

Australian and European History Re-Enacted: The Argument of Michael Gow's Historical Dialogue

I.

In the introduction to her anthology of Australian dramas of the eighties, the editor, Katharine Brisbane, sums up Gow's dramatic work. "All of Gow's plays", she writes, "are an attempt to make sense of a country burdened with an imported culture, and of how to express the authenticity of Australia's materialist, anti-intellectual character in the context of a lingua franca of literary reference."¹ The former actor and theatre director Michael Gow (b. 1955) ranks as one of the most noteworthy new playwrights of the eighties² and explicitly commits himself to a creative internationalism. Here, the crucial reference is made to the literature, music and history of Europe as well as America.³ Though with a new emphasis, Gow thus resumes a development which began in the late seventies with the work of Louis Nowra (b. 1950) and Stephen Sewell (b. 1953) and which has since been referred to as the "new internationalism". What once primarily meant thematic universality now in Gow's concept turns into a highly effective stage-presentation of a both lively and dynamic multinational discourse. This involves intercultural dialogue between Europe and Australia, which can best be analysed in the light of an operational intertextual theory whose practical applicability Broich, Pfister and others have convincingly demonstrated.⁴ Gow plainly seeks confrontation with European

¹Brisbane, Katharine. "Beyond the Backyard". *Australia Plays*. Ed. K. Brisbane. London: Hern, 1989. vii-xxviii, xxi.

²Thus, according to Leonard Radic, Gow is already one of the best-known Australian dramatists along with Patrick White, David Williamson, John Romeril, Stephen Sewell, and Louis Nowra. Cf. Radic, Leonard. *The State of Play: The Revolution in the Australian Theatre since the 1960s*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books Australia, 1991. 2.

³Cf. Akerholt, May-Brit. "Interview: Michael Gow Talks to May-Brit Akerholt". *Australasian Drama Studies* 12-13 (1988): 73-84, 82. See also Pearson, John M. "An Interview with Michael Gow". *Southerly* 52.2 (1992): 116-31, especially 120, 127.

⁴See Broich, Ulrich and Manfred Pfister, eds. *Intertextualität: Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985.

culture, especially its literary, historical and philosophical manifestations, in order to clarify Australia's identity.⁵ His understanding of the problem largely corresponds to the idea of historical individuality,⁶ which, in partial accordance with the thinking of Australian philosopher John Passmore, undoubtedly involves European roots. Only recently Passmore has made a provocative statement on the European historical awareness of the - from his point of view - "Australian Europeans". Its central idea runs as follows: "What do I mean when I say that we are European? The most important events in our history, the ones which have done most to make us what we are, occurred in Europe, albeit a Europe itself profoundly influenced by Egypt and the Middle East."⁷

However, by referring to the old continent, Gow neither reinforces the uncritical adoption of European historiography, nor does he subscribe to the opposite view which generally dismisses European historical writing as imperial and thus incompetent. There is no doubt that Gow's dramatic argument is aimed against an Australian nationalism which tries to establish identity solely by emphasizing differences from the dominating European (or American) text. According to Gow, the necessary historical revisions⁸ rather call for an open discourse which ideally

⁵Since the end of the sixties the question of the Australian identity has increasingly been tied to the discussion of the country's cultural development. In this respect the instructive publication by Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981., marks a turning point inasmuch as in the context of the Australian quest for identity the cultural heritage of Europe is now adequately taken into account. Among the relevant publications only Nicholas Jose's article, "Cultural Identity: 'I Think I'm Something Else'". *Australia: The Dædalus Symposium*. Ed. Stephen R. Graubard. North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1985. 311-42., need be mentioned here. It takes the work of contemporary novelists (among them Frank Moorhouse and David Malouf) as an example to point to an increased awareness of the influences of European culture.

⁶The terminological equivalence of the notions "identity" and "historical individuality of reflexive systems" is clarified in Hermann Lübke's contribution "Zur Identitätspräsentationsfunktion der Historie". *Identität*. Eds. Odo Marquard and Karlheinz Stierle. Poetik und Hermeneutik VIII. München: Fink, 1979. 277-92, especially 278.

⁷Passmore, John. "Europe in the Pacific". *Quadrant* 36.9 (1992): 10-19, 15.

⁸For the different ways of presenting history in the Australian drama

includes the European concept and the Australian counter-version. It thus strives for an objectivity that is based on mutual consent.

