

The Murky Waters of Australian Collective Consciousness



Literature

Keywords: Bakhtin, carnivalesque, grotesque, Lyotard, sublime.

Hazal Burcu Kışlak

Free University of Berlin. Germany.

Abstract

Although many critics see Richard Flanagan's novel entitled *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* primarily in terms of its author's politics and participation in the History Wars debate, there has so far been scant discussion of this work in relation to the theories of the grotesque and carnivalesque, developed by Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. As such, the purpose of this paper is to examine Flanagan's destabilisation of established truths and hierarchical, hegemonic discourses in his novel by applying French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern configurations of the sublime to these oft forgotten theories of Bakhtin. Accordingly, this paper also aims to contribute to the scholarship which examines the relationship between these concepts. Following notions of the sublime, the grotesque, and the carnivalesque, this paper underlines the importance of participatory processes and a dialogic relation between multiple differences in the forging of a new, collective and fair history for Australians that is yet to begin.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British Empire was at its height. Being the most extensive empire and, for a significant period of time, the most formidable superpower in the world, it comprised roughly a quarter of the globe. Since British colonialism was "bolstered by various scientific and social projects of the Enlightenment, it follows that colonies were founded as a type of Enlightenment laboratory" (Jones, 2008). The British colonisation of Australia, as Gascoigne (2002) points out, was a special case. The colonists' belief that Australia was *terra nullius* (empty land) lacking European socio-political and legal structures accelerated the implementation of Enlightenment projects specifically in Australian penal colonies.

Dating back to 1803, Van Diemen's Land (today's Tasmania) was the most notorious penal colony of the British Empire in the new lands, operating on "isolation, official neglect, forced labor, incarceration, torture, and executions" perpetuated on convicts and free settlers (Madley, 2008). The Empire justified its practices under so-called natural law, determined by a rigid interpretation of political sovereignty and deemed applicable to all situations and contexts. Therefore, the foundation of white Australia is deeply entrenched in oppressive imperial ideologies of the Enlightenment that misinterpret the potential of reason to advance humanity towards "a greater civilisation, emancipation and enlightenment" (Jones, 2008).

Within this context, the purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which Richard Flanagan, a contemporary Tasmanian historian and novelist, destabilises Australia's colonial history set up by the British Empire, and challenges the paternalistic intentions of the

Enlightenment project in his novel entitled *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish*.¹ This paper analyses how Flanagan disrupts traditional articulations of the sublime by allowing for the co-existence of the notions of the carnivalesque and grotesque, developed by Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, as well as French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern sublime for the benefit of the disadvantaged. Even though many critics see Flanagan's novel primarily in terms of its author's politics and participation in the History Wars debate², there has so far been scant discussion of this work in relation to Bakhtin's theories. Accordingly, this paper also aims to contribute to the scholarship which examines the relationship between the notions of the sublime, the grotesque, and the carnivalesque.

With his novel, Flanagan (2001) takes the convict subaltern from the dusty pages of history, and reworks his dismal experiences at the Macquarie Harbour penal colony on Sarah Island, "in the entire unknown, unmapped western half of Van Diemen's Land". Being an English petty criminal, William Buelow Gould is transported to Van Diemen's Land, "an antipodean dumping ground for *Irish* and lower class British undesirables" (Weir, 2005). Working as a deckhand on the way to the new colony, the fictional Gould "was present when the historically real first British colonial expeditionary force led by Lieutenant Bowen made its landing at Risdon Cove in 1803" (Bogue, 2010). Having first-hand experience with the oppressive power of the British colonial authorities, and witnessing the brutal colonisation of the territory and its free settlers, Gould instantly sympathises with the land stating that "both me & this country seemed to have been in trouble" (Flanagan, 2001).

Gould is set during the period called Black Wars, and depicts the brutality of the British colonial authorities inflicted primarily on the Aboriginal peoples, who are barely seen but remain prominent in the narrative. Perhaps the most disturbingly violent actions in the novel are those directed specifically against the Aborigines. For instance, the mutilated body of a black woman is "stacked out on the ground, abused in a most dreadful fashion & then left to die"; similarly, "part of the thigh & the ears" of another black woman is "sliced off . . . & made her eat them as punishment for trying to escape" (Flanagan, 2001). Flanagan here presents a spirit of acknowledgement against the great Australian silence by voicing the injustices perpetuated on the Aboriginal peoples.

Convicts and colonised peoples are also well-versed in the horrors of penal colony life. Examples include "the corpse . . . of an escaped convict who failed to make it to the mainland", and General Maurepas of the Haitian Revolution, onto whose body wooden epaulettes are nailed by the French (Flanagan, 2001). Accused of the murder of Mr. Lempriere, the prison surgeon—in reality ridiculously massacred by "his gargantuan pet pig" (Bogue, 2010)—Gould is held in dire conditions in a "cell built at the base of sandstone cliffs below the high water mark—one of those infamous fish cells" (Flanagan, 2001). Working between tides that threaten to drown him, Gould is

¹ From here on *Gould*, capitalised, shortened.

