

An Australian Convict in the Great English City: Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*

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What makes Peter Carey's 1997 novel *Jack Maggs* an Australian novel? The protagonist, the convict from Australia, at any rate claims: 'I am not of that race [. . .]. The Australian race' (312-13). Still, he is the only character in the novel who has ever been there. Australia is present in the novel only as the convict's trauma to be called up by hypnosis: a hot, hellish country governed by inhuman punishments. Furthermore, it becomes the place of the rather helter-skelter happy ending of the last two of the novel's 328 pages, the significance of which this paper will discuss later. In addition, *Jack Maggs* is not only dominated by the intertextual relationship with one of the 'great English novels', Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), but is almost exclusively set in London. Carey's historical novel presents different spheres of London life in 1837 with a Dickensian feel for the city which is one of the novel's most impressive and noteworthy elements (see Hassall). This prominent portrayal of London and its ramifications of meaning form the centre of discussion of 'Australianness' in this paper. First, the significance of place and particularly the metropolis in post-colonial⁴ thinking will be examined. This will be followed by a discussion of three elements in *Jack Maggs* which expose and question the power of the hegemonic city: the portrayal of dark London, the characterisation of the great Victorian author Tobias Oates and the disruptive force the Australian convict presents in the imperial city. Finally, the novel's 'Australianness' will be explored in relation to the ending of *Jack Maggs*.

The protagonist's choice of place in *Jack Maggs* threatens his life. As a pardoned Australian convict his return to England, if discovered, could result in a death sentence. These circumstances transcribe in fiction Edward Said's observation that empires are based on 'important philosophical and imaginative processes at work in the production [. . .] acquisition, subordination and settlement of space' (Jacobs 3). Jane Jacobs stresses that: 'expressions and negotiations of imperialism do not just occur *in* space. This is a politics of identity and power that articulates

4. As the spelling with the dash indicates, I follow Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (1989 : 2) in my understanding of the term 'post-colonial': both the process of colonisation and its consequences up to the present are implied in the term. Where either of the two aspects is referred to exclusively, the terms 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' will be used respectively.

itself *through* space and is, fundamentally, *about*space' (Jacobs 1). In a post-colonial context, place and setting thus merit careful examination, especially in the case of Carey's novel with its strongly emphasised *mise-en-scène*. *Jack Maggs* takes place in a city, or rather in *the* metropolis: London – the centre of the Empire. 'Metropolis' is a well-used term for post-colonial theorists because the meanings involved convey different aspects of powerful dominance. The Greek word combines the elements 'mother' and 'city' and has been used for referring to the capital of a country as well as to the parent-state of a colony (Fox 187), which allows Fredric Jameson to use the term 'metropolitan' as a synonym for 'the imperial nation-state as such' (Jameson 65).

London in *Jack Maggs* can thus be seen to represent imperial power metonymically. The protagonist's sense of identity mirrors the defining power of the English imperial discourse as embodied in the city of London to which he returns: 'I am a fucking *Englishman*, and I have English things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong' (128). The London life Jack Maggs constructs for his 'son' Henry Phipps demonstrates what Maggs, along with the society that defines him, considers to be the cultural values to which everyone should aspire. In the shape of a luxurious house and a classical education he provides Phipps with a 'cocoon of gold and jewels' and 'a scholar's robe' (264), thus creating a proper English gentleman who frequents a club and is too well-bred to ask who possesses the title for his house (270). London, and thus English, culture in the novel presents itself as a culture of the arts in the theatre Percy Buckle owns and of course in the great Victorian author Tobias Oates and his works. Furthermore, London is technically and economically progressive as symbolised by the introduction of gaslight, which figures prominently in the first chapter of the novel.

The gaslight, however, illuminates another side of London not quite in line with the image of the cultural model: '[t]his light had shone all the way from Elephant and Castle: gas light, blazing and streaming like great torches; sausages illuminated, fish and ice gleaming [. . .] the city had become a fairground'. The newly arrived Jack Maggs is stunned: '[a]ll around him was uproar, din, the deafening rush, the smell of horse shit, that old yellow smell of London Town' (2). With this alternative view of the glittering, culturally refined imperial metropolis, *Jack Maggs* introduces one factor – together with two others discussed in this paper – into the description of London that serves to question and even erode its position of superiority. For in *Jack Maggs*, London is also the sooty, overpopulated city of abominable poverty, illness, crime and prostitution, familiar from so many of Dickens's novels. In fact, this dark underside prevails in the novel, for instance in the story of Jack's childhood education as a burglar, in Mercy's past as a prostitute and gentleman's mistress, in Percy Buckle's former life as a fishmonger and even in Tobias Oates's fear of destitution and social ruin. *Jack Maggs* concentrates on the social spheres of servants and criminals. (There are no important upper class characters in the novel but several characters attempt to become gentlemen.) By foregrounding and contrasting the 'Dickensian' aspects of London with the glossy,

