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Postmodernist writings, Realist readings: Peter Carey's *Bliss*
and *The tax inspector*

By

Antonio Jose dos S. Simoes da Silva

A thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
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Postmodernist writings, Realist readings: Peter Carey's *Bliss* and *The tax inspector*.

Part 1-Introduction

Reality may have been flat like that in the old days ... But now everything is three-dimensional, reality has shadows too; even the most ordinary ant patiently carries his shadow on his back like a twin¹.

L'Écran réaliste est un simple verre à vitre, très mince, très clair, et qui a la prétention d'être si parfaitement transparent que les images le transversent et se reproduisent en suite dans leur réalité².

A fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics. The critic's task is to define the latter before evaluating the former³.

This thesis will engage in an analysis of Peter Carey's *Bliss*⁴ and *The tax inspector*⁵, focusing on the ways in which the novelist combines Realist and Postmodernist aesthetics as a means to *make meaning*. The thesis will propose, moreover, that it is through this fusion of two modes of writing which are, both aesthetically and ideologically, fundamentally opposed, which Carey articulates a political stance within the texts. In other words, Carey's texts may be seen to reveal the novelist's growing concerns with notions of national, cultural and moral identity in contemporary Australia. As Carey himself has stated:

I just think the world is coming up for a good old vomit and it's going to have to establish its morality again. I think morality is very functional, and not something one imposes. Morality is what people do if they want to survive as a group⁶.

Whilst one may discount such overt pronouncements by the author himself, it is possible to see the novels as a means of articulating his political position. This stance, as suggested in *Bliss* and *The tax inspector*, appears to support a new national identity revealed through notions of moral and cultural identity. Clearly, the notion of a 'national identity' is far from finally outlined. Indeed, Richard White suggests that "a national identity is an invention"⁷, a view later endorsed by Graeme Turner, albeit with certain

qualifications⁹. However, for the purpose of this study I have elected to endorse Kay Schaffer's working concept of 'national identity' as one which "projects sets of ideas which coalesce into an ideal self -- the 'real' Australian"¹⁰. I will contend, therefore, that the novels imply that such a concept is intrinsically linked to a communion with the land and a respect for the individual. As Brian Kiernan states, in *Images of society and nature*:

The relationship between a novel and society ... is a delicate one involving the author's whole vision of society and the reader's response to the total image of it he creates¹⁰.

The thesis will argue that Carey's works are compelling accounts of the life of contemporary Australians, of the ways in which they deal with the sort of reality which Cornell West has defined as "the reality one cannot know. The ragged necessities of the Real, of *Necessity*¹¹. The reality *Bliss* and *The tax inspector* portray is one of personal secrets, illusory desires, burning ambitions. It is a reality of trial, failure and achievement. It is also a reality of joy and sadness, corruption and honest behaviour. Commenting on the forthcoming publication of his first novel, *Bliss*, Carey said in 1981:

... I think the novel is going to show an uneasy balance between a general feeling that the world is fucked and a feeling of some hope for individuals, or groups of individuals, to survive. I think the way that everybody is living now is bloody insane¹².

The ability of a Realist narrative mode to endorse certain traditional values is reflected in the notions of resolution found in *Bliss* and *The tax inspector*. The texts' *dénouements* are accentuated by a suggestion of 'reward and punishment'. Those characters whose philosophies are questioned and, or, seriously condemned, ultimately fail to 'survive'. Others, however, are allowed to 'reach the end of the novel', and to find happiness and fulfillment, revealing their privileged status within the works. That is the case with Harry Joy, Honey Barbara and Maria Takis. One might then suggest that a Realist narrative structure presents Carey

with the means to endorse a favoured position by allowing a reconciliation of 'truth' and 'textual construct' which Postmodernism works to subvert. The latter, though, subverts an overtly dogmatic 'final stance' implicit in Realism. By arguing that the novels' Postmodernist aspects ultimately fail to subvert the notion that a fictional text may in any way represent reality, the thesis may be said to attribute to a Postmodernist narrative a narrower subversive ability. The movement's emphasis on intangibility of meaning and its continual refusal to accept the self as anything but a "philosophical and cultural mystification"¹³ demonstrates this point. As David Lodge notes:

the often-asserted resistance of the world of meaning to interpretation would be a sterile basis for writing if it were not combined with a poignant demonstration of the human obligation to attempt such interpretation¹⁴.

Peter Carey's works engage in a challenge to ideologically constrained literature. Whilst the mimetic nature of Realism is often undermined in *Bliss* and *The tax inspector*, the Postmodernist notions of relativity and intangibility of meaning are also seriously questioned. Carey's use of a Postmodernist narrative mode which denotes contemporary notions of chaos and alienation is counterbalanced by the Realist emphasis on order and the self. The title I have proposed: "Postmodernist writings, Realist readings", thus endeavours to articulate the relationship between Postmodernist and Realist aesthetics in Carey's fiction. My reading of the texts will explore the ways in which a sense of resolution, chronology, and methods of characterization may be seen to express an authorial stance.

However, this discussion of Peter Carey's work requires a clarification of certain elements which the thesis will take as 'givens'. Thus, other than defining what is meant by terms such as 'moral' and 'cultural', it is appropriate to set out the major differences between Postmodernism and Realism. Further, it is also important to establish the means by which to read a text which oscillates between Postmodernism and Realism.

The definition of 'moral' found in most dictionaries resides, fundamentally, on the distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' conduct. The term can also be seen as "expressing or conveying truths or counsel as to right conduct, of a speaker or literary work"¹⁵. In *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, while offering a similar definition, A.R. Lacey further proposes the interchangeability of the terms 'moral' and 'ethical': "Etymologically the Latin 'moral' corresponds to the Greek 'ethical'"¹⁶. Lacey then goes on to say that "a moral principle might be defined as concerning things in our power and for which we can be held responsible"¹⁷, which brings us to the use of 'moral' this thesis will employ. In *Bliss*, as in *The tax inspector*, a character's re-habilitation within the narrative is directly related to an ability to grasp its flaws, to discover, and resolve, its misjudged actions. The characters finally endorsed by the narrative were able to identify the ways in which their behaviour could change, and then set about executing it. In the manner endorsed by Realist narrative modes, they are seen to be accountable for their own fates.

By arguing about notions of 'good' and 'bad' in Carey's novels, the thesis will, to a large extent, be reflecting value judgements of my own. As Norman Holland states:

... a reader, as he synthesizes and re-creates a piece of literature, works; he transforms his own fantasies (of a kind that would ordinarily be unconscious) into the conscious, social, moral, and intellectual meanings he finds by interpreting the work¹⁸.

Moreover, I am also aware that to attribute to the novel an intention -- in this instance that it states Carey's views on art, politics and social issues -- is to enter the domain of what W.K. Wimsatt identified as 'intentional fallacy'¹⁹. However, Wayne Booth has also argued the point that there is "an inseparable connection between art and morality"²⁰. As Booth notes, the writers' "artistic vision consists of a judgement on what they see, and they would ask us to share that judgement as part of the vision"²¹.

Further, Terry Eagleton states: "Political argument is not an alternative to moral preoccupations: it is those preoccupations taken seriously in their full implications"²². Therefore the thesis will suggest that it is through the set of parallel equations, i.e. good/moral and bad/immoral endorsed by the novels which the political stance is conveyed. This may be seen to be established in the manner in which those characters whose behaviour and nature the texts signal as 'good' are rewarded (Harry Joy, Honey Barbara, Maria Takis, Jack Catchprice), whilst others such as Bettina and David Joy, and Benny Catchprice are 'punished'.

By arguing that Carey's work reflects a concern with moral ways of being, with the way we act here and now, I am also suggesting a degree of commitment in the Sartrean notion of 'littérature engagée'. Simultaneously, I will argue that the adoption of Postmodernist narrative techniques in the making of meaning prevents the works from acquiring the tones of a political pamphlet. Peter Carey walks the tightrope between political commitment and openly rhetorical fiction by using as his safety net an intertwining of both Realist and Postmodernist elements. To argue that *Bliss* and *The tax inspector* are politically committed works therefore implies the view that they reveal, primarily and ultimately, Carey's 'mission of social change'.

For the purpose of this analysis of Carey's work, the term 'cultural' may be best defined in terms of the way in which Carey represents an Australian cultural identity as a process of discarding and appropriating elements of various other cultures. As *The tax inspector* reveals, the Australia Carey writes about is no longer one dominated by an Anglo-Celtic sense of cultural identity. Carey presents instead a culture engaged in the process of finding, and defining itself, a construct which comes together as a result of the intrusion and participation of various peoples and cultural variants. Further, it is one which reflects a new relationship between different cultures in the one nation, but also how these cultures contribute to "the works and practices of art and intelligence"²³. It is

also a new culture which has as its foundation a strong relationship with the land. What I am proposing is that Carey's blend of Realist and Postmodernist aesthetics signifies an attempt by the writer to make sense of the cultural diversity of contemporary Australian society. Indeed, Carey questions the limitations imposed by a Realist representation of 'reality' whilst simultaneously dealing with those inherent in a Postmodernist denial of reality.

Carey's novels reflect the polysemic nature of a Postmodernist narrative, its sense of disjunction, discontinuity and randomness; its playful concern with form and intangibility of meaning. A Realist aesthetics, on the other hand, generally demands of the reader the ability to construct a coherent interpretation, the skill to *find* meaning. In *Realism and consensus in the English novel*, Elizabeth Ermarth explains:

To the extent that all points of view summoned by the text agree, to the extent that they converge upon the 'same' world, that text maintains the consensus of realism; to the extent that such an agreement remains unsupported or becomes impossible, to that extent the realist effect is compromised"²⁴.

Further, Ermarth offers as "some familiar qualities of fictional realism chronology, particularity, interiority, viewpoint and every day matter"²⁵. In *Bliss* and *The tax inspector*, though, Carey may also be said to practice a "suspension of realist continuities"²⁶. This is illustrated by the novels' intertextual drawing on different genres -- the fantastic and the western, the detective novel and science-fiction, pornography and fable. This random collection of different genres, which in themselves imply different notions of reality, undermines a Realist aesthetic which purports to represent 'reality'. Through a number of other elements, however, the texts endorse the view of a "realist consensus".

The accent on 'characters' in Carey's novels, and the portrayal of their trials and tribulations, indicates a subversion of a postmodern aesthetics, and consequently an

identification with Realism. Commenting on the nature of Postmodernism, Waugh avers:

postmodernism's ontological disruption (its suggestion that textuality is the primary 'reality' of a world and a book fabricated through discourse) mediates a disintegration of belief in the full humanist subject ... 27.

Waugh thus suggests that "it seems that the human 'subject' has disappeared from postmodern fiction. There are no 'persons' any more"²⁹. In *Bliss*, as in *The tax inspector*, however, the characters impress precisely by their 'human' qualities. Ermarth's views on the Realist approach to character appear therefore particularly pertinent to Carey's own methods:

The subjection of characters to various kinds of journeys, the proliferation of episodes and of sequences in realistic novels, are devices managed with the reader's developing depth-perception in mind. The more the characters see of the world, the more we see of the characters and, consequently, the better able we are to identify in the variety those deep consistencies both within individuals and between them that temporal continuities gradually reveal"²⁸.

"Realism", though, "along with the values it presupposes, has entered the age of suspicion, and has lost the linguistic innocence it may once have claimed"³⁰. It no longer can be taken to *inherently* endorse "those deep consistencies both within individuals and between them that temporal continuities gradually reveal" to which Ermarth alludes³¹. As the thesis will contend, a Postmodernist aesthetic thus allows Carey to explore in his texts a philosophy which places the individual subject at the centre of the world, able to make choices and act freely -- in the realist/liberal humanist mode -- without adopting the latter aesthetic *per se*. Although taken out of context, Alan Wilde's definition of "a narrative form which negotiates the oppositional extremes of realism and reflexivity" as a "mid-fiction" clearly applies to Carey's work³².

