

REVIEW

THE LOGIC OF THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE

Peter Carey. *The Tax Inspector*. St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1991. ISBN 0 7022 2391 3 \$29.95.

In his early short stories Peter Carey often avoided using place names that would link his fictions to recognisable Australian cities. His new novel, *The Tax Inspector*, is about corruption in Sydney and the familiarity of the place names testifies to the novelist's increasing social commitment. Jack Catchprice, a millionaire property developer, is driving a heavily pregnant Maria Takis from the home of her Greek father in Newtown to his architect-designed beach-house at Bilgola. In William Street, teenage prostitutes solicit in the lights of car showrooms. The Jaguar turns right into Woolloomooloo, up beside the art gallery and on to the Cahill Expressway. "If you look at the Cahill Expressway", Jack said, "... you can see how corrupt the city is ... You can read a city. You can see who's winning and who's losing. In this city ... the angels are not winning" (202). Jack later promises Maria "safe sex" (207), but she can't be certain that he is not one of the devils.

Carey has said that in *The Tax Inspector* he wanted to make up a world that corresponded to the real world. Its style is "melodramatic" in the sense that Peter Brooks uses that term in his discussion of such nineteenth-century novelists as Dickens and Henry James. "Within an apparent context of 'realism' and the ordinary", Brooks argues, "they seemed in fact to be staging a heightened and hyperbolic drama ... They seemed to place their characters at the point of intersection of primal ethical forces and to confer on the characters' enactments a charge of meaning referred to the clash of these forces."¹ The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo points out that using the melodramatic mode to think about actual societies has predictable, if problematic, consequences: it "presents human events with a distinctive moral intensity that follows the logic of the excluded middle ... [moving] readers to take sides in a battle between virtue and vice."² Carey's fictional Sydney is a world rigorously governed by

“the logic of the excluded middle” — and that is a source of both its strengths and its limitations.

There is something Dickensian about Carey’s heroine, Maria Takis, the tax inspector. Like Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* — to which Carey referred in his last novel, *Oscar and Lucinda* — she is an idealist and a moralist whose personal integrity is pitted against the corruption of the city in which she lives. Maria is the nemesis of woolly thinkers like Jack Catchprice: she is “one of those people ... with such a clear sense of the moral imperatives that they would never find themselves in that grey land where ‘almost right’ fades into the rat-flesh-coloured zone of ‘nearly wrong’” (170). She joined the Taxation Office believing taxation to be a public good:

I’m a very Tax Office sort of person. I hate all this criminal wealth. This state is full of it. It makes me sick. I see all these skunks with their car phones and champagne and I see all this homelessness and poverty ... You know how much tax is evaded every year? You don’t need socialism to fix that, you just need a good Taxation Office and a Treasury with guts.
(216)

Since a tax office is only as good as the human beings who run it, it will never be the answer to manifest human evil, and “a Treasury with guts” doesn’t exist outside the text of Paul Keating’s speeches. These are “melodramatic”, some would say fatuous solutions with little force beyond the limited charm of Maria’s own idealism.

As the novel opens, Maria is conducting an audit on a company owned by Jack’s family in the western Sydney suburb of Franklin. Like the Badgerys’ pet emporium in *Illywhacker*, Catchprice Motors has sold the farm: they sell General Motors products and are heavily in debt to the General Motors Acceptance Corporation. But myths of a lost golden age of Australian business are rigorously undercut by characters like Maria’s mother, who exchanged her home in Greece, with its fragrance of herbs and olive oil, for piece-work in a Newtown factory. Carey’s Sydney is conspicuously multi-cultural — though I notice there are no Vietnamese to chamois the Commodores on the forecourt at Catchprice Motors.



Moreover, the family business is not a legacy handed down from father to son. It was created for the men of the family by Frieda (Granny) Catchprice, who still offers jobs to young people like the unemployed Armenian Sarkis Alaverdian. Frieda's is a small-business ethic which has been displaced by the entrepreneurial business culture of the 1980s and '90s. In this novel, the past and future lie in the hands of women, and in the end, Frieda destroys with gelignite the ruins of the business she once gave to her husband.

The audit of Catchprice Motors discloses more than just bad debts. The Catchprice family conceals a dark secret: in each generation, the father has sexually abused his children. Carey's depiction of the cycle of violence, guilt and denial involved in such cases is one of the great achievements of this novel, which addresses to its readers the question the aptly named Mort Catchprice asks his mother: "What would that have done to you?" (247).

