

Colonising time, recollecting place: Steven Carroll's reinvention of suburbia

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Australian suburbs—like suburbs elsewhere¹—are attracting renewed scholarly attention during the latest phase of urban transformation. As work by Fiona Allon (2008), Amanda Wise (2010) and others shows, the lived experience, spatial contours and cultural demographics of contemporary suburbia are in flux. It is no coincidence that representations of suburbia are also changing in character and detail, as seen in recent literary fiction. Christos Tsiolkas's *The Slap* (2008), for instance, reinvents suburban terrain precisely through its engagement with Australia's diversifying demography and changing urban/suburban modes, in turn conditioned by global capitalism's fluid and precarious present, in what Zygmunt Bauman influentially terms 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 1-15). Yet literary critics and scholars of Australian literature are yet to move far from what has been, since the 1990s, a governing focus on an anti-suburban literary tradition. Critics have used 'pro- or anti-suburbia' as the key—if not sole—rubric for reading fictions of suburbia. Conditioned by the fiction itself, this approach was influentially introduced by Robin Gerster (1990), theoretically honed by Andrew McCann and others (1997; 1998), and continues into the present, albeit with modification and updating (Burns; O'Reilly). Fictions of postwar suburbia depicting the entrapment or flight of their protagonists are routinely read as anti-suburban, as a function of cosmopolitan habitus or artistic elitism. Even such an elusive work as David Malouf's *Johnno* (1975) has been positioned as anti-suburban:² there has been no escaping the dominance of this paradigm.

This is not to suggest that the critique of fictions of suburbia lacks validity. It testifies to suburbia as an enduring *topos* in Australian fiction, not least because nation and suburb are so historically and politically correlated: Australia has even been called the first suburban nation (Davison 1995). Literary suburbia remains seriously under-analysed, and avenues for conceptualizing how the novel speaks to the suburb in Australian literature are still too limited.³ The pro- and anti-suburbia paradigm does not adequately gauge, for instance, how the suburb works as a particular kind of literary topography. It does not account for the persistence of the suburb in fiction nor the emotional power with which even anti-suburban novels conjure lost or forgotten places, or address the contemporary era. The cultural moment at which we appear to have arrived, coinciding with broader urban change, is eliciting fresh approaches in adjacent disciplines of history, cultural geography, sociology and urban studies. Their insights are suggestive for literary studies where a more finely calibrated sense of the sustained role of the suburbs in Australian literature is long overdue. More attention could be given, for example, to how novels map suburban history, and encode the phenomenal or sensory contours of specific suburbs—how do they archive social transformations while reinventing suburban material for mainly literary purposes? The longer view suggests that suburbia has offered writers a surprisingly rich vein for the stylistic renovation of the novel itself. Novels about the suburbs respond to Australian vernacular modernity, occasioning stories of exile, longing and return, often through modernist temporalities that yoke suburban terrain to colonization and forgetting (McCann 146-7). As echoed in the title of Elizabeth Harrower's *The Long Prospect* (1958), the longer view can disrupt the provincial frame, revealing the transnational provenance of both suburban topography and literary modernism, and their mutual correlations with settler modernity.

Focusing on recent fiction by Melbourne writer Steven Carroll,⁴ this essay postulates the untapped potential of literary suburbia, reasoning that a rich complex of social, cultural and aesthetic meanings lies latent even in those novels that are held to define, often negatively, our collective idea of the suburbs. Carroll's novels, I suggest, not only reconfigure and reinvent suburban terrain for their own purposes; they also generate new perspectives that might in turn inform the critical re-reading of novels of the suburbs by writers like Patrick White, George Johnston, David Malouf, Elizabeth Harrower, and many others. In particular, we need to attend more closely to the rhetorical density forged by the dynamic between text and world, between what I call 'real' and 'imagined.' In juxtaposing terms like 'real/imagined' and 'suburb/novel' I do not mean to imply that real suburbs somehow pre-exist their discursive mediations, or function as the authenticating, original ground for fictional counterparts. Rather, I use these pairings under erasure so as to produce new perspectives not only on the novelistic negotiation of suburban domains but also on the suburbs as constitutive sites for contemporary fiction. In so doing, I draw on the phenomenology of Gaston Bachelard (1964), who insists that even though poetic image and sensory world are irreducibly distinct from one another, each can trigger the oneiric power of private memory. My argument also draws on J. Hillis Miller's analysis of the interactions of fictional and extra-fictional terrain, in his study *Topographies* (1995). For Hillis Miller, there is no necessary join or connection between fiction and world. Yet, as he argues, the 'text of a novel and the real landscape may be thought of as elements in a series' (Miller 19). Indeed, the meanings of fiction-landscape are metonymically constituted through a 'perpetually reversing metalepsis' (Miller 21). Discussing Thomas Hardy's Wessex, Trollope's Basset and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Miller contends that such fictional maps constitute the last elements in the series 'going from the real landscapes to the maps or photographs of them, to the maps based on the novels.' Within the fictional 'real' created by these maps, characters' paths cross and entwine and action occurs, thickening and interlacing meanings:

