

DIGGING INTO THE PAST, EXPLORING THE PRESENT: RICHARD FLANAGAN'S *GOULD'S BOOK OF FISH*: A NOVEL IN TWELVE FISH

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Abstract – This paper will analyze the ‘historical’ novel *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) by the Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan with the aim of reflecting upon the power of the creative word as a means to forge reality, shape identities, mask or unmask truths, and also to prefigure a different, alternative world order based on commonly negotiated and thus shared values. The postmodernist revisiting of the traditional genre of the historical novel does not compromise the postcolonial commitment of the writer: Flanagan’s incursions into the Australian colonial past are informed by his concern for urgent social and political causes which has characterized his unswerving fight against all systems of inequality and exploitation. In his novel, the subversion of the linear causal relation of events which calls into question the truthfulness and objectivity of history, together with the foregrounded metanarrative reflection on the art of writing, contribute to the revisiting and re-discussing of the myth of progress and the cult of rationality at the very roots of Western civilization and of its imperialistic enterprise. Flanagan’s ‘anti-historical’ historical novel tackles urgent questions about modernity interrogating the founding narratives of the Australian national identity, in order to explore the uncontrollable and shifting areas of the contemporary ‘transnation’ in which the traditional categories shaping subjectivities are disrupted. As the paper will demonstrate, the writer digs into the past of his nation not simply in order to unravel its hidden histories but to detect the profound, inextricable interconnections with the present across different times and spaces. Feelings and experiences that exist above and beyond historical contingencies and cultural differences represent the writer’s privileged area of investigation as they trespass upon conventional and artificial boundaries revealing what it is that makes us all human.

Keywords: Richard Flanagan; *Gould’s Book of Fish*; rewriting; history; colonial Tasmania.

1. The power of the Creative Word: Richard Flanagan’s committed writing

“There is so much in the world that divides us murderously – claims Richard Flanagan -, but you read a great novel and you’re reminded that you’re not alone, that what you share with others is bigger than what divides you” (Flanagan in Martinez 2009, p. 25).

The faith in the power of the creative word in literature, language and education as resisting a dominator paradigm and enhancing a partnership model of coexistence (Eisler 1987) based on sharing, mutual support and appreciation of diversity has always underpinned the Tasmanian writer’s intellectual career, finding a definite celebration in his literary achievements. Flanagan’s unswerving commitment to crucial social causes¹ in

¹ Among the major causes the writer has fought for, Flanagan has campaigned against the corruption of the Tasmanian Government, has polemically entered the debate on the “War on Terror” denouncing the perverse alliances and strategies of Western powers, has attacked the Liberal policies of “protection” of the Indigenous communities in the Northern Territories. Moreover he has harshly critiqued the destruction of native forests by the logging industry (see for example Flanagan 2007).

defence of all the marginalized and of an environment wounded by senseless acts of exploitation and destruction, expresses itself in his political activism and in his passionate participation in the contemporary intellectual debate through his awkward voice of protest and denunciation of injustices, violence and corruption. In parallel, his novels, and particularly *Gould's Book of Fish* which is the object of investigation in this paper, testify his firm belief that “[...] reading and writing books is one of the last defences human dignity has left, because in the end they remind us of what God once reminded us before. He too evaporated in this age of relentless humiliation – that we are more than ourselves; that we have souls. And more, moreover” (Flanagan 2001, p. 53)².

Flanagan's creative outpourings are thus to be conceived as part of his project of counteracting what he labels as “the Australian disease”, the conformity and acquiescence to power which, in its structural systems of control, has “desensitised a nation to the plight of others” (Flanagan 2011, p. 86), eroding the spirit of empathy and the generosity of a land traditionally supportive of all its “battlers”.