This reading of Peter Carey's *Bliss* and *The tax inspector* will endeavour to illustrate the claim of a developing political commitment in the author's fiction. The questions posed at the outset, then, relate to the ways in which a patently Postmodernist text can be seen to endorse an ideology which is concerned with morality, hence essentially antithetical to a literary aesthetic heralding, indeed celebrating, a plurality of meanings, the intangibility of *meaning*. As Wilde's views suggest, the novels are subversive Postmodernist works when questioning the constrained ideological boundaries of Realism; they are Realist works concerned with a greater moral order when refusing the 'death of the subject self' and undermining a Postmodernist refusal to deal with a reality.

Part 2-*Bliss*

In *Bliss* Peter Carey writes a novel which conforms to Robert Alter's views of a Postmodernist text as one "that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and probes the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality"¹. The novel highlights its own textuality, and its varying levels of intertextuality. At a time when daily existence is dominated by a feeling of radical scepticism, a Postmodernist narrative allows Carey the means to question, and to challenge, notions of a mimetic representation of reality. Indeed, ⁱⁿ its appeal to a variety of genres, the Postmodernist text may be seen to reflect the disjunction and contingency of contemporary life. On the other hand, *Bliss* transcends the limitations imposed by Postmodernism insofar as it centers on such basic Realist tenets as the characters' journeys through life in search of meaning. Its focus on human suffering and endurance, on the subject's relationship with society, reinforces the novel's alignment with a

classic realist narrative [movement] towards the reinstatement of order, sometimes a new order, sometimes the old restored, but always intelligible because familiar².

Thus whilst the Postmodernist *Bliss* 'exposes' its constructed nature to the readers, its Realist 'double' alerts them to the limitations of an aesthetics which purports to deny the existence of any reality. Through its attention to physical detail and its thematic seriousness, *Bliss* reveals the principles of active political and social involvement which underpin it. Peter Carey, in response to Ray Willbanks' comment: "It sounds as if you're making a statement about the writer--that he should invent what is morally desirable", recently asserted:

I would never put it like that. But I think the writer has a responsibility to tell the truth, not to shy away from the world as it is; and at the same time the writer has a responsibility to celebrate the potential of the human spirit³.

Carey "tell[s] the truth" by engaging in a satirical comment on Australian society and the ways it articulates its national identity through the cultural and moral. However engaging, indeed stimulating, the novel's show of 'strip tease' may be, it becomes secondary, if not altogether irrelevant, when contrasted with the gravity of its thematic issues: family violence, private and public corruption, loneliness, pollution, social, visual and economic hegemony. Thus, at the level of its themes, *Bliss* displays already the Realist ability to stifle, and ultimately displace the Postmodernist concern with textual play. This paper proposes that in *Bliss*, as later in *The tax inspector*, Carey explores a Realist/liberal humanist perspective which addresses the redemptive potential of literature. Thus the novel may be seen to suggest ways of leading a different, better, more just life.

Bliss(fully) Postmodernist

"A good story always had a little extra romance than real life"⁴.

The use of a Postmodernist narrative in the making of meaning allows *Bliss* to appear fashionably unconcerned with 'final truths'. The post structuralist/postmodernist mode views the text as a language construct. By drawing attention to the characters' constructedness, it undermines the Realist tendency "to offer as the obvious basis of its intelligibility the assumption that character, unified and coherent, is the source of action"⁵. The narrator then strives to deny the reader a single position, from which to attempt to capture reality:

Harry Joy was to die three times, but it was his first death which was to have the greatest effect on him, and it is this first death which we shall now witness [11].

The novel's foregrounding of its 'constructedness' denies the reader the illusory immersion into 'reality' afforded by a Realist fiction. Yet, as A.J.Hassall notes:

The sentence is deceptively lucid in its abrupt defamiliarization and its dream-like multiplication of death by three, which simultaneously diminishes and increases its menace⁶.

The narrator's account of Harry's death, focalized through Harry, brings the reader to share the joy of sliding

between the air itself ... stroked by something akin to trees, cool, green, leafy ... assailed with the smell of things growing and dying, a fecund smell like the smell of rain forest[p.12].

Moreover, this prologue-like opening of *Bliss* displays the tension which undermines the novel. The narratorial voice, although aware of the spurious reality of the text and its characters, appears to adopt the possibilities the text offers for a politically charged telling of their 'lives'. As the imagery of the world Harry enters in his death denotes, language can, and does point to the magic reality of life, a pungent, vibrant, riotous quality not unlike that of the rain forest. The narrative thus alternates between the Postmodernist questioning of reality, and a naturalist portrayal of 'reality'. This last aspect is illustrated by the following excerpt:

Harry Joy was thirty-nine years old and believed what he read in the newspapers. In the provincial town where he lived he was someone of note but not of importance, occupying a position below the Managing Director of the town's largest store and even the General Manager of the canning factory[13].

Immediately after, the narrative turns away from both Harry's and the narrator's viewpoints. Bettina's arrival at Milano's is, initially, offered through its proprietor's eyes: "Aldo would not have given them the table, not that particular table, but the woman tricked him into it"[15]. However, Joel's introduction is again left to the all-knowing narrator: "Joel was only twenty-six but there was about him the sense of something over-ripe and gone to seed"[15]. As he joins Bettina for lunch, the point of view shifts once again, this time to Bettina herself:

Bettina watched him with qualified pride ... He had no real idea of the impression he made. He would never understand why he offended people, why they thought him too pushy, too loud, or why they would also think

him refreshing and clever[16].

Whilst the narrative complexity of *Bliss* may be attributed to its typically Postmodernist intertwining of 'low' and 'high' art, its disjointed chronology and use of external referential sources, it is primarily its multiplicity of viewpoints which best works to destabilize the reader. It signals to him or her their dual position: both as outsiders to the text, reading *about* events, and insiders, ultimately the originating source of meaning. S/he wonders, as the various characters offer their views on each other, who really tells the story. This apparently polyphonic structure establishes the question of narrative reliability as a major issue in the novel.

A.J. Hassall remarks that the "we" which initially invites the reader "to witness" Harry's "first death"[11], is "a traditional fulsomely authorial storyteller"?. This point is illustrated, once again, as Harry takes a taxi home:

The rewards of originality had not been wasted on him and if he is, at this stage unduly cocky, he might as well be allowed to enjoy it. So *we* will not interfere with the taxi driver, who is prolonging his euphoria by driving him the long way home[my italics, 79-80].

Indeed, "at this stage" there is no suggestion that there is more than one narrator. The narrative, however, appears to suggest the 'true' identity the "we" signifies: "But now the last story, and the last story is our story, the story of the children of Harry Joy and Honey Barbara ..."[295]. If we were to accept that the story is told by the children of Harry and Honey Barbara, there would be a number of problematic issues. That the narrators can tell the story of their parents, is not unusual. After all, the narrative mode has made clear that there are no original stories in *Bliss*. The story the narrators tell is a composite of the stories which both Harry and Honey Barbara would have told them, the stories which "in the natural course of things, came to be told more slowly, with greater pride and a pride which could not be mistaken for arrogance"[294]. The stories on the page are the stories

which, presumably, were told around camp fires in the bush and kitchen tables in the city. What is uncommon is the degree of insight the narrators afford into the characters' minds:

Scratching around in the overgrown mess which constitutes [Harry's] mental state, we might find a few undiscovered reasons for [his fear of hell]. This is not to take credit away from him, for he hasn't seen them, and is acting by his own lights, bravely[41].

If the narrators are indeed the children of Harry Joy, it is unlikely that they would have had such privileged access into his mind. The knowledge they would have had of Harry's life story would have been as outsiders, as listeners, as *voyeurs*, to an extent. Thus, if the story we have been told is also the "story of the children Harry Joy and Honey Barbara"[295], this sets up a whole new relationship between text and *narratorial voice*. According to Hassall, this

indicates to the reader that what she or he has just read is the story of Harry Joy as told by his children: it has no other, privileged authority⁸.

I would suggest that it indicates, on the contrary, a superior level of consciousness; in Catherine Belsey's terms, such narrative devices reflect "a shadowy authority [which acts] as a source of the fiction"⁹. If the story is also their story, then, clearly, the children of Harry Joy are no more than characters *in* Peter Carey's novel. Hassall's later assertion, that "the reader--like Harry--never learns whether an elephant was really responsible [for the destruction of Harry's car]"¹⁰, stresses the point. That the narrators could not provide that information implies, in my view, an external author(ity). This view is emphasized in a number of other instances. Commenting on Aldo's reaction to Bettina's 'trick' at Milano's, for example, this omniscient narrator remarks: "It would be another minute before [Aldo] would know [about Harry's death], and then from a winewaiter!"[15]. The comment, almost a whisper in the reader's ear, works to offer the latter a sense of collusion with the narratorial

voice. It is this attempt at involving the reader, as much as the narrator, in the making of the text which, in my view, points towards a manipulator outside the text, an authorial presence. Again, at the time of Harry's last death, the 'narrator' betrays his 'true colours':

Nothing will happen in this story. It is as inconsequential as anything Vance told ... Any moment this thirty-year-old tree is going to perform the treacherous act of falling on the man that planted it ... There--it is done[295].

The level of prescience demonstrated suggests a being other than the children of Harry and Honey Barbara. Rather than simply narrating an event, the narrator is actually *making* it happen. Finally, the Reverend Desmond's visit to Harry:

It was not the buzzer which brought the Reverend Desmond Pearce but the good man's own blunt brogues, clumping down the hospital verandah as if testing for rot in its ancient planks. His hands were rough, coarse with nicks and scabs, a hint that the saving of souls required something a bit more muscular than his 4Ps, which--to get them out of the way here--were Prying, Preaching, Praying, and Pissing-off-when-you-re-not wanted[43].

The degree of irony, almost sarcasm, which Carey adopts in the passage appears directed both at the Reverend himself and at the institution he represents. The contrast between his coarseness, of demeanor and physical appearance, and the gentleness normally associated with 'men of the cloth', appears to betray an authorial stance. It is as if we, the readers, are expected to share with Carey the satirical tone of the excerpt.

The self-conscious aspect of *Bliss* is astutely explored by Teresa Dovey in "An infinite onion" (1983); Dovey argues that: "the stories [are not] original ... it is in the telling that the capacity for originality resides"¹¹. In *Bliss* Carey foregrounds the novel's structure, playing both with the notion of the text as a construct and with that of the reader as 'spectator'. Dovey suggests that Carey's role as an author is simply that of "re-creator"¹². Thus, when Alex Duval tells Harry Joy: "You were a good talker, Harry. That's what made you,

you know that? Not what you said, no... It was the damn way you said it"[138], the text may be seen to point to the nature of literature as a construct. A Postmodernist text suggests that it is the *telling*, not the *showing* that really matters, since the textual representation of life offered can never be mimetic. Harry's stories are, on the whole, a re-telling of his father's "stories, always stories: Wood Spirits, lightning, the death of Kings, and New York, New York, New York"[22]. Dovey notes that the tales which the various characters put together in *Bliss* are not original. At one level, they are the stories which Vance Joy told Harry, his son, and the stories which Harry has now passed on to his family. The focus of Carey's novel is both on the telling of stories as a re-telling of past narratives, and on the narrative as a product of story-telling. At another level, given "the novel's emphasis on the impossibility of originality, it seems legitimate to seek out its literary sources"¹³. Drawing on *Bliss*' and Garcia Marquez's *One hundred years of solitude*'s shared "cyclical concept of time"¹⁴, Dovey states: "All we can retain of past reality is words and these in fact have a very tenuous relationship with that reality"¹⁵. Thus it is the manner in which the stories are put together that makes them *mean*. They are appropriated by the novelist in order to signify within a contemporary Australian setting.

