first person narrators. What I am interested in exploring here is the Australian version of an international trend in fiction towards the creation of what Linda Hutcheon has called 'historiographic metafiction'. These are novels that do not confine themselves to doubting the efficacy of their own discursive strategies, but extend those doubts to history and challenge 'the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation' (92). She cites Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Graham Swift's *Waterland* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* as examples.

A number of major Australian novels fit into this broad category, among them books by those high profile and talented practitioners of Australian literature, Peter Carey and David Malouf. *Illywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda* are prime examples. *Oscar and Lucinda* is, in terms of the possibility that its narrator could possibly be privy to any of the details of his great grandfather's intimate life, clearly signalling its essential artifice. *Illywhacker* is similarly self-ironic, and full of manifest impossibilities deployed to underline that great lie of Australian history which emphasised settlement at the expense of invasion. Malouf's novels are not metafictional in this sense, but they continually probe at the notion of history as compulsively as a tongue going back again and again into a mysterious cavity. In a recent documentary about Malouf he began by talking about history as a discourse which overlooked most of people's actual lives by ignoring all the supposed mundane transactions that are the principal substance of our existence.

This is not a theme that has become exhausted: Peter Carey's latest novel, *Jack Maggs*, ends with a typically ironic reminder of the limitations of a purely documentary history by giving the reader the farcical story of the dedication to Percy Buckle in

the copy of Tobias Oates' novel about Jack Maggs kept in the Mitchell Library. Only the reader knows why Mercy has angrily torn the page out. But Carey clearly indicates that the story has been lost, even though its documentary traces remain in the librarian's brief notation about its 'v. rough excision' (392). The limitations of a purely documentary history are still being exposed.

This brings me to the odd expression in the title of this paper, anti-historicism. I toyed with the idea of using a more neutral term, 'ahistoricism', but that carries implications of an indifference to history that the writers I am interested in simply do not have. There is something oppositional in the way history has been portrayed in contemporary Australian fiction that is not anti-history (no-one, as far as I know, thinks that the past is utterly irretrievable), but is determined to point out the inadequacies of traditional historiography and tends to be suspicious of the notion that the past is susceptible to empirical analysis and that events in the past can be unequivocally verified. To a certain extent the idea that history is stuck in a nineteenth-century narrative mode and blindly obsessed with constructing hierarchies of significance is a critical artefact.

It has been pointed out before by Jennifer Strauss in an essay dedicated to analysing the depiction of history in Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* that history has become something of a straw man. She says that:

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

This emphasis on theory as a means of framing our analyses of novels has created a somewhat skewed focus; you find yourself thinking about how Australian novels might be an expression of Hayden White's theories, or Paul Carter's.

But have no doubt about it, historicism is regarded with suspicion by Australian writers. Take this example from Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia*. Obviously we are not meant to regard Justine as an oracle, or indulge in too much solemn moralising, but this exchange in a café between Justine and a woman whose family had been all but wiped out in Auschwitz is a perfect illustration of what I mean by anti-historicism. Justine says to the woman:

'I have trouble taking accounts of World War Two seriously. I have a lot of trouble with history.'

'You're just ignorant of history,' the woman said accusingly...

'History seems to me to have little to do with events and the way they take place,' Justine said arrogantly. 'History sees everything in terms of causes and effects, and once you can isolate the cause from the complexity of events, then the effect is inevitable, destined.'

'But I believe in destiny, in fate,' the woman exclaimed.

'And once history becomes destiny then there's no possibility for anything new to take place,' Justine lectured. 'No matter how specific the circumstances, history will always find the same in each new occurrence. The countries of Eastern Europe deserved the Nazi occupation, or so the historicist argument goes.'

'That's true,' the woman cried.  
 'And that reminds me of the way the law always proves, despite all evidence  
 to the contrary, that women who get raped by men ask for it,' Justine snarled.  
 (253-254)

This passage draws our attention to two aspects of historicism that are continually seen as problematic. One is that it is trapped in hindsight and imposes chains of cause and effect from a point in the future to which these chains must inevitably lead. The other, very starkly expressed here, is that history is like the law.