The powerful and successful political rhetoric which promotes ignorance and obscure truth, grounded in the promise of an apocalyptic liberation from the damned of the earth, the downtrodden, the refugees, all those who are stigmatized as different and disturbing, is openly contested by the committed writing of Flanagan who attacks old and new forms of tyrannies, whose affirmation and strength are grounded in the fear of “others”. The concrete answer to contrast such an authoritarian drift is, according to the writer, the act of “witnessing and questioning” (Flanagan 2011, p. 93) in order to dismantle prejudices and unravel lies and deceit, with the final aim of restoring a spirit of human sympathy and solidarity. The act of retrieving and re-reading the past is, in this respect, of fundamental relevance. Significantly, when asked to write a preamble to the Republican Constitution of Australia³, Flanagan elaborates a sort of romantic “national prayer” (Bradley 2003, p. 2) exhorting to find meaning in a common past united by the shared love for the land and the belief in liberty and truth: “We were born of a dreamtime that foretells our future, we arose out of a war that pitted a new world, fettered in chains against an old world fallen from the Southern heavens” (Flanagan in Bradley 2003, p. 4). In a visionary and most impressive afflatus, Flanagan makes the complex past of the whole country coalesce in the present, “for it is our history, both the parts of which we may be justly proud and those parts which are less comfortable which gives meaning to our present” (Bradley 2003, p.1).

2. Re-writing the past to explore the present: *Gould's Book of Fish* in the contemporary debate

Flanagan's whole literary production explores crucial phases in the history of the country which are at the very core of its contemporary tensions and contradictions. The conflicts of the present, the writer claims, can be overcome only through a collective effort to implement a culture of sharing against all systems of domination and oppression. *Death of a River Guide*, published in 1994, investigates Tasmania's past as a penal settlement. With his second novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), Flanagan rethinks the

² Following quotations from the novel are from the same edition and page references will be in brackets.

³ The Preamble Project was born out of a debate about the Australian Republic. Several writers were invited to write draft preambles to a Republican constitution which were supposed to synthesize the values, purposes and founding spirit of the nation.

immigrant experience in his country whereas *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006) revolves around the story of an innocent pole dancer who is considered a terror suspect, offering a meditation upon the post 9/11 world. With *Wanting* (2008) Flanagan gives voice to his fervent criticism of the “catastrophe of colonization” (Flanagan 2008, p. 256) and tackles the burning Aboriginal question by settling the story of the young black Mathinna within the context of a Victorian culture infected by the myth of its superiority and obsessed by the burden of its presumed civilizing mission. His most recent novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013), retraces the story of a flawed war hero who has survived the Death Railway, exploring the tragedy of wartime experience and its aftermath. The unswerving attention and preoccupation for a past too often obscured and distorted by its official narratives, a past investigated in all his works in its most contradictory and unpalatable aspects, comes to the forefront in Flanagan’s third novel, *Gould’s Book of Fish: a Novel in Twelve Fish*, published in 2001, which definitely marks the writer’s involvement in the present political and cultural debate and in social activism. The novel was nominated for the biennial Tasmania Pacific Region Prize, but revealingly the writer refused the prize because it was sponsored by the Tasmanian Forestry Commission which he repeatedly attacked for the cutting down of old-growth forests. With the recognition of the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize, the novel confirmed Flanagan’s status as an internationally acclaimed literary name attracting the critics’ enthusiastic praise for his visionary re-imagination of history, the word “masterpiece” appearing often in critics’ comments.

If it is true, as Kate Mitchell remarks, that “in recent decades, both novelists and historians have returned obsessively to the story of the European ‘settlement’ of Australia” (2010, p. 254), Richard Flanagan’s attention for the past of his country has to be properly contextualized. Flanagan’s historical novels are all the more challenging and disturbing because they tackle urgent and inescapable questions about the contemporary world and specifically about the present and future of Australia and Tasmania. For the most part set in the XIX century, *Gould’s Book of Fish* investigates Tasmania’s first modernity at the footnotes of the history of the British Empire, in order to reconsider its present ambivalent and contradictory modernity, still haunted by the phantoms of its past confinement and its present underdevelopment and isolation, longing for a progress which often reveals itself destructive (Flanagan 1997b, p. 155).