Dovey identifies the use of textual devices such as *prolepsis* and *analepsis* as central to the texts' ability to disrupt the reader's expectations. The narrator's remarks: "right now, it may as well be revealed: Lucy Joy will never get to the Hilton"[p.126], deprive the reader of the surprise element of a chronologically arranged Realist text. Further, they allow Carey to appear mischievously 'user friendly', to use the current jargon. In other words, by openly disclosing the means by which the text is making *meaning*, the author forgoes the ability to *show* which a Realist text offers. This ambivalence reveals the ingenious relationship Carey sets up between reader and text. "I think the moment [a book] is finished", Carey has said, "is when someone else reads it, not when [I've]

completed it"¹⁶. As the reader is gently coerced to fill in the *lacunae* within the text, the focus on the notion of active political and social involvement is shifted from the narratorial voice to the reader. Consequently, any 'moral' judgements appear to be located as much in the reader as in the author. By establishing a bond between the reader and the narrator, the text endows the reader with its own ideological baggage. The Postmodernist playfulness therefore enables Carey to *mean* by subverting the Realist element.

The text's construction of the reader is further illustrated in the following excerpt. Referring to Harry Joy's relationship with his family, the narrator declares at one stage: "It was not a question that would have occurred to Harry, who had never seen his family as you, dear reader, have now been privileged to"[37]. Although the passage may be interpreted, primarily, as a device to create between the reader and the narrator a sense of intimacy, indeed, of collusion, it simultaneously works to unsettle him or her. It is necessary, however, to return to an earlier extract in the text to realize the full implications of the passage quoted above. Alluding to Harry's limited point of view, a reflection of his place within the family, the narrator tells of David Joy: "This then is Harry's son, who in his father's words is 'a good boy, going to be a doctor'"[33]. The irony implicit in the fact that David is a petty-minded crook who will stop at nothing to fulfil his ambitions, is not lost on the reader. That, at this stage, Harry should remain oblivious to this fact, though, points not only towards his limited perspective as a character in the text but also, and most importantly, to his role in the family. "Irony", Catherine Belsey avers, "guarantees still more effectively than overt authorial omniscience the subjectivity of the reader as a source of meaning"¹⁷.

Carey's narrative style is intrusive and disruptive. The continuous qualifications offered within a sentence, notably inside parentheses, reflects one way in which Postmodernist form reflects contemporary society's fragmented condition. Moreover, such methods make explicit

the assumptions and asides which Realist fiction would take in its stride: "For his part, Harry was never heard to criticise anyone (or for that matter, anything) ..." [14]. And again:

A soft kerosene light threw benevolent shadows across the room and his father (who lived in the house for a total of four years and two months) would always be there ... [22].

Simultaneously, the use of parentheses might be seen to undermine the solemnity which a Realist narrative would normally adopt. The adverb 'suggestively' in the following excerpt demonstrates this view: "He did not go for walks with her like Harry did, or brush (suggestively) past her like Joel did" [240]. While on the one hand the word may appear critical of Joel's behaviour, it also suggests David's emotional and sexual immaturity. From David's viewpoint, Joel's actions appear comic rather than lewd, especially in view of his subservience to Bettina. The light hearted tone is again reflected in the next passage: "They [the Joys] ... drank a little (but not a lot) white wine" [250]. The definition immediately offered of 'little' disrupts the reader's ability to engage in any judgements. The notions of relativity implied by 'little' are thus reinforced by the comment within parentheses. Indeed, "little" is "not a lot". Further, the parenthetical phrase reflects Bettina's joyous mood, and the following example emphasizes this aspect: "There was such a sense of excitement, of comradeship, and it was nothing (it was everything!) to work till three in the morning ..." [250]. The narrative voice thus openly flaunts the means of its craft. The use of parenthetical devices alerts the reader to one other aspect in *Bliss*. When the narrator tells of David: "He grew into a tall thin boy who had been at first what children (or at least the children in that town) called 'Gooby' [22], the parentheses point to the relativity of language and cultural concepts. As the narrator glosses the term 'Gooby' (which, had the text assumed a culture common to everyone, would be unnecessary):

by which they meant someone who is a little slow and introverted and is likely to stand at odd places with

his mouth open, staring at things that no one would look at twice[22],

the text denotes its cultural background.

Realistic *Bliss*

Every literature must seek the things that belong unto its place, must, in other words, speak of a particular space, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and desires of its people¹⁸.

Linda Hutcheon writes, in *The politics of Postmodernism*: "Among the unresolved contradictions of representation in postmodern fiction is that of the relation between the past and the present"¹⁸. According to Hutcheon, knowing the past is knowing the present. In other words, it is necessary to make sense of the past in order to comprehend the contemporary. The point I would like to argue is that Carey is perfectly aware of the extent of these limitations imposed by Postmodernism, and strives in his novels to resolve them.

As a post-colonial society, Australian identity has emanated, primarily, from the imposition of foreign paradigms, and the consequent subjugation of indigenous cultural notions. Australia has kept not only an emphasis on its Anglo-Celtic roots, but also endorsed new cultural notions originating in the U.S.A.. In *Bliss*, however, Carey sets up a number of apparent binary oppositions, such as the notion of an Australian cultural makeup versus a domineering American one. The author recently remarked:

I don't think that I made such clear distinctions [though] ... I did have a thing about Australia being on the edge of the American Empire, [and] ... one can feel a great deal of reservations about American political actions in the world, the action of American companies²⁰.

This anti-Americanism in *Bliss* may be seen to reflect the novel's focus on the notion of a culture aware of its entrapment in foreign notions of identity. As Australian society strives to establish the basis of a working

partnership with the outside world on an equal or, indeed, a leading position, it must confront the influence of foreign, often stronger forces. The stories *Bliss* tells attempt to "address the ambitious task of substituting an Australian dreaming for a colonial dreaming -- whether English, American or Japanese"²¹. A rejection of all foreign influence, which the novel's closing at Bog Onion Road implies, would deny Australian society of any significant role in world matters. Yet, allowing itself to accept outside elements, may also represent a threat to a national and cultural identity not yet sufficiently established. It is this notion of a 'no win' situation which Paul Ricoeur defines thus:

in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary ... to take part in scientific, technical and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past²².

And as the narrator in *Bliss* asserts, those who inhabit the world at Bog Onion Road

were refugees of a broken culture who had only the flotsam of belief and ceremony to cling to or sometimes the looted relics from other people's temples. Harry had cut new wood grown on their soil and built something solid they all felt comfortable with. They were hungry for ceremony and story [*Bliss*, 291].

In other words, in *Bliss* Harry has substituted "an Australian dreaming" for a foreign one²³; "There was no embarrassment in these constructions" [291].

Peter Carey thrives on ambiguity and ambivalence, and a reading of his texts in terms of "black and white" would certainly be a flawed exercise. The way Harry is represented in the text illustrates this point. The juxtaposition of Harry's cruelty to his wife and partner and his inability to communicate with his children, against the pain he endures as he becomes aware of his own faults and the joy he discovers at Bog Onion Road, reflects his 'realness', a 'down to earth', endearing 'Good bloke'. Although the text appears to undermine the extent of Harry's transformation by constantly signalling its own

condition as a fictive construct, it cannot prevent the reader from identifying with the 'realness' of his predicament. Ironically, at times it is almost as if the novel has gained a life of its own, 'struggling' to subvert the characters' ability to communicate with the reader. As Harry is faced with the corruption within his own family and society's decay, the reader's attention is shifted away from the self-conscious tricks of the novel. It is a fundamental quality of Realism to explore the characters' moral failures in order to establish their humanity. Thus a reading of *Bliss* as a novel in which the Realist narrative mode ultimately subverts its Postmodernist counterpart is made possible not so much by the direct allusions to Harry's newly discovered respect for others or to the "rather Victorian morality" of Honey Barbara [213], but by the very fact that they are seen as human in their inability to be wholly moral, wholly good. They function as realist characters because "they move around among various, even contradictory sorts of behaviour", to borrow Leo Bersani's comments on the Crawfords in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*²⁴. In spite of his acting "as if he had sole proprietorship of the moral dilemmas of life" [91], Harry remains unable, or unwilling to help his own family. And Honey Barbara's status is clearly ambiguous: "pantheist, healer, whore" [179]. Thus the narrator comments: "as anybody could see, Harry Joy was pretty much like anybody else, having his fair share of stupidities and conceits but also some reserves of kindness and love" [292]. Harry Joy and Honey Barbara, though, serve as the norm against which the behaviour of the other characters in the novel must be assessed, and finally judged. By endowing them with the status of "ontological floaters"²⁵, Carey manages to walk the tightrope between overt preaching and enlightened political commitment.

The statement of a moral stance within the text is as diverse as the fusion of Realist and Postmodernist aesthetics presupposes. In a world of growing instability and scepticism, the Postmodernist focus on pluralism and contingency, its accent on reader complicity, undermine the Realist attempt to reflect 'reality' accurately. To this

extent the novel attempts to engage the reader, inviting him or her to join with Harry Joy, Honey Barbara and, ultimately, with Carey himself, in the creation of a textual 'reality'. Yet, such a simplistic proposition underestimates the way in which the novel actually works to privilege some views over others. As previously suggested, the novel's 'reward and punishment' approach, for instance, appears to bespeak the text's moral position. The Postmodernist concept of characters as simple word constructs, the product of a partnership between narrator and reader, denies them a 'human reality'. However, by establishing a hierarchical notion of 'good/ bad', 'just/unjust', *Bliss* points to the characters' 'realness', emphasizing their 'humanity'. Bettina and David Joy's 'punishment' comes in the form of a denial of their dreams of success in New York and Latin America. Joel Davies, Harry's partner and Bettina's lover, too, finally fails to succeed in life. Faced with Bettina's death, Joel commits suicide. Within the framework of binary oppositions which the novel establishes, those characters who fail to come through may also be seen to have been unable to fit within a new, more genuinely Australian narrative. *Bliss* thus appears to endorse certain ways of life and behaviour whilst simultaneously condemning others. Harry Joy and Honey Barbara ultimately survive by retreating to Bog Onion Road. They reject an urban lifestyle and the increased danger posed by foreign cultural elements.

Ironically, this suggests a limited number of opportunities available to the few elect. Indeed, the sort of closure offered in *Bliss* is both optimistic and escapist. Although it is possible to read such an idealistically limited ending as reflecting the novelist's immaturity, in light of the fact that *Bliss* was Carey's first novel, his latest work appears to endorse similar values and attributes. In *The tax inspector*, Peter Carey again suggests that it is possible to escape into the 'bright sunset'. However, such a narrow sense of closure appears somewhat contradictory. This simplistic resolution undermines the novel's ending. The idealistic nature of

the ending detracts from the level of credibility conveyed, and demanded, by a Realist narrative.

As noted above, Harry may be described as an 'ontological floater', a term which denotes a character who moves between various realms of reality. Though the novel opens with a 'dead' Harry, shown as he slowly discards the physicality of his nature and enters the metaphysical world of after-life, it soon establishes his 'realness'. Indeed, whilst the title of the chapter, "Knocking at the Hellgate", itself suggests a number of different worlds, it also refers to the Christian notion of punishment meted out in Hell. Harry's arrival at the gates of hell thus implies an earthly life of sin and wrong doing. Within the parameters of a Christian mythology, Harry is being 'punished' by being refused entry into the paradisiacal world of God. Placed within the context of the novel's overt proposition of anti-Americanism, and its endorsement of a 'truly Australian' way of life, Harry's condemnation may be seen as a reflection of "the way he conducted his business more or less in the American style ..." [13]. Harry, however, "was to die three times, [and] it was his first death which was to have the greatest effect on him ..." [11]. The narrator's comment thus presupposes the possibility of change, of transformation. Although he now finds himself at the gates of Hell, Harry will endure a conversion sufficiently radical to allow him into Paradise, symbolized by the world of Bog Onion Road. Here, compensation is multifaceted and total. As a Bushman, Harry attains spiritual fulfillment and emotional satisfaction:

He had many friends. He was not only liked, he was also necessary ... Harry cut new wood grown on their soil and built something solid they all felt comfortable with [290-1].

