

Brian Castro: Hybridity, Identity and Reality

MICHAEL DEVES, FLINDERS UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Brian Castro is a writer of very complex novels, ones that do not lend themselves to easy interpretation. Not surprisingly, many readers find his novels too difficult, and too self-consciously 'writerly'. But it is Castro's intention to challenge the reader. He questions the notion of a fixed order, his purpose being to encourage us to firstly examine and then to re-invent our conception of the world around us. As we cannot build our world afresh from first principles every day, Castro suggests that what we do is largely a patchworking process of examining parts, discarding or refreshing some, and patching in or adapting new paradigms. It is a process of hybridisation.

Castro's novels are concerned with recurrent themes: while his broad focus is 'the great primal drives', 'sex and death, the same old things really, which Freud had pointed to almost a century ago' ('Heterotopias' 180), he characteristically concerns himself with the problem of identity in what might loosely be called a postmodern world, one that does not acknowledge fixities or absolutes. This view is expressed in Castro's statement that:

Writing, like ordinary life, is actually a muddle and a feeling of one's way through darkness ... (181)

For Castro being 'in a muddle' is not a 'problem' or a 'failing' on our part, it is the natural state of human existence. Rather than trying to resolve the problems of existence, a fruitless exercise, he suggests we should be exploring life's possibilities. This is what *he* does as a writer, a process of exploring which he expresses in his (Cartesianesque) mini credo: 'To write therefore is to be unsettling.' (179)

Castro's techniques involve destabilisation, and they investigate what it is that makes us tick as people, both at the individual level in terms of psychology, and at the social level in terms of national and cultural identity. Castro argues that to have a stable position or identity is to be at best stagnant, and at worst out of touch with life. As existential philosophers and psychologists have argued, the world is complex and at times crazy, and if you have too neat a view of life it may be that you are blocking out part of the reality.

It is therefore the lot of characters in Castro's novels to be unsure of their identity, and often to begin to disintegrate or question their identity during the course of the novel. They may learn more about themselves and find out more about the world, and may therefore 'develop', but they will not become 'whole' people 'comfortable' with their position. The character Shan in *Birds of Passage* returns to China a changed, even 'wiser' person, but there is still a sense of him struggling with himself:

Preparing to resume the life he had led in China, he was also conscious of the immense changes in himself. He was on a different path now, in control of his destiny, and he brought with him something of the void he had experienced in Australia, the silence and the stillness that helped him to accept his microscopic role in the eternal recurrences of nature. Pursued by ghosts threatening to overwhelm him, he willed the ship to fly ... (153-4)

This is a rare example of someone *developing* in a Castro novel, but there is still the

sense of unsureness in the core. Shan is able to go forward only because he is now convinced that he can cope with the uncertainties in his identity.

Human endeavour is always a balance of the drives towards unification and finding common ground—the totalising or integrating forces—and the impulse towards differentiating ourselves as individuals. To go too far in either direction may be destructive. We must continuously examine the totalising tendencies in our culture to make sure they do not swallow up our individuality and to make sure that our current 'total' myth or world view is appropriate to the times. Writing is, Castro says, one way of challenging our myths.

To write therefore is to be unsettling. In it [writing], the idea of a cosy and clannish home is backward-looking and defensive. In it, totalising myths are discarded. Contemporary writing seems to be creating a defamiliarisation with the world, and with one's place in it ... It is a paradoxical procedure, this attempt to name what is constantly slipping away. Words and things have drifted apart. It is nevertheless a procedure as old as the novel itself, wherein languages, ideas and styles have always formed an unsettled mixture. The old novel however, ... had defined boundaries within which information was traded for the reader's loyalty to a common and national agenda. The new novel places the boundaries themselves under question. ('Heterotopias' 176)

Castro is proposing that the [traditional] novel has relied for many years on what became unwritten conventions, such as belief in 'realism', belief in progress and linearity, and the suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. Once embedded in a culture, this leads to problems such as novels being interpreted as reality, for example the 'Australian myth' that Australia is populated by terse, laconic Blokes who live in 'The Bush'. These ideas are no longer accepted blindly—we allow that women, Aborigines and migrants are an integral part of 'Australia', so in Castro's conception we have a new but fluid 'myth' or world-view.