rich and educated London of the ideal of the gentleman, Carey's novel points toward a dichotomy in the perception of the metropolis. This dichotomy was already a familiar one in the nineteenth century, spurred by a general interest in urban life and the new social conditions (see Walkowitz). For the context of this paper, the attitude displayed in descriptions of social life of those times is very illuminating: '[i]mperialist rhetoric transformed the unexplored territory of the London poor into an alien place, both exciting and dangerous' (Walkowitz 18). Thus, the binary oppositions *within* London mirror the familiar ones that contrast the centre with the margin. The London dichotomy 'juxtaposed a West End of glittering leisure and consumption and national spectacle to an East End of obscure density, indigence, sinister foreign aliens, and potential crime' (20). Like the colony Australia in the centre-margin framework, the '*terra incognita* of the London poor' (19) occupies the inferior pole in the familiar opposition between West and East. As Walkowitz observes: '[t]he opposition of East and West increasingly took on imperial and racial dimensions, as the two parts of London imaginatively doubled for England and its Empire' (26). The typically 'Dickensian' portrayal of London's dismal, dark side in *Jack Maggs* thus exposes the serious impact of the binary mechanisms of the English discourse hidden by the dazzling image of London's metropolitan power. The novel is concerned with those occupying the wrong – poor and uneducated – pole in the hierarchy, and in the process links them with those who can never hope to fulfill the requirements because they are connected with the wrong place, a colony. Consequently, both London and Morton [sic] Bay are dubbed 'hellish' in the novel (291 and 168).

The novel's treatment of the character Tobias Oates who seeks 'comprehensive knowledge of the Other' (Walkowitz 20), both from within the city and in the convict from the margin of Empire, represents a second step in exposing the impact of metropolitan hegemony. The great writer goes about his craft in a truly Victorian manner: he collects 'Evidence' (*JM* 43) in alphabetically ordered pigeonholes. He starts to work every morning at half past five (43) and has a 'study [. . .] ordered as methodically as a laboratory' (44). He is proud of his scientific approach, likens himself to a surgeon and archaeologist and sees in the Australian convict an object for study: '[i]t's the Criminal Mind [. . .] awaiting its first cartographer' (90). Furthermore, the novel underlines the writer's shaping role for the image of London: 'it was Tobias Oates who 'made' the City of London. With a passion he barely understood himself, he named it, mapped it, widened its great streets, narrowed its dingy lanes, framed its scenes with the melancholy windows of his childhood' (182). Even sporting garish waistcoats, the great Victorian author in *Jack Maggs* is thus very recognisably modelled on the young Charles Dickens and, like Dickens in his portrayals of London, English family life and Christmas time, occupies a formative role in creating an image of the ideal England. Oates is engaged in creating the imaginary geography of imperialism. Yet, by offering the reader insight into the process of this creation and into its originator, Carey's novel discloses the precariousness, contingency and injustice of the colonial discourse. Tobias Oates's moral standing is eroded by his cowardly treat-

ment of his love affair with his sister-in-law; his integrity as man and author is furthermore dismantled by the two books he keeps of the hypnotic sessions with Maggs, always showing the convict the invented one. He entirely lacks any scruples in altering Maggs's memory in the state of hypnosis, possibly even planting the phantom in his mind. Tobias Oates is a penny pincher like one of his most renowned creations, the famous miser (198); he sets great store by possessions to provide him with social status, is exceedingly vain and dependent on the opinion of others. The drafts of the chapters of the novel he is to write later about the Australian convict, *The Death of Maggs*, and their contrast to the actual events in Carey's novel, reveal that Oates is not a moral model creating a sublime work of art; rather his idiosyncrasies and his hate for Jack Maggs determine his writing. In a novel that works with a polyperspectival method, integrating the views of a variety of characters on the same events, the instances given serve to 'downsize' the great Victorian author and make him probably the least likeable figure in the novel. This trend culminates in the fact that, as London's dark side resembles its colony, so Tobias Oates displays the traits of the object of his study and his fiction, the criminal convict. Oates is 'as trustworthy as a Newgate bird' (30) from the outset and makes the convict feel 'burgled, plundered' (32), finally allowing the novel to state 'it was he, Tobias Oates, who was, by some trick of Fate, suddenly the criminal' (183). His major crime is to exercise his power of description and definition freely and without scruples, writing the story of Maggs to suit his own mercenary ends. The motif of crime consequently provides a telltale and subversive parallel between the convicted criminal and the great author and 'creator' of London. It serves to destroy the supposed moral superiority of the centre represented by the great Victorian author and the metropolis. This reaffirms the new emphasis in the connection between London and its convict colony since as James Clifford remarks: '[d]ifference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhoods, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth' (Jacobs 13). This observation stresses the coexistence of alterity and identity in London as outlined above, and as exemplified in the relationship between Tobias Oates and Jack Maggs. It is necessary to realise how this coexistence is supplemented and concealed by the geographical dislocation of alterity – epitomised by the motif of crime – to Australia. The 'familiar' that 'turns up at the end of the world' is the same alterity constituting 'dark' London.