The text seems to endorse the notion of Harry as a "Good Bloke" [14], as a type representative of the 'chosen ones': "there was about Harry a feeling that he belonged to an elite" [14]. It is no surprise, then, that "when the patrons at Milano's saw his empty seat on Monday lunch-time ... they felt a gap, an emptiness, as if something very important was missing from the place" [14].

Realism, Belsey contends, strives to set up "a hierarchy of discourses which establishes the 'truth' of the story"²⁶. As the narrative then moves to rehabilitate Harry, setting him up on a redemptive journey of self-discovery, it aligns itself with the traditional values endorsed by a Realist aesthetic. Harry's previous uncaring behaviour can now be excused on the basis of his ignorance of the end results of his actions. As he finds out about the carcinogenic properties of the product one of his clients sells, Harry immediately closes the account. To know and not to act is the real wrong. As A.R. Lacey explains: "a moral principle might be defined as concerning things in our power and for which we can be held responsible"²⁷. Shocked with Harry's decision, taken on the basis that petrol causes cancer, his client, Adrian Clunes comments, perplexed: "You handle our business for ten years and then you ... Look, think about it. Consider it"[123]; to which Harry retorts: "I just found out ... I *just* found out. I won't do it"[123]. For as Honey Barbara points out: "What you do in this life affects your next life ... "[130]. Harry's spiritual growth results from his decision to abandon the world of advertising. From being the pivotal element in Joy, Kerlewis and Day, Harry Joy gradually develops into someone for whom the most insignificant of things or actions attains a new value. Harry's metamorphosis, from a shrewd and uncaring urbanite to a man who "talked to lightning, the trees, the fire, gained authority over bees and blossoms, conducted ceremonies ..."[286], is directly related to his stay in hospital. It is "during his convalescence from his successful operation, [that] Harry became convinced that he was actually in Hell"[52]. Had it not been for his close encounter with death, Harry may never have changed his ways and crossed over the "river ... black as the Styx"[79]. "Lying in a hospital bed and contemplating death ... [Harry] worried about where he would go after dying"[23]. According to Catherine Belsey, periods of illness are a conventional device adopted in Realist fiction to convey the development of a character. Belsey explains: "The illness marking such adjustments of character ... "

reveals a classic Realist method of conferring characters a degree of 'humanity'²⁸. Thus Harry's transformation may be seen to happen within a typically Realist framework. In this manner, Peter Carey's study of the subject's relationship with the outside world allows for an analysis of moral dilemmas. However simple-minded in their idealism, Harry's words before cutting down the trees at Bog Onion Road reflect the new dimension his character has attained:

You have grown large and powerful. I have to cut you. I know you have knowledge in you from what happens around you. I am sorry but I need your strength and power . . . These stones and my thoughts will make sure another tree will take your place[267].

The prayer, spoken not with "the silky voice Harry Joy used in his city life, but [with] something at once coarser and softer"[287], reveals Harry's new self. He is now a caring, compassionate individual, true to himself and others. The words attain a special significance by being spoken by someone to whom the double edged nature of language was an intrinsic part of life.

He may indeed be guilty of "acting as if he had sole proprietorship of the moral dilemmas of life"[91], but Harry is also the moral norm which the novel ultimately appears to endorse. Finally, not only is Harry rewarded with Honey Barbara's love, he is also *given* a new life, other "doorways with new possibilities"[18] in the safety of the Australian bush. Harry's new status as a bushman symbolizes a rejection of the philistinism the city embodies and represents the adoption of the mythic characteristics the bush offers.

In *Bliss* the playful is never far from the earnest, and no opportunities to 'moralize' are ever lost. Ray Laurence, director and co-writer, with Peter Carey, of the film version of *Bliss* points out: "A lot of [Carey's] work seems bizarre, but if you look at it, it is very humane, thoughtful, and thought provoking"²⁹. In fact, even in the most bizarre of situations -- as when Harry Joy is taken into the police station for questioning -- Carey is able to state a position: "Sellotaped to the wall was a

small printed sign which explained, in *ten sarcastic* points, how to produce a juvenile delinquent" [my italics, 72]. The passage, however detached and matter-of-fact, betrays its ethical stance in the reference to the tone of the language adopted in the poster. Moreover, given the novel's overt religious allusions, the number of points, 'ten', may be seen as parodying the biblical Ten Commandments. However, the parody appears to be located on the use of the word by the police. Indeed, one might suggest that the narrative actually fails to endorse such parodic elements in this instance. Its preoccupations with notions of goodness underpin such a stance. The irony of the situation is emphasized by the traditional role of the police force within the community, e.g. to prevent, or eliminate, juvenile delinquency. Rather than merely telling of a situation, the narrator then elects to take sides.

Although the above excerpt from *Bliss* is dominated by the narrator's angle, the shift takes place when Harry is heard to declare "It was all wrong" [72]. The emphasis, then, is on the vulnerable humanist self, subject to fate's design. Given the fact that the text had previously worked to establish a strong bond between Harry and the reader, the passage strengthens it by highlighting the character's plight. Ermarth's views on characterization techniques adopted in Realist fiction is an apt description of Carey's approach in *Bliss*:

The implication of realist technique is that proper distance will enable the subjective spectator or the subjective consciousness to see the multiple viewpoints and so to find the form of the whole in what looks from a closer vantage point like a discontinuous array of specific cases³⁰.

The de-humanization of the self is here reflected in the policemen's allusions to Harry as an 'it', a thing devoid of feeling and emotion: "Maybe it could think of something original Don't know if it's capable of it ... Maybe all it can do is tell old stories. Maybe I pass him over to you" [73]. Taken within the context of the views expressed on the poster on the wall, the above extract may be interpreted as a critique of an inhumane

and heartless police system where people become objects. At the hands of Constable Box, "who liked tricks, slow, drawn-out entertainments"[76], Harry is emotionally terrorized, physically ill-treated and finally coerced into telling a "completely original story"[72]. The scene at the police station oscillates between the statement of a position, as it presents the defenseless self, and the disclosure of the constructed nature of literature. Although the two stances may be seen to complement each other, I would suggest that the Realist concern with the self ultimately displaces the Postmodernist awareness of its own status as fiction. Finally, one is left with the reality of Harry's sense of helplessness.

The story Harry offers the police officers, "the only original story he would ever tell"[76], highlights the issue of the originality of art. "In fear of punishment, in hope of release, glimpsing the true nature of his sin"[76] Harry told the story of Little Titch. There is a suggestion that truly original art can only be achieved out of adverse conditions, of the necessity to struggle with fear and oppression. Moreover, the story of Little Titch represents the re-introduction of oral story-telling within the narrative. At one level the adoption of oral story-telling may reflect the Postmodernist textual structure, its reliance on a variety of methods to make meaning. The point is here reflected in Harry's comments:

He never thought of what he did as original. It wasn't either ... He was merely sewing together the bright patchworks of lives, legends, myths, beliefs, hearsay into a splendid cloak that gave a richer glow to all their lives. He knew when it was right to tell one story and not another. He knew how a story could give strength or hope[291].

As the passage clearly suggests, Postmodernist narratives are constructed of many diverse *meaningful* elements. Further, as Timothy Brennan states:

the conflict between originally oral literature and that (like the novel) which has from the beginning been dependent on the book ... suggests the conflicts now occurring between developed and emergent societies, a conflict that begins more and more to characterize the postwar political scene²¹.

At another level, Harry's "only original story" might also be read as reflecting a reinstatement of a pre-mass culture suggesting an order which preceded the contemporary condition of dis-order, contingency and randomness. More importantly, though, it is the content of the story which really accounts for its role in the text. It highlights the way 'real' issues are dealt with in the novel. Oral story-telling is therefore seen to be related to the means to construct a new, more original Australian narrative. Further, the device is 'real' in the way it *functions* within the real world, providing Harry with his means of escape. There is also a sense in which the storyteller's own physical presence endows the story with a greater degree of credibility than a narrator may ever attain on a written page.

Harry's ability to create for himself a new way of life at Bog Onion Road is directly related to his wish to escape his previous life in the city. Alluding to his success, the narrator remarks:

He had never ceased to see where he lived and, having begun with the aesthetic of whip bird to whom the rain forest is shelter and cannot be left except nervously, he had, as the months passed, developed a more relaxed view in which gratitude to the trees and to the people of Bog Onion was not his sole emotion but had become blended with wonder and made volatile with some lighter spirit[283].

Harry's relationship with the land is now based on communion with the land and respect for others, and has enabled him to find not only a place to live but also his own self. That he has created for himself a lifestyle which, in itself, is not unique, is irrelevant:

... when Harry Joy squatted on his haunches and contemplated a pea growing it did not matter a damn to him (it did not occur to him) that his experience was not new. He was not interested in newness[284].

What matters, the text appears to suggest, is the way the simple experiences in life are significant to one's journey of self-discovery. It does not matter that "[e]verybody has pointed this out to everybody else ... [that] [t]hey have made films about it and called them 'Miracle of life' and so on"[284]. The narratorial voice

here appears to identify with Harry when it remarks that "it did not matter a damn to him"[my italics,284]. It then distances itself slightly by addressing the reader in a less emotive fashion:"(it did not occur to him)". The use of parantheses,an intrinsic element of Carey's style to signal the intrusion of the narratorial voice,often fails to disrupt the ability of the Realist mode to portray the 'seemingly real'.

A.J. Hassall has suggested that:

"Harry's ultimate skill as a story-teller to the forest community at the end of the book seems to consist of finally understanding the stories of his father that he had been hearing and telling ..."³².

The stories of Vance Joy,which Harry repeated without ever really understanding their meaning,represent the tools of Harry's new craft. As a storyteller to the people of Bog Onion Road,he is also the artisan "sewing together the bright patchworks of lives,legends,myths,hearsay into a splendid cloak that gave a richer glow to their lives"[291].

Carey,too,I would suggest,knows "when a story [can] give strength or hope"[291]. *Bliss*,and *The tax inspector* even more so,make explicit Carey's concern with the proposition of a new role for the writer in contemporary Australian society. The author's 'intention',if I may use the term,is to point towards better,more positive ways of living life. According to Arun Mukherjee:

Insofar as texts ... talk about a 'reality' they do not want us to question,the reality of economic, political,social and cultural oppression,they are different from postmodernist texts that "use and abuse" everything³³.

Although the novels can not be read as a simple political manifestos,bent on highlighting social injustice,they nevertheless clearly privilege some forms of behaviour over others. In Helen Daniel's terms:"Carey suggests that an aesthetic which owes no allegiance to the real and to the moral is a destructive force which threatens our world"³⁴. Thus the thesis suggestion that Peter Carey's

work reflects a political commitment to social change focusing, primarily, on a return to fundamental values such as goodness, truth, social justice.

The novels reflect a fundamental faith in people and in their ability to modify and 'amend' their behaviour. Although he has since come to regard Carey in a slightly different light, George Turner's comments on his short stories seem to me to be particularly relevant to both works analysed in this study. Carey, Turner commented, was "an angry writer who loves his fellow man but cannot forever condone him"³⁵. As Carey himself has said: "What I often do is present that nothing is absolutely right or wrong"³⁶. This level of ambivalence may be interpreted to suggest that frailty is intrinsically human. Thus Honey Barbara's comments on Harry and his family: "Honey Barbara thought they were decadent but she liked them anyway. Not even her rather Victorian morality would censor them"[213]. She is aware of the flaws in their characters; yet Honey Barbara cannot but love Harry and his family. Her own status within the novel is indicative of her humanity: "She was Honey Barbara, pantheist, healer, whore"[179]. She combines the qualities of a mercenary sexuality with a genuine desire to help others, to be good. The juxtaposition of her drug-dealing role against that of healer suggests that the fictitious boundaries established by language are not always immutable. Flitting back and forth between the city and Bog Onion Rd., two worlds apparently opposed, Honey Barbara can be seen as a truly transgressive type. Significantly, her fall from grace is also linked to a chance meeting with an American:

So there was nothing to prepare her for the American on the bridge ... [Their] marriage, as it turned out, was bigamous. In fact a great number of things turned out differently from how they appeared ... At sixteen, standing on the bridge, she had never seen a city, never been to a restaurant or stayed in a hotel; she had never been a whore; she had never been in jail or in a mental home[175].