A novel is a figurative mapping. The story traces out diachronically the movement of the characters from house to house and from time to time, as the crisscross of their relationships gradually creates an imaginary space. This space is based on the real landscape, charged now with the subjective meaning of the story that has been enacted within it. The houses, roads, paths, and walls stand not so much for the individual characters as for the dynamic field of relations among them. (Miller 19)

Miller's model describes the serial generation of topographical meanings, and in this light the pairing of 'real/imagined' is a process through which fictional landscapes garner meaning, through intertextual links with extra-fictional landscapes. Real world landscapes are, in turn, recharged and made to mean through their contingency with fiction: in other words, the interactive series of narrative-landscape-narrative invests landscapes with meaning. The contingency of 'real/imagined' or 'suburb/novel' does not imply a simple parallelism or relationship of causality. But it does prompt recognition of how realms of fiction and world, though inseparably divided, are also necessarily coupled; and through this coupling their respective fields of meaning are generated, amplified and renewed.

A multidimensional dynamic between real and imagined, suburb and novel, is mobilized by Carroll in his 'Glenroy' novels, an acclaimed, prize-winning series that is yet to receive significant critical attention.⁵ To date, the Glenroy series comprises four books, although at the time of my writing Carroll is well underway with a fifth and envisages a sixth that will conclude the series.⁶ The four extant Glenroy novels conjure the author's childhood suburb

through reverie or dream. In ‘Blue Suburban Skies,’ a piece published in 2007 in the *Advertiser*, Carroll attributes the inception of the series to his visit, years ago, to Penny Lane in Liverpool, where he encountered the contradiction between a ‘quiet, unprepossessing, decidedly middle-class street’ and ‘the most perfect pop song ever written.’ The Beatles’ mythologisation of Penny Lane, their preservation of memory in the ‘aspic of a timeless song,’ is transferred by Carroll to his own childhood suburb, a place so ordinary and familiar, already so overdetermined by ‘limited, ready-made’ mythologies, that the challenge became one of reinvention. Suburbia, for Carroll, is:

rarely seen as the site for the grand narratives of literary fiction. Somehow, suburbia has to be re-invented for readers to see, mirrored in the writing, their own exoticness. For readers to see the utterly-taken-for-granted-and-familiar made unfamiliar. (Carroll, ‘Blue Suburban Skies’ W11)

In an account that perfectly matches the oneiric quality of his fiction, Carroll explains how he was moved to draft the first of the books after a vivid dream of himself as boy walking with his parents along their street at sunset, in a kind of *tableau vivant* (W11). Set in 1958 (though the exact year is not explicitly given until chapter five of the third book), *The Art of the Engine Driver* (2001) replicates this dream logic with its family’s long walk down their darkening suburban street to a neighbour’s engagement party. During their slow promenade, the narrative crosses from character to character, intertwining their lives with a parallel plot involving the protracted and inexorable collision of two trains, the impact of which resonates through the series, and conjuring as its historic counterpart the fatal collision of the Southern Aurora with a northbound freight train at Violet Town in 1969.⁷ *The Gift of Speed* (2004) unfolds against the radio broadcast of a legendary Australia versus West Indies test match in 1961. Now in adolescence, Michael stokes his speed bowling ambitions and screens off his parents’ growing estrangement. Carroll’s Miles Franklin Literary Award winning third novel, *The Time We Have Taken* (2007), shifts to 1970, with Michael at university and in love, with Whitlam rising to power on the great wave of change brought by the baby boomers, and with the suburb’s elders commissioning a mural to mark its centenary, respectability and progress.

My focus is on the fourth, most recently published novel, *Spirit of Progress* (2011). It exemplifies the existing set, working once more over what are by now, for Carroll’s readers, familiar settings, characters and scenarios. But *Spirit of Progress* also recasts the preceding volumes by extending their temporal and spatial reach and by thickening their intertextual threads—not least through an intricate play between ‘real’ and ‘imagined,’ suburb and novel. Hillis Miller observes that ‘landscape exists as landscape only when it has been made human in an activity of inhabitation that the writing of the novel repeats and prolongs’ (21). How, through the entwining of real with imagined, do Carroll’s ‘Glenroy’ novels prolong, inhabit and memorialize his lost suburban landscape? What might closer attention to the interaction of real and imagined in novels of suburbia reveal, not least about the role of the suburb in Australian literary modernism? Can we not rethink the wider cultural significance of such novels as sites of collective memory, as repository or archive of lost places, with all the ambivalent settler-colonial remembering, and forgetting, that this implies?

In Carroll’s novels, the play between real and imagined, fiction and world, is multidimensional, moving through times, and shuttling between local, national and global frames. At one level, the novels map, without naming, precise coordinates, traversing locales closely based on a remembered Glenroy from the 1940s through to the 1970s. Here, as in Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* (1991), the suburb functions as synecdoche for nation, the part that

represents the whole.⁸ Yet the fictive topography of Glenroy exerts tension with populist, national narratives of ‘progress.’ Tracing the suburb’s transitions decade by decade from farmland, to frontier suburb, to municipal tidy town, Carroll’s novels collectively dramatize local transformations that refract the socio-political history of postwar white ‘Australian settlement’ (see Gleeson 9-24).⁹ Postwar suburbia generated much of the iconography that populates Australia’s cultural imaginary, constituting, as Carroll puts it, a ‘limited, ready-made’ mythology of the ‘ordinary’ (Carroll, ‘Blue Suburban Skies’ W11)—and this mythology has also been replenished in and through Australian fiction. Carroll’s novels enact a generational saga in which his suburb’s baby boomer offspring, the generation that voted for Whitlam, represent an historical force of change. In *The Time We Have Taken*, set in 1970, Whitlam is amusingly ‘wheeled’ on, a mountainous and remote figure signaling the eruption of capital H History into the timeless space of the suburb. The housing, immigration and social policy reforms of the Whitlam government, not least its adoption of multiculturalism, would in turn, and over time, transform the suburbs again.