What brings these ideas together and underpins much of Australian fiction's reaction to historicism is the persuasive notion that history *legitimises*. To describe, say, the processes of colonisation is seen to give the processes themselves legitimacy, as if description is collusion. Paul Carter in *The Road to Botany Bay* is most explicit about this, castigating Australian historians for producing a kind of history

which reduces space to a stage, that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone, [and which] might be called imperial history. The governor erects a tent here rather than there, the soldier blazes a trail in that direction rather than this: but, rather than focus on the *intentional* world of historical individuals, the world of active, spatial choices, empirical history of this kind has as its focus facts which, in a sense, come after the event. The primary object is not to understand or to interpret: it is to legitimate. (xvi)

Just why focussing on facts after the event is necessarily 'imperial' is not made clear, and nor is Carter prepared to concede that understanding and legitimisation might conceivably coincide, but what is unmistakable in this quote and the rest of his book is this peculiar disdain for hindsight. Like Justine Ettler's hero, Carter characterises historicist argument negatively as being inherently fatalistic because he doesn't really desire an analysis of the past which is dependent on a ponderous and selective retrospective construction of cause and effect, but something more experiential, something less linear and commonplace.

Carter's influence in Australia has probably been greater on literature rather than on history. This is mostly because his concept of spatial history requires such a radical re-imagining of the past. What he wants to do is to reintroduce uncertainty and manifold possibility into our perception of past events; he wants the past to feel like the present. This idea is, unsurprisingly, immensely appealing to novelists.

Both Peter Carey and David Malouf enthusiastically endorsed Carter's 'essay in spatial history' when it was launched against the background of impending historical re-enactments for the bicentenary. Carey had even read a copy of the manuscript during the time that he was working on *Oscar and Lucinda*.<sup>1</sup> It did not have an effect on Carey or Malouf that is obvious in their subsequent writing, but it did feed into their interest in history as a theme. Perhaps that acolyte of Major Mitchell in *Oscar and Lucinda*, Jeffris, owes something to Carey's reading of the chapters in Carter's manuscript that concern Major Mitchell's way of imposing his preconceptions onto the landscape. It could be that Malouf's characteristic emphasis on the intensity of the lived moment as opposed to the broad implications of major historical conflicts was validated by Carter's book.

The point is that the combination of Carter's vigorous attack on the value of empirical history, coupled with the relentless problematising of history in not just Carey and Malouf, but a number of other well-known Australian writers such as Kate Grenville (who, in *Joan Makes History*, indulged in some leaden irony in rewriting the landing of

the First Fleet) has led to a devaluing of historicism as an adjunct of critical evaluation.

This could seem a peculiar assertion to make about a period which is supposed to be invigorated by the pragmatism of new historicism. But new historicism has acquired its reputation for being a more pragmatic approach by rejecting what it saw as the precious formalism of old-fashioned new criticism which held that the text alone should occupy the attention of the critic. The historicism that is then brought to bear on the social and cultural backgrounds which give meaning to a text is not the empirical, confident historicism with its faith in deduction and inductive reasoning (the decline of which Keith Windschuttle was lamenting in his book, *The Killing of History*), but a historicism that has engaged post-structuralist theory. What I am suggesting here is that new historicism as a critical practice has not really taken hold in the field of contemporary Australian fiction, but is strangely manifest in the actual novels. It is certainly the case that criticism about *Oscar and Lucinda* has focussed on Carey's depiction of history as random and chaotic and recognised the implicit attack on triumphal colonial history that the novel contains. But the critics have not analysed the historical and social context of that depiction. Carey's view of history in this novel is much closer to a new historicist approach in that he is engaged in recontextualising some of the stories of Australia's past in a way that doesn't merely revise them, but revises them in a manner that highlights doubts about their own construction.