We also now allow that novels do not necessarily show us 'reality', and that 'reality' itself is a variable construct. In fact, the more one thinks questioningly about the world the more one finds it 'strange'. But for Castro the word 'strange' does not have negative connotations. Although he aims to destabilise, he says that he is not doing so in a destructive or aimless way but in a constructive way, in an explorative way that allows us to accept what seems at first strange.¹ He says his method is 'Not a prescription for dislocation but a location for the unfamiliar' ('Heterotopias' 179).

In his novels Castro tries to defamiliarise, through language and plot. One of the novelists whom Castro admires is B.S. Johnson, the experimental English writer who died in 1973. (In fact *Drift* was conceived as a completion of Johnson's unfinished 'Matrix' trilogy).² One of Johnson's novels, *The Unfortunates*, was published in loose leaf format and can, except for the first and last sections, be read in any order. The purpose was not entirely flippant, but was meant to show that reality, as myth or story, can be constructed or interpreted in many ways, that the reader is involved in this interpretation, and that the process can, to some extent, be a kind of game and enjoyable on that level. Castro's novels rely heavily on this fragmentary approach, where the reader must reconstruct a narrative from the sections. His novels cannot be read in linear fashion—the reader is forced to move backwards and forwards to interpret events—and they are always fresh to reread, because the constructive process offers novel versions of the 'novel'.

As well as providing different 'identities' for his novels, Castro is perpetually con-

cerned with his characters' identities. This is true of each novel, from *Birds of Passage* to the most recent, *Stepper*, in which the protagonist is a spy, someone deliberately adept at moving between 'identities', and in this case a person of mixed nationality working across several cultures. Castro's third novel, *Double-Wolf*, has as its focus Freud's famous neurotic patient the 'Wolfman'. The novel's thesis is that if the Wolfman's identity³ is such an unstable construct, it is possible that Freud's theories, many of which were based on the Wolfman case, are just as unstable.

Limiting this discussion to just one novel, *Birds of Passage*, illustrates the concept of hybrid identity. In this novel two protagonists must come to terms with their identity in psychological and cultural terms. The novel interweaves two narratives, one of an 1850s Chinese migrant, Lo Yun Shan, who comes to the Australian gold-fields, and a contemporary Australian-born Chinese, Seamus O'Young.

Shan leaves China because he finds difficulty fitting into the changing China of the time. In Australia he comes up against the vicissitudes of life on the gold fields and racial hatred. His beliefs in the ideas of Confucianism are tested, and he comes to adapt to his new country, itself full of hybrids (not 'Australians', but European migrants adapting to *their* new culture and identity). He returns to China a wiser person, not 'integrated', but able to accept the disparate parts of his identity, which now includes 'Australian' elements. He leaves a record of his life in a journal which is later found by Seamus.

Seamus is an orphan who does not know his background and feels himself an alien, not only because of his hybrid racial mix but because of his adolescent psychological or ontological insecurity. He fortuitously finds Shan's journal and begins translating it.

Translating has an enhanced meaning for Castro; the changing of one language into another is accompanied by a cultural translation as the time and background of the work must also be translated into a new time and background. In *Birds of Passage* Seamus says:

In the library I consult Chinese dictionaries. How does one give meaning to feelings in another language, especially one that is built on images? Are the feelings exact? Are the words exact? I want to feel exactly ... Are the feelings the same even if these things occurred more than a hundred years ago? (104)

In the novel Castro goes further and equates this translation process with the regeneration of the person writing (Shan). It is the conceit of the novel to have Shan virtually come alive and inhabit Seamus, who through the process rediscovers his lost Chinese roots. In a dream-like, imaginative epiphany at the end of the novel the two characters 'meet' each other. Castro uses this 'meeting' as a figurative way of explaining that we are a compound of the influences around us and which precede us. We are hybrids, and not simply members of a category such as 'Chinese' or 'Australian'.

How does Castro see this hybrid world that his characters, and therefore we also, inhabit? The word he uses is 'heterotopia'.⁴ A heterotopia is a system that allows multiple values and disbelieves—even actively discourages—the possibility of a uniform, dominant system. At a concrete level, Castro attacks totalitarian systems such as Chinese Communism (e.g. *After China*), but he is also attacking less obvious regimenting forces such as Western chauvinism.