His re-imagining of Tasmania’s past, in order to foster a different modernity for the country’s future, is to be set within the lively and controversial diatribe raging around the question of conservation versus development. Moreover, it also stands witness to the still vexed question of the impact and consequences of the dramatic colonization in terms of the genocide of the Aborigine population, the gratuitous violence of the colonizers and the fundamental failure of the sustaining values and myths of the Western civilization, a critical re-reading of the past which has been fiercely contested by revisionist historians and intellectuals, headed by Keith Windshuttle, who vigorously denied the “black armband” view of history⁴. Flanagan’s novel enters the debate through the shocking, vivid and dispassionate representation of the most outrageous aspects of the imperial enterprise with its gratuitous violence and the degeneration of the “Idea” standing at the back of it. The fetishization and manipulation of such a history by the grand narratives of the Empire

⁴ The term “black armband” was first used in the 1990s by the historian Geoffrey Blainey in order to categorize an approach to Australian history, inaugurated by Henry Reynolds in the 1980s, which emphasized the negative aspects and consequences of British imperialism in terms of exploitation, dispossession and genocide of the indigenous peoples.

and the distorted foundational myths of the new country, legacy of its past, are constantly foregrounded in the novel.

Despite the undeniable advancements in the process of reconciliation with the indigenous communities⁵, the Australia of the liberal Prime Minister John Howard, whose political terms span from 1996 to 2007, strived to preserve an Anglo-Australian identity denying all contributions of cultural “otherness”, isolating the country from South Eastern Asia and bending its policies to the American imperialistic projects. The professed state policy of multiculturalism, celebrated and promoted for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games to envision a new country ready to embrace and represent not only its Anglo-Celtic settler population but its indigenous cultures together with the numerous ethnic groups of Asian and European migrants, sounds like an empty label. If it was supposed to inaugurate a new direction abandoning racialist policies and marking the road for an appreciation of an enriching diversity, nevertheless multiculturalism has soon revealed its flaws, demonstrating its inability to answer the crisis in Anglo-Australian identity at pains with coming to terms with the shameful past of colonial violence against the Aborigines and embarrassed by the darkest aspects of its convicts’ history and by the collectively supported “cult of forgetfulness” (Dixon 1999, p. 107). In the post-Mabo years, when mass migrations redesign the tissue of Australian society and the country tries to redefine its role within the Pacific area facing the growing influence of the US and of the other raising powers, Flanagan offers his personal, dispassionate vision of the past in order to reconsider what “being Australian” means today. With his novel he foregrounds the necessity of rethinking and reshaping a collective identity as inclusive of “otherness” at large, through the honest and unbiased recognition and re-appropriation of an often shameful past.

3. An historical “anti-historical” novel

“I come from a society saturated in the past” – the writer claims – “and yet haunted by the suppression of history” (Flanagan in Wagner, 2002, p.15). Though deeply steeped in the history of Tasmania’s XIX century penal colony, the novel is conceived by its author as “anti-historical” (Flanagan in Wagner, 2002, p.15) because it does not pretend an historical veracity, but constantly foregrounds its unreliability. It reveals itself as an act of the imagination although, at the same time, it is imbued with a gritty, harsh realism which inextricably connects the past of the country to its present. Thanks to his studies in the field as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, Flanagan realizes that “the idea of history as a railway line with designated stops was completely inadequate. History in Tasmania is circular”, the writer claims, “that’s the way people tell stories. The past isn’t really a subject; it’s part of us, it’s the nub of us” (Flanagan in Wagner, 2002, p. 15).

The horrors of the colonial penal system, the abominations of the genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines, together with the degeneration of the Enlightenment project of progress and civilization, are explored in the novel as directly affecting with their legacy a contemporary society still panting to forge and assert its collective identity.

⁵ The process of reconciliation has marked significant steps from the mid to the late 1990s, starting with the Mabo sentence in 1992 which overturned the doctrine of the “terra nullius”, through the passing of the 1993 Native Title Act, the 1996 Wik sentence and the 1997 Reconciliation Convention.

