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Greg Manning

WHAT THE DICKENS?

Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs*. St. Lucia: UQP, 1997. 391 pp. ISBN 0 7022 2952 X

Jack Maggs is Peter Carey's version of the story of Abel Magwitch, the convict who early in Dickens's *Great Expectations* is transported to New South Wales, where he becomes the mysterious patron of the central character, Pip. But Carey's novel does not tell the story which that bald description might lead you to expect. Indeed, far from filling in Magwitch's "missing" New South Wales years,¹ the main narrative of *Jack Maggs* never sets foot in the colonies: it opens with the old lag's return to England in search of his

protégé, and it closes when they meet. Carey's story thus occupies a *notional* site in Dickens's narrative, but one which does not actually appear in Dickens's text, since in *Great Expectations* we meet the returned Magwitch only when he meets Pip. Taking up the story in this way, at a point which is still *within* Dickens's tale, requires that Carey rewrite Dickens, both before and after the moment of Magwitch's return. In short—to borrow an image which takes on increasing significance as the narrative proceeds—Carey can be said to have jemmied an opening into Dickens's novel and taken his pick of the contents. To complete the theft and mark the new property as his own, he renames the key personages (which lets him depart as he chooses from Dickens's story), but as it is also important that the principals be instantly recognisable, he gives them names which are very close to the originals. Hence Abel Magwitch becomes Jack Maggs, and Pip—Philip Pirrip—is Henry Phipps.

Nor are Magwitch and Pip the only familiar figures. When Maggs reaches Phipps' house to find his boy gone, he takes a situation as footman in the place next door. On the first night in this new home who should come to dinner but the most celebrated young novelist in London, Charles Dickens himself, also thinly disguised by a new name, "Tobias Oates." During dinner Oates performs a mesmeric cure on Maggs, ostensibly to rid him of a crippling *tic douloureux* but really to impress the

guests, and during this treatment he disturbs some of Maggs's dark secrets. When Maggs pursues him to find out what he has given away, Oates bargains with him for more such sessions, in the course of which he steals the rest of Maggs's story. Thus, having stolen Dickens's characters, Carey offers us a Dickens who stole them himself—from the character Carey has invented.

Each night, as he waits for Phipps's return, Maggs breaks into the young man's house and by the light of a single candle writes his life story for his "son" to read. At the start, especially, it is the story of an unlucky Oliver Twist, an orphan who was forced into burglary at the age of ten by his fostermother, Ma Britten, and who at 14 started a baby with his childhood sweetheart Sophina, only to see the child aborted by Ma. Later, after Sophina was betrayed by Ma's son Tom, Jack saw her condemned to hang, and after he confessed to the theft in a vain attempt to save her life, he was shipped to New South Wales. It is the tale of one who never stood a chance, who was born in the depths and kept there by the creatures around him, until he was consigned to a hellhole. Maggs's writing symbolically undoes his original crimes, in that he now breaks into a rich man's house and leaves something—a real treasure—his story. But it is not a gift his "son" has the capacity to value.

Carey's story is thus a very different one from Dickens's, told from a

different point of view and with a different set of priorities. Partly as a result of these differences, there are times when the forced marriage of the old and the new in *Jack Maggs* confuses the moral implications of the narrative. In *Great Expectations* the adolescent Pip is sometimes a pompous twerp—his vanity is greatly wounded when he finds out that his money comes from a convict—but he does come to learn humility and the true meaning of human worth. In Carey's tale, however, Maggs has wasted his kindness on someone more like Dorian Gray than Philip Pirrip, a soulless parasite who preys on servants and children, and devotes his generously provisioned hours of leisure to pornography and debauchery. He may have all the external things that the young Maggs did not, but he has none of Maggs's inner worth. Clearly, Phipps's putrid soul reflects Carey's democratic Australian contempt for inherited wealth and privilege, but the problem is that it is Maggs who has taken—stolen?—Phipps's destiny, Maggs who has here committed the Sin of which the novel accuses Tobias Oates, of tampering with another human soul. It is not easy to feel sympathetic towards Henry Phipps, but the fact remains that he, and his victims, may well have been better off had he been left at the forge. The problem, I suspect, emerges from Carey's literary conceit: Dickens in *Great Expectations* has no in-principle quarrel with the idea of a rich man using his money to let a poor boy become a gentleman, but Carey the