Molested by his father at the age of three and shot in the arm by his mother, Mort's son Benny personifies the corruption of the present generation by the past. Now 16, Benny seduces Mort by posing as an angel of lust:

...[Mort] studied the wings and saw how they followed the form of the body ... into what was clearly a tattooist's *trompe l'oeil*, one which gave perfect attention to each individual feather, dissolving sensually from crimson into blue, always quite clear, not at all ambiguous until the upper reaches of the marble-white buttocks where the feathers became very small and might be read as scales ... [Mort] quickly saw that the tattooed wings were not the only thing his son had done to himself — he had also used a depilatory to remove any trace of body hair. His chest, his legs, his penis all had that shiny slippery look of a child just out of the bath. (152)

Benny is a cross between Milton's Satan, punk-rock star Billy Idol, and Steve Bisley's sleazy car salesman Gordon Farkis in *The Big Steal*. Even

at his most bizarre Carey is always moral and humane, but the episodes involving Benny are not for the squeamish. If he is an angel, then, as the ambiguity of the feathers on his buttocks suggests, he is very much a fallen angel.

Benny reads hard-core pornography and American literature on sales motivation. The fact that either will give him an erection suggests a parallel between the psychology of the salesman and his "prospect", and the rapist and his victim. Reproducing pornographic images and narratives can have unpredictable consequences. Nevertheless, Carey describes in detail the photographic images Benny contemplates: a young woman is restrained on a device especially made to force her arse into the air; the device is "not a hard thing to make ... you could do it in your back yard, your cellar". A male protagonist lubricates his penis and rapes her anally: "they showed it close and it was good quality printing — you could feel the coolness of grease on the knob" (48). It will be interesting to see whether this episode provokes the kind of debate which surrounded the description of a pornographic film in Mark Henshaw's first novel, *Out of the Line of Fire* (1988). Henshaw was playing post-modern games, exploring the role of the spectator in perception. Carey also flirts with post-modernism, but his concern with the reading of pornographic texts is patently moral. Benny Catchprice actually makes the restraining device in his cellar from moulded fibreglass, and uses it — or tries to use it — in two of the most disturbing scenes in the novel: first on the company's new salesman, Sarkis Alaverdian and, more shockingly, on Maria Takis just before she gives birth to her child.

Carey has said that he was prompted to write about corruption in Sydney by reports of the Anita Cobby murder. Although the story of *The Tax Inspector* departs from this source in many ways, it remains open to a network of intertextual relationships with media reports of rape and serial killings, and the various discourses upon which they draw, including detective fiction, pornography, horror movies, gothic literature, crime fiction and soaps. This can have unforeseen effects. Whether Carey likes it or not, it gives *The Tax Inspector* a relationship with the current string of books about serial killing: Stephen Egger's *Serial Murder*, Joel Norris's *Serial Killers*, Tony Parker's *Life After Life*, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* and Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*. Carey's novel is not about serial killing; but it has in common with these other texts a tendency to make sexual violence a metaphor for public corruption.

Carey has also said that he wanted to produce art that was both popular and morally serious. But there are problems in using events that have been mythologised by the discourses of popular culture as a way of thinking about the real and complex causes of public corruption in Sydney. It is probably impossible to write a “snuff” story without reproducing the allegorised and mystified construction of the world already inscribed in the media and other texts. I am reminded of Dorothy Green’s warning about the application of allegorical modes of thought to “real” situations.³ Benny Catchprice is in no sense a typical teenager, but in the melodramatic world of *The Tax Inspector* he does become the “type” — in Lukacs’s sense — of a wounded generation. Perhaps it is better not to think of sixteen-year-old kids from the western suburbs as either angels or devils - even if they do wear *Judas Priest* t-shirts. As Raymond Williams warned years ago,

I do not think of my relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, as masses; we none of us can or do. The masses are always the others, whom we don't know, and can't know. Yet now, in our kind of society, we see these others regularly ... They are here, and we are here with them. And that we are with them is of course the whole point ... Masses are other people. There are in fact no masses, there are only ways of seeing people as masses.⁴

Carey has always sailed close to the wind with the relationship between his art and advertising, packaging and promoting his novels with consummate skill, while passionately condemning the commodification of art and experience. The problem of the relationship between a morally and politically incisive art and the commodification of the novel by corporate publishing is an important theme in recent debates about post-modernism. Fredric Jameson describes the “effacement ... of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture”. It is marked by “the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the ... whole ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film.”⁵ For critics on the left like Terry Eagleton and

Dan Latimer, the postmodern “dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production” empties it of its political content and prevents art from fulfilling its traditional role in “educating the moral sensibility”.⁶ In striving for a fiction that is morally incisive while flirting with the narrative forms of popular culture, Carey has placed his feet firmly astride this problem: he has tried to make a novel of high moral seriousness by **bricolage** from certain popular cultural forms. It must be said, however, that Carey has not always mastered these discourses by using them as self-consciously or deconstructively as he might have done. There will be some — especially feminist — critics who will take issue with his failure to do so.

