
Bob's Dreaming: Playing with Reader Expectations in Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*

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In *Oscar and Lucinda*, for the first time in his novels, Peter Carey focuses on the colonial period of Australian history. The action takes place in Australia and England, mostly during the 1860s, that is to say, during the Victorian era. This period also gave its name to a group of novels often characterized by their bulk, certain narrative procedures (including literary realism and didacticism), common themes and leitmotifs (Horsham 1-11). During the Victorian era, the colonies were a liminal presence that haunted the periphery of imperial awareness: a place where criminals were punished or where progressives went to try out their new ideas¹ far from the stultifying social atmosphere of the mother country. In *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey chooses both to recreate the period and to inhabit the canonical genre that characterized it. He apparently adopts the “classical” post-colonial strategy which, to borrow Salman Rushdie’s famous phrase, consists in “writing back” to the “Centre”²—“Not, incidentally, ‘back’ in the sense of ‘for’ the center, but ‘back’ in the sense of ‘against’ the assumptions of the centre to a prior claim to legitimacy and power” (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 244-245).

But Carey does not limit himself to attacking English imperialist discourse. On the extradiegetic level, he deconstructs three myths put forward by official Australian history: that of Australia the “Lucky Country” (Horne), that of the saintly missionary come to “save” the “heathen Blacks,” and that of the intrepid and heroic explorer who “opened up” the country for settlement and “civilization.” Parallel to this undertaking, but on an intradiegetic level, the protagonist (whose name may be Bob, as we discover at the end of the novel) also “writes back” to a personal “center.” He rewrites his family history—his “dreaming”, to borrow the Aboriginal concept—in order to refute the imperialist version his overbearing mother has imposed on him, his siblings and her husband. The protagonist also briefly offers a space in his text to another homodiegetic³ narrator, Kumbaingiri Billy, who “writes back” to official Australian History by narrating a bloody episode of “Australia’s Secret History.”⁴ The use in the title of this essay of the English-language rendering of the Aboriginal

concept of the “dreaming” is intended to highlight white/Aboriginal co-ownership of Australian history.⁵

The experienced post-colonial reader, having recognized from the outset that the novel “writes back” to imperial English discourse, expects to encounter subversion of the historical balance of power between periphery and center and a corresponding subversion of the implicit conventions of the canonical genre that Carey has chosen to inhabit. However, the author’s literary subversion ventures outside the reader’s comfort zone when her expectations are strikingly frustrated at the end of the diegesis. Understanding the source of this frustration necessitates re-reading and interpretation. The Victorian intertext leads us to reflect on literal and literary hermeneutic practices, literal interpretation being likened to religious fundamentalism and games of chance. Carey lures the reader into playing a different kind of game in order to provoke awareness of the distress of the subject who is marginalised by imperialist discourse.

Carey borrows several elements from the Victorian novel, including a thematic preoccupation with orphans, inheritance, and gambling. For example, the three main characters are orphans and one of them an heiress; marriage is presented as a gamble for women—a very uncertain way out of their condition of child-like dependence; and several characters are gambling addicts. But in *Oscar and Lucinda* these Victorian themes undergo a shift in meaning.

In Victorian novels the orphan symbolizes rootlessness and a search for identity at a time when society was undergoing profound changes. The father figure represents the law and reality. If he is absent or lacking then the orphan has difficulty fitting in and has to found his own values. Lucinda loses first her father and then her mother; Oscar loses his mother and then chooses to leave his oppressive father; and Carey’s working title for the novel was *Orphans* (Jach 29).

The narrator of *Oscar and Lucinda* sets out to rewrite his family history because he is unsatisfied with the oppressive version his mother imposed on the whole family during his childhood. In the first chapter he recalls his mother’s version of how Oscar Hopkins transported a church to Bellingham, how she used the story to embarrass and cow her family, and how they all resented it without daring to challenge. According to this version of family history, Oscar was a stereotypical Victorian clergyman (1). The narrator declares that this is untrue. He implicitly casts doubt on the legitimacy of his mother’s version by explicitly proving another form of “official” history unreliable: that professed by the local Historical Society. He quotes their explanation of the name of a local forest—Darkwood—a reference, according to them, to the “darkness of the foliage” (2) and reveals that he knows from personal experience that this is not the origin at all, the current name being a bowdlerized

form of “Darkies’ Point” where some of the local men went, not so many years ago, to massacre a whole tribe of Aborigines (2). At this point in the story, this reference to Aboriginal history seems to be a side issue, simply an illustration of the fact that official histories are sometimes not to be believed. The narrator’s aim is to set the record straight, apparently not so much on this detail of local history but principally as concerns his own family history. He is going to contradict the imperialist maternal version that reduced the rest of the family to silence.

In a post-colonial rewriting of history and literature, the experienced post-colonial reader expects to encounter subversion and the breaking of imperial rules, but in accordance with implicit post-colonial rules, that is to say in such a way as to transform the erstwhile colonial subject into the new winner in the power struggle between periphery and center.

