

Andreas Gaile: *Rewriting History: Peter Carey's Fictional Biography of Australia*. Costerus New Series 184. Amsterdam / New York: Rodopi, 2010. 348pp. € 89.80. ISBN 978-90-420-3071-8. **Reviewed by Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp**, University of Bonn.

Winner of the Association for Australian Studies' award for the best PhD thesis in 2006, Andreas Gaile's study of the work of Peter Carey, *Rewriting History: Peter Carey's Fictional Biography of Australia*, was highly acclaimed even before its publication last year. Carey's legendary status as a writer, along with Thomas Keneally, David Malouf, Colleen McCullough, Bryce Courtney, and Tim Winton, was confirmed by Australia Post last year with "a Stamp of Approval" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 January 2010). He is Australia's most widely recognized writer at present, both nationally and internationally. AustLit cites an impressive list of awards to date, among them, famously, two Bookers, and no fewer than 899 titles on his work. Amid this mass of criticism and critics, Andreas Gaile, for his part, has stood out as a recognized expert on Carey's work since his impressive 2005 edition of critical essays *Fabulating Beauty: Perspectives on the Fiction of Peter Carey*, at the latest. In the introduction to the latter volume, Gaile describes Carey as "one of Australia's most outspoken critics" (xxii) and as a writer who has set out to chronicle his country's history in his fiction. It is this reading of Carey's fiction which also informs the study under review.

In *Rewriting History*, Gaile describes Carey's oeuvre as a fictional biography of Australia, spanning the last 150 years, in which the writer aims both to counter "the historical apathy of a country where most of its citizens think there is so little history it is not worth investigating" (287) and to revise the master narrative of Australian history, to expose its gaps and distortions, with respect to, for example, the dispossession of

the Aborigines, the convict experience, or notions of Australianness with reference to gender and ethnicity. Carey's project, Gaile argues, is not intended to arrive at a more truthful version of Australian history, but to dismantle the authority of "official history" and alert the reader to its constructedness. At the same time, and despite the postmodern narrative techniques employed by the writer, Carey's serious engagement with history and historiography, understood by Gaile as an intervention in the country's history wars (287), is informed by a "humanist ethos" (22), an emancipatory vision and even "didactic purpose" (293) which make Carey side with the historic losers and ultimately invite the "utilitarian reading" (293) Gaile proposes in his study. Gaile even goes so far as to claim that Carey's fiction is "a positive contribution to Australia's attempt at coming of age" (293), employing, as with "maturity" (287), a biological metaphor which seems somewhat quaint. In any case, Gaile rightly claims to be presenting the first book-length systematic reading of the author's approach to and concept of history which, as he discloses, is inspired by Carey's explicit stance on Australian history and historiography, as voiced in his numerous interviews, in particular.

Gaile's analysis ties in with the postmodern interest in history and historiography; however, he does not base his readings on cultural memory theories, currently so popular, which is quite refreshing because cultural memory studies tend to repeatedly confront the reader with the same theoretical framework. Instead, Gaile locates Carey's rewriting of history more broadly within the philosophical context of postmodern, postcolonial and poststructuralist theorizing in the field of history, focusing on aspects such as the negotiation of truth, the foregrounding of the constructedness of both fiction and history, or the distortions of the imperial tradition of colonial history and their degrading effects on colonial subjects. His close readings of exemplary Carey fictions are always theoretically informed and considered, quite apart from the fact that his study

demonstrates a profound knowledge of Australian cultural history and current affairs.

The theoretical premises are spelt out in Part One of his study. Part Two, "Theorizing Carey's Fictional Biography" focuses on Carey's specific outlook on history and his narrative strategies. It begins with a chapter in which Gaile addresses Carey's transformation of history into "mythistory", borrowing the concept from historiography, and describing it as a kind of discourse which eschews the truth-and realism paradigms of traditional Western epistemology and allows an oscillating "between poesis and mimesis, invention and representation, and ultimately, truth and lie" (43). The remaining three chapters in this part of Gaile's study explore Carey's strategies of dissolving the essentialist distinction between truth and lie – see the prominence of the confidence trickster or liar in the eponymous *Illywhacker*, the eponymous lovers in Oscar and Lucinda, both of whom are passionate and masterful liars, the many versions of the life of Jack Maggs, or the intricate deviations from the truth in *Bliss* -, his strategies of defamiliarizing reality, such as metafictional comments or elements of fantasy, and finally, the foregrounding of storytelling in the fiction of a writer who is renowned for the "profuse, celebratory, quality of his storytelling" (88).