The main narrator, William Buelow Gould, convicted forger transported in the 1820s to the notorious Sarah Island, last resort for the re-offending irredeemable outcasts of the Empire, fights against a world which has condemned him to silence by reclaiming his right to the “word”. Sealed off in a seaside cell he shares with a mysterious king and there awaiting his death, he writes his autobiography, the *Book of Fish*, on scraps of paper with most improbable inks, producing a marginalized convict’s counter-narrative which subverts the official, authorized version of the life in the penal colony enshrined in the history books and documents stored in the island’s Archive.

Recast upon the historical figure of the real forger and thief Gould, transported to the penal colony of Van Diemen’s land in 1825⁶, Billy is able to escape the control of the System through his art, forging in his narratives his own shifting and elusive identity, sliding like the fishes he captures in his coloured inks. As an unreliable narrator he challenges the reader to bypass the traps of misunderstandings, the gaps and sudden twists and swerving of subjects, the many digressions which foreground the instability and relativity of any fictional narration: the account of his experience as a convict at the antipodes is grotesque in its veracity, but simultaneously fantastical and whimsical. His presumed autobiographical narration is deemed by experts in the XXI century to be of questionable authenticity and dismissed as fraudulent whereas Gould himself states, in several occasions, that it is a subjective account not faithful to the truth. His narrative, moreover, is not original but recollected and rewritten by Sid Hammet, a contemporary Hobart fake antiques dealer, whose voice introduces the novel by explaining how he discovered the original *Book of Fish* illustrated by Buelow Gould in a junkshop. Sid Hammet, expert in reproducing fake antique furniture for tourists who are ready to buy “what they mistakenly thought to be flotsam of the romantic past, rather than what they were, evidence of a rotten present” (p. 5)”, and in falsifying the convicts’ records in the Archives Offices, is fascinated by the manuscript which contains 12 watercolours of fish and a cracked narrative of the convict. Once the book mysteriously dissolves in a puddle of water on a bar-room table (pp. 29-30) – this is the first definite turn of the novel towards magic realism - Sid feels compelled, by a sort of inescapable spell, to reproduce it out of his fevered memory, dispersed annotations and transcriptions. The book’s dazzling, gentle radiance blurs the frontiers between past and present, overcomes the boundaries between one chapter and the other activating in Sid Hammet an “inner, disturbing metamorphosis” (p. 15). Hammet’s ambiguous and disquieting narration ends up on page 45 with his improbable transformation in a weedy sea dragon leaving room for Gould’s tale with which the book proper begins, prefaced by a note that signals that the first 45 pages of Gould’s book are missing. The shrewd narrative framework, however, keeps on overlapping and intersecting the two temporal levels, obliging the reader to come to terms with a circular, endless vision of history. Gould introduces his life as a convict referring to his arrival in “Van Diemen’s Land as we then knew it – Tasmania, as its native-born now prefer it, shameful of stories of the type I tell” (p. 46), an impossible annotation for a XIX century convict which is meant to emphasize the intermingling of different narrative

⁶ Gould’s artistic paintings of the submarine fauna are kept in the State Library of Tasmania. See <http://www.linc.tas.gov.au/tasmaniasheritage/popular/allport/gould>. The novel includes at the beginning of each chapter colour illustrations of Australian sea creatures. The attention of the reader on the different colours in which the chapters are printed is captured by accurate descriptions of how the artist was able to get his inks.

voices and temporal dimensions and which foregrounds, from the very beginning of the novel, the crucial question of the role of the past of the country in the shaping of its present collective identity.