Oscar and Lucinda is a contemporary novel that addresses contemporary Australian preoccupations. This perspective is regularly underlined by anachronisms and geographical references that are displaced from the English center to the Australian periphery. For example, the narrator compares Theophilus Hopkins’ description of Devon as “almost tropical” (28) to an Australian “referring to a certain part of Melbourne at ‘the Paris end of Collins Street’” (28). He disagrees with this Anglo-centric view: “When I visit Devon I see nothing tropical. I am surprised, rather, that so small a county can contain so vast and indifferent a sky. Devon seems cruel and cold. I look at the queer arrangements of rocks up on the moor and think of ignorance and poverty, and cold, always the cold” (28). Here, otherness is not a characteristic of the ex-colony but of England. The periphery has become the center and vice versa. Carey uses Australian similes—black umbrellas hang from a stand “like flying foxes” (194); Oscar dances “like a brolga” (377) around the prototype of Lucinda’s glass building. He also uses Australian terms like “chooks” (272) instead of “chickens” and makes reference to the bicentennial celebrations in Sydney at the end of the 1980s through a mention of “tall-masted ships” (295) at anchor in Sydney Harbor. These references underline the common experience of the narrator and the implied reader, thereby establishing an implicit bond between the writer and the Australian reader and suggesting that his story is a quintessentially Australian story. All this corresponds to a “classical” post-colonial approach.

Carey also transforms the Victorian novel in other ways in *Oscar and Lucinda*. For example, he plays with the Victorian intertext by transforming the famous Victorian author, Marian Evans, into a character in his novel. Evans was famous for flaunting the social mores that imprisoned Victorian women. However, this anticonformism did not spill over into her fiction where her heroines, although they may have chafed under the social constraints that reduced them to playing infantile roles, generally

had to submit to their fate. In *Oscar and Lucinda*, Lucinda's mother, Elizabeth Leplastrier, is a personal friend of Marian Evans and used to belong to the circle that met around her and George Lewes. Elizabeth, an intellectual and a feminist, comes to Australia with the aim of putting into practice her theory that women would find social and economic emancipation in factory work. Even though she allows herself to be side-tracked from this aim, she does raise her daughter according to the anticonformist principles of Evans' group. In a letter to her mentor, she laments that Lucinda, the result of this type of modern education, simply does not fit in in the backward colony and states that her real place is "at home" in England. She implies that Lucinda is the perfect product of Evans' own progressive theories. Ironically, when Lucinda does finally make the trip "home" and meets her mother's friend, the latter dislikes this colonial product of her own feminist teachings:

Even George Eliot... was used to young ladies who lowered their eyes in deference to her own. Lucinda did not do so. The two women locked eyes and George Eliot mentions... "a quite peculiar tendency to stare". It may well have been this, not her bits-and-pieces accent, her interest in trade, her lack of conversational skills, her sometimes blunt opinions or her unladylike way of blowing her nose—like a walrus, said George Eliot—that made her seem so alien. (204)

This is a subversion of the image of the canonical Victorian writer. The contemporary Australian reader feels doubly smug: about her own politically correct attitude on the issue of women's rights and about the implicit moral superiority of the Australian heroine over the British icon. But the smugness is punctured later in the narrative when Carey's subversion spills out of the classical post-colonial bounds and challenges conventional reading practices.

Given the title of Chapter 82, "Orphans," the experienced reader may expect it to contain post-colonial reflections but, placed as it is over three quarters of the way into the book, all readers will expect it to be in some way about Oscar and Lucinda, our two orphaned protagonists. In fact, it contains a striking transgression of the implicit rules of narrative preparation. We have just arrived at the point in the story where Oscar and Lucinda have agreed on the terms of their bet.⁶ The reader was beginning to despair that they would ever manage to overcome the series of misunderstandings which were keeping them apart. This chapter abruptly interrupts their story to introduce an intruder. The interruption is unwelcome to the impatient reader, and the narrator adds insult to injury by nonchalantly announcing, at this late stage of what has been presented as his account of his family history: "Our history is a history of orphans... as it applied to the *three* corners of the family history, to Oscar, to Lucinda, to Miriam Chadwick" (390; emphasis added). But the bemused reader wonders who on earth is Miriam Chadwick. The whole chapter is

then devoted to an account of this new character's background. The fact that she is also an orphan seems for the moment to be the only justification for inserting her into the story. The reader, who in most cases has by now fallen into the trap of "automatic reading," and is rushing forward without paying attention to detail in her haste to find out if Oscar and Lucinda's bet will finally lead to their much hoped-for marriage, is irritated by this intrusion. Moreover, such tardy introduction of a character who, if the narrator's declaration is to be credited, is one of the three cornerstones of his-story, goes against all the rules of narrative preparation. The rest of the chapter offers the reader a profusion of dates, figures, historical references: details that generally serve to reinforce the illusion of realism. Since the chapter seems to contain nothing but an irrelevant analepsis, the reader is perplexed. But the main strand resumes, Miriam is dropped from the story and the reader is once more seduced into a passive reading mode, hurrying on in hope of a happy end. Then, in the final pages of the novel, Miriam leaps back out of the recent narrative past to frustrate the protagonists' romantic plan, just when the author had led us to believe that it was going to work.

The reader is extremely disappointed by the terrible fates that befall the two protagonists she had identified with, all the more so since the story seemed to be shaping up for that end beloved of Australian readers: the victory of the underdog. She also feels she has been cheated because this ending breaks the tacit rules of the code she believed she had identified as the one governing this narrative. This holds true whether the reader had identified the code as Victorian (where the protagonists generally end up marrying), as a post-colonial writing back to the English canon (where the colonial characters are supposed to win out in the end despite imperial oppression), or simply as a popular neo-realist novel (where the heroes generally live happily ever after). Indeed, several critics expressed outrage at the severity of the fates meted out to Oscar and Lucinda.⁷

The risk a writer takes in choosing to frustrate reader expectations like this is that of alienating readers. The payoff is the possibility of channeling the anger to achieve his own ends—a procedure that Carey undertook in *Illywhacker*.⁸ Anger can also lead the reader to retrospection and the search for an alternative meaning to the one she had erroneously anticipated. The first step in this process is an attentive re-reading which, in this case, reveals both careful narrative preparation of the actual ending and a series of red herrings that lead the reader to expect the traditional happy ending.