On the other hand, Carroll’s source suburb—with its specifics of place, time and community—is thoroughly reinvented through the exercise of autobiographical memory in concert with fictive imagination. Against the readymade, historical story of local and national progress, these novels are carefully wrought narrative machines, transposing and rearranging sources that otherwise scaffold the plot. Their style, incantatory voice and narrative composition not only amplify themes of time, memory and loss but also embed their fictive suburban topography into the genealogy of both Australian literary suburbia and transatlantic modernism. In mood and sensibility, in their networks of borrowing, they escape the rigidities of the national frame by looping themselves into world literary space—specifically, into the settler novel’s modernist, Anglo-European literary heritage (Dimock 3-4). The widening of literary coordinates this entails also complicates the stereotypically national frame for reading suburbia—literary or otherwise—as an exclusively Australian phenomenon. Instead, suburbia is made manifest as a local variant of larger, historic, colonial, transnational and global forces of urbanization. One of the central motifs in the Glenroy novels—the impending collision of trains—literalizes the historic intersection between the dissemination of the novel and, following railway lines, the spread of the suburbs. In their separate realms, novels and suburbs are contingent on and vehicles for bourgeois capitalist modernity. Familiar parallels—between travelling by train and reading novels—are implicitly mobilized through the motif of collision between steam and diesel. Not only do they evoke the clash between nineteenth- and the twentieth-century technologies, the colliding trains represent cultural and discursive collisions: such as the collision of the novel, the prime vehicle for narrative in the European nineteenth century, with cinema, the prime vehicle for narrative in the American twentieth century. Or, as Carroll himself suggests, they suggest the dramatic collision in the literary academy of poststructuralist theory with Leavisite literary criticism.¹⁰

In terms that recall Patrick White’s fiction, Carroll reanimates Australian literary suburbia by routing his novels through Anglo-European modernism, albeit with different effects. The first novel’s title, *The Art of the Engine Driver*, echoes Alan Sillitoe’s *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, and the whole is structured by the unified, twenty-four-hour time scheme recommended in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. This design refers us to the narrative temporalities of high modernism, to Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*. Further, the blend of regionalism with monumentalism in Carroll’s treatment of Melbourne’s suburbs, especially in the first book, is indebted to early twentieth-century European literature, including Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes*, a work concerned with lost, primal places. There is an

obvious parallel with the Proustian project, though Carroll only read the entirety of that novel in 2008, in the interlude between completing *The Time We Have Taken* and drafting his fourth volume, *Spirit of Progress*. Proust's use of narrative in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* to recover the lost time of his narrator's childhood in provincial Combray, to prompt and reactivate 'the vast structure of recollection' (Proust 64), resonate strongly with Carroll's fictional suburbia. Indeed Carroll's belated reading of Proust appears to have had an impact on the fourth novel which shows heightened recursiveness, and folds itself back into an already established fictional topography.

Spirit of Progress amplifies themes of time and memory, desire and discontent that recur throughout the series. The wider arc it describes, through Paris and inner Melbourne, is a deviation that only underscores steady patterns of return to the same suburban rectangle, a mile and a half long and half a mile wide (Mares n.p.). Ephemeral human life here and throughout the series is set against abstract forces of history, modernity and progress. Characters are monumentalized by Carroll's incantatory prose and measured, *andante* tempo as he puts moving figures into gestural tableaux. This measured pace tugs against the speed of modernity, as figured in the title, *Spirit of Progress*, the name of an historic express passenger train service that ran from Melbourne to the Victorian border and, after gauge standardization, through to Sydney. The recurring trope of parallel tracks that never meet, in tension with impending collision, replicates the phenomenology of time, in turn implicating *novel reading* as a temporally bound, linear experience doubled and subverted by the internal, nonlinear pulses of memory and consciousness.