Her innocence lost, Honey Barbara would soon "strut across the bitumen with ugly high heels strapped to her beautiful feet, an expert on fear, poison and city-life"[175].

Bliss thus thrives on contraries and contradictions and one might suggest these reflect the 'way of things' in life. Further, such a narrative mode appears to identify the novel as a "mid-fiction", a narrative form described by Alan Wilde as one "which negotiates the oppositional extremes of realism and reflexivity"²⁷. As the narrator notes, referring to Honey Barbara's relationship with Harry's family:

It was a long time, six months, since Honey Barbara had been round anyone as young as Lucy and she remembered what a charge you could get from fifteen-year-olds; how fresh they seemed, and confident and strong, and also what a pain in the arse they could be[213].

Honey Barbara may be childishly idealistic, her definitions of 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' too simplistic. Yet, she at least tries, not only to be good, but also to adapt to the ways of Ken and Lucy, Harry, David, Bettina and Joel. In the narrator's terms, only "an uncharitable observer may have noted a slight primness in Honey Barbara's mouth"[213]. Carey's work, rather than one of limitations, is always one of "new doorways with new possibilities"[18]. Even at times of bleak despair there is always a positive opening:

this cancer business ... There is a great deal around and it is going to save us from ourselves. It is going to stop us from eating and breathing shit"[67].

In spite of the sarcasm in the passage, and of the facile idealism of the pronouncement, there is also a suggestion that from the prevailing rot new life will spring forth. When Honey Barbara gives Harry "his first lesson for survival in Hell"[132], the subject is one which foregrounds its own ridiculousness. The tone of the excerpt, albeit one of reverence, implicitly underlines the satire directed at Honey Barbara's 'hippyish' beliefs. Then, as she gives Harry the simplest of gifts: "I'm going to leave you some honey"[132], the emphasis is placed on the simple beauty of the gift. She may sound, and act, crazy at times. Yet, she is also the embodiment of all that is

good and pure in people.

In Peter Carey's narrative the extraordinary and the ordinary are never far apart, and meaning is drawn both from the complex ontology of Postmodernism and from a Realist epistemology which asks questions about what we know and how we know it.

Part 3-*The tax inspector*

The tax inspector is Peter Carey's latest work of fiction. Written nearly ten years after *Bliss*, *The tax inspector* in many ways resembles Carey's first novel. Thematically, for example, the novel retains a focus on a number of issues found in *Bliss*: family violence, degeneration of morals, public and private corruption. The issue of environmentalism is addressed by Granny Catchprice, who reminds Benny: "There's concrete underneath all the gravel in the car yard ... But there's good soil under there, ... it's like a smothered baby[164]. And the narrator later remarks:

Benny failed every science subject he ever took, but he knew this water in Deep Creek now contained lead, dioxin and methyl mercury ... He could feel the poisons clinging like invisible odour-free oil sticks ... [116-117].

Carey's fiction, as reflected in *The tax inspector*, appears increasingly concerned with society's modes of behaviour and the ways in which its identity is created. Thus at times his novels appear almost to be a catalogue of all the issues affecting contemporary Australia. *The tax inspector* stresses the changing face of an Australian society dealing with the arrival of people of different cultural backgrounds and presents the problems they encounter in their new land. Yet this is done without appealing to the sort of compassion such cases of alienation may engender. "To give a for instance", as Benny would put it¹:

His[Sarkis'] mother's feelings about the Armenian community made her judgement bad. She might have hated them, but she was one of them. When she met someone who was not Armenian, she got herself into a drama. No way she was going to serve *Gargandak*. She was reinventing herself as an Australian. But if not *Gargandak*, what cakes were right? ... She was thawing out the Sara Lee Cherry Cheese Cake[84].

By positioning the Catchprices' suffering in the same league as that endured by Maria Takis and the Alaverdians, *The tax inspector* places an accent on a new identity born of a communal sharing of the suffering and joy present in

contemporary Australia. Therefore the novel does not suggest that fragmentation and alienation are experienced solely by migrants. It seems to indicate instead that these are intrinsic elements of late twentieth-century.

Sarkis' mother's sexual behaviour with her Yugoslav lover also serves to introduce, if only in passing, the dangers of AIDS. The subject is then mentioned again when Benny goes swimming in Deep Creek; having first undressed, "... he then put on his shoes as a protection against AIDS" [116]. That Benny appears aware of the dangers posed by AIDS may seem incongruous in view of his later seduction of his father, and attempted rape of Maria Takis. Further, the novel alludes to the threats posed to the individual by capitalism, pornography and drug-dealing. It is this emphasis on the gravity of the issues affecting contemporary Australian society which reveals *The tax inspector's* strong sense of social commitment, a willingness to expose, though rarely to explore, issues directly affecting contemporary Australian society.

The text offers accounts of events and a re-telling of facts without overtly engaging in any moral judgements. The Postmodernist notion of pluralism and elusiveness of meaning as reflected in Carey's work denies the reader a single position from which to judge. As in *Bliss*, the narrator's ability to 'hide' behind an ambiguous and ambivalent tone, subverts any possible moralistic readings. Contentious subjects are offered, almost casually, leaving to the reader the difficult task of making judgements. To take an example, the novel describes the young in the following terms:

... the twelve-year-olds were like dogs in a pack. Their breath stank like service stations and their nails scratched. They were feral animals [93].

Juvenile delinquency is an issue which society no longer can avoid. However, since it is offered through Frieda and Sarkis' viewpoint, the narratorial voice remains apparently neutral. Again, as the subject of tax evasion is later mentioned, it is by Maria, whose passionate idealism makes her judgement somewhat suspect:

I'm always shocked to hear wealthy people complaining about tax ... I watch them eating with their Georg Jensen cutlery and I want to stand up and shout and make speeches about poverty and homelessness[248].

Her comments are undermined by the fact that she is, at that very moment, enjoying a meal with those whom she berates, and, quite possibly, herself using Jensen's cutlery: "The salmon on Maria's plate was subtle and flavoursome ..."[243]. Irony is a device which allows Carey to establish pluralism in his fiction. Quoting Daniel O'Hara's views on Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Alan Wilde remarks:

[irony allows] the power to entertain widely divergent possible interpretations--to provoke the reader into seeing that there is a radical uncertainty surrounding the processes by which meanings are determined in texts and interpreted by readers².

As in *Bliss*, the general mood in *The tax inspector*, too, is one of fear and apprehension. The point is illustrated, quite literally, by the tax audit of the Catchprices' affairs. On a metaphorical level, there is the "stick of AN 60 and the bag of detonators in a little lilac whats-oh"[56] which Granny Catchprice carries with her till nearly the end of the novel. The implication is that the Catchprices, Maria Takis and the other protagonists are living in times of danger, an invisible threat hovering, ominously, above their lives. Children, traditional symbols of innocence, now roam the streets, menacingly:

There were homeless kids wandering around with cans of beer full of petrol. They saw fiery worms and faces spewing blood. They did not know what they were doing[87].

The fact that *The tax inspector* is more openly engaged in a scathing comment on the wrongs of society might also be seen to affect the level of humour in the novel. Indeed, despite the overwhelming bleakness of its humour, *Bliss* appears more lighthearted, its satire less aggressive.

Postmodernist elements in *The tax inspector*

The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it³.

As a novel written in the latter part of the twentieth century, *The tax inspector* foregrounds its condition of artifice, engaging in the playful disclosures of the text as a construct. From a structural viewpoint, the novel reflects the sense of ambivalence and ambiguity which is central to the novelist's ability to offer the reader an illusory freedom to interact in the making of the text. Despite the fact that the novel remains unambiguously Postmodern in its self-conscious mode, it is also more clearly charged with notions of 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'evil'. The need to avoid being seen as didactic, at a time when the reader has become increasingly suspicious of the text's ability to represent the indeterminacy and relativity inherent in contemporary society, demands of the writer a degree of stylistic complexity capable of engaging the reader's attention. Given Postmodernism's ontological concerns, it is an apt mode to deal with present notions of uncertainty about, and the intangibility of, reality. By using the term 'ontological' in this context, I am referring to Postmodernism's focus on the depiction of plural universes. "Ontology", Thomas Pavel writes, "is a theoretical description of a universe"⁴. As McHale then points out, "it is a description of a universe, not of *the* universe"⁵.

Carey's approach to writing appears to combine a number of Postmodernist devices with a view to subvert the potentially didactic element of Realism present in the novels. The emphasis on a multiplicity of viewpoints is one such device. This approach had already been adopted by authors writing within Modernism, and, indeed, by late Realists, as F.J. Hemmings points out in *The age of realism*⁶. However, it has become inextricable from the Postmodernist narrative's reticence to deal with the telling of facts and events. Linda Hutcheon argues thus: "This [the postmodernist] novel disorients its readers on the level of its

narration(who speaks? is the text written? oral? transcribed?) ..."7.

Carey's careful handling of point of view in *The tax inspector* is demonstrated in the novel's introduction of the Catchprices:

In the morning she put three soft-boiled eggs outside Benny Catchprice's door and in the afternoon she fired him from the Spare Parts Department. That's who she was -- his father's sister. They were both the same -- big ones for kissing and cuddling, but you could not predict them. You could not rely on them for anything important. They had great soft lips and they had a family smell, like almost-rancid butter which came from deep in their skin, from the thick shafts in their wiry hair; they smelt of this from within them, but also of things they had touched or swallowed--motor oil, radiator hoses, Life Savers, different sorts of alcohol--beer, Benedictine, altar wine on Sundays[3]

Benny's perspective places the accent on the Catchprices' flaws and reveals his position as an outsider in the family. The use of a number of demonstrative pronouns in a relatively short passage again stresses this point:

He had the ducktail because *he* was a Rock-a-Billy throwback ... *He* had this rash because *he* hated Catchprice Motors ... *They* had a Waiting Room. *They* set it up ... *they* had a photograph of Cathy ... If *they* had paid as much attention to Catchprice Motors as *they* paid to [Big Mack] there would have been no crisis ever[my italics,3].

Such an unflattering portrait of the novel's main characters works to establish between Benny and the reader a degree of sympathy which is denied the other characters. It suggests a sense of collusion between the reader and Benny, a notion of 'them' and 'us'. Simultaneously, to the extent that it reveals his intimate knowledge of their behaviour and attitudes, Benny's position in the family is also that of an insider. The use of interior monologue reflects another way in which the narrative presents Benny as a sympathetic character:

He was shocked and humiliated, but she was doing the crying. She offered him a job in the front office -- serving petrol! Serving petrol![4-5].

The exclamation marks identify the passage as one seen through Benny's eyes, and denote his troubled state of

mind, at once angry and bemused. As the reader is offered an insight into Benny's character, s/he is subtly brought on board, invited to share his dislike for the Catchprizes:

The truth was: he wore the Walkman to block out the dumb things [Cathy] and Howie said. They were so loud and confident. They went on and on in some kind of croaking harmony--her bar-smoke voice and his bass humble[5].

The Postmodernist text's multifaceted nature is further revealed in the text's dealing with the theme of incest, or of incestuous relationships. The Catchprice's secret, alluded to early in the text[18], relates, literally, to sexual abuse suffered by Benny at the hands of his father. Mort Catchprice, however, had himself been abused as a child. Thus, when Benny threatens: "I could have you put in jail"[153], Mort replies: "My father did it to me. His father did it to him"[155]. Such narrative complexity is typical of Peter Carey's texts, as previously illustrated in Benny's characterization. There is also a sense in which Benny may be seen as Mort's *alter ego*. Whilst the latter is unable to free himself from the prison the past represents, Benny attempts an overnight transformation which will afford him a new life: "He knew he was on the very edge of his life and he balked, hesitating before the moment when he would change for ever"[20]. It is to that other existence that the characters aspire. Ultimately, it is a life of dreams and desires, a life "at new doorways with new possibilities"⁸. In *Bliss*, too, Harry Joy's son, David, stands "on the edge of his story"[203]. Although one goes to South America and becomes a popular hero, and the other believes himself an angel, David and Benny remain prisoners, and then victims of their dreams.