In retrospect, Oscar's death only half surprises the reader since it has been foreshadowed several times both through direct references to drowning (67, 217, 392, 429, 476) and by intertextual references to *The Mill on the Floss*. But Lucinda's

fate—destitution—shocks. And yet, attentive re-reading reveals that it was also prefigured. The first instance is when Lucinda is introduced into the story as a child. The damage she does her doll provokes a violent reaction in her parents: “These missiles were not directed *at* her, but the air was filled with a violence whose roots she would only glimpse years later when she lost her fortune to my great-grandmother and was made poor overnight. Then she wondered how much the doll had cost” (81). Here, although the narrator indicates clearly that Lucinda is not his great-grandmother, the reader is not in a position to seize the significance of this information at this early stage of the narrative, when she is not yet even familiar with the character. This is narrative “cheating” insofar as the real outcome is actually foreshadowed, thus protecting the author against subsequent charges of insufficient narrative preparation but in such a way that it does not prevent the reader from jumping to the wrong conclusion later in the story.

The second narrative building block prefiguring Lucinda’s fate is found further on in the narrative: “She could not know that she would, within two years, beyond the boundaries of this history, be brought so low that she would think herself lucky to work at Edward Jason’s Drutt Street pickle factory, that she would plunge her hands into that foul swill and, with her hands boiled red and her eyes stinging, stand on the brink of the great satisfaction of her life” (152). This passage does clearly prefigure Lucinda’s ruin but it also promises her the greatest satisfaction of her life which, to the stubborn reader who believes she is reading a love story and consequently wants the implicitly promised romantic ending, means Love. The third narrative prediction comes on the next page and its ambiguity makes it easy to neglect on a first reading: “Years later when she remembered how she and the vicar had looked at bottles, with what abstracted superior curiosity they had examined them, so removed from the loud and sweaty business of sauces and pickles and jams, she judged her young self harshly and forgot how much of what she would become was already there” (153). The threat it contains becomes clear only on a second reading.

In fact, all these instances of foreshadowing are placed before Oscar and Lucinda’s love is revealed, that is to say before the reader can interpret them to predict the failure of their common project. Moreover, Carey has also included in the narrative a series of red herrings which seem to promise the happy ending the reader longs for. For instance, the reader who has recognized in this novel an example of the Victorian genre, will expect its traditional ending: marriage of the protagonist(s); the reader who has identified it as a post-colonial rewriting of a Victorian novel will expect the Australian protagonist, the currency lass, Lucinda, to triumph in the end. Above all, the title contains an implicit promise—its very first promise before the reader even begins to read the narrative—and the reader’s corresponding expectations seem to

be supported by the fact that the novel spends hundreds of pages narrating the lives of Oscar and Lucinda and only a few at the end on Miriam's.

The title, then, is also a red herring. This text is the narrator's story. The first pages make this clear. But we had assumed that it was also Oscar and Lucinda's story, given the title, in which case they must have been the narrator's ancestors if his-story is also theirs. The end of the story indicates that this is not so. Since Oscar's role in the implied author's story comes to an end when Miriam gets hold of Lucinda's fortune, he is simply brushed off in a few words—"he disappeared for ever from my great-grandmother's life" (501)—before the narrator turns his attention to those elements of Miriam's story which are relevant to his family history. The reader is horrified to see the story she thought she had been reading for 500 pages suddenly negated and replaced by another. She even fears that she will be deprived of closure in Oscar's story and never learn what becomes of him. Carey does however make a final concession to the reader's (legitimate) expectations in the novel's final chapter which describes the clergyman's death by drowning.

Lucinda's fate is sealed in an equally offhand manner. After allowing her the courtesy of a final epistolary intervention where she asks Miriam to leave her at least part of her fortune, the narrator abruptly excludes her from his-story and arbitrarily inserts her into the course of Australian labor history instead, where he leaves her to finish her own story as she sees fit:

Lucinda was known for more important things than her passion for a nervous clergyman. She was famous, or famous at least amongst students of the Australian labour movement. One could look at this letter and know that its implicit pain and panic would be but a sharp jab in the long and fruitful journey of her life. One could view it as the last thing before her real life could begin. (506)

Apparently, she ended up putting her mother's theories into practice. This alternative in no way satisfies the reader at this stage because she is not interested in Australian history, having become too involved in Lucinda's story. The narrator cannot get away with moving the goal posts like this so far into the game without provoking an angry or dismayed reaction.