Playing upon literary belatedness, literally disturbing what had become known as the Glenroy 'trilogy,' *Spirit of Progress* (2011) introduces a prequel to the existing set by going back to the immediate postwar years and a cluster of days in 1946 and 1947, before and after Michael's birth. Thence the narrative jumps to 1949 when Michael's parents Vic and Rita build their suburban house. The impending collision between steam and diesel that will irrevocably change Vic and Rita lies in the fictional future already given in the first novel, and is refigured in the fourth novel as anticipated event. This temporal relation further thickens the workings of time in Carroll's fiction, which not only builds its spatial network by moving from character to character but also moves back and forth in time, through analepsis and prolepsis. Characters constantly look backwards to the past or forwards to the future; rarely do they dwell in the present. This temporal yearning produces the melancholy of the characters with respect to a past that has gone, while engendering, for readers, the melancholic mood of the future anterior, the anticipation of a future that has already come to pass. The constant shifts between retrospection and prospection work to enlarge the present and slow time, working athwart, as Peter Brooks argues, the narrative drive of the plot—with its 'internal logic of the discourse of mortality'—towards closure (Brooks 22). Compounding these temporalities, *Spirit of Progress* functions not only as prequel but as bookend, or outer temporal frame, for the preceding novels. This encompassing outer framing is created by the Prologue and Epilogue, set in 1977 and post-dating *The Time We Have Taken*, set in 1970. The looming election of the Whitlam government that created the contextual frame in the latter text is now shadowed in *Spirit of Progress* by a further future, now in Michael's past, of the 1975 Dismissal.

In *Spirit of Progress*, with its post-Whitlam-era frame, thirty-year-old Michael travels by train through the suburbs of Paris towards the west coast of France. As Michael prepares to board his train at the Gare Montparnasse,¹¹ he views the station through the palimpsest of remembered French Impressionist paintings of similar locations:

These artists were painting movement and change, History in mid-stride. Why else, Michael speculates, would Flaubert have hated the railways? Because it meant movement and speed had come to his world, and would soon take it away. That's what Progress does. It's always taking your world away. And that's what these painters caught: not just impressions of fleeting moments, but of fleeting worlds, here one minute, gone the next. (Carroll, *Spirit* 6)

Carroll's invocation of Flaubert and the French Impressionists—proto-modernist respondents to modernity—returns to the motif of Progress developed in the preceding works but now engages representational fields central to the European history of modernist art and fiction, a metanarrative that produces a series of palimpsestic simultaneities. The slowing down effected by crossings in time is augmented by crossings in cultural space. From scene to scene, we move within the space of the suburb, from suburb to city, from Australia to Europe. Michael's future-directed physical travel is coupled with his past-oriented yearnings towards dead father and the suburb left behind:

Soon, quietly and surreptitiously, this sleek, shiny modern train will leave the platform, carrying Michael through the rail yards, the inner city and the outer suburbs of Paris, into the green countryside with its bare trees, its villages and towns that are worlds away from his. He will look out upon one world and inward upon another. Two landscapes, travelling side by side. (Carroll, *Spirit* 13)

Meshing time and space, the chronotope (condensed space-time) of the train journey becomes analogous to the metatextual mobilization of real and imagined. Here, Michael's double journey—his two landscapes travelling side by side—echoes the incommensurable yet serially joined worlds that constitute Carroll's fictional topography: the real of suburban place, in its remembered or sensory detail, and the imagined of all that is generated discursively, through disparate representational fields—literary and cultural, national and transnational—in which the novel embeds itself.

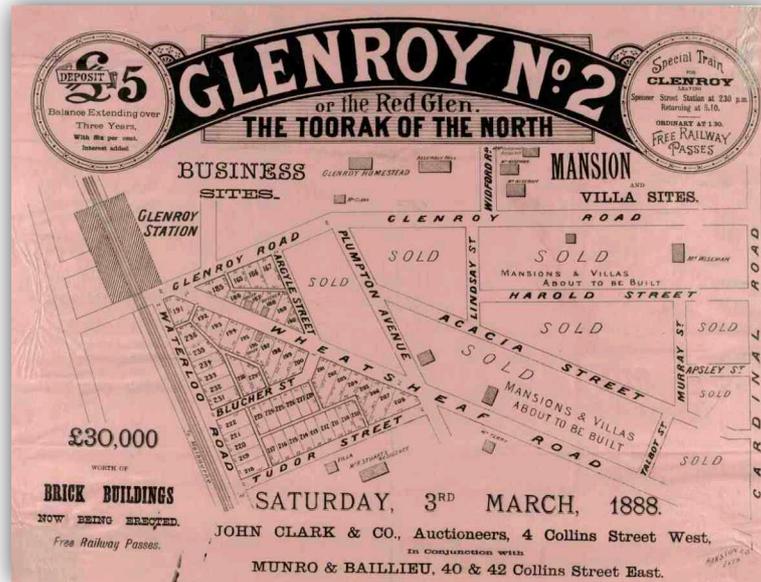
In a curious development that plays with the real/imagined nexus, *Spirit of Progress* turns on a belatedly uncovered, autobiographical or historical event—that is, the remarkable story of the author's own great Aunt Katherine who lived in a tent on her block of land in then outer suburban, semi-rural Nunawading. As Carroll himself learned relatively recently (Elliot; Case), his Aunt Katherine was the subject of a newspaper story that piqued the interest of Sidney Nolan, who subsequently painted her portrait: 'Woman and Tent' (1946).¹² Carroll's fictional folding of this personal connection into the cultural history of Melbourne's postwar bohemia offers a dramatic instance of the real/imagined dialectic. Rather than weighting the novels more heavily towards autobiography, this only brings them closer to the Proustian model described by Lydia Davis: 'the novel is not autobiography wearing a thin disguise of fiction but . . . fiction in the guise of autobiography' (Davis ix). In *Spirit of Progress*, fiction and autobiography are entangled: the autobiographically aligned but *fictionally* named Michael, Rita and Vic interact with the autobiographically aligned but *factually* named Miss Katherine Carroll. Enter George, a journalist, Carroll's fictional evocation of George Johnston. *My Brother Jack* (1964), the iconic novel of Australian suburbia, was written looking back on Melbourne from the expatriate remove of Hydra in Greece where, ill from tuberculosis, Johnston had reached a nadir in his life (Kinnane 216). *My Brother Jack*, moreover, is an already well established intertext for Carroll's Glenroy novels: in *The Time*

We Have Taken, set in 1970, the same year as Johnston's death, Michael discovers *My Brother Jack* and meditates on its dying author (*Time* 200-202).