Yet *Jack Maggs* does not only show its readers the defining power of the metropolitan centre, it also reveals the reciprocal nature of the centre-margin relationship. For the Australian convict returning to the centre possesses the power to threaten and disrupt the comfortable partitions of the identity-alterity constellations. He is the 'other' disturbing the 'self', an unsettling presence from the first page of the novel, who keeps observers guessing: '[h]e was a tall man in his forties, so big in chest and broad in the shoulder that his fellows on the bench seat had felt the strain of his presence, but what his occupation was, or what he planned to do in London, they had not the least idea' (1). It is very clear to the footman Constable: 'You are not a servant, Mr Maggs' (122) and Mercy thinks him 'ever

so distinguished' (15). Like the social victim Abel Magwitch of *Great Expectations* but in a strikingly different way, Jack Maggs is powerful and even lovable. He displays his intelligence and education in his letters to Henry Phipps, quotes from *King Lear* and corrects his fellow servants' dropped aitches. Physically he is very strong and thus gets people to do what he wants them to: on the very first page of the novel, even the porter of the Golden Ox, 'a famously insolent individual' (1) does instantly what Maggs wishes when 'convinced' by his force- and painful grip. Maggs is a figure to inspire strong emotions: Oates and Buckle are afraid of him (45), and hate him eventually, while Mercy and the homosexual footman are sexually attracted and fall in love with him. In the course of the novel, Jack Maggs transgresses a number of established boundaries between centre and margin. Firstly, the Australian convict's ownership of a gentleman's house in the metropolis produces quirks in a city where wealth is a – or even the – major element for the definition of social status. Maggs does not only create problems about his own social status, however, but also upsets existing social arrangements. Because of Maggs, Mercy gives up her loyalty to Percy Buckle to whom she is both servant and mistress, having hoped that Buckle will eventually marry her. This 'defection' produces Buckle's attempt to have Phipps kill Maggs since he feels his secure female possession threatened. Most disturbing for the existing power structures, however, is the power Maggs exerts over Tobias Oates with the secret of Oates's affair and his threatening physical violence. Maggs unsettles him and furthermore resists having his secrets exploited and plagiarised, demanding that Oates return the manuscripts – even if he is not very successful against Oates's tricks. In *Jack Maggs* the convict writes his *own* version of his story which counteracts and contradicts Oates's story and the intertextually implied *Great Expectations*. Maggs's stay in London thus creates social and emotional unrest, casts doubts on a Victorian icon and questions the stories of Empire in great Victorian novels.

In the portrayal of the metropolis in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* the drive for revealing the city's hegemonic and discriminatory power together with the convict's – and particularly Mercy's – resistance to it improve Australia's image by sheer implication: once the instance terming Australia inferior is dismantled, the continent becomes superior. The proof for this seems to be the happy ending for Jack Maggs and the servant Mercy, who was the one to show the convict how blinded he had been by English values. The readers learn how with their flight and founding of a dynasty in Australia a new genealogy for the Australian race is created – in opposition to the dead end for the Australian influence in *Great Expectations* brought about by Magwitch's death. Yet, if the intention of Carey's historical novel is to 're-write history', why doesn't it change the setting? Why is Australia a rather vague space in the novel, represented mainly by the figure of the convict, while London is such a powerful concrete presence? Perhaps the dominating presence of London testifies to the impossibility of what the happy ending of one and a half pages seems to suggest: to leave the centre behind to create a completely new origin at the margin. Australian 'alterity' must come to terms with English 'identity' to create a viable identity for itself. The expansive portrayal

of Jack Maggs's decisive stay in London, the novel's emphasis on the mechanisms of writing and the extensive use of polyerspective are a warning of the pitfalls of creating origins. These elements alert us to the fact that every event possesses different meanings for different people at different points in time. While the metropolitan centre is subjected to discursive mechanisms denying this, Australia should try to escape these mechanisms and not reiterate this mistake by putting itself above its (former) coloniser. The final paragraph of the novel, which supersedes the happy ending by describing the bequest of Mercy's seven copies of Oates's novel *The Death of Maggs* to the Mitchell Library in Sydney, reminds the reader that English influence belongs to the 'library' of Australian culture. And the playfulness of the last sentence throws an ironic light on the new Australian genealogy, proving it to be still embroiled in the London story: '[t]he Mitchell's librarian has noted on each index card the 'v. rough excision' of that page which reads: Affectionately Inscribed to PERCIVAL CLARENCE BUCKLE – A Man of Letters, a Patron of the Arts' (328). By tearing out the page bearing the dedication to Percy Buckle Mercy tries to erase Buckle's part in the story of *Jack Maggs* (the novel) because of her affair with him. Furthermore, the wording of the dedication turns Buckle at least on paper into what he had always longed to be. And the dedication represents the fulfilment of a deal between Tobias Oates and Percy Buckle in which it had served as an incentive for Buckle not to give up Jack Maggs to the police (140). Oates only appears good-natured in this deal, however, since the deal is an attempt to retain his object for exploitation. Readers reading the last sentence remember all this and relish the different paths of meaning: certainly original, but no new origins.

Works Cited

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