Chapter 50, "Pachinko," provides a second step towards understanding this frustration of reader expectations, by making the tacit reading agreement clearer. The pivotal function of this chapter is underlined by its approximately central position in the text (pages 225-231, out of a total of 511). In this chapter the extradiegetic narrator explains his creative procedure:

In order that I exist, two gamblers, one Obsessive, the other Compulsive, must meet. A door must open at a certain time. Opposite the door, a red plush settee is necessary. The Obsessive... must sit on this red settee, the Book of Common Prayer

open on his rumpled lap. The Compulsive gambler must feel herself propelled forward from the open doorway. She must travel towards the Obsessive and say an untruth (although she can have no prior knowledge of her own speech): “I am in the habit of making my confession.” (225)

The materialization of this scene in his text is a narrative necessity if his-story is to fulfil its function of explaining his origins. The narrator emphasizes how difficult it is going to be for him to bring his narrative to this point in a convincingly “realistic” way: “this... conclusion... requires, of the active party, a journey as complex as that of a stainless steel Pachinko ball (rolling along grooved metal tunnels, sloping down, twisting sideways, down into the belly of *Leviathan*, up, sideways, up, up, and out of the door to face the red settee)” (225). But the narrator assures the reader he will manage this exploit thanks to the “eccentricity” of the ventilation system of the ship the protagonists were travelling to Australia on. This eccentricity enables Lucinda to overhear from her stateroom the voices of stewards playing cards in another part of the boat: the voice of the serpent tempting her. Both the ensuing narrative route and Lucinda’s apparently aimless wanderings through the bowels of *Leviathan* in search of a game are as sinuous and indirect as the journey of the steel ball in the game of Pachinko. But, six pages later, there is Lucinda, just where the narrator wanted her, in front of the red settee, where she announces to the red-headed clergyman, “I am in the habit... of making a confession” (231). This practical demonstration of the narrative procedure the implied author follows to reach his predetermined end is a mise-en-abyme of the narrative procedure Carey follows in the novel as a whole: all of the “coincidences” which change the course of the story are narrative maneuvers by an author who began with the end of his story and then worked backwards.

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Carey describes his starting point for *Oscar and Lucinda*: there was a little wooden church not far from where he was living and he was disappointed to learn that the authorities intended to remove it. Then he was intrigued by his own reaction and wondered why an atheist should care about the disappearance of a church. He concluded that, for him, it represented the white Australian heritage which is largely based on Christian culture if not on the Christian religion. This culture had replaced 40,000 years of Aboriginal culture in order to take its place and now its turn had come to be wiped out. This made him feel nostalgic (Wachtel 103-104). His starting point was therefore a little wooden church that was to be removed by the authorities. In his narrative, it becomes the little weatherboard church at Gleniffer, belonging to the narrator’s family, that is first mentioned in the first chapter. Despite its pivotal role in his family’s history, it is finally “carted away” (508) in the chapter before last because “it was not of

any use" (508). He has created five hundred pages of narrative to explain and give meaning to a pre-established and inalterable event.

This process is analogous to that of the historian whose starting point is an event that (s)he can do nothing to change and who must work backwards to recreate a coherent chain of cause-and-effect that can explain and give meaning to the event. History reflects the historian's viewpoint, contains traces of his/her aim and motivations whether (s)he be an individual or a representative of an institution. History is not Truth. If we nonetheless accept the notion that history is legitimate, then the personal version of history related in *Oscar and Lucinda* is also legitimate: it corresponds to the extradiegetic narrator's clearly stated need to explore his roots. In the chain of cause-and-effect that he creates, Lucinda is only a catalyst who is no longer of any importance once she has given up her fortune and her church to Miriam. It is unfortunate for the reader if this version clashes both with her romantic vision of what history should be like (glory, heroic acts, justice, etc.) and with the romantic fantasies stimulated by the novel. Official history tells the victor's version of events; the vanquished are marginalised and reduced to silence.

Here then is a partial answer to the question about why Carey frustrated reader expectations through the outcome of *Oscar and Lucinda*. The reader feels that Carey has cheated by changing the tacit reading rules at the last minute. This provokes frustration and anger, the very feelings that must be experienced by any subject whose "story" is suppressed and viewpoint marginalised by imperialist discourse. This narrative strategy thus points to the existence of alternative histories. *Bliss* and *Illywhacker* showed us that individual stories may give us food for thought on the issue of national identity. In order to extract general principles from the individual story, the reader is encouraged, indeed provoked, into undertaking the partially creative act of interpretation. As in *Bliss* and *Illywhacker*, the importance of this act is once again one of the themes of *Oscar and Lucinda*. This time it is contrasted with the act of gambling, which is the opposite of play, and with fundamentalist religious practices.

Before embarking on his tale, Carey recognizes his debt to Edmund Gosse, author of the autobiographical novel *Father and Son* (1904), in his "Acknowledgements."⁹ This novel describes Gosse's childhood in the 1850s and 1860s and the way he was brought up by his father, well-known zoologist and member of the Plymouth Brethren, a group of fanatical evangelists.¹⁰ Carey thanks "Edmund Gosse from whose life I borrowed Plymouth Brethren, a Christmas Pudding and a father who was proud of never having read Shakespeare" (i). Philip Gosse was proud of never having read Shakespeare because he represents Literature, with its allusions, metaphors, and allegories that all demand an effort of interpretation. The

Plymouth Brethren preached literal reading and forbade critical interpretation of the Bible. The narrator of *Father and Son* declares that his parents believed they infallibly divined God's will through prayer. They had no doubt that the "answers" they "received" by this method of direct communion expressed God's will and not their own thoughts on the subject. They believed that only the Plymouth Brethren would be saved on Judgment Day and that everyone else, all those who did not have the privilege of being custodians of the Truth, would be condemned for the unforgivable sin of misinterpretation.

The narrator's mother forbids him to read fiction as it would encourage him to go against the family tradition of literal interpretation. Similarly, Theophilus Hopkins, Oscar's father "did not doubt that Satan spoke through novels" (214). After his mother's death, "Gosse" discovers fiction with its notions of tacit reading agreement, willing suspension of disbelief, subjectivity, and interpretation. It is through literature that he manages to escape from the intellectual prison his parents' practice of literal reading had prepared for him.