In *The tax inspector*, as in the previous novel, Carey points to problems whilst refraining from offering solutions. When the Catchprizes' dark past is finally revealed, it is through Mort imagining (re-living?) a conversation with his son Benny. Mort himself is discussing with Maria Takis the ambit of her tax audit:

Benny stood behind the glass with a strange-looking man in a light-coloured suit. He grinned and pointed his finger at his father.

You want me to show her my life?
O.K., I touched you.

Not touched.

O.K.,fucked,sucked.I made you stutter and wet your bed [157].

Rather than interfering to comment on Mort's own plight,the narrator remains neutral. The narrative simply contrasts Mort's words on his relationship with his son with those of Benny's. Although the insight into Mort's consciousness makes even more explicit his guilt,it also reveals that there is always another side to any 'truth':

Every time you turn on the television,someone is saying:child sexual abuse. But they don't see how Benny comes to me,crawling into my bed and rubbing my dick, threatening me with jail.Is this abuse?
I am the one trying to stop this stuff and he is crawling into bed and rubbing my dick and he will have a kid and do it to his kid,and he will be the monster and they will want to kill him. Today he is the victim,tomorrow he is the monster. They do not let you be the two at once[158].

By presenting the passage through Mort's point of view,the text emphasizes the attraction Mort holds for his son. Indeed,he is clearly aware of Benny's "look of a child just out of the bath"[152],and the use of the diminutive,'Benny', reinforces the point. Yet,by shaving himself of all body hair,"he had used a depilatory to remove any trace of body hair" [152],Benny himself reclaims the look of childhood innocence which first attracted his father. In this way,he may be seen to reject his status as a victim,appearing,on the contrary, just as willing as Mort. There is a disturbing level of ambiguity in the way in which the text deals with Benny's relationship with his father. One might suggest that it may be interpreted as an easy 'cop out',as it were. The narrative appears to anticipate the reader's revulsion and disgust. Implicitly,it seems to expect to be seen to share the reader's reaction. It is perhaps this failure to overtly declare a moral stance which makes some readers recoil in horror. The narrator is presuming,perhaps demanding,from the reader a degree of critical sophistication the latter may not always possess;more importantly,may not always want to exercise. Indeed,rather than simply emulating the fragmented condition of contemporary society,the novel,as a *genre*,may be expected to counter it by suggesting a sense of order. Although I would argue that *The tax inspector* does

eventually allow for such an interpretation, on the surface its emphasis appears to be on the role of art as diversion. Ironically, whilst in *Bliss* Harry and his son David are unable to "hug each other ... it was not what the family did. They were not touchers"[39], in *The tax inspector* it is human touch which is the cause of so much pain and anguish. Mort's comments: "You see those other fathers, too scared to even touch their kids. They're just terrified of natural feelings" [111], are sadly undermined by his actions. As the narrator previously disclosed: "When Benny was three years old, ... his mother ... stood at the door one Saturday afternoon and saw her husband sucking her younger son's penis" [105]. Once again, though, Carey "refuses absolutes"⁹. In spite of the fact that Mort's words are subverted by his actions, they retain some degree of truth. This degree of ambiguity, and ambivalence in the narratorial voice's stance, is also revealed in Mort's later remarks about Benny's future: "Today he is the victim, tomorrow he is the monster. They do not let you be the two at once"[158].

Writing on *Bliss*, Diana Giese has stated: "generating meaning after meaning, the opening scenes must be some of the most morally ambiguous in recent fiction"¹⁰. The very same comments might have been uttered about *The tax inspector's* ending. The novel reaches its climax with the death of Benny and the birth of Maria Takis' child. Maria is being tormented by Benny, although one wonders if Benny is not tormenting himself:

Maria felt already that she knew every part of her tormentor intimately: his thin wrists, his lumpy-knuckled fingers, his long, straight-sided, pearl-pink nails, his shiny hair with its iridescent, spiky, platinum points, his peculiar opal eyes, his red lips, real red, too red, like a boy-thief caught with plums[276].

As the reader is taken through Maria's suffering at Benny's hands, s/he is both repelled by the violence, the horrific nature of the scenes, and seduced, indeed, mesmerized, by the way the action has built up to such a *meaning* laden moment. The ambiguity of the narrator's tone denies both Benny and Maria the high moral ground. Just when the reader has come to identify with Maria's plight at Benny's sadistic hands,

the scene endowed with pathos by the affront to motherhood, the narrator intervenes. As Benny holds the baby, the narratorial voice comments:

She was shouting now, *but there had been so much shouting in his life. He knew how not to hear her.* Tears were streaming down Benny's face. He did not know where they were coming from. 'He's mine', he said. He hunched over the baby [my italics, 276].

The emphasis on Benny's physical fragility, on his boyhood, seems to make his actions less despicable, his behaviour less contemptible. Indeed, one of the novel's greatest achievements is perhaps the fact that Benny remains, at the end, a character whom the reader cannot dislike. Since the narrator refrains from taking sides, the reader is left little, or no indication, of the novel's ethical viewpoint in its closing chapter. The coarseness of the language used by both Benny and Maria, stresses the ugliness and despair of the scene whilst simultaneously undermining the melodramatic element:

She stood straight and tried to lick her lips. 'Get me something clean', she said.

'There's nothing clean', he said. 'This is where I live'. 'That'.

First he thought she meant him. She wanted him. She had her hand out towards his cock, his belly. He stepped back. She was pointing at his shirt. He could not believe it. He could not fucking believe it.

'Get fucked ...'

'You see what has happened? The jealous cunt blew up my career. He didn't want it, so he killed it for me' [272-3].

The paratactical style adds strength to the tragic portrait of Benny the text presents. When the reader had already identified the 'villain' and the 'saint', the narrator changes the cards. Carey reveals the Postmodernist sense of ambiguity in order to place any moral judgement 'outside the text'. Carey's own words, spoken nearly ten years before the publication of *The tax inspector*, seem here particularly pertinent. They reflect the ambiguity of tone adopted in the novels. In an interview with John Maddocks, Carey stated: "What I often do is try to present that nothing is ever absolutely right or wrong"¹¹.

The use of multiple viewpoints is not the only device Carey adopts in *The tax inspector* to destabilize the reader's position. The frequent references to time found in both novels may be read in a similar way. Although the device can be taken to emulate the Realist text's attempt to establish some notion of chronological order, its use borders on parody, alerting the reader to form as much as to content. It becomes thus intrusive and destabilizing:

At three-thirty At five-thirty At six-thirty
 Just after the seven o'clock news At seven-
 thirty At eight-fifteen At eight-twenty
 At eight-thirty-three At eight-thirty-five
 [18-19].

Further, each sentence comprises a new paragraph, and the gap between the time references declines, from two hours to one hour, then to thirty, fifteen and five minutes. Form thus underlines the tension building up within the text, culminating in Benny's metamorphosis:

He rose up through the cracked, oil-stained, concrete floor of the old lube bay and stood in the thick syrupy air, breathing through his mouth, blinking in the light, his stomach full of butterflies.
 He was transformed [19].

Carey's use of Postmodernist devices is not always so elaborate. Indeed, at the very basic level of typography, *The tax inspector* denotes the playful engagement between the reader and the text. Rather than offering the reader a 'normal' structure, with the pages themselves reflecting a sense of mimetic order, Carey's texts are a jumble of digits, presented individually or in groups, lower and upper case letters, dashes, parentheses, and so on. These devices denote the text's self-reflexive nature. As the reader turns a new page, s/he is faced with a number of signifiers which beg, almost literally, for attention. Their presence on the page subverts a linear reading. The following examples are found in two consecutive pages:

He put in an express order for a body shell of a
 92029932S Commodore Station Wagon but he typed 92029933S
 instead so they delivered a sedan body and an invoice
 for \$3,985,00 [6]

... there was a G.M. dealership tucked away between

A.S.P. Building Supplies and the Franklin District Ambulance Centre ... There was a sign ... which said CATCHPRICE MOTORS ... The Catchprices ... were in debt to the General Motors Acceptance Corporation for \$567,000 ... [6].

It is possible almost to visualize the author, engaged in an immensely enjoyable game, enticing, and entangling, the reader with his games of words and devices:

These digits jumped places, transposed themselves, leap-frogged. They were like mercury in [Benny's] fingers as he tried to keep them still: 6's rolled over, 2's and 5's leap-frogged and 4's turned into 7's. Benny's wrists were covered in numbers. Numbers stretched along his long fingers like tatoos, across his palms like knitting, but he still made errors" [5].

Meaning, in Carey, is as slippery as the mercury simile indicates. Thus Benny's errors with numbers may be seen to reflect the reader's mistakes with words: in spite of an abundance of words on the page, their meaning is never absolutely clear. The reader's attention is won over by the complexity of the narrative, and the novelist's apparent willingness to share the writing of the text with him or her. According to Trollope, cited in Booth: "It is the first necessity of the novelist's position that he make himself pleasant"¹². Carey certainly knows how to make himself pleasant.

Carey's adoption of contraries and oxymorons in his novels is yet another way of revealing the convoluted nature of today's society. Further, the devices allude to the polysemic power of words; in his fiction "Carey refuses absolutes"¹³. Such devices suggest the duality of any notion of truth: "humour *and* malice lay *twisted* in the black centre of the pupil" [my italics, 16], and again, "[Benny's] rat-tailed hair was now a *pure or poisonous* white [ibid, 19]. Indeed, Carey's turns of phrase often reflect the elusiveness and indirectness which characterize Postmodernism. They reveal the 'real' essence of reality: always changing, never tangible; to paraphrase Roman Ingarden, a shimmering opalescence. Thus the narrator remarks of Benny:

"when he smiled like this, his eyes looked scary--they danced, they dared you, they did not trust you. The eyes pushed you away and made you enemy" [16].

The reader can therefore identify with the characters by recognizing in their world his or her own reality. It is this talent to write about characters with such compassion which identifies Carey as an author whose novels are more than Postmodernist reflections of the chaotic condition of late twentieth-century. This ability to engage the reader in the suffering the characters endure denotes the presence of a higher consciousness in the works, a 'manipulator'.

Realist elements in *The tax inspector*

He ... would go to the desk and turn on the lamp and do some work, going over what he had written during the day, the scant drip, the ooze of speckled matter, the blood sneeze, the daily pale secretion, the bits of human tissue sticking to the page¹⁴.

In spite of all its Postmodernist playfulness, however, I would argue that *The tax inspector* is more overtly Realistic than in *Bliss*. The Postmodernist elements of the narrative fail, ultimately, to suggest that Carey is himself indifferent to Benny's cruel treatment of Maria Takis, or that the novelist is only interested in society's woes from a voyeuristic perspective. Carey's skillful exploitation of the Postmodernist narrative devices to suggest to the reader that the text is not 'real' is weakened by the novel's emphasis on its own moralistic view of life. It is perhaps a case of the 'gentleman protesting too much', only the seducer is here playing both roles. Whilst the reader is hypnotized by the mastery of the tricks the novelist performs, s/he cannot ignore the sense in which Carey is ultimately author of the novel. As Belsey points out, such devices fail to suggest that a text constructs itself; to this extent, Carey remains "present as a shadowy authority and as a source of the fiction"¹⁵. Thus, when Maria, watching a video on birth methods, remarks: "After thirty minutes of film time--thirty hours of real time--the baby's head emerged"[73], she may be seen to alert the reader both to the novel's contrived nature and to that of the 'contriver'. She knows that: "...this videotape had been *selected* to show the birth

class. There could be nothing 'unexpected' in this respect"[74].