In Castro's heterotopia hybridity is an anti-Platonic concept, which argues that there are no pure forms, and that everything is a mixture or hybrid construction. In his novels, therefore, it is often impossible to untangle a single 'purpose' from a given passage. 'Purposes' tend to be implied rather than concrete, and to be just as slippery

as his world. It is often difficult to decide in a Castro novel which way the 'argument' is proceeding. It is also hard to decide when he is 'being serious' and when he is 'being provocative', as he often parodies cultural mores and literary styles (for example, genre writing like detective fiction and literary theory).

His writing is 'heteroglossic' as described by Bakhtin.⁵ Like many of the writers whom he admires—such as Joyce, Beckett, Nabokov, White, Bellow, Pynchon—and whom he calls 'the language writers', Castro is fascinated by language and its elusive ability to vary its meaning. Castro's novels are also highly intertextual, sometimes written in imitation of others, sometimes parodying, sometimes writing 'with' another writer (e.g. *Drift* as extension of B.S. Johnson), sometimes writing against other texts, especially literary theory. For example Roland Barthes is introduced as a cameo character in *Birds of Passage* but quickly excuses himself: he 'stood up, apologized and said that he was in the wrong compartment [of the train]' (71).

Hybridity is also a useful way of examining ethnic and cultural constructs. Castro sees himself as a hybrid character, by temperament as well as racially. He sees advantages in his mixed nationality.

Hybridity was the sort of crossing or chiasmus ['cross-breeding'] I had to make even before I began to write. And my ancestors had made these before me. People were transported across and arranged in sites totally alien to the surface familiarity of the world. I wanted to evoke that diversity. ('Heterotopias' 180)

Castro's six novels deal with characters who are hybrid types, several of them being Asian/European/Australian mixes. Because of his own background Castro is interested in the confluence of these three currents in Australia. He is particularly interested in national stereotyping. He condemns the simple-minded approach which pigeonholes people by outward appearance, because it impedes the possibility of a deeper or more meaningful engagement at a cultural level. In *Birds of Passage* Seamus comes up against this problem, which Castro himself has also experienced.

'Seamus O'Young. It's not my real name. I'm not Irish. I am in fact an ABC; that is, an Australian-born Chinese. Yes and no. I find your questions infuriating. People are always very curious about nationality. They will go to extraordinary lengths to pigeonhole someone. They think this knowledge gives them power.' (*Birds of Passage* 8)

According to Castro, this short-sighted approach has its source in 'fear and loathing' of anything foreign, rooted in a lack of firm national identity.

Castro recalls growing up in Hong Kong in a society that was multicultural 'before anyone trumpeted it'. He has a very mixed racial background (Chinese/Portuguese/English, and now Australian), but 'There were no racial slurs in the schoolyard.' He remembers that 'The first time I was asked not "Who are you" but "What are you", was when I arrived in Australia.' ('Writing Asia' 6-7) This is mirrored in Seamus O'Young's experiences:

'O'Young. What kind of a name is that?' he asked.

You see, I have blue eyes. That is why I could not be completely Chinese. I used to think long and hard about this when I was a schoolboy ... One day I asked my best friend in the playground to describe me. This is how he saw me.

'You have a moonface,' he said, 'with black hair sticking out of the top and your eyes are slits. Your nose is flat and you have yellow skin.' (*Birds of Passage* 10)

Castro argues that the problem of identity arises from clinging to an outdated

myth. In its historical position as offspring of the British Empire and inheritor of the European tradition, Australia has felt itself isolated and has tended to look back to a mythical past.

Australia has had to define itself against others. But the tendency has been that instead of defining itself, and realising itself as a continually changing society, it has nostalgically yearned for stasis, drawing on a large number of myths which, while uniting segments of its population, retards its overall ability to absorb newness and deal adequately with others. ('Writing Asia' 4)

This passage uses two of Castro's key words: *stasis* and *myth*. For Castro myth is the defining ethos, the sum of how we interpret ourselves at any given point in time. *Stasis* is the enemy of culture and intellectual activity: it represents constipation of thought. Castro's aim in his writing is to regenerate myth. He is fond of Japanese Nobel Prize-winning novelist Oe Kenzaburo's dictum: 'It is the second job of literature to create myth. But its first job is to destroy myth.' ('Writing Asia' 7)