Oscar, on the other hand, does not escape even though the beginning of the narrative gives us the impression that he is going to rebel against Theophilus' tyranny. Oscar's story begins with a radical rewriting of the plum-pudding scene borrowed from *Father and Son*. In Gosse's novel, the description of the scene covers only a paragraph (Gosse 111-112). It illustrates the child's early submission to his father's doctrine: he admits his "sin" and his father simply seizes the remains of the "idoltrous confectionery" and throws them into the dust heap. Carey expands the incident in scope and meaning. It marks the beginning of Oscar's story and the narrator introduces it by announcing that it is the catalyst which has made his story and even his existence possible: "There would have been no church at Gleniffer if it had not been for a Christmas pudding. There would have been no daguerreotype of Oscar Hopkins on the banks of the Bellinger. I would not have been born. There would be no story to tell" (7). The description of the scene fills a chapter and Oscar's reactions are the opposite of "Gosse's." Oscar does not admit his "sin," although his father catches him red-handed eating the pudding. He finds its taste divine and does not believe his father when he says it is the fruit of Satan. Theophilus hits Oscar and forces him to drink salt water until he is sick. The memories of the delicious taste of the pudding and of his father's violence lead the boy to doubt Theophilus' evangelical beliefs. Oscar seems to be about to rebel but his upbringing has atrophied his ability to think for himself. In his attempt to rebel, he merely apes his father's practices: he seeks another set of certainties to replace those of the Plymouth Brethren and he substitutes his first game of chance for Theophilus' "prayers of communion." He is incapable of using his intelligence to search for an alternative to his father's sectar-

ian beliefs. Since he believes Theophilus is wrong, he feels his only alternative is to choose between the four existing systems of belief represented in his small world at Hennacombe: evangelism, Baptism, Catholicism, and Anglicanism. He draws four boxes on the ground, each one representing one of these denominations: "They were a structure for divining the true will of God" (32). Certain that, through this device, God will show him the way, he then throws a "tor" back over his shoulder onto the magic drawing. It falls on the square representing the Anglican church. This is how he decides to move in with the Anglican minister and his wife. When he grows up, he perpetrates the paternal heritage of literal interpretation of the scriptures (112) and also develops his own version of Theophilus' "divining of God's will" through prayer, an abandonment to the arbitrary dictates of "fate" which logically leads him on to other games of chance. Even at Oxford he fails to develop his intellectual potential. Instead, during his time there, he

produced sixteen smudge-paged clothbound notebooks in which were recorded not the thoughts of Divine Masters, not musings on the philosophy of the ancients, but page after page of blue spidery figures which recorded... the names of horses, their sires and dams, their position at last start, the number of days since the last start, the weight carried at the last time, whether they were rising in class, or falling in class, who was the owner, who the jockey and so on. (178)

His paternal heritage of literal interpretation has left him a prey to the attractions of gambling. This dependence on games of chance and literal interpretation eventually lead to Oscar's death: instead of using his eyes and common sense to interpret Lucinda's behavior towards him, he believes the nonsense she tells him about being in love with another man. She only does this because she is afraid that by telling Oscar the truth she may frighten him off, as proper Victorian ladies do not take the initiative in romance. Since he does not know how to go about winning her love, he decides to do what he has always done: abdicate his responsibility to think for himself by abandoning his fate to yet another game of chance, the superfluous and dangerous bet which leads to his death.

Oscar establishes a link between betting and his Christian faith: "Our whole faith is a wager... We bet—it is all in Pascal ...—we bet that there is a God. We bet our life on it. We calculate the odds, the return, that we shall sit with the saints in paradise" (261). And he uses it to justify his own passion for gambling: "I cannot see... that such a God, whose fundamental requirement of us is that we gamble our mortal souls, every second of our temporal existence.... It is true! We must gamble every *instant* of our allotted span. We must stake *everything* on the unprovable fact of His existence" (261). He adds that he cannot see "[t]hat such a God can look unkindly on a chap wagering a few quid on the likelihood of a dumb animal cross-

ing a line first, unless... it might be considered blasphemy to apply to common pleasure that which is by its very nature divine” (263). Of course Oscar’s church considers this belief heretical, and even he does not really believe it: it is just “a guilty defense” (262).

In *Oscar and Lucinda* the inability to undertake figurative interpretation is likened to an addiction to gambling. This metaphor is particularly apt in the context of a study of Australian identity through its Victorian roots since gambling is both a Victorian leitmotif and an Australian “obsession.” In the preface to his history of gaming and betting in Australia, O’Hara states that “Australians have long thought of themselves as a nation of gamblers—perhaps even the world’s greatest gamblers.” According to the narrator of *Oscar and Lucinda*, it was already an Australian obsession when Oscar arrived in New South Wales in the 1860s: “Oscar had never seen such a passion for gambling. It was not confined to certain types or classes. It seemed to be the chief industry of the colony” (308). O’Hara informs us that, in the UK, the evangelists had already attacked gaming and betting at the end of the eighteenth century but that the gentry, who were still influential at this time, had resisted this attack on one of their pastimes. But, when the attack was renewed at the beginning of the Victorian era (1830-1850), the gentry was no longer in a position to resist, their hold over British cultural values having been weakened by industrialization (O’Hara 42). However, the colonial society of 1830-1850 was seeking to reproduce not contemporary English society but the pre-industrial England of the eighteenth century (O’Hara 44). Even though the evangelists tried to attack gaming and betting in Australia too, the Anglican church supported the gentry and accepted the tenets of conservatism because it needed the protection of the “old order” in the colonies (O’Hara 47). Furthermore, gambling in the colonies was not restricted to certain social classes as in England. In Australia, people from all walks of life gambled, as Oscar remarks on arrival.

