

Writing as Truth in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*.

Ned Kelly, the narrator in Peter Carey's novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*, seeks to explain his criminal activities and combat perceived inequity in the colony of Victoria by couching his autobiography in terms of a narrative of class oppression. Kelly, who directly equates the act of writing with the telling of truth, attempts to harness its subversive power. However, the author has created a rounded character whose bias embodies the speciousness of his claim to historical truth, and whose repeated admissions of his family's mendaciousness undermine the very narrative of victimhood that he employs to argue his case. In so doing, Carey demonstrates that the writing of history is a highly subjective endeavour, and by extension that histories themselves are often equivocal.

In Parcel One the narrator describes how his Irish Catholic kin are oppressed, contrasting their poverty and suffering with the affluence and power of the English, the police and successful squatters in colonial Victoria. To illustrate his relative powerlessness, Kelly employs water imagery, likening his family's victimhood to being at the mercy of the elements. Thus, in describing his home he writes that "the roof were leaking above the camp oven each drop hissing as it hit", and of his arrival later that day with his mother at the police camp, that they arrived "drenched to the bone and doubtless stank of poverty a strong odour about us like wet dogs" (8). The Kellys are presented as pitiable because they lack the wherewithal to fend off the onslaught of importunate weather. Kelly uses the wet dog simile precisely to demonstrate his lack of social standing and corresponding powerlessness. The police, by contrast, basking in the "lovely warmth of the fire"(8), remain dry and by extension secure in their authority. Similarly, being Irish Catholic is cast as an impediment, as if the social conditions are also inclement. In this vein, Kelly reports the local school teacher's perception that "all micks was a notch beneath the cattle" (32). In his study of the novel, O'Reilly, citing Souter, notes the basis for the narrator's complaint in the historical record. Many people across the colonies experienced persecution at the hands of the police, including a very large number in Ned Kelly's family (490). The primary proposition of the first parcel then, is that the Kellys are victims of prejudicial behaviour. This proposition is supported by historical fact, which has the effect of lending the narrative an air of veracity, despite its highly subjective nature.

Narratives of victimhood are undermined when Carey has Kelly write with bias. Upon entering a policeman's office with his mother, the narrator insinuates that the officer is sanctimonious in his bearing: "Approach said he as if he were an altar" (8). By implying aloofness, Kelly attempts to draw a distinction between those with power and those without. The attempt backfires however, because it is Kelly's own prejudice that marks this passage. Given that the only word imputed to the officer himself is "approach", the emphasis is on the narrator's opinion. As Kelly and his mother have come to give nothing less than a cake to an incarcerated relative, the officer wishes to inspect it. Kelly goes on to recall the imperious tone of the man: "No cake shall go to the prisoner said the trap I could smell his foreign spicy smell he had a handlebar moustache and his scalp were shining through his hair. Said he no cake shall go to the prisoner..." (8). Kelly cannot help but interject upon his own narration with his observation on the apparent foreignness of this figure of colonial

power. Passing judgment takes priority over narrating the events, as for him, truth resides in his own assessment of appearances. Such a lack of objectivity thwarts the narrator's attempts at vindication throughout the novel.

At the same time as manipulating narratives of oppression and victimhood in *Parcel One*, albeit with mixed results, the narrator attempts to equate writing with truth. Having been "raised on lies and silences"(7) is, for Kelly, a motivation to write. He construes this act of writing as revelation when he states that his "history...will contain no single lie may I burn in hell if I speak false"(7). Returning to the motif of wetness, Kelly writes on the assumption that the very fact of being wet as opposed to warm and dry attests to the truth content of his writing. Anything the narrator writes in order to be heard must be true, as it is the voice of someone standing (literally) outside, separated from the warm glow of power. Only a man of influence, warm, dry and already in possession of a voice, could have the opportunity to use that voice manipulatively. A circular logic operates within the narrative, whereby opinion becomes fact simply for having been written down. This subjectivity of truth within the novel has been noted by many critics. Caroline Bliss puts it another way when she states that "narrative can create reality" (296). Kelly's naive belief in the power of the written word underlies his narration. From his perspective it is truth because it has the power to convince, which is to create reality. Writing subjectively, the narrator sees his output as standing in opposition to lies and silences. Yet the lies and silences cited are often those of his own family, not the enemy elite. Thus his father "were a man of secrets and what he said and done was different things"(10). In an attempt to set the record straight, or at least tell his side of the story, Kelly both consciously and unconsciously admits to the fallibility of himself and his family, irrespective of the impact such an admission has on his credibility. Consequently the dubiousness of the claim to truth is highlighted from within his own narrative, over which he has only partial control.

The positing of a hierarchy, the deployment of narratives of victimhood and oppression, and the equating of writing with truth are all intended by the narrator to make his account acceptable as historical fact. Yet as already demonstrated, the writing is marked by bias and inconsistency. Kelly analyses events according to a privilege/poverty duality, whereby events are pressed into the service of the narrator's intention, either exemplifying his family's plight or his antagonist's discrimination. However, the manifest bias provides for alternative interpretations of the narrative beyond the narrator's intentions. Thus, when the policeman O'Neill recounts Kelly's father's criminal past, Kelly comments that O'Neill was "much affected by his own story" (13). The irony appears unintended, however, as Kelly believes his own account is objective. Both the narrator's bias and lack of objectivity act as tacit acknowledgments of the intentionality of writing: one may be affected by one's own story. Neither O'Neill, Kelly nor indeed any author can maintain pure objectivity when recounting events. As such, the narrator's equation of writing with truth is undermined by the novelist, affording insight on the equivocality of written history. In his essay on the novel, Xavier Pons argues that Peter Carey has shown how fiction and history are intertwined. He quotes Carey as having said that, for him, writing fiction is "the invention or discovery of my own country" (72), whereby Carey conflates his own historical research with the creative writing process. Invention and discovery are figured as two sides of the same coin. Similarly, in his study of Carey's manipulation of the means of historicisation, Ashcroft states that