The novel takes place over a period of four days, Monday to Thursday, and despite occasional instances of analepsis, *The tax inspector* is fundamentally Realist in its causal and chronological approach. Admittedly, whilst accepting the Realist tag, Carey himself recently offered the following disclaimer: "Though [the novel] is relatively realistic, I do have a major character who transforms himself into an angel"¹⁸. Yet Benny never really attains the status of an angel; though he flicks through "A Dictionary of Angels" [104], and gradually opts for the status of "a Fallen Angel ... Angel of Plagues, Angel of Ice, Angel of Lightning" [104] ... "Angel of Lust ... Angel of Fire"[262]. Whereas the Postmodernist text might have been able to *make* the reader believe otherwise, angels belong to an 'unreal reality' which defies tangible representation. The fact that Benny finally fails to metamorphose into an angel is itself indicative of the text's Realistic basis. Unlike *Bliss*, where Harry 'literally' rises from the dead, *The tax inspector* cannot transcend category boundaries in the manner that a Postmodernist text is able to.

Carey's adoption of multiple shifts in point of view in *The tax inspector* has one other function other than maintaining the narratorial voice's distance. Indeed, it allows the text to subvert traditional concepts of 'Australianness' based on masculinity and Anglo-Celtic ancestry. By occasionally offering situations viewed through the eyes of these 'new Australians', the margins are allowed to address the centre, to paraphrase Salman Rushdie. The new comers, in this instance migrant women working at a Sydney textile factory, are given a role as co-(re)writers of the text. Seen from their angle, a traditional Australian icon of femaleness -- that of a blond, fair skinned, and, presumably, blue-eyed woman -- is wryly satirized:

Sometimes the man's mother would come out. She was nearly always dressed like a film star with tight belts and high heels. She had bright yellow blond hair and pink arms and red lips and dark glasses[35].

Ironically, by comparing "the man's mother" with a film star, the migrant women, perhaps unconsciously, highlight the foreign influences on which Australian society models its identity. Indeed, as Richard White has remarked:

When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve¹⁷.

Yet, whilst shifting the focus of an Australian identity away from a purely Anglo-Celtic one, the novel refrains from endorsing a notion of ethnic plurality as the answer. This, as previously suggested, is implicit in *The tax inspector's* treatment of both 'new' and 'old' Australians in the same light. It is the influence the chaotic condition of contemporary society has on humans in general, rather than on particular social groups, which both *Bliss* and *The tax inspector* reveal.

However, there is also a sense in which Carey's novels impress by their strongly delineated Australian setting. In contrast with a characteristically Postmodernist propensity to place works in locations which lack definite physical boundaries, Carey deals, in this text especially, with an actual location. I would propose that this may be seen as articulating the novel's Realist stance, dealing with 'real' issues in 'real' places. The condition of artifice of the text is thus subverted. Yet, there is also an undeniable truth in the fact that the novels could have taken place mostly anywhere in the so-called developed world. When Maria declares her hatred for Sydney, Gia replies: "Don't hate Sydney, Maria ... All cities are like this. Where could you go that would be different?" [186]. High levels of industrialization have contributed to a commodification of such humanistic values as love, friendship, and respect which is not uniquely Australian. Moreover, modern society is now comprised of a number of social classes whose identities are established solely on the basis of a material ability to buy, to consume.

Thus I would argue that, in spite of all its stylistic

complexity, Carey's fiction relies on a rather simplistic premise which presupposes a return to a traditional, more 'morally' charged myth of Australian national and cultural identity. According to Malinowsky:

Myth acts as a charter for the present-day order; it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief, the function of which is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events¹⁸.

While *The tax inspector* does not appear as 'nationalistic' as *Bliss*, it nevertheless seems to suggest a rejection of foreign values as a prerequisite to happiness and self-discovery. Indeed, Maria's new found happiness is only possible after her dismissal of such 'New Age' methods of self-enlightenment as her *Affirmations* and *Actualizations* tapes. Further, the less than flattering portrait of the wealthy residents of Double Bay seems to emphasize this view. They dine on imported dinner sets, drive foreign made vehicles, and their aesthetic tastes are also alien to Australia. The implication is that they, too, are 'un-Australian'. Paradoxically, whilst arguing for a return to, or at least respect for the land, the novel seems to imply that these are only within reach of those with financial means. Unlike *Bliss*, where communion with the land meant shedding previous material wealth, in *The tax inspector* money alone can afford it. As Maria and Jack set out to live 'happily ever after', they will be able to do so in the comfort of Jack's mansion by the sea. As they find love, and, presumably happiness, Jack and Maria reject the worlds in which they mix, professionally and socially. Moreover, in a move that recalls the concluding chapter of *Bliss*, they forgo the city life, the source of all 'evils', in exchange for a life in true communion with the land:

...she could not fear a man who lived in a house whose main living room had an arched roof which opened like an eyelid to the night sky, whose side walls were of pleated canvas, a house whose strong, rammed-earth back wall promised the solidity of a castle but whose substance then evaporated before her eyes as Jack, clambering first on the roof, and then round the walls, opened the house to

the cabbage tree palms which filled the garden and in whose hearts one could hear rustling possums[203-4].

Indeed a truly edenic ending, were it not for the gruesome events awaiting Maria. The novels' ending appears to demonstrate Schaffer's view that the bush myth "has endured as the representation of an authentic Australian identity"¹⁹.

In his work *The New English Literature*, Bruce King states:

Nationalism is an urban movement which identifies with the rural areas as a source of authenticity, finding in the 'folk' the attitudes, beliefs, customs and language to create a sense of national identity among people who have other loyalties. Nationalism aims at ... rejection of upper classes, intellectuals and others likely to be influenced by foreign ideas²⁰.

As *The tax inspector* alerts the reader to the 'foreign' element in Australian society, it looks, almost nostalgically, into the past:

Franklin was no longer a town ... The population was 160,000 and they bulldozed the old Shire Hall to make municipal offices six storeys high ... There was drug addiction and unemployment ... [6].

Moreover, the novel highlights the 'Other' not in terms of the invisible, but precisely as that which is most visible, acting thus as a constant reminder of foreign dependency. In the Realist mode, it appears to suggest that the characters will eventually 'do the right thing', choose the correct way, having been made to experience life in its different forms. As Patricia Waugh explains:

Realism presents history as linear chronology, presents characters in terms of liberal humanism [which] allows for the possibility of free will and responsible moral choice²¹.

In *Bliss* Harry Joy finds peace and equanimity in the world of Bog Onion Road; Maria Takis, in *The tax inspector*, is rewarded both with a baby and a man with a "bright, shining smile"[193]. The suggestion that Maria and Jack will stay together in the 'future', is emphasized by her attempts to control her feelings towards him:

It was not the last time Maria would judge herself to be too tense, too critical with Jack Catchprice, to feel herself too full of prejudices and preconceptions that would not let her accept what was pleasant in him[194].

And again, later, as she feels "one of those brief periods of estrangement that marked her feelings for Jack Catchprice" [202], there seems to be a direct allusion to the strong relationship they will, given time, develop. The romantic element thus reveals an ordered ending, a sense of closure which ultimately stifles the Postmodernist appeal to a polysemic ending suggested by the diversity of genres found in the closing chapter of *The tax inspector*. Though Jack Catchprice is himself perceived by some characters as corrupt and somewhat less than morally pure, the narratorial voice refrains from endorsing this view. Rather, it appears to suggest that these flaws are human. Therefore change and redemption will follow as a result of Jack's association with the woman "with a clear sense of the moral imperatives"[170].

It is this simplistic suggestion of moral growth based on lived experience which may be seen as didactic. Those characters who are unable to reform and fit within this concept are inevitably eliminated. Benny, dreaming of 'making it in the big city', and Bettina, Cathy and Howie, pining for a relocation to New York, illustrate this view. Unable to learn from their experiences, they remain trapped in the world of their dreams and illusions. Significantly, although Maria and Benny share in their chosen method for self-improvement, they finally opt for different paths. Maria decides that the "Self-Actualization" program "did not work"[253]. In contrast, Benny holds on to his till the very end: "I am my word' ... You've got to understand that --I committed"[262]. However 'committed', Benny does not survive. In Carey, the characters' moral failures are used as a device which subverts the Postmodernist notion of characters as constructs. They struggle to attain "moral rectitude"[170]: "Realism tends to offer as the obvious basis of its intelligibility that character, unified and coherent, is the source of action"²².

Maria's status as a Realist character is reinforced by

the fact that she is never wholly good or wholly moral. Moving "around among various, even conflicting sorts of behaviour", to borrow, once more, Leo Bersani's words on the Crawfords in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*²³, her humanity is re-asserted. Thus, when she addresses Jack,

I see all these skunks with car phones and champagne and I see all this homelessness and poverty. Do you know that one child in three grows up in poverty? You know how much tax is evaded each year?[216],

her preacherly manner is seriously undermined by her own fetish for French champagne. And as Jack Catchprice points out, he, too, has a car phone[216]. Maria's facile idealism fails to impress whilst simultaneously emphasizing Carey's view that "the good people aren't always right and the right people aren't always good"²⁴. Jack, though, is attracted to Maria by her

clear and simple sense of right and wrong ... such a clear sense of the moral imperatives that [she] would find [herself] in that grey land where 'almost' right fades into the rat-flesh-coloured zone of 'nearly wrong'[170].

Aware of his own inability to live a wholly moral existence, and of what are "achievable goal[s]"[171] in his life, Jack knows that perfection is not human. As he remarks, there are people

in whom he had always been disappointed and then relieved, to discover small personal flaws, lacks, unhappinesses that proved to him that their moral rectitude had not been purchased without a certain human price--this one is lonely, that one impractical, this one poor, that one incapable of a sex life[170].

Carey's fiction is 'about' the destruction of the planet by humans and the dehumanization of the self by society. It is also 'about' telling a good story, yet a story which is more than a simple chaining together of words and devices to entertain the reader as Postmodernist narrative may appear to do. Peter Carey has stated that:

the writer has a responsibility to tell the truth, not to shy away from the world as it is; and at the same time to celebrate the potential of the human spirit²⁵.

As a writer of fiction, however, Carey is prevented from stating his position so openly in his novels. Moreover, the text itself may often 'fall short' of its author's avowed intentions. Indeed, *The tax inspector* offers the reader a number of contradictory positions and statements which work to subvert a literal reading. Jack Catchprice's redemption is facilitated by his love for Maria Takis. Yet, when Jack declares:

'If no one can change ... what point is there in anything? If we cannot affect each other's lives, we might as well call it a day. The world is just going to slide further and further into the sewer[251-2],

his stance is undermined by the narrative's earlier revelations. As a guest at the Double Bay dinner party tells Maria: "we took dirty money from the Medicis, so I guess we'll take it from Jack Catchprice too"[243].

In *The tax inspector's* closing scenes, Carey forces the reader to both recoil in horror, and to share in the sadistic yet pathetically touching actions of Benny. No easy, detached, stance is permitted here. The Postmodernist intrusion of Gothic/crime novel's elements, its ontological concerns, is directly juxtaposed against a realist epistemology which supports notions of right and wrong. Traditional 'low' art and 'high' art combine in Carey's complex way of making meaning. Metaphorically, this is reflected as Jack Catchprice commutes between Sydney and Franklin, in an

... increasingly second-rate landscape--service stations, car yards, drive-in bottleshops..., surrounded by the smell of genuine leather, with the Mozart clarinet concerto playing loudly[167].

Alex Comfort revealed himself particularly prescient of the directions in which literature would go when he wrote, in 1948, that unlike the nineteenth-century novel modern writing

can make no assumptions about [the reader's] beliefs or activities comparable to those which the nineteenth-century novel, addressed to a section of society, could make ...²⁸.