In *Spirit of Progress*, when Carroll's fictional George learns of Aunt Katherine, he seeks her out and, though she is uncooperative, publishes her story accompanied by a photo taken without her consent. Enter George's friend Sam, a gifted painter apparently modeled on Nolan but in fact a composite figure: the name 'Sam' conjures Nolan's contemporary, the Heide artist Sam Ayteo who was the basis for Johnston's own *fictional* bohemian artist in *My Brother Jack*, the tragic Sam Burlington (see Kinnane 18-19). This complex web of allusions casts an ironic light on the ultimate expatriate trajectory of Carroll's Sam, who eventually leaves provincial Melbourne, but who for now, intent on painting Aunt Katherine as mythical pioneer, cycles out to the suburb. When Katherine angrily refuses his charming overtures, Sam decides instead to base his painting on George's newspaper photo, and to call the resulting portrait 'Woman and Tent.' Using the painting's actual title, Carroll incorporates Nolan's painting into his fictional topography with a playful exactitude that mirrors the confusion between models and originals, between reality and its reproduction that constitutes the series. Likewise, if fictional George is an oblique portrait of George Johnston, Carroll also reinvents his precursor's destiny. Carroll's George chooses to stay in Melbourne, to embrace his career as a journalist rather than pursue the literary expatriation of his namesake. Fictional Sam, the Nolan figure, travels away from suburban Australia towards London and his future, leaving behind his patron and lover, Tess, the fictional correlative of Sunday Reed. Paralleling Michael, Sam's nostalgia for the provincial Australia he leaves behind, however, haunts and defines his art. Thus drawing into their ambit the literary-historical nexus of Melbourne's bohemia and its ambivalent (critical/high modernist) attitudes towards the suburbs, Carroll implicates his novels within that space, affiliating their fictional topography with an always-already transnational literary and artistic space.

In *Spirit of Progress*, the figure who most represents the intricate intersection of real with imagined is Katherine. Unlike Michael, Vic or Rita, Katherine bears the actual name of Carroll's aunt. Carroll transplants his fictional Katherine, however, away from the real historical location of his aunt's block of land in peri-urban Nunawading, to a block of land in his fictional suburb, adjoining Skinner's farm. Serving as a hinge-figure between real and imagined, Katherine also represents the join between past and present, the pivot point where pioneering history is overtaken by modernizing progress. The forward march of progress, however, induces 'imperialist nostalgia,' a mourning for that which is destroyed, but then rendered as comforting myth (Rosaldo 107-109). Carroll reimagines Katherine vividly, giving her a voice, and seeing her from several angles—her own, and that of those who encounter her. In the end she remains an elusive figure who anchors the historical verisimilitude of Carroll's fiction while signaling the inaccessibility of the past, and its ineluctable conversion into myth.

Though he claims to have done little research into local history for their writing,¹³ Carroll's novels nonetheless yield surprisingly exact correspondences with historical sources, repeating, for example, the wording of 1880s real estate marketing that badged the newly subdivided Glenroy as the 'Toorak of the North' (Carroll, *Art*, 8):



‘Glenroy no. 2 or the red glen: the Toorak of the North’ [Cartographic material]
Melbourne: Harston, 1888. Online via State Library of Victoria.

Encoding Glenroy’s distinguishing landmarks, Carroll’s geographical coordinates relay the doubling of real with imagined. In *Spirit of Progress*, the artist Sam cycles to the suburban fringe to find the old woman of whom he has read. Along the way he observes features already familiar to Carroll’s readers—features precisely mapped against the geography of actual Glenroy, past and present:

Soon he reaches the T-intersection and eyes what his map tells him is the Old Wheat Road, and, to his left, the flour mill that George told him to look for. ... he turns the front wheel and cycles carefully down the dirt track of what seems to be the main street of this small community, past the shops, the baker, and whatnot. Established shops, three of them, he notices. Brick, their walls carrying faded advertisements for things that people bought once but not now ... A turn here, a turn there, as the map tells him, and then he is staring at the tent. (Carroll, *Spirit* 122-23)