twentieth-century Australian is intensely alert to the irony of Maggs devoting his life to replenishing the class that banished him (in the end, Phipps literally becomes the image of Maggs's nightmares). Carey seems to intend that in the novel's hierarchy of burglars Maggs should be recognised as the "honest thief," who steals only silverware, and who was in any case forced to go stealing by his wicked stepmother. But Maggs has stolen Phipps's destiny with money, and that act has consequences which render it as black an abortion as any of the others we witness in the novel, as black as Ma Britten's theft of his and Sophina's baby, or as the abortion that kills Lizzie Warriner. Carey *has* to saddle Maggs with this abomination, to make him make Henry Phipps what Phipps becomes, because Maggs is Magwitch. But Maggs is not Magwitch—not enough. And the 1990s does not accept what the 1860s did. The consequence is a serious fracture in the moral implications of the novel.

Another split develops from Tobias Oates, Carey's version of Dickens. Oates is a compulsive performer, an occasional stageplayer who enjoys tricking others by sleight of hand and disguise; he is also systematically deceiving his wife with his sister-in-law, and he deceives Jack Maggs about his motives for mesmerising him, even to the extent of keeping two records of the sessions, two sets of books, like any other producer of dodgy accounts. His totem in the novel is deception:

in the parlance of the day, *he* is the "magsman."² Yet this man must one day go on to write a novel of the stature of *Great Expectations*. Carey tries to reassure us of Oates's genius and his fierce commitment to his writing, perhaps to show that it is possible—to adapt Gadamer on Heidegger—for the greatest of writers to be the most petty of men. One passage, in which Oates starts to feel his novel coming on, seems to be offered as a sign that he has the true novelist's gift of a kind of second sight. I presume that Carey has felt something like this himself, which means that the passage has the added effect of bringing this vain and self-absorbed peddler of tales closer to his own author, Peter Carey:

... he was emboldened by the hard ache behind his eyes. He knew this pain of old. It was the exact same sensation he had when he first glimpsed the comic figure of old Captain Crumley. It was the distinct twinge behind the eyes, the tension in the tendons of the hands. When he entered the soul of Jack Maggs, it was as if he had entered the guts of a huge and haunted engine. He might not yet know where he was, or what he knew, but he felt the power of that troubled mind like a great wind rushing through a broken window pane. (154)

But simply showing us that Oates has talent, even genius, is not sufficient to accommodate his ultimate success. Besides, the novel *demand*s that he fail in his literary ambition—that his last, best hope as a writer should be as much of an

abortion as his last, best hope as a man, which was to acknowledge the fatherhood of his sister-in-law's baby. But he has to succeed, since his whole identity is predicated on his writing his version of *Great Expectations*, the book he calls *The Death of Maggs*. Without that book he would be anchorless, and *Jack Maggs* would lose its point. Carey's answer to this dilemma is to condemn Oates to silence about Maggs for 24 years—his life over again—so that his novel appears in 1861, the year of *Great Expectations*, when we can imagine him a chastened and a wiser man, by which time Maggs has grown rich, old and content in Wingham, NSW, and has died.

Perhaps, then, the young Tobias Oates is to be compared as a novelist to the young Peter Carey, in that both saw their babies aborted (this is on the public record; Carey has written a "therapeutic" essay on the matter), both have stolen stories, and both have felt the novelist's thrill of penetrating another soul. Carey, we might note, also had to wait thirty years after his child was aborted before he could write *Jack Maggs*.

Around the core narrative of Maggs and Oates, Carey arranges a population so mean and venal that they make *Jack Maggs*, in its ardent Pom-hating, by some distance his most contentedly Australian novel. Based now in New York, imagining London, Carey seems to find Australia much easier to like from a

distance. Apart from Oates and Phipps, we have: Percy Buckle, the cowardly little former grocer who is decent to Maggs at first but whose fundamental smallness of soul emerges when the "footman" bests him in love; Oates's wife Mary, a woman of granite resolve and no poetry who is prepared to abort her sister with poison rather than see her give birth to her own husband's baby; Lizzie, the doomed sister, enchanting in muslin but fundamentally thoughtless and irresponsible; and least subtly of all Ma Britten, the slattern who sent Jack out stealing and who aborted his baby. Mother England, who kills the unborn, enslaves the children, and banishes the youth. The only characters for whom Carey has any time at all are the ones whose destiny is in Australia, Maggs himself and the splendid Mercy Larkin, the darling bud of May who finally persuades Maggs that New South Wales is his true home. The last page of the book summarizes their life together in Wingham, prosperous, sunfilled and content, all money and sport. Lucky countryfolk.