Though all except the latest of Gow's six published plays⁹ might well be labelled historical, this paper will confine itself to the discussion of those dramas in which the modification of national or international historical and historico-cultural images occupies the central thematic position.¹⁰ The dramatic reassessments of the past to be detected in *The Kid*, *Europe*, and *1841* include: (a) the apocalyptic demythologization of Australian history, (b) criticism of the achievements of European history and culture, and (c) conjectures on an alternative liberal revolution in colonial Australia.

II.

The Kid, Gow's first work, which premiered in 1983, uses Richard Wagner's (1813-83) opera *The Ring of the Nibelung* (1876), which is itself a post-text to archetypal myths,¹¹ as a musical pre-text whose task as a mythical contrast lies in its contribution to dramatic meaning. It is the apocalyptic vision, generated by inter-media connections between music and text, which strongly reinforces the drama's implied request for a new definition of identity.

see John McCallum's article "The Development of a Sense of History in Contemporary Australian Drama". *Contemporary Australian Drama*. Ed. Peter Holloway. 1981. Sydney: Currency, 1987. 148-60. Apart from the older "Celebrations of the Past" and the modern "Past as Present"-concept McCallum examines dramatic "Reassessments of the Past", which roughly coincide with the term "revision of the past" preferred above.
⁹Cf. Gow, Michael. *The Kid*. Sydney: Currency, 1983. *Away*. Sydney: Currency, 1986. *Europe/On Top of the World*. Sydney: Currency, 1987. *1841*. Sydney: Currency, 1988. *All Stops Out*. Sydney: Currency, 1991.

¹⁰This paper is the slightly modified version of a lecture given at the Triennial Conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in Graz, Austria, 18-22 May, 1993.

¹¹See Brinkmann, Reinhold. "Mythos - Geschichte - Natur: Zeitkonstellationen im 'Ring'". *Richard Wagner: Von der Oper zum Musikdrama*. Ed. Stefan Kunze. Bern: Francke, 1978. 64-73. Ingenschay-Goch, Dagmar. *Richard Wagners neu erfundener Mythos: Zur Rezeption und Reproduktion des germanischen Mythos in seinen Operntexten*. Bonn: Bouvier, 1982. 124-51.

According to Gow, the younger generation has to accomplish this by means of an objective confrontation with both Australian and European history.

The plot is straightforward: Four youngsters on the loose, the sister and brothers Snake, Dean and Aspro, the "kid", as well as Donald, who is roughly the same age, have found a temporary place to stay in a Sydney surrounded by menacing bush fires. In the anonymous block of flats they meet the fifteen-year-old Desiree, whose violent father forces her to hand out leaflets of an American sect. Dean's attempts to win the girl's trust are in vain, and Snake's intention to apply to the authorities for compensation for her brother Aspro's head injury is similarly unsuccessful. When Aspro dies shortly afterwards, Dean, now completely isolated, tries to commit suicide.

With the aid of numerous scene changes Gow is able to integrate most of the operatic pre-text. Like the chorus in Greek drama, the interludes, all of which except one quote leitmotifs from *The Ring*,¹² comment on the events in such a way that through this classical perspective the intense apocalyptic mood reveals itself. But before the intertextual musical quotes can activate the apocalyptic connotations of the operatic pre-text, each motif of the interludes first comes into effect within the immediate scenic context. It has to be admitted, however, that the identification of the references, which include motifs from the whole Wagnerian tetralogy (Rheintöchterang, Sturm-, Wallhall-, Liebesbund-, Waldvogel-, Waberlohe-, Mannen-, Götterdämmerungs-, Erlösungs- und Feuerzauber-motif),¹³ might present a few problems. But if it is true, as Lévi-Strauss maintains, that music can be described as a language tran-

¹²The incidental music "O a me, sceso dal trono" combining the fourth and the fifth scene is taken from *Madame Butterfly* (1904) by Giacomo Puccini. A little later a tape recording is played as part of the plot. It is the "Dance of the Seven Veils" from Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* (1905).

¹³For the motifs of the *Ring* see Burghold, Julius, ed. *Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, Götterdämmerung von Richard Wagner: Text[e] mit den hauptsächlichsten Leitmotiven und Notenbeispielen*. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, n.d.

scending the level of its articulated equivalent,¹⁴ the motifs, i.e the messages sent out have to influence the audience's reception, regardless of whether they are identified as specific mythemic units.