Castro sees his role as being a myth questioner, dismantling received views of the world and opening them up for regeneration. Stories are a favourite way of doing this, engaging the imagination so that we can explore different possibilities. In stories we construct and explain our world, and we do so by rewriting the existing narratives to suit our times and circumstances. In this regard Castro has been influenced by George Steiner's ideas of retelling as a way of re-experiencing.⁶ So, for example, Joyce's *Ulysses* reworks Virgil which reworks Homer. In a more recent example Graham Swift's *Last Orders* can be seen as reworking Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

It is worth emphasising that Castro sees his role as a novelist as explorative, and not prescriptive or overtly political. (Brian Castro the essayist is more polemical). Whenever he talks about his position as a novelist dealing with things 'Asian', 'Asian/Australian', or 'multicultural', Castro makes his stance clear: 'Well, I'm a writer, not an academic nor an Asianist nor an Australianist. And a writer must teeter on the brink of such chasms.' ('Writing Asia' 6)

Any investigation of the world around us is mediated by language, the device that allows our imaginations to explore our world. Once again, the more language(s) one has, and the more imaginatively one employs language, the richer the results.

Language marks the spot where the self loses its prison bars—where the border crossing takes place, traversing the spaces of others. When one speaks or translates Chinese, one metaphorically becomes Chinese; when one speaks Japanese one 'turns' Japanese. Each language speaks the world in its own ways. The polyglot is a freer person, a person capable of living in words and worlds other than the narrow and the confined one of unimagined reality. When we translate from one language to another we not only reinvent ourselves but we free up the sclerotic restrictions of our own language. We feel free to transgress, to metamorphose, to experience the uncanny ... Other cultures and languages reinforce and enrich us by powerfully affecting and destabilising our familial tongue. We gain by losing ourselves. (9)

Australia has produced few writers capable of this polyglot exploration of culture and identity.⁷ The result has been to Australia's disadvantage.

Castro's writing combines difficult and obscure passages, where unfamiliar words, unfamiliar syntax, and unfamiliar ideas and customs are mixed to disturb the reader's comfortable position and encourage new syntheses.

But Castro proposes that the only way writing can affect the reader is if it makes

the person experience something. Hence his writing is very poetic and lyrical at times, quite sensual and visceral at others, but never bland. He argues that writing serves no purpose if it appeals only to the intellect, and that ideas alone are sterile. We learn about life through experiencing things, even when that experience occurs in the imagination, as happens in moving or emotional stories.

Castro bemoans the lack of 'experimentation' in contemporary writing, where experimentation has for him a specialized meaning. 'In the cultural sphere, this word has, in relatively recent times, been devastatingly corrupted. 'Experiment' originally meant to have experience of, to experience, to feel, to suffer.' ('Heterotopias' 181)

Castro sets out to restore the 'humanistic force' of the writer, to restore the idea of a novel providing its readers with a felt experience, and in doing so having something to say about the world around us, and indeed for 'reality', whatever that expression might mean to us. Castro admits that it is impossible to divorce the absurd from life—'To have to articulate the meaning beneath experience is always self-contradictory. It cannot be accomplished without absurdity.' (181)

This means that his novels can be two things at once: a disturbing combination of psychological and philosophical exploration that is at times harrowing and gross, and at other times an enjoyable game that we can indulge in. The rapid switches between the serious and ludicrous continually keep the reader off balance. However, Castro would argue that this is all part of life, which has its comic, anarchic, and downright baffling moments, and his role is not to explain it, but to explore it.

Notes

- 1 Castro's ideas have much in common with John Barth's 'as if' principle (*The Floating Opera*, *Chimera*; Freud, on the uncanny; Kafka's familiar yet 'strange' worlds).
- 2 See *the Old Lady Decently*, published in 1975; *Buried Although* and *Among Those Left are You* were planned but not written. *Drift* 'completes' the two latter books.
- 3 Castro noted that the Wolfman, Sergei Wespe, harboured ambitions to be a writer, and it is quite possible that he was adept at 'writing', that is fabricating, his life experiences and thus his own 'identity'.
- 4 Modelled along the lines of utopia, dystopia, etc.: *hetero*—'other', 'different'; *topos*—place.
- 5 See, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse'; reprinted in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (Longman, London, 1988), pp. 125–156.
- 6 See, for example, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?*
- 7 Especially Asian culture. Castro's honourable exceptions (at the time he wrote 'Writing Asia') were Alex Miller and Nicholas Jose, who not only speak Asian languages but have attempted to engage with the culture and philosophy of Asian countries.

Works cited

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