² See Jones' article for more detailed information about this issue.

assigned to serve the scientific ambitions and further the reputations of penal colony authorities by painting the local fish.

Acknowledging that present-day Australia is haunted by the massacre of its Aboriginal peoples, and the suffering of the convicts and colonised peoples at the hands of the colonizers, Flanagan unflinchingly reveals the cold-blooded atrocities being committed. As Flanagan's novel repeatedly refers to exaggerated and imponderable corporal experience—damaged, mutilated and suffering bodies, it engages with Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque. "Dancing the old Enlightenment" (Flanagan, 2001) is a euphemism used by Gould to refer to sex. There are certain references to "bodily lower stratum" (Bakhtin, 1984): "The publican's wife's splendid white thighs & buttocks rising & falling as we danced the dear old Enlightenment" (Flanagan, 2001). Such grotesque "material bodily principle" with an emphasis on "lower stratum" connote "degradation", "death", as well as "re-birth" and "regeneration" (Bakhtin, 1984). This implies the reversal and debasement of all hierarchies and hegemonic discourses to the material level in favour of the multiplicity of voices. Indeed, through such images of the human body belonging to people from below, the injustices of social structures are contested. Once the high-low divisions are turned upside down, "rebirth" and "regeneration" become possible, while the grotesque body remains in an "unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, growth and becoming" (Bakhtin, 1984).

As Yaeger (2000) reiterates, "the manipulated bodies are, on an unconscious level, also perceived as phantasms of the fragmented body". This, according to Wawrzinek (2008), challenges "the transcendence promised by the [traditional] sublime", since transcendence remains inherently fragmented, and "wedded to the flesh giving birth". Although "the traditional sublime abjects the grotesque and sublimates the carnivalesque within its process of subject-formation", Lyotard's postmodern sublime opens up a harmonious space enabling the possibility for its co-existence with the carnivalesque and the grotesque (Wawrzinek, 2008). In other words, Lyotard's postmodern sublime reconfigures traditional models of sublime "in ways that maintain its potential for transformation but that deny any final and absolute transcendence"; hence, it rejects a power struggle with the valorisation of one over the other (Wawrzinek, 2008). It also emphasises "the point of contact between subject and world (self and other)" by embracing "multiple differences, and allowing the sublime and the grotesque to be situated alongside one another" (Wawrzinek, 2008). Accordingly, Lyotard's postmodern sublime, which questions and revises established norms, is closely tied to the concept of the grotesque for its "disruptive capacity" (Lyotard, 1984). It is also tied to the concept of carnival, as "the focus on the relation between perceiving subject and radical other . . . recalls the hybrid spaces of carnivalesque" (Wawrzinek, 2008). This model of sublimity is "horizontal, or multi-dimensional, rather than vertical, multiple and hybrid rather than singular, and where emergence depends on connections and becomings rather than on overcomings" (Wawrzinek, 2008). It enables "a spreading of awareness", and opens up "ever-new potentialities" by attempting to include formerly excluded disadvantaged groups (Wawrzinek, 2008).

The realities of immeasurable bodily suffering are juxtaposed with the fallacies of the officially pre-determined scientific plots. The atrocities of the British Empire, along with the delusions of the Enlightenment project, are primarily represented by Mr Lempriere, the Commandant, and Jorgen Jorgensen, who all have grandiose schemes for creating a falsified history. Through his phrenological research, Mr Lempriere displays his taxonomic ambitions in wanting to collect the “heads of the blacks ... [which] could only greatly enhance our understanding of such misbegotten issue of the human race” (Flanagan, 2001). Flanagan refers to the violent nature of the colonial and Enlightenment projects based on pre-configured racial hierarchies. He also stresses “the true dangers of false facts that can go on to destroy lives all in the name of science” (Whitmore, 2012), along with “the conventional scientific wisdom” that legitimate “the dreadful horrors visited upon the aborigines” (Barraud, 2012)

The British Empire’s aspirations, including imperialist science, are clearly suggestive of the sexual and gendered nature of colonisation. As Hall (2009) highlights, “colonialism takes place through gendered and sexualized forms that reconstitute both individual and communal indigenous identities in stigmatized and disempowering ways”. This is exemplified specifically through the main Aboriginal female character, Twopenny Sal, the daughter of Aboriginal leader Towtereh, as well as Gould’s former lover and the Commandant’s mistress. Twopenny Sal has not only been silenced by being abducted by the British sealers, and separated from her child; she is also made abject and marginal by being branded as radically and sexually other by the British authorities (Bogue, 2010). Due to the limits on the rights to freedom of expression of the Aborigines as well as the convicts and the colonised peoples, it is not only Mr Lempriere who is able to ensure the smooth fulfilment of his barbarous projects, as the Commandant himself also draws an analogy between the black female body and the land, describing Twopenny Sal as “the bedroom of history” (Bogue, 2010). This suggests a necessary dichotomy opposing men and women, white and black, mind and body, and science and nature pre-determined by the dominant socio-cultural groups.