Through labyrinthine twists and switches, the convoluted narrative of Gould's life is pieced together spanning from his youth in London, his apprenticeship in America at the master bird artist John A. Audubon, his collaboration in Bristol with one of the most famous forgers, Thomas Chatterton⁷, to his arrest and final transportation to the atrocious Sarah Island where he survives by making himself indispensable, as all the other characters capitalize on his artistic gift for their own personal interests and projects of self-affirmation. Gould becomes the instrument for the prison surgeon Lempriere's failed ambition of being admitted to the Royal Academy of Science. In his flamboyant celebration of the Enlightenment rationality and its system of classification, Lempriere, who significantly speaks only in block capitals as a homage to his scientific pretence of objectivity, commissions Gould painted tables of fish for a taxonomic study of the colony's marine life. Paradoxically, the very system of knowledge to which he bows and devotes his feverish ambition reduces Lempriere's gigantic skull, once he is devoured alive by his pet pig, to a misclassified exhibit to be exposed with pickled Aborigine heads and studied by phrenologists as a token of the inferiority and degeneracy of the Aborigine race.

4. Crossing boundaries, undermining myths and re-forging identities

Resisting the fixity of pseudo-scientific categorization and challenging the pretence of objective knowledge, Gould dismantles the rigid lines of the fictional and fallacious geometrical order of the penal colony by constantly re-forging his own identity: "They diminish me with their definition, but I am William Buelow Gould, not a small or mean man. I am not bound to any idea of who I will be. I am not contained between my toes & my turf but am infinite as sand" (p. 107). Slipping and sliding from the confinement of his role identity, Gould, with his "undefinable" (p. 108), fluid and ever re-forging nature, crosses the boundaries of traditional forms of belonging and parameters of identification disrupting the apparently stable order of the system he is subjected to. The characters of the novel confusingly and disturbingly float into one another discarding any fixed notion of identity, Gould summoning upon himself all of them in a final climax. In the Afterword the reader is presented with the disquieting revelation that Gould is registered in the Tasmanian Archive Office as "prisoner number 873645; aliases Sid Hammet, 'the Surgeon', Jorgen Jorgensen, Capois Death, Pobjoy, 'the Commandant'".

In such a confusing visionary picture Sarah Island itself is transformed into the symbol of the failure and degeneration of the civilizing project of the British Empire, a parody of civilization itself, a "counter-colony" which mortifies the Enlightenment myth of progress in the name of which it was constructed. The most extreme and brutal conditions of life blur the boundaries between the gaolers and their victims making them all captives of the violence and degeneration of the system. Hierarchies are disrupted by

⁷ The novel is disseminated with references to historical characters which create that illusion of historical veracity which the writer calls into question and definitely disrupts.

shifts in power relations and positions of control: the escaped convicts turn into bushrangers ready to vindicate the inhuman treatment previously suffered; freed convicts become cruel captors, persecuted Aborigines mimic the white man's violence longing for positions of power (Jones 2011, p.124). Alliances between victims and perpetrators fluctuate and recompose themselves anew disrupting the Commandant's megalomaniac plan to reproduce the civilization of the Empire on a remote island at the antipodes. An impenetrable and disquieting lunatic, protected by a smiling golden mask which he constantly wears hiding his feeble traces of humanity, the Commandant is obsessed by his dream of creating his empire risking the implosion and definite destruction of its small society. A railway going nowhere in a circular obsessive and useless motion penetrating the Tasmanian bush together with the pretentious Mah-Jong Hall, deserted by its potential gamblers and gradually decaying, are the visible signs of his failed enterprise conducted at the expenses of the island and its people. The Commandant's ambitious oeuvres are financed by extravagant and dangerous dealings with Japanese loggers who unscrupulously proceed to the deforestation of the land whereby part of the continent is exchanged for a fleet of Siamese girls. His hallucinated aim is that of forging the penal colony as "the product of his imaginative will" (p. 179) enacting the model proposed by Miss Anne, whose letters are the most feverish and infatuated celebration of the founding myths of the Enlightenment. After the death of the lady's brother, former English officer of the island, the Commandant steals his identity and reshapes himself as the new ruler of Sarah Island. Miss Anne's letters addressed to her brother, rich in the description of the new European modernity, are thus translated into a physical reality not only through the construction of buildings and railroads, but by the symbolic replication of her written words on the walls of the Great Mah-Jong Hall. Fascinated by the power of words to create an alternative world, the Commandant stubbornly transfers the model of the European modernity to an alien context with the inevitable consequent failure of the project, powerfully embodied by the gradual decay of the buildings and the deterioration of the painted words. After a sudden blast of growth, the island is doomed to collapse in a state of decay, its useless railway, symbol par excellence of order and progress, standing as the paradigm of futility, destruction, and hallucination. The final apocalyptic vision of the island devoured by the fire represents the visual climax of the insensate violence and folly of a system which exploits and dehumanizes its people ruining the natural resources of the land.