The Kid's inter-media construction does not follow any narrow aesthetic dogmatism. It rather meets the Brechtian concept to attain a subtly diversified overall effect of word, music and scene¹⁵ on the stage. Whenever the thematic or personal references change, Gow varies the function of either the audible or the visual media; they promote apocalyptic parallels between the mythical or historiographical pre-text and the dramatic post-text, they ensure the characterization of Dean and Desiree in the light of their operatic counterparts Siegfried and Brünnhilde and finally, just to complete the picture, they simply intensify a rather insignificant contrast.

Analogous to the prevailing pessimistic mood of the play, which was produced in the context of contemporary nuclear holocaust-scenarios,¹⁶ scenes with a past or future perspective are amplified by pieces of incidental music deepening the understanding of the plot through the musical image.¹⁷ Neither historical re-orientation nor future perspectives provide the young with incentives for identification to which some teleological action could possibly refer.

¹⁴See Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Mythologiques: Le Cru et le Cuit*. Paris: Plon, 1964. 23. His reflections on similarities between myth and music are based on the following central idea: "La vraie réponse se trouve, croyons-nous, dans le caractère commun du mythe et de l'oeuvre musicale, d'être des langages qui transcendent, chacun à sa manière, le plan du langage articulé [...]" (23). Cf. Ingenschay-Goch, *Wagners neu erfundener Mythos* 10. An interesting comment on Wagner's *Ring* is Lévi-Strauss' short article "Notes on the Ring". *"Das Rheingold": Programmheft II*. Ed. Wolfgang Wagner. Verlag der Festspielleitung: Bayreuth, 1983. 38-40.

¹⁵See Görner, Rüdiger. "'Über die Trennung der Elemente': Das Gesamtkunstwerk - ein Steinbruch der Moderne?". *Maske und Kothurn* 29 (1983): 98-122, especially 100.

¹⁶See for example the two articles by Ian Bellany. "How World War III Would be Fought". *The Bulletin* (19.2.1980): 50-54. and "Your Chances of Surviving a Nuclear War". *The Bulletin* (26.2.1980): 48-55.

¹⁷As proof of this see the fierce "Sturmmotiv" at the end of the second scene and the warlike "Mannenmotiv" at the end of the eighth.

In a humorous travesty on the bushranger myth¹⁸ the playwright pointedly demythologizes well-known historical legends whose present insignificance partly reflects the intellectual, ethical and social loss of identity. No longer, it seems, are Gow's youngsters of the eighties able to compensate for this deficit with new ideas. As Veronica Kelly puts it: "the withdrawal of values leaves them hideously vulnerable, and their attempts to dream a future and to pull together their fragmented world - shattered like Aspro's mind - fall victim to defeat."¹⁹ A highly pessimistic historical view that, like the Brechtian slide show of the eighth scene, reduces history to a succession of divisions, riots, wars, devastations, famines, and catastrophes replaces a meanwhile anachronistic belief in progress. Instead, there is the growing destructive appeal of fundamentalist religious movements such as the profit-seeking Armageddon sect, in whose apocalyptic world view the crises of the past are nothing but heralds of an inevitable global conflagration.

The plan of the Siegfried-figure, the courageous Dean, to rescue Desiree from her father's psychic manipulation and physical clinch is bound to fail because of the girl's inability to replace the slavish filial bond by youthful love. It is a climate of social as well as personal coldness, which, as a dramatic theme, Gow himself explicitly sees in the tradition of the plays of Franz Xaver Kroetz (b. 1946) and the early work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1946-82).²⁰ And, truly, these German playwrights' "emphasis on short scenes, few words, hopeless fringe figures"²¹ largely characterizes Gow's small excerpts from the Australian urban wasteland. In this world the young rebel or Wagnerian hero Dean cannot act as a liberator so long as an existential social Darwinism is not seen as a human deficit. This concept finds fine symbolic expression in the

¹⁸Cf. *The Kid* ii, 10-11.

¹⁹Kelly, Veronica. "Apocalypse and After: Historical Visions in Some Recent Australian Drama". *Kunapipi* 9.3 (1987): 68-78, 70.

²⁰Cf. Pearson, John M., "An Interview with Michael Gow" 116.

