

# Discourses of Vocation in Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*

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**T**wentieth-century Australian culture responds uneasily to those who make strong claims to a particular vocation or calling: the prophets, visionaries, strong leaders, whether in intellectual, political or religious life. At best we treat our putatively prophetic figures – Daniel Mannix, B.A. Santamaria, Judith Wright, Patrick White, Manning Clark, Mudrooroo, Noel Pearson, Pauline Hanson, Brian Harradine – with ambivalence, or party-political allegiance or disgust.

The very terminology of vocation has become so vexed in contemporary discourses about work, having a quaint, nineteenth-century resonance: seen as individualist, a throw-back to earlier notions of genius, individual talent and choice, with Romantic and religious connotations. The etymology of vocation derives from both the sacred and secular sources, the OED offering: 'the action of God in calling a person to a particular function or station', and 'one's ordinary occupation, business or profession.'

In the current discourses of vocation in the university system, for instance, the emphasis on 'vocational training' often equates with a steadily mounting attack on the Humanities, at least in what are deemed to be their more esoteric and unpragmatic manifestations. In the language of the UNS, with its emphasis on '*university* research strengths' (read: 'those areas likely to be funded by the corporate sector, or recognised as of national, strategic importance in the fundings race') as opposed to individual, or institutionally-unsanctioned research, *individual* intellectual work, with its possibility of critique of institutions is under mounting pressure, seen as reeking of eccentricity.

And for good reasons, from certain sectors within the Humanities, the notion of the prophetic leader has long been suspected, in favour of more structural or ideological explanations of history and social organisation. For example, Boris Frankel's *From the Prophets Deserts Come: The Struggle to Reshape Australia's Political Culture*, exhibits a real reluctance to acknowledge any positive input from individual voices: '... [with] the current generation of political, economic and cultural prophets ... their panaceas and visions of the future will create both metaphorical social deserts as well as ecological ones' (qtd in Jones 9). Barry Jones' review of Frankel's book acknowledges the fulsome list of all the elements that make up the *public* culture in contemporary Australia – 'politics of left and right, economic and social-pressure groups, greens and feminists, the media, the arts, Aborigines, education, the churches, business lobbies' – but argues that in such a *structural* analysis, 'the contribution of the prophets then becomes marginal to his description' (Jones 9). Of

course this comes from Barry Jones, who perhaps has his own claim to minor prophet status.

And from other sectors of the contemporary Humanities, *professionalisation* and the relation of the individual to the institution are areas of angst. In his *Higher Education Supplement* article, 'Shape of the revitalised academy to come', Simon During describes what he sees as a more appropriate structure for academics wishing to be not merely 'university employees', but 'members of a properly professionalised discipline':

It would be open to all members of the profession: that is, all teachers and researchers working in Australian universities, as well as all intending members (that is, graduate students aiming for professional employment) and any other unaffiliated scholar.

It would be formed by and for members of the profession; belonging to it would be a mark of professional status. In broad terms, its mission would be to promote the academic humanities nationally and internationally, and to help reproduce the Australian profession. (31)

During continues by listing the large number of centralised and bureaucratic functions such an organisation could undertake, along the lines of the M.L.A. in America. In what seems to me a blithely optimistic act of faith, During depicts the American organisation as having a leadership 'provided by elected committee members who (as the US experience demonstrates) turn out to be a mixture of the more energetic and more intellectually respected academics active at any particular moment' (31). This new kind of academy would, he argues, be more democratic, more representative anyway of the current profession.

I'm not so interested in the rights and wrongs of what is here only a sketchy proposal, but in tracing the tensions played out around and through the individual (in this case the humanities academic) and the institutions which hail, construct, enable, or limit that individual. The discourse of individual vocation in During's narrative seems to be totally circumscribed by variant models of institutional power: old, elitist and canonising powers, or newer, competitive, putatively democratic, professionalising processes. This is of course a broadly Foucauldian model of the individual both deployed by and deploying variant models of power within an overarching, deterministic system.