Soon after the publication of *The Road to Botany Bay*, Malouf interviewed Carter and asked a rather revealing question: 'I suppose it's proper, Paul, that you should find yourself talking to a writer rather than a professional historian or a geographer because, finally, what your book's about is the act of writing, isn't it?' (173). Malouf shares an interest with Carter in the processes that underlie the creation of history—the act of writing and language itself. One of Carter's fundamental ideas—that the basic linguistic function of naming in a sense creates what it names, but is also at the same time inevitably a distortion—had already been expressed by Malouf in *An Imaginary Life*. Malouf has his ironic and rebellious Ovid desire to go beyond simple rebellion or the use of satire to a state entirely outside of language. In the case of Ovid, moving beyond these boundaries is death, a pantheistic reintegration with all of time and space:

It is summer. It is spring. I am immeasurably, unbearably happy. I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six.  
I am there. (152).

The concept of the past as a series of events that cannot, by their nature, be experienced is being challenged. Words cannot capture the experience, but the imagination can apprehend it. Generalised knowledge is not what Malouf wants to glean from the past. He wants to extract transcendence from history. His vision in *The Great World* of the treatment of Australian prisoners of war is not outraged or even mythic, but dreamily detached and relentlessly focussed on minutiae.

This is not to say that I disapprove of the broadly anti-historical slant evident in a number of Australian novels. Malouf's fictionalised death camp in no way traduces the memories of those people who were actually involved. History in a postmodern age has to be aware that it is a discursive practice which is inevitably shaped by prevailing political or social interests. That novels choose to highlight the complexities of how the past is represented is in general terms a good thing, despite the fact that history has begun to change and is not nearly as unaware of its conceptual distortions as it

once was. The present preoccupation of Australian literature with history has been a reaction to the perceived collusion of history in creating and promoting the chimerical notion of a unitary national identity.

Some time ago Christopher Norris announced his wariness about the space this sort of pervasive valorisation of plurality in historical accounts gave to right wing revisionism. He is quite prepared to accept 'that history is a field of competing rhetorical or narrative strategies, a plural discourse which can always produce any number of alternative accounts' (137). But he is concerned that 'the result of such thinking is not only to efface the distinction between fact and fable but to undermine the very concept of historical reason as aimed at a better, more enlightened or accountable version of significant events' (137).

In Australian fiction, the blurring of fact and fable to challenge the way we perceive major historical events is clearly deployed in an early Carey story, 'Fragrance of Roses'. A timid old man takes up residence in a village where the inhabitants speak Spanish. The old man speaks Spanish poorly and is subject to petty torments; he bears this patiently. He lives in a house which has an elaborate wrought-iron glasshouse, in which he breeds a black rose. After fifteen years two foreigners come looking for him: they are members of the Israeli security service and the old man is 'none other than the former commandant of Auschwitz' (296). Anyone familiar with the history of Nazi Germany would know that Rudolf Höss, the Auschwitz commandant, was captured in 1946 on an island off the German coast and executed soon after. So what is Carey doing in this distorted vignette of the past?

Carey's point, of course, is that the Nazi war criminals were not slaving monsters, but something much more abhorrent—supposedly civilised men who should have known better. The old man is also playing out, in a symbolic sense, the Nazi eugenic fantasy. Plant breeding requires careful selection and ruthless extermination. The old man has not been just creating in his beautiful glasshouse, he has been massacring all of the ordinary looking roses. The black rose is a symbol of the exclusive society the Nazis thought they could attain through wholesale slaughter. It is defiant, not regretful.

This story shows that at least since the mid seventies Australian fiction has been conflating fact and fable for the purpose of showing up the inadequacy of traditional historiography in conveying all the subtle nuances of significant historical events. Furthermore, there has been a considerable influence exerted by the burgeoning adoption in the eighties of this technique in internationally famous novels—we are back at the phenomenon that Linda Hutcheon recognised, the historiographic metafiction. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is probably the best known example. Indian history is so complex and bloody that Rushdie feels compelled to reintroduce the irrational and the fantastic—and to make errors of fact—in this fictional version of Indian history following independence. Because of this, it resists being judged in terms of its status as a secondary historical document, despite its emphasis on post-colonial revisionism. Closer to home, *Illywhacker* employs similar techniques to expose the lie of Australian history with its use of magic and blatantly unreliable narration. However, the most relevant example for the purposes of my argument is D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*.