²¹Calandra, Denis. *New German Dramatists*. London: Macmillan, 1983. 94.

so-called "God's Survival Kits" sold by the head of the Armageddon sect. Their contents include a gun to be used in an emergency to ensure one a place in a bunker. Small doubt then that in the living conditions of urban alienation and a reckless individual fight for survival the fraternalistic mateship-concept, once the popular topic of the colonial balladists as well as of Australian historiography and taken up early in the play,²² has completely lost all social relevance.

III.

Despite its historical outlook *Europe*, first performed in 1987, is again set in the present. This time, however, the place is the old continent thus providing the playwright with a constant, but not too obtrusive frame of cultural and historical references. Douglas, an Australian student, has made every effort to find a young actress, Barbara, with whom he had a brief affair in Adelaide. And indeed, he meets her in the dressing-room of a European theatre.

The theme of the play focusses on different models of identity, at one time stressing the cultural discourse, at other times pointing first of all to the historical dialogue. What is really being dealt with here is the exposure of paradigms of both perception and judgement working within the European-Australian discourse. Initially, Douglas' image of Europe is characterized by naive, hackneyed conclusions and an effusive enthusiasm for the western cultural tradition. But parallel to the interhuman confrontation between the two young characters, the stereotyped access to Europe slowly gives way to a much more sophisticated perspective. At the end the Australian is therefore quite capable of critically tracing the cultural and historical achievements of the European macro-text back to their relevance to the present quest for identity. To be sure, *Europe* does not amount to a scenic denial of the Eu-

²²Cf. *The Kid* ii, 10.

ropean cultural tradition. It rather advocates, in the words of May-Brit Akerholt, "that we [the Australians] integrate its history and culture with new ideas; that we build on what they [the Europeans] have rather than copy them."²³

As far as the intercultural relationship between the two continents is concerned, the European sentiment of superiority still interferes with the dialogue. It is the Europeans' constant endeavour to seek refuge in a one-sided historical tradition that Douglas intensely denounces. Significantly, the dramatist here makes full use of the Australian vernacular to bring his point home. Douglas becomes the mouthpiece of an attack against a bloodthirsty European colonialism and imperialism whose historical manifestations have always seen the Australians in the role of victims, from the deportation of the convicts up to the sending of the ANZACS in the First World War.²⁴ It is true, Barbara can expose those absolute "we-you (-they)"-stereotypes as mere deficits of an Australian quest for an identity that - as in all post-colonial societies - is located "in difference rather than in essence".²⁵ But the reproach of a presumptuous Eurocentricity in the writing of the historical record nevertheless remains. By employing the full symbolic potential of the relationship between the Australian student and the European actress, the dramatist seems to demand a true dialogue coexistence of the two historical texts. Or, to put it in other words, it implies an objectivity of mutual consent that denotes histories in which,

²³Akerholt, May-Brit. "Review of *Europe/On Top of the World*, by Michael Gow". *Australasian Drama Studies* 12-13 (1988): 195-200, 197. Signs of cultural dependence do not at all imply literary inferiority ipso facto. This has recently been made perfectly clear by Rudolf Bader on the basis of Shakespeare's work. Bader writes: "The cultural condition of dependence does not degrade any Australian writer into a second-class category, just as Shakespeare cannot be considered any less significant because of his dependence on Italian Renaissance culture". "Images of Europe in Australian Literature". *Antipodes* 3.2 (1989): 108-13, 108.

²⁴Cf. *Europe IV*, 29-30.

²⁵Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989. 167. Cf. *Europe IV*, 30-31.

according to Hermann Lübbe, the presentation of different identities does not collide with each participating nation's view of its own historical individuality.²⁶

IV.

Australia's bicentenary in 1988 provided the outer setting of Gow's commissioned historical play *1841*, which met with a rather mixed critical reception at the Adelaide festival. The dramatist might have reckoned with such a response beforehand, because the main character's audience address right at the outset of the play lowers the level of expectations.²⁷ Expectations that could at most be satisfied by historical misrepresentations in the style of glittering revues.