Two penny Sal nevertheless resists being appropriated by hierarchical binary oppositions and the yoke of colonial suppression of the British Empire. Through this indomitable character, Flanagan evokes the indigenous Australian voices that have been effaced by colonisation. As a way of resisting pre-constructed history, Twopenny Sal cleverly suggests shipping the skull and bones of Mr Lempriere, discovered amidst pig faeces, as part of the gruesome scientific project. Ironically, Mr Lempriere’s epitaph is named “MH-36” based on his very own method for cataloguing the skull samples as scientific prototypes, and “the Great Scientist in death had become part of his own Immortal System” (Flanagan, 2001) clearly not “as a scientist but rather as a specimen” (Whitmore, 2012).

More significantly, it is the convict Gould who uncovers the deceitfulness of the British Empire’s colonial historical records. Gould’s history from below, based on his personal experiences, is in contrast with clerk Jorgensen’s fabricated volumes of the official historical Registry, which Gould discovers when the ceiling of his fish cell collapses. Much to his surprise, Gould finds no evidence in the archives of the experiences of the subalterns (Flanagan, 2001).

Jorgensen's narration creates a constructed world in the archive, which mercilessly distorts the facts in the way that would fulfil only the expectations of the British colonists. Even though Jorgensen's Registry displays qualitative data, it deliberately avoids tackling the realities of the corporeal suffering and loss that instead constitute Gould's work. As Jorgensen's official history falls short of presenting the actualities, which are, on the contrary, reflected in Gould's unofficial history from below, it shows the necessity of finding a method of a more equitable and inclusive reflection of the past. In this sense, Jones (2008) emphasises "the limitations of official records and conventional historical publications in representing the past in any full sense; it demonstrates the necessity of approaching the past through the historical [postmodern] sublime". Ironically, Jorgensen gets crushed to death under fallen volumes as "weighted bricks", and he is swallowed by the twisted world he has constructed (Flanagan, 2001). Gould makes a full-fledged plan to run away with the Registry, expose the fallacy, and save the convicts and colonised from "an eternity of imprisonment" (Flanagan, 2001). Nevertheless, Gould's plan comes to a full stop when the Registry catches fire and flames up, creating an inferno (Flanagan, 2001). Flanagan here implies that Gould challenges pre-established hierarchical and hegemonic structures, inflicted upon the subaltern. By opposing the paternalistic ideologies of the British Empire, which effaced the voices and bodies of difference, Gould in the same breath reconfigures hierarchical traditional forms of the sublime, depending on an antagonistic struggle of binary opposites and resulting in the transcendence of, for instance, the powerful and dominant self over marginalised, abjected other.

In his powerful depictions of the Aborigines, Flanagan does not tend to caricaturise them, and instead writes them as individuals. Twopenny Sal and her father, for instance, are central figures who have influenced and altered Gould's initial biased perceptions and attitudes toward Aboriginal peoples. As Gould confesses "I found my own opinions of the savages changing, & I could no longer think of them as I formerly had" (Flanagan, 2001). Gould begins to "sense unexpected depths in her being" (Bogue, 2010): "I began with certainty; that she was black, that she was for me pleasure, & I could make love to her without consequence. I ended in doubt, both as to who she was &, even more shockingly, as to who I was" (Flanagan, 2001). Through Twopenny Sal, Gould appreciates their unique indigenous culture, and—even to a certain extent—achieves a cross-cultural understanding, which enables him to reconstruct his own identity. A key moment in the novel occurs when Twopenny Sal performs a ritual incision of two circles on Gould's body, naming one "Palawa", a word for Aboriginal peoples, and the other, "Numminer," a word for white men (Flanagan, 2001). Gould initially makes no sense of Twopenny Sal's actions, nor does he realise the significance of her words: "Gould Numminer, but long time before you were Palawa ... you were us" (Flanagan, 2001). Gazing upon Aboriginal paintings on the ceiling one day, Gould experiences an epiphany: "discovering that implicit in a single seahorse was the universe, that everyone had the capacity to be someone, something, somebody else, that Numminer were Palawa & Palawa Numminer" (Flanagan, 2001). Through Gould's epiphany—his "revelation, though not Aboriginal per se ... that passes through or alongside an Aboriginal view of the world" (Bogue, 2010) Flanagan hints at the possibility of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Having "encountered with a non-Western mentality, he is able to

enter a becoming-other ... becoming-fish” (Bogue, 2010): “Like the crayfish leaping backwards into the water after abandoning its shell, I prepared to abandon the shelf of who & what I was, & metamorphose into something else ... I finally felt my soul taking flight” (Flanagan, 2001). Gould, eventually, has metamorphosed into a primitive, long-lived weedy seadragon fish.