Part Three, "Carey's Biography of Australia: Key Events in the Life of a Nation", focuses on the actual content of Carey's fictional biography, on Carey's narration of historical key issues, such as Aboriginal dispossession, the explorer myth, the convict system, and the mechanisms of colonization in both colonial and in postcolonial times. The titles of the individual chapters are occasionally obscure, as, for example, in the last two chapters of Part Three. Chapter eight is entitled "'Decolonizing the Mind' (I): Colonial Australia", and chapter nine, by analogy, "'Decolonizing the Mind' (II): Postcolonial Australia". The reader cannot infer from reading the latter title that chapter nine deals with American cultural imperialism in *The Unusual Life of Tristan*

Smith; as the slogan goes in advertising, Peter Carey's previous sphere of activity, the reader is thus left to "come in and find out".

Part Four, "Carey's Biography of Australia: Australian Identity", investigates identity constructions past and present with a strong focus on gender. The first chapter serves as a kind of introduction and addresses a number of issues and historical notions related to identity, such as language, the notion of the "cultural cringe", Russell Ward's legendary sketch of the typical Australian, and identity constructions in multicultural Australia. The following two chapters deal with Peter Carey's reevaluation of the role of the sexes in Australian history and his reinscription of women into the Australian tradition. According to Gaile, "women are that group of Australian society which the author most clearly speaks out for" (283). Even "gender bending", an interesting feature of some of Carey's fiction, receives Gaile's attention, who traces the dissolution of gender boundaries in *Illywhacker*, *Oscar and Lucinda*, *True History of the Kelly Gang* and the short story "The Chance". In his concluding paragraph, Gaile notes, without going into detail that, in his more recent publications *My Life as a Fake* and *Wrong about Japan*, Carey has moved away from gender-related concerns towards another aspect of identity, namely the "Asianization" of Australia.

The "Postscript" summarizes the main arguments; in particular it testifies to the temporal gap between the completion of the study and its publication four years later, something which is evident in, for example, the fact that the introduction mentions Carey as the author of eight novels, whereas the postscript mentions him as the author of eleven novels. Gaile undertakes a critical reassessment of his approach which is motivated by the fact that, on the one hand, Carey's more recent novels have been criticized for an overload of fictional self-reflexivity and have therefore been less warmly received by readers than were his previous novels, and on the other by the demise to move

beyond postcolonialism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism" (286). Gaile argues in defence of both Carey's fictional investigations and postmodern critical theory, whose value he sees in combating essentialist thought and in questioning official history.

The textual analyses are convincingly informed by theoretical considerations, they are densely argued and offer perceptive insights into individual novels as well as points of comparison between them, even to readers who are familiar with Carey's fiction. The structure of the book is ambitious in that it does not work its way down a list of novels, ticking each one off, but is guided by narratological and thematic concerns. The fact that the subchapters to the four parts of the book are numbered consecutively all the way through, rather than each chapter beginning afresh, is unusual and confusing. Whilst this may be a result of Gaile's attempt to present Carey's biography of Australia as a continuous narrative, it complicates the reader's grip on the text nonetheless. The study closes with a comprehensive bibliography and a very useful index which helps the reader to find analyses of individual works easily, as well as central motifs or narrative features.

With respect to Carey's novels published since 2006 – *Theft: A Love Story* (2006), *His Illegal Self: A Novel* (2008), and *Parrot and Olivier in America* (2009) – Gaile notes that Carey has turned away from his project of writing the fictional biography of Australia. Not that this was its greatest merit, but in a way it makes Gaile's study a complete, not just provisional, analysis of a significant phase in the work of one of the most widely-read contemporary writers in English. The chapters on Carey's narrative strategies will serve as invaluable tools to analysts even of Carey's more recent novels and, most likely, of those to come.