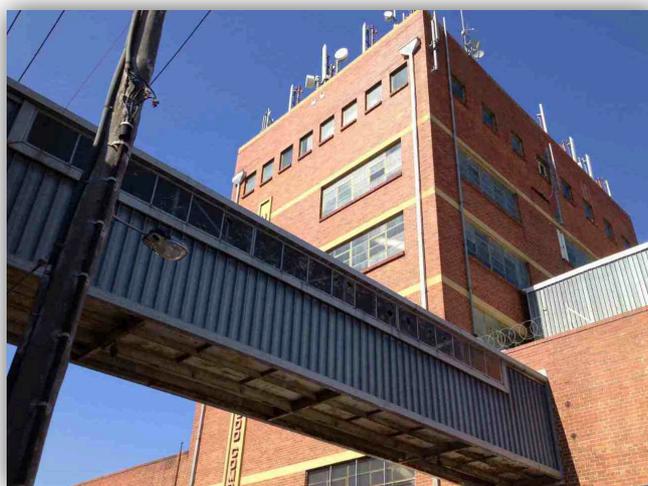
Sam’s navigation of the intersection of railway and Old Wheat Road exactly corresponds with Glenroy’s Wheat Sheaf Road, from which the flour mill and the two original shops can still be seen. Indeed many of the novel’s fictive locations correspond to items listed in the online Victorian Heritage Database. The virtual visitor can use Google Maps to search for these heritage addresses, instantly accessing the visible traces of the past in the present:



Shop – 92 Wheatsheaf Road, Glenroy.



Shop – 139 Wheatsheaf Road, Glenroy.



Hutchinson's Flour Mill: this red brick tower was built between the 1930s and 1940s, but its grain silos were demolished in the mid 1980s.¹⁴

These images are not from Google Maps but photographs I took during a visit to Glenroy. In themselves, they merely testify to the rough coincidence of text and terrain. In their opacity to memory, their mute facticity, they tug against the fullness of Carroll's fiction which invests meaning, emotion and memory in what must otherwise appear to non-local observers of Glenroy—to those with no primal attachment to the place—a typically abstract and featureless, not even particularly 'featurist,' suburbia (see Boyd 17ff). Yet for Glenroy residents gathered for a talk at Moreland City Council Library, Carroll's fictional Glenroy is profoundly moving—and not even fictional:

Audience member: I'm a bit teary now because you've brought the past back, which has gone, and that suburb with the mud, which anyone that lived there would remember, and the railway line and all of that. From the first page ... I was hooked. I thought it tremendous that somebody has actually written about Glenroy and the surrounding area and it wasn't ordinary ... yes, it was ... but it was extraordinary. And you capture that very well.

After some joking about how special Glenroy is, the following exchange occurs:

Steven Carroll: I think there was something very, very intense about being ... see, it's not just Glenroy, is it? Look, it's the whole frontier suburban experience.

Audience member: For me it's so personal because it's so ... it's the peppercorn tree.

Steven Carroll: Oh, that, yeah. Well, you'd know the schoolyard pines and all the rest of it, yeah. (Moreland City Council n.p.)

Members of the Glenroy community have clearly mustered their own personal links to Carroll's novels, reading them as maps of remembered places and people. There is no necessary join, as already argued via Hillis Miller, between fictive discourse and external world. Yet Carroll's fiction evidently performs a communal function. Multiple meanings emerge from the gap (a gap that is also a coupling) between fiction and real, conjuring in Bachelardian terms the oneiric poetics of space. Even though no factual detail can replicate the internal image or give access to the minds of readers for whom the memory-image is a singular, fleeting and private phenomenon, this internalized process is shared, *as process*, producing singularities in tandem. In this light, Carroll's novels represent an archive of vanished place, albeit displaced and transfigured, but offering the trace of a Glenroy of former decades, alive only in memory. From this angle, Carroll's novels suggest the potential for re-reading and reconnecting other novels of suburbia—even White's *Tree of Man* (1955) or Johnston's *My Brother Jack*—with local places and communities from which they partly or indirectly derive.

If there is potential to reread novels as an archive of lost suburban places, then the nature of this archive and its meanings are necessarily elusive and revert to the fictional realm. Carroll himself tells a story, reported to him, of one Glenroy resident who, upon seeing one of his novels lying in a surgery waiting room, confidently declared to those present that she could correctly identify all the real people on whom its fictional characters were based.¹⁵ Though his characters are clearly composite fictional creations, Carroll nonetheless plays with the conjunction of real and imagined, drawing on memories of adults who once lived in Glenroy. Locals recall a retailer of electronic goods, named Vanderloo (the basis for the fictional Van Rijn), and a wealthy businessman named R. K. Morgan (the basis for the fictional Webster) whose engineering works included a factory in Glenroy and who was reputed to have owned a Bentley.¹⁶

A fictive topography like Carroll's, however, is not concerned with historical accuracy but fosters divergence, creative misreading and misrecognition. It requires a confusion of real with imagined that can in turn condition the truth-effects and generative power of fictional narrative. Divergence from the real may be exactly what endows fiction with mobility, with the capacity to travel from one context to another, from local to distant readers. I neither grew up in nor know Glenroy in the way that local residents do. Even so, as I read Carroll's novels, images of Glenroy stand in my mind, both familiar and out of reach. I see its fields of thistles, its grassy paddocks and muddy streets, its row of pines in the schoolyard, the glow of its kitchens and lounge-rooms glimpsed through picture windows at dusk. Such internal images, composed of random fragments from my own remembered childhood scenes, are charged with affective longing. My sympathetic nostalgia is infused with a sense of irony, knowing that such homely places are far from special, are ordinary and un-distinctive. From the aerial perspective, through photographs or Google maps, through the eyes of the casual visitor, by contrast, the suburb seems merely the effect of the cadastral survey, the *tabula rasa* of a geometry imposed on the organic contours of the land. With its mess of bitumen, telegraph wires, commercial and municipal signage, its fences, its grid of detached housing and its occasional patches of green, Glenroy could be anywhere on earth.