By resisting the oppressive pre-determination of his status as a colonial subject, and by not yielding to the appropriation and traditional sublime individuation of his identity by the British Empire, Gould refuses his singular and autonomous identity. Lingered between European and Aboriginal cultures, Gould occupies “a hybrid space within which identity involves contingent alignments and realignments within a field of difference” (Wawrzinek, 2008). Indeed, Gould inhabits “a between space that allows new possibilities forms and relations to emerge, it is a temporal corporeal space rather than a space of transcendence” (Wawrzinek, 2008). In this sense, Flanagan paves the way for postmodern configurations of the sublime which, unlike conventional forms, proceed in a dialogic and interactive fashion. Hence Lyotard’s postmodern sublime does not disrupt the point of contact between multiple differences (including conceptions of the sublime, the grotesque, and the carnivalesque). Instead it opens up a hybrid space for the possibility of their situation alongside one another, their co-existence.

Through cross-cultural engagement and interaction, Gould re-invents his own identity. He is no longer a homogenous, solidary or unified subject; rather his identity becomes heterogeneous and multiple. Hence, Gould’s “subject constitution is predicated on dialogue between difference and trans-substantiation of one form into another” (Wawrzinek, 2008). Flanagan here critiques the simplistic idea fostered by the British colonial authorities that Australia is a monocultural land. In contrast, Flanagan stresses that Australia is a multicultural hybrid space with the diversity of voices, opinions and stories. Hence, Flanagan’s novel values a field of multiplicities, and suggests ever-new possibilities by means of Gould, whose metamorphosis into fish implies “a new beginning rather than a retreat or death” (Wawrzinek, 2008).

Flanagan’s novel is reminiscent of the hybrid spaces of carnival in many ways: By challenging Jorgenson’s falsified history, Gould shatters “the prevailing truth and the established norms, order and faculties” (Bakhtin, 1984). Gould turns the pre-conceived and imposed socio-cultural norms upside down by suspending all hierarchical rank, doctrines and prohibitions. He hybridises all binary and dialectical oppositions, merges all opposing categories, ideologies and configurations. The polarities and the strict lines between both members of antithesis (high-low, powerful-weak, life-death, fact-fantasy) become blurry.

Lastly, this paper has examined Flanagan’s destabilisation of hierarchical, hegemonic discourses and established truths in *Gould* by applying Lyotard’s postmodern configurations of sublime to the often forgotten theories of Bakhtin: the grotesque and the carnivalesque. As we have seen, Flanagan values postmodern configurations of multi-dimensional sublime that do not elevate one term over the other, but instead, highlight the concerns of disadvantaged groups and open up the possibilities for the co-existence of multiple differences—such as the sublime, the

grotesque and the carnivalesque. Flanagan's protagonist—Gould creates a new world upside down, where all hegemonic discourses are disrupted by the subaltern, whose voices are no longer effaced. In this new world, people are reborn with the possibilities for becoming, change and renewal. Flanagan points out the need to open up a hybrid space in present-day Australia for achieving dialogic human relations and mutual participation between white Australians and Australian Aborigines based on equality, freedom, and abundance.

References

1. Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
2. Barraud, A. (Interviewer) & Flanagan, R. (Interviewee). (2012). *Richard Flanagan on the Decline of Love and Freedom* [Interview Audio File]. Retrieved from ABC The Book Show Web Site: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/2012-01-02/3818410>
3. Bogue, R. (2010). *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
4. Flanagan, R. (2001). *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish*. New York: Grove Press.
5. Gascoigne, J. (2002). *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Hall, L. K. (2009). Navigating Our Own 'Sea of Islands': Remapping a Theoretical Space for Hawaiian Women and Indigenous Feminism. *Wicazo SA Review*, 24(2), 15-38.
7. Jones, J. (2008). Dancing the Old Enlightenment: Gould's Book of Fish, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 114-29.
8. Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Pres.
9. Madley, B. (2008). From Terror to Genocide: Britain's Tasmanian Penal Colony and Australia's History Wars. *The Journal of British Studies*, 47(1), 77-106.
10. Wawrzinek, J. (2008). *Ambiguous Subjects: Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
11. Weir, Z. (2005). Set Adrift: Identity and the Postcolonial Present in Gould's Book of Fish. *Postcolonial Text*, 1(2).
12. Whitmore, A. R. (2012). Reconfigurations of History and Embodying Books in Gould's Book of Fish. *Postcolonial Text*, 7(2), 1-16.
13. Yaeger, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*. Chicago: University of Chicago.