The model of the individual largely determined within larger public institutions and formations is a dominant intellectual one today. Is it immediately ahistorical – traditionalist, residually humanist – to consider the moment of the individual, even as we consider the contexts and uses to which that individual figure can and will be put? I would want to argue that for many there is an abiding interest in, and a politically urgent need to think about, the role of the independent – possibly outrageous, deranged, deluded – individual who claims to be called, to have a vision, a cause. That might seem odd in the very real face of Pauline Hanson and her One Nation prophetics, but let me argue myself out on to a limb here, and suggest that

to understand and to counter, for example, a Hanson and her appeal, an analysis – and not just a knee-jerk dismissal – of the power of the category of the prophetic is necessary.

Along with many followers of *The Blues Brothers*, I laugh every time I see Jake and his mates being whacked into submission – or mission – by the floating nun, or dancing unfettered with James Brown in the black Baptist church, receiving their ‘mission from God’. If our current postmodern style towards the prophet is predominantly parodic or debunking, there is arguably in all these responses a continuing interest in the figures around which such discourses of vocation and calling have circled. Parody, after all, begins with an acknowledgment of the power of the very object it is sending-up – unless of course the parodist is just as purist and monomaniacal as she supposes her object of parody to be.

Martin Scorsese’s beautiful, reverential and highly political film *Kundun*, on the early life of the Dalai Lama, Christopher Hitchen’s politically debunking book on Mother Teresa, *The Missionary Position*, and Salman Rushdie’s essay on the Mahatma Gandhi are three very different examples of such interest in figures called to a particular and dramatic vocation. Rushdie’s essay on the Mahatma is a wonderfully parodic piece, its parody focused on the processes of capitalist history, rather than on any ‘real’ Gandhi. It’s the *image-making* of capitalist history that Rushdie targets, citing Apple Macintosh’s use of the familiar image of the cross-legged, semi-naked personification of purpose:

Double-click on this icon and you open up a set of ‘values’ with which Apple plainly wished to associate itself, hoping they’d rub off: ‘morality’, ‘leadership’, ‘saintliness’, ‘success’, and so on. They saw ‘Mahatma’ Gandhi, the ‘great soul’, an embodiment of virtue to set beside, oh, Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, the Pope.’ (3)

Similarly, Rushdie targets Richard Attenborough’s ‘much-Oscared movie’ *Gandhi* as ‘an example of this type of unhistorical Western saint-making.’ Yet Rushdie is also open enough to the strange, usable twists of historical reinterpretation of such figures, arguing that

... the film, for all its simplifications and Hollywoodisations, had a powerful and positive effect on many contemporary freedom struggles. South African anti-apartheid campaigners and democratic voices all over South America have enthused to me about the film’s galvanising effects. This post-humous, exalted ‘international’ Gandhi has evidently become a totem of real inspirational force. (3)

So how does all this lead me to Peter Carey’s revisionist novel *Oscar and Lucinda*? How does this late twentieth-century novelist contemplate/construct early nineteenth-century characters embroiled in their very nineteenth-century obsessions, centring around the claims of fundamentalist religion, and its accoutrements: mis-

sion, guilt, truth, salvation, calling, vision? First, he does it through the creation of individualistic characters on their various trajectories of mission. But second, he suspends the characters' preoccupations with purpose, motivation and mission in a larger twentieth-century, existentialist context of chance and the arbitrary. This context is metonymically figured around the trope of gambling.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which Carey's text constructs this dialogue between calling and chance, between purpose and the arbitrary, duty and pleasure, the individual and institutions. Such dichotomies proliferate in the text: in the subtle contours of the characterisation, and in the interwoven narratives of colonial and individual destinies. It is in the tenor of Carey's parodic art, with its narrative use of liturgical, biblical and other religious markers, and his more severe depictions of the ravages of colonial narratives of progress and mission, that we can measure the novel's in no way merely dismissive understandings of vocation.

In the novel's opening, Carey folds a range of elements into his characters' sense of an ordered, divinely-organised, scientifically rational and categorisable universe, a universe which hails the holy individual into right purposes. For Theophilus Hopkins and the Plymouth Bretheren, the world, with its pain and struggle, as well as its order, is as God ordains it to be. Even the tragedies of a wife's death and a son's defection do not manage finally to deflect Theophilus' sense of the true: 'The teeth of lions, the torture of martyrs – these were flea bites in the face of eternity' (26). He is the epitome of the unswerving, a character little-known in late twentieth-century folk-lore. A character generally to be pitied by twentieth-century readers, even if quietly admired by some, just as Oscar both pities and needs to absent himself from his father. In Theophilus' world, he is called absolutely to '... bare witness to the miracle of the resurrection' and 'he did not ... accept the notion of coincidence'; he had been 'vouchsafed' salvation, both for himself and his son (28, 33). In these early scenes, the author's only slightly questioning voice interrupts the third-person narrative with a more direct, authorial interpretation of the voice of God for Theophilus, as the father leans over-protectively above the sleeping form of his young son: 'This voice he heard may not be what you would call God, but let it rest. You may have another word for all the things both Hopkinses (father and son) called God. It was his fear, his conscience, whatever you want, but it was clear to him' (26).