Settler amnesia and estrangement from place routinely occlude the prospect of ordinary suburbs as places that might stretch back beyond generational white settler memory, and further still, towards silent, unrecorded pasts. Since 1788, successive waves of change have broken over local Australian places, burying deep all trace of previous owners. This seems even more so for the suburb than for central business districts of capital cities where buildings may stand for longer. If the suburb is the Australian frontier writ small, its miniature reflection and parody, it is also the frontier writ large, a zone of inexorable territorial repossession and forgetting. References to Aboriginal land in Carroll's series are few but telling, showing its suburbanites as unsettled and full of longing, as pervaded, in the words of Gelder and Salzman, by a sense of 'alienation and vulnerability, where "the right to start over again" collapses into a sense that things will never again be the same' (Gelder and Salzman 47). Progress is just another word for colonization, opposing the past with the future. In *Spirit of Progress* Skinner, the solitary farmer and 'last of his tribe,' is the Past; he stands in the place of (repressed, forgotten, erased) Aboriginal possession. The Future is embodied in developer and factory owner Webster, the supreme modernizer and machine man—ironic, of course, from the viewpoint of the present, in which the Australian factory owner has been rendered all but obsolete. Webster is monumental, a faceless force of history, an aerial surveyor whose ambition is coterminous with colonizing modernity. He will bulldoze the land to build his factory and its suburb:

Never mind who might have lived there for thousands of years, never mind the farms and the farmhouses that have been there for generations; they are nothing. Spaces on a map, waiting to be filled by someone with vision. (89)

This version of Webster, in *Spirit of Progress*, is set against what Carroll's readers already know lies in his future, the gnawing discontent and secret desire for speed that will bring about his untimely end. The temporal design of Carroll's novels disrupts the colonizing myth of progress. In the mural commissioned by the suburb's elders and unveiled at the climax of *The Time We Have Taken*, an Aboriginal past flickers up briefly, momentarily challenging the suburb's grand settler narrative before succumbing to the tide of colonizing change that ruthlessly washes away *all* the inhabitants of the land. The temporality of suburbia,

ceaselessly erasing place and history, structures settler amnesia (McCann 146-7). Memory is powerful in Carroll's fiction, actively resisting amnesia, yet the generational foreshortening and cultural limits of the novel's memory systems are also apparent. In tandem with suburbia, the novel's generic focus on domestic realms of household and family, on the cultivation of individual interiorities, has arguably provided an avenue for the reproduction of imperial modernity's buffered self. The novel's capacity to address buried, forgotten histories, except obliquely, through patterns of deferral and displacement, through gaps, silences and divergences, may be inherently limited.

Though it uses history, the novel is utterly and necessarily distinct from historical writing. Yet both the novel and history draw on shared cultural imaginaries, on the discourse of the suburb as a frontier of time, place and identity. In *Broadmeadows: A Forgotten History* (1982), Andrew Lemon provides a comprehensive history of the district to which Glenroy formerly belonged (it now comes under the jurisdiction of the City of Moreland). In his epilogue Lemon invites his readers to what was then, in the 1980s, the outer boundary of Broadmeadows, its peri-urban, transient edge:

Here you can stand, and the distant past at Broadmeadows remains vivid. The year 1857 is not just imaginable, it is present. But this is 1982, and it will fade. It will fade when the roads and footpaths arrive. It will fade when the ponies are taken from the vacant blocks. It will fade as more paddocks turn to houses, as the overgrown trees are pruned and tidied, as the thistles with their deep blue flowers and clusters of seed are finally eradicated. But if the few old cottages and the bluestone buildings can be preserved, and the gullies and creeks allowed to keep something of their old course, and the bridge left in place, and the pepper trees and gums encouraged to reach for the sun and to spread their summer shade, it will not be lost entirely. At old Broadmeadows you can still feel the earth beneath your feet. (Lemon 226)

Looking backwards and forwards in time and space, this history closes on themes of suburban change, memory and forgetting with the same evocative cadences and images, the same sense of the future anterior, that we encounter on every page of Carroll's fiction. Carroll's novels, however, develop these elements much further, elaborating them as existential questions, and translating everyday cultural experience as myth. His fiction thematises two landscapes that never meet: the outer time-enslaved world bearing bodies to the future along undeviating silvery tracks, and the inner world of remembrance, interior consciousness, and yearning for vanished scenes of time past. Though written in simple, lucid prose, these novels are complex in design. They couple worlds that run in parallel but never meet: inner with outer, past with future, here with there, real with imagined, novel with suburb. Their multi-layered simultaneities affiliate suburban place with literary modernism.