“history is a method rather than a truth -- words create the history” (207). This is akin to saying that history comes into being in the act of writing it down. The gap between what occurred and what is written is filled by the writer’s imagination. The interpretative act of writing over the gap is intended to provide insight. It could be said, then, that Carey’s blending of fact and fiction is designed to enable another perspective on Australian history, or the discovery in it of something that historical method alone, with its claim to objectivity, cannot acknowledge.

In *True History of The Kelly Gang*, Peter Carey has created a narrator who, motivated by a sense of injustice, attempts to address a power imbalance in the colony of Victoria. Kelly’s equation of writing with truth underlies his naive belief in the ability of his history to act as a corrective. Yet in writing candidly, he exposes his own prejudice as well as the misdeeds of himself and his kin. In this very layering of ‘truths’, those consciously constructed by the narrator and those which the narrator inadvertently conveys, the author implies the equivocality of history itself. His novel is able to go beyond the semblance of factuality in a bid to find meaning. It is but one of several ways in which Carey builds an alternative history, allowing us to see both the notion of historicity and the historical record through other eyes.

1487 words

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Stylistic devices in *True History of the Kelly Gang*

In his novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Peter Carey imbues the narrator with charismatic charm by tailoring the writing style to specify his social, historical and geographic location. In so doing, the author fosters goodwill for the larrikin protagonist amongst a largely Australian implied readership.

Carey has the autodiegetic narrator, Ned Kelly, depict himself as part of a poor Irish minority struggling with discrimination in an anglocentric Australian society. In the following two excerpts, the narrator signals his Irish origins and level of education through the non-standard use of “was” and “were”.

I said no one would employ me to do so much as bury a dunny
can... ..then [he] offered the job of constructing a split rail fence for a
horse paddock it were 5/- a day which were v. good money.

Going on the traps' payroll made me fair game but I were already
reviled as a turncoat I could not see my reputation disimproving but I
were wrong. (p.182)

We thought you doomed and rooned the minute you walked out past the
chook house and Wild delivered that great sidearm to your head, you
was on the floor before you even stepped up up to the scratch. It were a
proddy pub so no one give an eff what happened to a mick they planned
to drink your blood. (p.214)

Instances of switching the conjugations “was” and “were” occur regularly throughout the novel suggesting an established pattern of speech familiar to the narrator. This in turn reflects the limited educational opportunities in nineteenth century rural Australia for the Irish working class. The relation between social class and education is also established through the minimal punctuation scheme. The elision of the last two sentences in each of the paragraphs above is indicative of a style throughout, in which the pace of reading is quickened, approximating casual speech. The effect is of an earnest appeal from a semi-literate man. This forthrightness, combined with a pleasing rhythm created by the grammatical and punctuational schemes, heightens the narrator's charismatic appeal.

The excerpts above contain several instances of vocabulary particular to the mid-nineteenth century setting of the novel. Felling, splitting and assembling timber for a “split-rail fence” was arduous and time-consuming work that quasi-aristocratic free-settlers would previously have had assigned convicts do, and thus in the context of the mid nineteenth century may be associated with the lot of the socially disadvantaged. The derogatory term “traps”, meaning police, was common in Victoria at the time and reveals the narrator's antagonism with the law. “Rooned”, if understood as the narrator's own meld of ruin and rune, would suggest the fate of the Irish in Australia: their doom tied to their Celtic origins. However, the author is also making a reference to the 1921 Australian poem “Said Hanrahan”, in which an Irishman famously exclaims, “we'll all be rooned”, which is a transcription of ‘ruined’ pronounced with an Irish accent. By using this word, Carey puts a well-known twentieth century coinage in the mouth of a mid-nineteenth century character for the sake of affirming the Kelly legend's place at the heart of Australian cultural history. “Proddy” and “mick” were terms used by Irish Catholics to describe protestants and themselves respectively. “Mick” also designated the reverse side of a coin. Hence, the contention between the English and the Irish is symbolised by the two sides of a coin, the front face of which almost always depicted the British monarch. Thus

instances of language may inform us of the narrator's historical period, depict his social status, and importantly, signal his connection to the implied readership's cultural knowledge.

The geographic location of the narrator can be determined through his use of Australian colloquialisms. "Dunny", meaning toilet, has the -y (or -ie) ending characterising much Australian slang. The use of the word "paddock" in Australia to describe a field of any sort necessitates specificity in defining it as one for horses. The written abbreviation "v." is also used ironically in Australian speech, the humour lying in its failure to improve efficiency. Finally, "chook house" is an Australian term for chicken coop. By employing vernacular speech that the majority of Australian readers find familiar, the author locates the narrator and facilitates an empathic reception of his narrative.

The author's use of an Australian idiom throughout the novel establishes the narrator's social, historical and geographical location. Carey specifies the narrator's relationship with the anglocentric establishment, tailoring the style of language to have the charismatic appeal of the larrikin: a dissenter whose disruptive activities are routinely forgiven by those parts of the Australian community sympathetic to his social condition. Thus the author reveals an implied readership who might take pleasure in imagining the novel to be a "true history".

800 words

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