Of course Oscar absents himself from his father, but does so, taking much of the tackle of fundamentalism with him, even as he transmutes it through individualist interpretations. His first steps towards a new, potentially post-oedipal calling are through sign-seeking – 'if it be Thy will that Thy people eat pudding, smite him!' – a good biblical principle, signs and wonders (20). Of course Carey has the boy mix Oscar's sign-seeking with pagan rituals of chance and the use of the tor, and with an individualistic dread at his own part in the whole drama – 'he saw his father had been smitten ... He lowered his bucket, frightened of what he had begun' (20–1). And Oscar is moving from one father to another – to Hugh Stratton, the Anglican church, Oxford and holy orders. This transition commences in a scene both comic and poignant:

Oscar's mouth was open. The seat of his breeches had been torn when he slid down the bank. He thought the clergyman looked like some sort of vegetable picked too long ago ...

'You, boy, go home to your father.'

'I cannot,' said Oscar, taking a step back on top of the new lettuces.

'Get off my lettuces,' said Hugh Stratton. He took a step forward. This was a mistake. It forced Oscar to take another step backwards, into one more lettuce.

'I am called,' said Oscar.

It was some time before he could make himself clear. (44)

The comedy is vaudevillian, with all the innocence of the Charlie Chaplinesque Oscar, mouth open, torn breeches, clomping all over the lettuces. Does this comedy serve to heighten the ridiculousness of his claim to be called, or to confirm its very human – needy – clumsy, but driven vitality? The text has it both ways, neither dismissing nor confirming the young boy's desires, but able to draw the reader in to the bold, even heroic action of the child who is attempting, painfully, to break with the overpowering presence of the father, even as he runs open-mouthed into the arms of a less individually embodied, but more pervasive institutional patriarchy.

The character of Lucinda is constructed around more secular notions of vocation – the sceptical figure of Mary Ann Evans lurking in the background – notions which are given shape in the glassworks. In chapter thirty-two, entitled 'Prince Rupert's Drops', the novel moves from a present-tense narration of the orphaned Lucinda's journey to Sydney, dropping into a prophetic stance – past-tense with a future knowledge – towards Lucinda's destiny:

She did not know that she was about to see the glassworks and that she would, within a month, have purchased them. And yet she would not have been surprised. This was within the range of her expectations, for whatever harm Elizabeth had done her daughter, she had given her this one substantial gift – she did not expect anything small from her life. (131)

There is a great deal of the accidental, the coincidental and individualistic, not to mention capitalist, about Lucinda. It is around the commodity and the beauty of glass – 'frail as the ice on a Parramatta puddle ... stronger under compression than Sydney sandstone ... invisible, solid, in short, a joyous and paradoxical thing, as good a material as any to build a life from' – that Lucinda seeks her vocation (135). Glass, and of course gambling, which is not unconnected to the spiritedness of a young orphaned girl taking on the role of factory owner.

However, it is in the figure of Oscar that Carey draws together the secular and the sacred discourses of vocation, the gambler and the visionary. In chapter forty-two, 'Called', Oscar uses the flipping of a florin to determine whether God is calling him to New South Wales. Sitting with Fish in the Cremorne gardens:

... [Fish] found at last a penny ... flipped the coin, lethargically, as if he had not guessed that he was tossing for his friend's destiny. It was a dull and dirty penny he sent spinning through the air.

'Call,' he said.

The Odd Bod had gone pale and waxy ...

'Call,' said Wardley-Fish ...

'I cannot, Fish You know it.' ... 'I am frightened,' hissed Oscar ...

'Then why do you do such things to yourself,' smiled Wardley-Fish.