This English novel was subject to controversy when it was published in the early eighties for the context in which the horrific descriptions of the massacre at Babi Yar were presented, namely, using metafictional devices. The novel uses letters, erotic journals and, finally, an impossible incident to underline Freud's misdiagnosis of what was

actually wrong with European society—not its sexual repression, but its virulent anti-Semitism. Frau Anna has symptoms that Freud cannot find the root of. She has a pain in her left breast and her pelvis. These turn out not to be the result of some sort of neurosis, but are prescient agonies of what will happen to her at Babi Yar. She survives the shooting at the top of the ravine by jumping in, but she is discovered by two Ukrainian soldiers who viciously kick her in the pelvis and the left breast and then proceed to rape her with a bayonet. One of these soldiers is called Demidenko.

Quite early in the Darville controversy Terry Lane mentioned this other fictional treatment of Babi Yar. Gerard Henderson recognised *The White Hotel* as a possible source of Darville's alias, along with the book that Thomas had used to research his novel, Martin Gilbert's *The Holocaust*. What is interesting is not so much the audacity of Darville taking on the name of a war criminal, but the conditioned critical approach that informed the reception of *The Hand that Signed the Paper*.

There was a noticeable division between historians who saw in the novel another manifestation of the discredited argument that Bolshevism was a Jewish conspiracy and literary critics and reviewers (but by no means all) who regarded the novel as a legitimate and courageous alternative view of the holocaust. My view is that people interested in the literary world had become so wedded to anti-essentialist theories about history—I include myself here—that they initially found in the novel a daring, but justified exploration of the recent past which had the added force of its supposed basis in an ethnic oral tradition. Even looking at the novel as a series of obviously prejudiced voices presented without editorial comment, and knowing nothing about the eccentricities of its author, one can mount a defence of the book utilising the narrow focus of the enduring new criticism. The author is distant and uncommitted, but that is no crime.

The questions posed in a recent article by Ken Stewart which he claimed had been passed over by the polemical attacks on the book will help to bring me to some sort of conclusion to this discussion. These are the questions he posed: 'When does the *novel's* "history"', the words and tropes on the page, become separable from fiction, and how does the fictional *scheme* affect the meaning of the "history"? Why is an artist licensed to rework "inaccurately" or fictionalise anything in the world except the recent significant past?' (Stewart 73) The fictional scheme of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* is not very effectively moralised, and not simply because the narrator is detached. The novel consciously uses the perspective of the losers—not just the military losers, but the ethical losers. We may be invited to judge, but we are also invited to empathise. If we take into account the reported views of Helen Darville on the question of war crimes tribunals and the sheer brazen naivety of pretending to be Ukrainian to lend the text legitimacy, we cannot help but see that there is no useful resonance in the discrepancies between the history that the novel depicts and the facts as we know them.

Artists are of course perfectly entitled to fictionalise the recent significant past, but the question of its purpose cannot be avoided. The paradox is that those Australian writers who have fictionalised history cannot avoid a historicist purpose. Carey and Malouf are ultimately committed to a morally based revision of Australian history. Darville's novel should not be suppressed because it operates poorly as a moral technology, but its vision of people as inherently evil is sustained by historical distortion that is not aimed at arriving at a more enlightened version of the past.

## Notes

- 1 The manuscript and a letter from Paul Carter dated 3/1/86 thanking Carey for his interest can be found in the Fryer Library's Peter Carey collection (UQFL 164 Accession 880700-1 Box 12 Item 4). Apparently David Malouf had also read *The Road to Botany Bay* before it was published. Carter says in the letter: 'I have found the generosity of spirit which both you and David Malouf have shown quite humbling.'

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