Aurora, the allegorical personification of liberty, newly arrived on Australian soil, has to act without any support. It seems as if Gow cut out as it were an inter-medial quotation of the famous painting *La Liberté guidant le peuple* by the French artist Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) only to show it being rejected like an alien element in the context of colonial Australia. And yet, according to Gow's historical hypothesis, the year of the title, 1841, at least for New South Wales the year 1 following the last deportation of convicts,²⁸ could have marked the dawn of a new liberal age in Australia. Presumably, the Botany Bay-stigma, which has time and again hindered the quest for identity, would in that case have given way to the revolu-

²⁶See Lübbe, Hermann. "Zur Identitätspräsentationsfunktion der Historie". *Identität*. Eds. Odo Marquard und Karlheinz Stierle. Poetik und Hermeneutik VIII. München: Fink, 1979. 277-92, 286.

²⁷The relevant lines are:

"AURORA: All I have to offer is a story of defeat. Failure is the only prize I have for you, the only trophy. [...] How can I explain to you all, sitting here waiting for a story of triumph, a parade of glory, a victorious spectacle? [...] My defeat will fill up this bare platform. The least honour I can do those I've disappointed is to find that moment when hope failed." (*1841* I.1, 1)

²⁸Cf. Hughes, Robert. *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*. London: Collins Harvill, 1987, esp. 162.

tionary self-confidence of a free and independent republic. Along with the successful continuation of liberal pre-textual achievements both in the USA and in France, the potential post-colonial identity of early 19th century Australia itself could have claimed the status of a model.²⁹

At the beginning of the historical pageant, that is still on board *The Eden*, Aurora witnesses the brutal ill-treatment of the convict Lynch, whose life of suffering she later fails to use as the decisive fact that could trigger off a revolutionary mass protest. Within the presented sequence of different forms of violence, which includes the genocide of the Aborigines, Aurora's intention to enlighten the early colonists is disregarded simply because each reminder of injustice is straightaway checked by the paralysing effect of fear for one's material livelihood.

Among the European pre-texts Gow's play refers to are the Enlightenment's ideal of freedom³⁰ as well as the work of Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805),³¹ to which the dramatist explicitly drew attention during an interview with May-Brit Akerholt.³² In addition, the paratextual epigraph of the published edition includes quotations from Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Louis de Saint-Just (1767-94) and finally Ludwig Börne (1786-1837), who all stress the significance of freedom. Apart from the work of Saint-Just, who thoroughly approved of the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution, all other pre-texts provide convincing points of dramatic reference. Thus, briefly, like Börne, the radical German liberal, Aurora wants to use the theatre for politi-

²⁹See McLachlan, Noel. *Waiting for the Revolution: A History of Australian Nationalism*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books Australia, 1989. 33.

³⁰For the actual role of the Enlightenment as the third factor of influence, together with Irish Catholicism and British Protestantism, within the colonial development of Australia see Manning Clark's lecture "Some Influences on European Civilisation in Australia". *Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings 7* (1958-59): 19-25.

³¹See Waldeck, Marie-Luise. The Theme of Freedom in Schiller's Plays. Stuttgart: Heinz, 1986. 73-85. Kaiser, Gerhard. "Idylle und Revolution: Schillers 'Wilhelm Tell'". *Deutsche Literatur und Französische Revolution*. Ed. G. Kaiser. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974. 112.

³²Cf. Akerholt, "Interview" 78.

cal aims.³³ And William Tell, no doubt, would have approved of her belief in the liberating act of one individual.³⁴ Above all, however, in her personification of freedom Aurora does represent the central idea of the early phase of the Australian Dream,³⁵ whose post-textual status generally involves numerous European and other pre-texts. As a consequence Aurora's failure not only marks the end of Gow's hypothetical reassessment of the Australian past, it also points to the temporary postponement of the dream or rather to its essential inability to ever become an absolute reality at all; freedom, though in the Painite sense again made a "fugitive", is still alive and searching for a permanent "asylum for mankind".³⁶

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³³Cf. 1841 I.7, 32-34.

³⁴Cf. 1841 II.10, 64.

³⁵Cf. Prießnitz, Horst. "'A New Britannia in Another World' oder 'A Barbarous Britain under other Skies'?: James Tuckers *Ralph Rashleigh* als kritischer Kommentar zur Frühphase des 'Australian Dream'". *Poetica* 12.2 (1980): 205-26.

³⁶See the play's epigraph, which includes the following quotation from Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense*: "O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only tyranny, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her as a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind." (1841 epigraph). Cf. Aldridge, A. Owen. *Thomas Paine's American Ideology*. Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1984. 17-26.