'Come, dear Odd Bod, and -'

'Heads,' said Oscar.

Wardley-Fish sighed. He lifted his hand to reveal the head of Queen Victoria.

The Odd Bod's face was ghastly, a mask carved out of white soap, and you did not need to be a mind-reader to know that God was sending him to New South Wales. (189)

In this eccentric, comic figure, full of what are registered as both phobias and spiritual promptings, Carey offers a bizarre hybridity: feminine, angelic man, gambling reverend, frightened fundamentalist. A man with a mission, fleeing himself, his father, his phobias, and the very notion of destiny, even as he sidles, 'pale and waxy', towards it: the call of the coin flip and the call to a life's mission. What this depiction of the imperial missionary's decision-making process does is complicate politically rigid notions of imperial mission – the masculine, proselytizing, and arrow-like aggressivity of the colonial missionary – by revealing the partial, needy and self-fearing aspects of individuals embroiled in such a mission. All this at the same time as the novel attempts to register the horrific effects of the imperial mission for indigenous Australians. For some critics this has been a merely tokenistic endnote to a largely white, colonialist novel.

In Lucinda and Oscar's growing friendship on board the *Leviathan*, we are presented with a similarly complex, Careyesque characterisation of Oscar. As the bully Mr Borrodaile impersonates Oscar – '... his legs jerked sideways then up. The upper body swung from side to side like the mainmast ... The hands unclasped and clasped and then flew apart to grasp at – at what? A butterfly? A hope? A prayer?' – Carey here uses the layers of theatricality and artifice, the parodic actions of Mr Borrodaile, in a tiny self-reflection on his own art (245). The parody is hugely appreciated by the fellow passengers, but the comment, part Lucinda, part author, is that the parody was 'exactly like the red-haired clergyman, no not exactly ... his walk was to the original as a jiggling skeleton is to a dancing boy' (245). So parody is placed, but then placed again as Oscar's own response is given:

A great gift ... And I do not mean your performance – I am pretty well uneducated in theatrics and cannot judge it ... But your sensitivity to the inner man, to those parts which we do not readily show the world ... this perspicacity, Mr Borrodaile, it is really admirable ... It is something

which should not be used merely to amuse passengers on a long voyage. It is something a Christian should use in life. (246–7)

Parody, and with it the larger category of artistic representation and its relationship to authenticity, and to those observers/readers who receive it, is dissected here:

As he spoke, Oscar became bigger and more eccentric than even Mr Borrodaile's impersonation might have allowed. He was, with excitement, embarrassment, a little wine, more of the character that Wardley-Fish loved, more like the schoolmaster sixty boys from Mr Colville's school would still remember in their dotage. He was animated. His long arms waved across the table, missing burgundy glasses and hock bottles, but only because his fellow diners removed them from the radius of his arms ... He looked from one face to the next, drawing them into the bubbling pot of his enthusiasm ...

Lucinda, who had begun by thinking Mr Hopkins merely clever, was, when she saw there was no guile in this enthusiasm, so moved by his goodness that her eyes watered ... (247)

The subject here is authenticity – how and whether it might be represented, let alone premised. The centering word is ‘enthusiasm’, an enthusiasm without guile, the bubbling pot of his enthusiasm, an openness or authentic selfhood which places itself in the responses of the other, but is not merely a reflection or mimicry of, or reaction against, that other. Lucinda calls it goodness. The relationship of the self to the other, a central thematic for postcolonial poetics, is often rigidly formulated as a question of discrete separation, of the self – masculine, colonial, white, Anglo-Saxon – having no right to speak its mission or purpose or concept of destiny to or with the other, the often subjected and oppressed other.

What becomes of the question of authenticity – of calling, vocation, mission – as Oscar goes on his fated expedition down the river with the glass cathedral? Oscar the angel, the choirboy, the ‘girlie boy’, the quivering aquaphobe, ‘The Reverend Mr Hopkins (who) told the Narcoo men the story of St Barnabas eaten by a lion ... the story of St Catherine killed with a wheel ... the story of St Sebastian killed with spears’ (469). If we are looking for colonial scapegoats, for rough explorers who hack their way through Aboriginal sacred places, who kill and rape, then we have these in the figures of the cedar cutters, and in the leader of the expedition, Mr Jeffris, who would ‘cut a new path in history ... slice the white dust covers of geography and reveal a map beneath, with rivers, mountains, and names, the streets of his birthplace, Bromley, married to the rivers of savage Australia’ (441).