Through its reflexive metanarrative, Carroll's fictional topography garners further layers as each new part of the series appears, a pattern likely to continue in volumes five and six. Appearing belatedly, *Spirit of Progress* reorders, amplifies and transfigures the set. In the Prologue and Epilogue of *Spirit of Progress*, Michael's viewpoint implicitly converges with the third person narrative, framing its retrospective recall of the time just before and just after his own birth. This logically impossible retrospection marks the unbridgeable gap between autobiographical memory and fictional creation—a gap that the series nonetheless harnesses, one suggestive of the Derridean supplement. As both postscript and prequel, as belated, outer boundary that deepens what's on the inside, *Spirit of Progress* is a pocket larger than the whole (Derrida 81). The logic of the supplement refers us, then, to the open-ended play of

textual meanings unleashed by fiction's real/imagined dialectic, and to an always-already fictional topography that archives and reinvents suburban terrain.

As his impossible memory carries him back to his Australian suburb, Michael travels forward in time and westward by train, and also, perhaps, back in history towards one of the cradles of modernism. For in a double movement that reflexively conjures the author, Michael is traveling towards the provincial Brittany of Chateaubriand, Flaubert and Proust, and the Post Impressionist painters. Similarly Carroll, who no longer dwells in the suburb about which he so lovingly writes, has travelled abroad, and has himself visited Pont Aven, a little town on the coast of Brittany, the erstwhile site of Paul Gauguin's artist colony (Mares n.p). It was while staying at Pont Aven that Carroll wrote his first complete draft of *The Art of the Engine Driver*, interweaving his dream narrative of the family promenading down their street with the fatal plot of the engine drivers and their colliding trains.¹⁷ It seems that the distances interposed between times and places, between real and imagined, are as productive as their convergences. It is most often through the prism of distance, loss and longing – through modernist temporalities that colonize and complicate even the most negative fictions of suburbia—that novels look back in time and space towards the suburbs that they leave behind.

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¹ In addition to research by Allon and Wise, new scholarly networks like ‘Cultures of the Suburbs’ (the latter hosted by Exeter University) are refocusing attention on changing suburbia. See <http://suburbs.exeter.ac.uk/>

² Both Gerster and O’Reilly discuss *Johnno* in these terms.

³ In a recent book, *Exploring Suburbia* (2012), Nathanael O’Reilly offers the first and so far only extended academic commentary on the topic, including a chapter on Steven Carroll’s novels, which in giving a celebratory view of suburbia serve as a contrast to other fiction discussed; O’Reilly’s work valuably re-opens debate but my present argument seeks to re-orient existing terms of discussion.

⁴ Steven Carroll, *The Art of the Engine Driver*, Pymble NSW: Harper Collins Press, 2001; *The Gift of Speed*, Pymble NSW: Harper Perennial, 2004; *The Time We Have Taken*. Pymble NSW: Harper Perennial, 2007; and *Spirit of Progress*. London, New York, Sydney, Auckland: Fourth Estate, 2011. All subsequent references to Carroll’s novels in the text are to these editions.

⁵ The one exception is the chapter in O’Reilly’s book: see note 3.

⁶ Personal communication with Steven Carroll, 9 April 2013.

⁷ Hence the title of Mark Joffe’s film *Violet Town*, currently in production and based on Carroll’s *Art of the Engine Driver*. See <http://if.com.au/2013/02/15/inprod/Violet-Town/UDJVKQAIYZ.html>

⁸ Graeme Davison (1995) has influentially suggested that Australia has a claim to being ‘the first suburban nation,’ since nationhood and suburbia are historically so fully and tightly intertwined.

⁹ In *Australian Heartlands*, Gleeson discusses the ‘Australian settlement,’ a phrase referring to the post-Federation political contract that, coinciding with the long economic boom and secured by affordable housing for workers, led to suburban sprawl; this idea of the ‘Australian settlement’ derives from Paul Kelly’s 1992 book, *The End of Uncertainty* (see pp. 2ff).

¹⁰ Personal communication with Steven Carroll, 9 April 2013.

¹¹ Claude Monet’s most famous paintings were of the Gare Saint Lazare, so it is both ironic and resonant that Michael is at the Gare Montparnasse, a station famously associated with the extraordinary photographic image

of the 1895 derailment of the Granville-Paris Express train. See the image at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gare_Montparnasse Accessed on 13 November 2013.

¹² Sidney Nolan's painting, 'Woman with Tent' (1946) is held in the Nolan Collection, Canberra Museum and Gallery, but is available for viewing online—see slideshow image number 5 of 24— at <http://www.museumsandgalleries.act.gov.au/nolan/> Accessed on 31 January 2013.

¹³ Personal communication with Steven Carroll, 9 April 2013.

¹⁴ An aerial photograph of Glenroy, with the flour mill and its silos, as well as a picture of the silo under demolition are both available from Picture Victoria: see <http://www.picturevictoria.vic.gov.au/site/moreland/miscellaneous/6730.html> and also <http://www.picturevictoria.vic.gov.au/site/moreland/miscellaneous/6546.html> Accessed on 13 November 2013.

¹⁵ Personal communication with Steven Carroll, 9 April 2013.

¹⁶ Personal communication with former resident of Glenroy, Tom Davison, on 5 April 2013. R. K. Morgan is briefly described by Andrew Lemon in *Broadmeadows: A Forgotten History* (215).

¹⁷ Personal communication with Steven Carroll, 9 April 2013.