Immigrants are often in search of a new identity. Some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century migrants—missionaries, for example—were hoping to create a new society in their own image in the New World. At the time when Oscar emigrated to “Australia,” fundamentalist evangelism had already been discredited in the UK.¹¹ And gambling, his guilty passion, was also under attack. In England, Oscar is doubly an outsider, hence his nickname, “the Odd Bod.” By emigrating, he hopes to impose his religious practices on the natives, as a missionary, and to escape from his addiction to gambling. Ironically, the colonials share his addiction but refuse out of hand his transfer of the basic principle of gambling—abandoning oneself to chance—to the religious domain.

Carey also subverts the conventional narrative function of chance in *Oscar and Lucinda*. In the Victorian (and other forms of the realist and neo-realist) novel, coincidence is frequently used as a narrative catalyst.¹² Generally the reader consents to suspend disbelief because narrative coincidence leads to the happy end that she is hoping for. In *Oscar and Lucinda* this process undergoes a shift. For example, “chance” prevents Wardley-Fish, Oscar’s Oxford friend, from saving the Odd Bod’s life. Wardley-Fish’s ship enters Sydney Harbor just as Jeffris’ expedition is leaving it. The narrator has already given us to understand that Oscar is heading off towards the “heart of darkness” in the power of this monster. We fear the worst and desperately want him to be saved. Wardley-Fish sees Oscar and tries to fly to his aid by jumping overboard. He is prevented from getting any further by the captain who takes exception to the airs this New Chum gives himself. Meanwhile, Oscar has not seen his friend and has been spirited off into the wilds by the monster. But the game is not over yet: three days later Wardley-Fish heads off in pursuit of the expedition. The narrator gives us a taste of the torments Oscar is made to suffer and then almost seems to be thumbing his nose at the implied reader when he informs her that “[a]t Maitland, Wardley-Fish had been barely a day behind the party, but then there was a game of cards with squatters in a so-called Grand Hotel. He had tried to leave, but he was too far ahead and his companions would not hear of it. By the time his game was finally settled Mr Jeffris’s squeaking, whip-rattling convoy was far ahead” (463). Foiled by gambling! The reader is frustrated by this apparent refusal to observe the tacit rules of the game but thinks perhaps this is just the phase when the author delays reader satisfaction in order to heighten enjoyment when it is finally granted. Things get worse on the expedition; Jeffris forcibly turns Oscar into a laudanum addict subject to hallucinations. But there is a final surge of hope when we learn that Wardley-Fish/Zorro is still hot on the trail. Alas, he now finds himself face to face with a character borrowed from Australian folklore: a bushranger, who steals everything he has, right down to his trousers, thus putting an end to his rescue mission and our hopes.

“Foul!” protests the reader. But the narrator is telling his-story with its foreordained conclusion. The plot is surging towards this end and there never was any hope of Wardley-Fish saving Oscar. The author was simply playing on the tacit conventions of his chosen genre in order to raise false hopes in the reader, which serve to heighten her frustration. Two further inventions of “coincidence” fix Oscar’s fate: when he arrives at Boat Harbor, Hassett delivers him into the hands of the very woman who has predatory designs on any single male. She seduces Oscar and then, in an attack of post-coital guilt, he is obsessed with the wish to repair the “damage” he has done

this woman and conveniently forgets that if he marries Miriam she will become heiress to the fortune Lucinda has just lost to him through his winning their bet.

In *Oscar and Lucinda* Carey follows the exasperating example of Oscar who pushes to its logical but unreasonable limits the principle underlying his father's faith. Carey lays bare the narrative function of chance, the conventional narrative motor which generally serves to camouflage the author's intervention in the plot, by using it to frustrate rather than satisfy reader expectations. This frustration of the reader's legitimate expectations, her marginalisation by the narrator's egocentric account of his-story, is analogous to that experienced by Aboriginal Australians whose oppression by the white settlers was written out of Australia's Eurocentric official history. Carey brings the Aboriginal perspective home to the reader by subverting three beloved myths of Australian history.

First, Lucinda, the Australian heiress whose fortune was made by appropriating, subdividing, and selling off Aboriginal land, is haunted by guilt because she knows "her" land was taken violently from its Aboriginal custodians. Only when she finally shucks off her ill-gotten fortune can she embark on a satisfying life as a factory hand and as a central figure of the emerging labor movement. She can be seen as a symbol of modern Australia, the "Lucky Country" whose wealth is in fact historically based on the theft of natural resources from their original owners. This representation deconstructs the Australian myth of national wealth being based on the "innocent" development of natural resources, reflected in such expressions as "riding to wealth on the sheep's back."

Second, Oscar represents the misguided English missionary who comes to Australia with the well intentioned but arrogant aim of imposing his Christian stories on this alien place that is already full of Aboriginal stories he is too deaf to hear. Oscar's evangelizing mission is represented by his attempt to transport Lucinda's glass church overland to Boat Harbor, an Australian "heart of darkness." Puny as he is, he cannot possibly do this alone. He needs the self-styled explorer Jeffris to take care of the physical side of things, just as the "explorer" needs the misguided ideological mission as a source of both funding and legitimacy. The missionary undertaking is shown to be complicit in the violence of the colonial undertaking.