Unlike nineteenth-century readers, to whom Realism appealed

especially through its ability to 'capture' reality, the Twentieth-century reader is overtly cynical of reality itself, let alone of the text's capacity to capture it. Carey thus appropriates the ontology of the postmodern text, "... (posing questions about the nature and existence of reality)"²⁷, and the epistemology of realism (asking why we act as we do, and how can we behave differently). John Mellors notes:

Carey has a gift for 'beautiful lies' even when he is dealing with the most serious issues, for instance, wondering how mankind can be prevented from destroying the planet, or whether an individual can 'be transformed through love'. He uses his lies to make questions like that the more urgent and memorable²⁸.

Granny Catchprice's decision to take her destiny into her own hands, reflects, on a literal basis, an attempt to put an end to all her family's woes. As she lay dying, the Catchprices "clung to her, like piglets to an old sow" [271]. Metaphorically, the passage can also be read as suggesting a sense of traditional order, centered around the family matriarch. Moreover, it may be read as an act of liberation. The violence of its nature appears to relate to that which awaits the birth of Maria's baby. The "smothered baby" Frieda alludes to earlier in the novel is now free to be born. Within the novel's endorsement of a return to Nature, the birth of Maria's child stands as a metaphor for a reawakening of the "good soil [which lay] like a smothered baby" [164]. As the language used to describe the land rising and that adopted to describe Maria's pregnancy suggest, Maria stands as a surrogate mother for a new future:

The petrol tanks Grandpa Catchprice had installed were now rising like whales and the concrete on the forecourt cracked a little more each summer [22]

... she felt so full of fluid, such a net of bulging veins and distended skin ... [23].

Indeed, Maria herself is later referred to as "a whale" [51], as Jesse, the young apprentice at Catchprice Motors, taunts Benny: "You want to fuck a whale?" [51]. Maria's child may therefore be seen as the harbinger of a new, better, more

just, future. When Jack tells her: "It'll be O.K." [251], referring to the birth of the child, Maria replies: "Don't you dare say it's O.K. *Christ*" [251]. It is difficult to discern whether the change of typeface reveals that "it's not O.K." because Maria does not want the baby, or if the "it's not O.K." symbolizes the uniqueness of this birth. 'Christ' is perhaps then being used simultaneously as expletive and a means to signal to significance of the birth of a 'saviour' to the world. The passage also highlights the religious significance of names in the novel. Maria, the tax inspector, is "eight months pregnant" [23], as the text reveals, and although her pregnancy was not the result of divine intervention, the birth of her child is invested with religious significance. The reverential tone of the novel's closing lines: "She took her little boy, warm, squirming, still slippery as a fish, and unfastened her bra, and tucked him against her skin" [279] attempts to convey the suggestion that her child is to be a saviour to a chaotic and decaying world.

There is a level of irony in the use of the name 'Benjamin' in *The tax inspector*. "The name of the patriarch Jacob's youngest son"²⁸, it has come to be used to identify the "youngest, (and, consequently, favourite) son of a family"³⁰. Although the youngest in the Catchprice family and certainly Mort's favourite, Benny is also an outsider. He himself accuses his brother and Grandmother of failing to protect him from his father when he needed them. Moreover, Mort is no patriarch in the traditional sense. Not only does he cross conventional gender categories: "I soon found out how to cook and how to sew" [109], his relationship with his youngest son, too, transcends traditional social boundaries. Benny's dreams of a transformation which will cleanse and purify him: "'When my past is dead, I am as free as air' ... 'My past is gone and I am new -- born again -- my future will be wrapped with gold'" [117], reinforce this view. He is clearly aware of the subversion of the father figure by Mort: "Death was everywhere ..." [118]. The allusions to death which the name Mort embodies are emphasized by Mort's actions. They suggest a strong sense of decay which point to the novel's focus around life and death. Perhaps, in other

words, to the putrid in life.

A.J. Hassall asserts that the novels' satiric mode exposes "absurdities and corruptions so familiar that they customarily pass unnoticed and unchallenged"³¹. This point is revealed by Mrs. Catchprice comments:

When my husband was alive, we always worked with the law. We always supported the police. We always gave them presents at Christmas ... He'd take them down to the police. They thought he was the ant's pants[40].

This level of irony suggests the novel's concern with unmasking and re-writing false myths. It works because the reader *knows* that giving "presents at Christmas ... to the police"[40] can be perceived as bribery. Maria Takis' reply, however, hammers home the message: "... you weren't *bribing* the police?"[40]. At this point, the effectiveness of the satire is lost in the aggressive manner in which the 'lesson' is delivered. Maria's words deny the reader the capability to apprehend the irony implicit in the passage.

Thus Maria's remark points to an original source of knowledge beyond the narrator, an all seeing eye for whom she is a spokesperson. Indeed, as Frieda Catchprice's doctor addresses Maria Takis, the point of view appears to belong to no one in the novel. It seems almost 'suspended':

'The situation ...', said Dr. Taylor, with the blunt, blond certainties that come from being born 'a real Aussie' in Dee Why, New South Wales. 'The situation ...' He wrote two more words on the form and underlined a third[28].

It is unlikely that Maria could remain so detached as to be able to analyze the situation with such a sophisticated, degree of irony. Her reply to Granny Catchprice's comments: "... you weren't *bribing* the police?"[40], reveal that she is as much a part of the scene as Dr. Taylor and the others. In other words, the authorial voice betrays its presence as a manipulator of the text, characters and events.

The world Peter Carey portrays in his novels is "like the aftermath of a war: everything shattered but people going about their lives with a certain optimism"³². Carey appears insistent on portraying a cruel and unrepentant view of

Australia. The space and time in which we exist are captured remarkably in his fiction. The immediacy of the present, the despair and hopelessness of contemporary society, are constantly reflected both in the randomness of the texts and in the urgency of the issues they probe. Simultaneously, the novels may be seen to be, ultimately, affirmations of faith in the human ability to change, to amend its behaviour and eventually transcend the chaos of the present.

Part 4-Conclusion

David Lodge has commented that critics and academics are often to blame for the inclusion of a particular author within a specific narrative category. Referring to Fay Weldon, Lodge remarks that, despite the fact that her narrative technique is essentially Postmodernist,

her work rarely figures in any discussion of post-modernism in literary quarterlies. Fay Weldon has been pigeon-holed as a feminist novelist, and the criticism of her work is almost exclusively thematic¹.

In my view, Lodge might easily have been talking about Peter Carey's work. Indeed, Carey, too, has been pigeon-holed, only in his case as a Postmodernist author. Most criticism of his work focuses on the innovative approaches to narrative style, the adoption of devices to dazzle and unsettle the reader. Critics strive to 'dissect' the novels in an endeavour to find the clearest evidence of Carey's attempts to subvert both the reader's and the text's status. To take an example, Teresa Dovey argues in "An infinite onion" that *Bliss* is "concerned with the nature of narrative, and with the forms and functions of fiction"². Dovey then proceeds to unravel the multi-layered structure of the novel, the infinite onion the title of her essay alludes to. M.D. Fletcher, in a more recent study of Carey's fiction, attempts to "indicate very briefly the relevance of metafictional techniques to post-colonial writing"³. Focusing on the role of language as a means of colonial dominance, Fletcher discusses the importance of self-reflexivity as a means of unmasking the "nature of language and literature" and "the question of validity of particular histories as well as other narratives ..."⁴. The role the self-conscious aspect of Postmodernism plays in post-colonial literature is further explored by A.J. Hassall. In his essay, Hassall again suggests that Carey's accent, in *Bliss*, on the text as a narrative construct, underpins the author's endeavour to substitute "an Australian dreaming for a colonial dreaming -- whether English, American or Japanese"⁵. Self-reflexivity, then, is identified with a

subversion of the traditional role of a language which is itself seen as a foreign cultural paradigm. In "Lies for sale", Helen Daniel stresses both the satirical nature of *Bliss* and its accent on "the notion of a heritage received, transmitted without understanding and thereby changed"⁶. However, Daniel, too, believes that *Bliss* is "about story-telling, with the storyteller quietly reminding us of the artifice and strategies of his own telling"⁷.

Insofar as this paper has engaged in a study of the tensions between Postmodernist and Realist narrative modes in Peter Carey's *Bliss* and *The tax inspector*, it has perpetuated a formal mode of analysis. It is argued that the juxtaposition of a Postmodernist mode primarily concerned with form and style, against a Realist emphasis on content, is the basis of this friction. In other words, the novels shift between 'ontological flickering' and 'epistemological focusing' on notions of reality. Peter Carey's texts seduce the reader through an exploration of form, an interweaving of different genres and styles which reflect the contemporary sense of chaos, randomness and disjunction. According to Patricia Waugh's definition of the genre, Carey's works appear therefore quintessentially Postmodernist:

the reader is always presented with embedded strata which contradict the presupposition of the strata immediately above and below. The fictional content of the story is continually reflected by its formal existence as text, and the coexistence of that text within a world viewed in terms of textuality⁸.

However, in its conclusions, the thesis has differed from most previous critical analysis of Peter Carey's fiction. Indeed, it is argued that the thematic emphasis placed on issues such as environmental pollution, human alienation, love, life and death, reflects the endorsement by a Realist narrative mode of a belief in the transformative capacity of fiction. By alluding to the serious nature of these subjects and the way the self is affected by them, the texts stake a political stance of social commitment. The satirical mode which Carey adopts thus permits an extrapolation from the 'reality' of the texts to the reality of the outside world. The self is shown in a constant struggle against the world,

learning from his or her experiences, growing, spiritually and humanly.

I have then argued that, in spite of the convoluted nature of the narrative, *Bliss* and *The tax inspector* are essentially Realist works. A Realist narrative is most evident in the novels' approach to the self and in the manner of their resolutions. Whilst the reader is dazzled by the complex and engaging stylistic devices, the thematic concerns ultimately impose themselves. The suggestion of an uncontrolled energy propelling the texts is finally brought under control, as it were, by the positive manner in which they are resolved. I have argued that, on a metaphorical level, this destructive element may be seen to reflect the condition of contemporary society. Carey's adoption of a Realist closure thus appears to privilege the re-instatement of a sense of order which undermines the Postmodernist narrative's polysemic ending. To this extent, *Bliss* and *The tax inspector* depict the triumph of hope and possibility in the future over the despair, the hopelessness, the bleakness of the present.

In Carey, a Realist narrative seems to offer the means to confront, complement, and, lastly, to supplant a Postmodernist emphasis on the text as purely a language construct. As Susan Midalia has argued of Kate Granville's *Dreamhouse*:

What emerges is the ultimate privileging of a realist aesthetics and the more traditional, albeit qualified, humanist concept of the self as a more or less autonomous, stable and coherent entity, capable of choice and change⁹.

This thesis has argued that Peter Carey's fiction, too, privileges a Realist narrative's view of the self as "capable of choice and change". Further, it suggests that this is intrinsic to the novelist's ability to engage in a political debate on contemporary notions of 'Australianness'. The paper has thus linked literature and national identity, especially the ways in which a body of literature may be seen to reveal a unique quality about Australian society. In my view, Carey's novels reveal an awareness of the role the novelist can play in re-defining his or her society. Insofar as a Postmodernist aesthetics subverts the traditional ideology of a Realist narrative, it

is essential in a debate which can only ever be in constant motion. A Postmodernist narrative emphasis on the spurious reality of the text, though, may become a hindrance to, rather than a means of, subversion. It functions, in Edwin Thumboo's terms, as

the lie that pretends to a liberation from the tyrannies of the past only to allow those, tyrannies, of social and economic exploitation, by denying that we have the means to confront them¹⁰.

In Peter Carey's fiction, contemporary notions of instability and disorder are finally displaced by means of an escape into a world which is still relatively unspoilt and the guardian of traditional moral values and mythic notions of 'Australianness'.

Finally, the thesis has contended that *Bliss* and *The tax inspector* articulate for the reader Carey's "whole vision of society", in Brian Kiernan's words¹¹; a vision which appears, increasingly, to reflect deeply held views on social and political commitment. This stance is particularly evident in the notions of Australian national and cultural identities which the novels enunciate, signifying a re-definition of the term 'Australianness'. Peter Carey's position may be said to reveal the active role the novelist can and must play in society.

Notes

Introduction

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