Carey has subverted some of the structures that characterise media reports of cases like the Anita Cobby murder. One of the reasons why the Cobby murder aroused such intense public interest was that Anita Cobby was an icon of the feminine woman: she was a faithful wife and a nurse, and had been a beauty queen.⁷ Carey’s narrative is violent, but he avoids using it to reinforce these particular values. Maria’s child is born as Benny holds her at gun point in his cellar beneath the concrete floor of Catchprice Motors. But Carey’s heroine is Greek, not Anglo-Celtic, the father is a married man, and she does not particularly want to have his child.

In other respects, however, Carey’s account of the attempted rape does reproduce the structures of news reports which, like pornographic texts, present violence through the rapist’s eyes and objectify his victim. This is so in the final scene of the novel, which is observed partly through Benny’s eyes. Carey seems strangely at one with Benny here in his insistence on a big finish. In labour, Maria Takis is a cross between a monstrous De Kooning woman and a Roy Lichtenstein cartoon: “She had an industrial strength bra with white straps. He was shocked by how her stomach stretched, by the ragged brown line down her middle, by the size of everything, the muscles in her legs ... She had buckshot wounds in her arms and thighs” (273). Benny responds to Maria’s naked babe like a movie vampire — his instinct is to make it his own, presumably in the same way his father “initiated” him — but in death he commands our pity, like a butterfly smashed by a car. Despite its moral forthrightness, I believe this climax was ill-conceived and it is not something I would willingly re-read.

The Tax Inspector is vitally concerned with the social, moral and economic problems of contemporary Australia: the entrepreneurial

business culture of the 1980s, pornography, the unequal distribution of wealth, and Australia's economic vulnerability to foreign interests. But even more than *Bliss* it derives its imagery from the popular culture which is so often an agent of that corruption. It sees the problems of the real world not so much in black and white, as in terms of allegory — which can amount to the same thing. Narratives of sexual violence are seriously flawed as a vehicle for analysing corruption in contemporary life. As one commentator has observed in the case of Dennis Nilsen — the biggest multiple killer in British criminal history — “the only large general conclusion I could find was the already-established one that in some people, whatever prevents the majority of us from acting on Nilsen's ‘dark images’ is simply absent”.⁸

The central problem with *The Tax Inspector* is the connection it implies between child abuse and public corruption: the one cannot be taken as a metaphor for the other. The causes of financial and political corruption in Sydney are only tantalisingly suggested in figures like Jack Catchprice and his business associates, the criminal Wally Fischer, and a fictional Attorney General. Any one of these characters could have told us a great deal about the roots of corruption, but their full potential in the narrative is never really exploited — that would have resulted in a novel more like *Bliss* in its interest in the business world. By bringing the problems of political and business corruption into relation with child abuse, Carey's text creates the impression that the sexually abused teenager can be regarded as a symbol — **the** symbol — of corruption in Sydney. And this is to reproduce precisely the **misapprehension** created by the texts of popular culture, which also operate through a process of **bricolage**. It may therefore be significant that Carey has cited the Anita Cobby murder as his originating myth rather than the murder of police-informant and heroin dealer Sally-Anne Huckstepp, who was killed at about the same time. Wendy Bacon speculated in *The National Times* that the authorities invested their energies in the Cobby case to draw public attention away from the Huckstepp murder, which was linked to public corruption and not merely symbolic of it. Carey's fascination with incest in the western suburbs allows that particular can of worms to remain unopened.

The relationship between *The Tax Inspector* and popular forms of satire is also problematic. One of the signs of Jack Catchprice's corrupt character, for example, is that he drives a Jaguar, and Maria knows from experience that crooks drive Jaguars: “She had sat in John Sewell's herself, two years before, copying down the names of Jaguar owners as starting

points for tax investigations” (188). Sure enough, as if to confirm the “truth” of this proposition, a dinner guest at a ritzy Rose Bay function later confirms that Jack Catchprice is involved with “dirty money”. This problem is compounded by the closeness of Carey’s style to popular forms like the satirical television sketch. A world in which we can know a crook by his car phone is closer in kind to *The Gillies Report* than *Four Corners*; what it has to say about corruption in contemporary Sydney is often not news, but *Not the Nine O’clock News*.

1. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1976), p.ix.
2. Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p.138.
3. Dorothy Green, *The Writer, the Reader and the Critic in a Monoculture* (Townsville: Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, 1986).
4. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p.289.
5. Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, *New Left Review* 146 (1981): 53-92.
6. Terry Eagleton, Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism, *New Left Review* 152 (1985): 60-73; Dan Latimer, Jameson and Post-Modernism, *New Left Review* 148: 116-128.
7. See Angela Matheson, Violence Against Women: Pornography as news? *refactory girl* 38 (March 1991): 7-11.
8. John Lanchester, Strangers, *London Review of Books*, 13.3 (11 July 1991): 3-5.