Third, through his depiction of Jeffris and his expedition, Carey deconstructs the colonial myth of the heroic and adventurous explorer who braves all sorts of dangers to advance the cause of "civilization." Jeffris' aim is to make himself a name by cartography, imposing new names on places (that already have Aboriginal names) and writing up his exploits in a journal that he hopes will become part of Australian history. He hacks his way through the landscape and the Aborigines with stunning brutality and then later writes his Aboriginal victims into silence by using

the consecrated imperialist language of his time: they are reduced to “treacherous knaves” who have to be “dispatched” (472).

The narrator of *Oscar and Lucinda* acknowledges this injustice by offering a space in his narrative to a descendant of the victims and allowing him to tell his people’s version of that particular story. The narrator’s version of his family history may have turned out to be as exclusive and frustrating for the reader as his mother’s version was for the rest of the family, but it does offer a narrative space to and coexist peacefully with another version: that of the Aboriginal victims. Thus Carey makes a space in his story for Australia’s secret history.

The narrator introduces the Aboriginal version of Jeffris’ expedition by quoting his (oral, in conformity with Aboriginal tradition) sources:

When I was ten, Kumbaingiri Billy told the story of “How Jesus came to Bellingen long time-ago.” ... [He] must have first heard it when he was very young and now I think about it it seems probable that its source is not amongst the Kumbaingiri but the Narcoo blacks whom Mr Jeffris conscripted at Kempsey to guide the party on the last leg of its journey. But perhaps it is not one story anyway. The assertion that “our people had not seen white people before” suggests a date earlier than 1866 and a more complex parentage than I am able to trace. (467)

Nevertheless, he inserts it directly into his narrative as we realize when we discover at the beginning of the next chapter, “Glass Cuts,” a use of first-person pronouns which breaches the by now well established narrative code: “The white men came out of the clouds of Mount Darling. *Our* people had not seen white men before. *We* thought they were spirits” (468; emphasis added). These pronouns do not refer to the narrator’s family but to members of the Narcoo (or Kumbaingiri) tribe. So, for the first time, the narrator is handing over his authority and narrative space to a homodiegetic narrator. Certain details of this account tally with details already given in the extradiegetic narrator’s story, thus consolidating the reliability of both. Kumbaingiri Billy’s story relates how some of his people met “the Reverend Mr Hopkins” (Oscar) and he told them many Christian stories. They saw boxes on the wagons accompanying the expedition (the boxes with the prefabricated church inside): “they got the idea these boxes were related to the stories. They thought they were sacred. They thought they were the white man’s dreaming” (469). Although the terminology is alien to Christian culture, that is exactly what the church represents: the white man’s dreaming. The Aborigines then learn the hard way that glass cuts, “cuts the skin of the tribes” (469). It is through Kumbaingiri Billy’s homodiegetic account that the reader learns about Jeffris’ massacre of the Aborigines, a massacre that Oscar tried in vain to prevent. The extradiegetic narrator subsequently makes allusions to the massacre but does not presume to appropriate it himself by retelling

it as part of his-story: it belongs to the Kumbaingiri victims and so is told by their descendants, not by a white historian.

The extradiegetic narrator resumes his textual authority in the following chapter where he implicitly acknowledges the territorial rights of the Aborigines to the place where Oscar kills Jeffris by pointing out that although the whites call it Bellingen Heads, its “real” name is Urunga (471). A few pages later, the narrator once more surrenders the floor to Kumbaingiri Billy in Chapter 103, “Mary Magdalene.” He reveals that the woman who was being raped all day long in the tavern at Bellingen Heads/Urunga was Kumbaingiri’s aunt. In a mixture of reported speech and free indirect discourse, we learn that it was this person who helped Oscar’s white accomplice to hide Jeffris’ body, who showed them how to go about transporting their church to Boat Harbor and where to get the necessary equipment. Ironically, it is thus an Aborigine who takes over from the white explorer and makes the realization of Oscar’s imperialist undertaking possible. In the fifth paragraph of this chapter, Kumbaingiri Billy tells in his own words, quoted by the narrator, the end of his aunt’s story. Thus, through the voice of her descendant, it is the Aboriginal victim who describes how Oscar converted her to Christianity with his stories. She believes he is a good man and does not seem to resent his having imposed on her a Christian name that denied the value of her Aboriginal culture and identity. It is her descendant who points out, to the narrator, Oscar’s imperialist attitude: “It was a damn silly name for a Kumbaingiri and if you want my opinion, *Bob*, it was ignorant to talk to us Kooris in that way” (488; emphasis added).

This is the only indication the text gives us of the narrator’s name: Kumbaingiri Billy calls him “Bob.” The narrator gives us no indication of whether this is his real name or just a nickname Kumbaingiri Billy gives him, perhaps in the same vein as the nickname most whites give him: “Come-and-get-it Billy” (466). However, the extradiegetic narrator implicitly gives it his seal of approval by choosing to leave it in his narrative. And I have chosen to accept it as his name for the title of this essay. After all, to quote *Midnight Oil*’s “Beds are Burning,” “the time has come to say fair’s fair.” Whites have always assumed the right to re-name the other; it is about time the other was accorded the same right. Thus ends the homodiegetic story of Kumbaingiri Billy, a unique breach of the dominant narrative code of omniscience. The fact that this is the only exception underlines its importance.