As is always the case with Carey, the experience of reading *Jack Maggs* is very easy to enjoy. Perhaps too easy: the temptation to sit back and relax the critical faculties is strong. The intriguing story kicks along at a rattling pace, the many villains are colourful, and Dickens *aficionada* have the added fun of recognising characters and scenes as they go. Like the old serialist, Carey enjoys ending his chapters with a surprise or a

cliffhanger, and he gets plenty of practice: on average, there is a new chapter every four pages, and a new page for each chapter. Of course, the latter isn't Carey's decision, but all those bite-size chunks and all that white paper eventually develop the feel of a commercial mini series, constantly being interrupted by the sponsor. The slow, stately, inexorable rhythms which are so much a part of a Victorian novel never get the chance to develop: the book becomes less a simulacrum of a Victorian novel than a simulacrum of a simulacrum, a "Victorian novel" for twentieth-century attention spans.

But it would be unfair to take *Jack Maggs* to task for not being *Great Expectations*. 130 years on, it is a selfconsciously postcolonial narrative, both insofar as it is critical of the people and the forces who first condemned others to colonization, and insofar as it playfully makes to "steal" a great English novel and claim it as a distortion of a tale which truly belonged—or belongs, possession being nine points—to a colonial. At the very least it's excellent sport, and like the best sport it touches on serious matters, among which is its relation to "canonical" English literature. There is at present pressure, in Australia and elsewhere, to curtail the dissemination of the literature of previous centuries in favour either of writing from emerging nations and other culturally underrepresented groups, or of contemporary cultural studies.

The pressure is perhaps intensified just now by the felt need to "sever ties with Britain" which often comes with commitment to the idea of a republic. The "opposition" in this debate are often caricatured as neo-Leavisite traditionalists, whose aim is to imbue young colonials with a reverence for the "mother culture" and a properly dismissive attitude towards their own. Novels such as *Jack Maggs*—others include Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Barbados), Ian Wedde's *Symmes Hole* (NZ) and Beryl Fletcher's *The Iron Mouth* (NZ)—suggest a wiser course which that simple opposition excludes. Their engagement with the books that have helped to make postcolonial cultures what they are, and what they are thought to be, may be irreverent, it may be iconoclastic—it may, to some, amount to misreading, but if so it is the "misreading" which Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, placed at the heart of modern literary production. As such novels show, the way forward is neither to deny nor exclude the cultural past, but to engage critically with it, thus to create the new.

Notes

1. That task was performed in 1982 by Michael Noonan in a little-known novel called *Magwitch* (London and Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton), and by the ABC in a television mini series of the same name.
2. A street swindler, or confidence man. The OED quotes *The Town* of 27 June

1838, the year after the events of this novel: "a magsman must of necessity be a great actor and a studious observer of human nature." In Australia, a "magsman" is a storyteller or raconteur.

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Kathy Anderson

A QUEER PRACTICE

Dean Kiley. *and that's final*. Sydney: BlackWattle Press, 1995. 154pp. ISBN: 1 875243 19 4.

when we say we're here
and we say we're queer
your dicks will all drop off
every last gay and lesbian of you
and you will be fossils

Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Failing that, be paranoid.
("Ladies Gentlemen" 145)

and that's final, Dean Kiley's first collection, is the practice of queer. The disruption of linearity, straightness and fixed identity that characterises queer practice is examined in the collection by the analogy between queer communities and the Net. Both are constantly shifting. The Net users urge to make

up for their loss of corporeality by emphasising identity and personality (8) has led to an "explosion of introductions ... self-summaries and unsolicited life histories" (8). There is a "slippery mobility" about these proliferating identities, as "people joyride in someone else's identity/name/address, holiday in alter egos, develop interesting voices and often find themselves out of place or depth with people they'd never associate with in RL ('real' life)" (39). Navigating the Net can be risky: "when you're searching or exploring you may end up travelling without arriving, especially if you set out without a Locator. Never just trust to chance. For that matter, never (fully) trust anyone you meet on the way: always remember they can be whoever and whatever they want, since they're only words" (121). The advice applies equally to navigating this text, and the queer communities it documents.

The advice is given by the (part-time) narrator who opens and closes the text with stories of Net parties, and who appears throughout in the brief Net fragments which precede each story as well as in other stories. He knows the people he meets in the Net "in real time"; they are the characters we meet in the other stories. The narrator and other recurrent characters, and the connections between them, link the seventeen structurally diverse stories in this self-reflexive collection. (The narrator reflects on his role in the first story, "Still Unfinished"), when he steps