In the face of such easily readable figures of colonial atrocity, what are we to make of the more sympathetic, but possibly equally imperial and misguided Oscar? Are we being asked to repudiate, or to pity but finally dismiss, or to admire this driven/called, figure, as he sits on his hard wooden chair in the middle of the floating church:

My great-grandfather drifted up the Bellinger River like a blind man up the central aisle of Notre Dame. He saw nothing. The country was thick with sacred stories more ancient than the ones he carried in his sweat-slippery leather Bible. He did not even imagine their presence ... In this landscape every rock had a name, and most names had spirits, ghosts, meanings. He had given his hat to Kumbaingiri Billy's father's sister. It was the Wednesday before Good Friday ... (493)

Carey here pits history against history, Christianity against the Aboriginal sacred, the martyr against reality, and refuses simply to dismiss Oscar. This is the Oscar who has by now witnessed the massacre of Aboriginal people by Jeffris and his men, bellowing in horror, but impotently tied to a tree, ferocious with grief and regret. And it is given to Kumbaingiri Billy, the Aboriginal witness, to describe to the present how 'even in the shadow ... fire danced around this man's head' (492). Is it because Oscar's journey is one which culminates in self-sacrifice, perhaps even suicide, that twentieth century readers are even willing to entertain his status as martyr, as visionary, as someone fulfilling a vocation? It is also possible to interpret this novel parodically, reading the description of the floating Oscar 'gaunt and ugly, with a bright adam's apple and a bright red hooked nose ... like the most fearsome Calvinist' (493) as purely mocking, the last, pathetic, laughable representative of the imperial dream.

In the same way, the image of the Anglican church floating its way down river monolithically can be read as an image of colonial arrogance, a penetration of a land already inhabited by Aboriginal peoples and the particular cause of yet more violence against those peoples, and/or a ridiculously poignant, misguidedly heroic and necessarily tragic image of an individual's and a people's vocation. The final image of Oscar, trampled up in the arbitrary and violent outcomes of his journey, punting on one final heroic mission, falling asleep before he manages to voice his ultimate prayer – for the destruction of the glass church – is both a grotesque and parodic image of the individual vocation, and by implication the colonial mission. I read this final scene needing to acknowledge the grotesque Oscar. Yet the novel has been structured traditionally around realist characterisation, and readers have responded to the individual fate of this character 'panicking in the face of eternity', like all good martyrs and missionaries drowned by the stubborn, overwhelming materiality of history: 'at ten minutes past eight on Good Friday eve ... with no fuss, it sank' (510).

Postcolonial responses to this novel have been diverse. Some would simply relegate the tale of two odd-bod Anglo-Saxon refugees stumbling around on the Australian continent to the same category as David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, describing Carey's bicentennial novel as yet another version of white – individualist, Romantic – history superseding black narratives. And it is true that as a revisionist novel, white, eccentric and basically likeable, even perhaps heroic characters still take centre-stage. But it would be interesting to compare this novel, written and published in the context of the bicentennial debates, with North American



novels and their popular film versions, films such as *Last of the Mohicans* and *Dances with Wolves*, both of which construct – in the context of North America – an incorporatist fantasy of whites into frontier and indigenous life.

If there is more guilt in this Australian text, and more realisation of the awful imposition of white ontology and material practice onto black Australia, is it anything more than a white, liberal guilt? The novel is written out of, or emerges with, a realisation that white beliefs, traditions, histories and ontologies have been and are continuing to intersect with indigenous Australia in a way which must and does rewrite ontologies and material existence for *both* white and black Australia. The current day narrator, the ancestor of Oscar, is certainly not hero-worshipping. He has a wry, open, parodic sense of the violent ramifications of Oscar's lofty, father-haunted, teleological mission. The parodic retains its two-faced ability to honour what Oscar brings, even as it sees its necessary submission before a new continent, a new set of practices and beliefs and stories, '... some as small as the anthropods that lived in the puddles beneath the river casuarinas ... like fleas, thrip, so tiny that they might inhabit a place (inside the ears of the seeds of grass) he would later walk across without even seeing' (492).

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