The narrator thus demonstrates his respect for the Aboriginal version of that episode of his-story that overlaps their-story, a respect he does not show for any other version. In this way, Bob sets himself apart from the imperialist approach to history, including his mother’s version. This brings us back to the very first chapter of the novel, where he mentions the unreliability of official versions of history with

reference to “Darkwood” and the way a white massacre of Aborigines was written out of the Historical Society’s account. At the time, this appeared to be just an illustration, but it has turned out to be more than that. Some critics have considered the Aboriginal component of *Oscar and Lucinda* to be no more than a gimmick. Windsor, for example, calls it “one of the weakest things in the novel [that] reads like a special insert for the bicentennial edition” (Windsor 70). I disagree with this assessment and would even suggest that it clarifies the whole point of the novel, that its inclusion in the narrative is the source of the legitimacy of Bob’s post-colonial rewriting of history.

Oscar and Lucinda was published in 1988, the year of the Australian bicentenary of white occupation. It is itself a bicentennial monument to the memory of the white Christian cultural heritage but it also contains a plea to keep aside a place in the national historical records where Aboriginal voices can erect their own monuments in honor of the shared Australian past. This novel is one step in the process of replacing Australian history with a multiplicity of Australian histories, each told by its owners and their descendants. Never mind if each of these stories does not necessarily suit everyone. Thus Carey contributes to accomplishing the task of post-colonial writers which, according to Hayden White, is “not simply to contest the message of history, which has so often relegated individual post-colonial societies to footnotes to the march of progress, but also... to reinscribe... the heterogeneity of historical representation” (Ashcroft et al., *Post-Colonial* 356).

The transgression of narrative conventions and the frustration of reader expectations described above offer the reader a direct experience of how it feels, on a personal level, to be written out of official history. The novel is called *Oscar and Lucinda* but in fact it narrates “Bob’s Dreaming.” Similarly, the official version of the nation’s history is called the “History of Australia” whereas what it really tells is the history of white Australians. From the Aboriginal viewpoint, this is a frustrating misnomer. Carey has adopted a ludic approach in trying to make his white Australian readers understand this fundamental message: he has offered us the opportunity to try on another role. In fact he tricks us into playing this role of the other, whose viewpoint is erased from the story and whose desires are not taken into account. He implicitly invites us to identify with Oscar and Lucinda and uses his narrative authority to make us believe that they/we represent the center. Our expectations are therefore frustrated when they/we are abruptly written into silence and pushed out to the periphery of the story at the end. The experience is not a pleasant one. But learning by vicarious experience through role-play is a far more effective way of appreciating the depth of this injustice than just reading about it in abstract terms, an approach favored by the didacticism of Victorian novels. ✱

Notes

¹ For colonies as a place where criminals were punished, see George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) or *Silas Marner* (1861); for a place where progressives went to try out their new ideas, see Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872).

² This phrase was propelled to the forefront of post-colonial theory in 1989 by the publication of the ground-breaking work *The Empire Writes Back* by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin.

³ According to Genette, a narrator who shares the spatio-temporal world of the characters.

⁴ This term refers to the Aboriginal version of Australian history, including the history of their oppression by whites. This unflattering aspect of Australian history was completely repressed by official historians until the 1970s.

⁵ Dreaming: "In Aboriginal belief: a collection of events beyond living memory which shaped the physical, spiritual, and moral world; the era in which these occurred" (*The Australian National Dictionary*).

⁶ If Oscar can succeed in transporting Lucinda's prefabricated church from Sydney to Boat Harbor by Good Friday, then she will have to give her inheritance over to him. The unstated follow-on from that premise is that he will then feel under a moral obligation to marry her, which is precisely what he wants to do anyway. The "catch" is that the journey is a very perilous one.

⁷ For example, George Turner, one of the three judges of the fictional section of the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards for 1988, eliminated *Oscar and Lucinda* from his selection for what he termed narrative "cheating" and "plain manipulation, akin to solving a murder mystery by discovering in the last chapter the existence of a passing tramp" (200); Da Silva accused Carey of "sabotage" (151); Jacobson called the ending "blindingly upsetting and nihilistic."

⁸ In *Illywhacker*, Carey presents to his Australian reader a provocative image of Australia as a nation of pets who have continuously sold themselves and their country's natural resources to the highest bidder, ever since Federation in 1901. The aim of this provocation is made clear by analogy at the end of the narrative when he describes angry crowds who have taken to the streets to rebel against this type of selling out as represented by the emblematic Badgery pet emporium.

⁹ These "acknowledgements" were apparently deleted from later editions of the novel.

¹⁰ In his article, "Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* and the Subversion of Subversion," Callahan reflects on the significance of Carey's choice of Gosse's novel as an object of post-colonial rewriting, underlining the ambivalence of Gosse's status as a representative of the English canon. Gosse was famous in his lifetime as "the 'official British man of letters' in H.G. Wells' words, an omnipresent commentator... in the late-Victorian and Edwardian

literary worlds" (22). But his authority as a critic was challenged in the English "center" soon after his "reign," his only remaining claim to authority being his fictional autobiography which, ironically, sets out his own "writing back" to the oppressive authority of his father.

¹¹ For example, Edmund Gosse's father was ridiculed in the British press for the way he tried to reconcile his own literal interpretation of the Bible and the theory of evolution: he claimed that God had placed fossils on the earth when He created it.

¹² See, for example, the series of unlikely coincidences that the evolution of the narrative in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* depends on.

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