The ambiguities and compromises of the colonial society reverberate in present complacencies and in the unbridled individualism at the roots of contemporary social and economic structures. The XIX century penal colony was victim itself of a brutal, inhuman state-imposed system which encouraged individualism and self-interest as a strategy of survival: convicts kill and decapitate the indigenous peoples, the Aborigine Tracker Marks works for the redcoats identifying escaped prisoners and illegal bushrangers; Jorgen Jorgensen, the prison clerk, once a revolutionary, betrays his fellow convicts erasing their brutal treatment and their sufferings in his official fictional version of the colony's history (Jones 2011, pp. 124-5). Flanagan's confrontation with a past of institutionalized violence and terror is aimed at denouncing the legacy in the present of the Enlightenment project of which the Tasmanian colony was an experiment. Complicities, lies, acquiescence affect the contemporary society blinded by the celebration of civilization, progress and rationality: "we all make our accommodations with power – Gould claims at the end of the story – & the mass of us would sell our brother or sister for a bit of peace and quiet" (p. 442). *Gould's Book of Fish* thus interrogates the past of the country to explore its present in order to encourage a radical social change for the future. As Jessie Shipway argues, the

writer subverts linear development and drops causal connections in order to create a fictional past that can become “the alternative future for a non-fictional present” (2003, p.44).

The postmodern pastiche, with unreliable narrators, time shifts, interwoven and abruptly interrupted narratives, a convoluted and fragmented plot dominated by a scathing irony and a self-reflective, metafictional attention on the art of writing itself, is deliberately adopted as a subversive postcolonial strategy. This postmodern and anti-realist novel however skips from any excess of reflexivity and complacent self-indulgence in the untrustworthiness of words and relativity of truth in order to denounce, in a typical postcolonial attitude, “the systems of inequality and exploitation in the Australian present” (Jones 2011, p. 116). Calling into question the myth of progress and causal development as celebrated in linear historical narratives with their pretence of witnessing the truth, this subversive historical novel offers a disquieting picture of the degeneration of the Western project of civilization and progress and of its founding myths of rationality and control through the representation of the Tasmanian hellish “anti-colony”, where humanity, mutual respect and commonsense are substituted by uncontrollable greed, personal ambitions, lust for power and pure folly. The much revered bust with the shape of the bust of Voltaire found on the shore, symbol of the Western enlightened civilization, ironically betrays its failure by offering with its brandy temporary comfort to the convicts vexed by the inhuman system of oppression established in the penal colony by the white colonizers themselves.

5. The “fabrication of History”: the official master narrative and subversive counter-narratives

The fallibility of the pretence of objectivity in the representation of the past, the ambiguous relation between fact and fiction, the forging of artificial founding myths, the power of words to construct and deconstruct reality and identities, are major issues at the core of this dense and challenging novel which constantly shifts and reshapes itself anew as the *Book of Fish* Sid Hammet is captivated by: “[...] it sometimes seems so elusive, this book, a series of veils, each of which must be lifted and parted to reveal only another of its kind, to arrive finally at emptiness, a lack of words, at the sound of the sea” (p. 38). A book “that never really started and never quite finished [...] not at all the sort of open-and-shut thing a good book should be” (p. 16), a book which stems out from Gould’s confessed ambition and most sacred desire to expose that “the Word and the World were no longer what they seemed that they were no longer One” (p. 343).

The process of fabrication of history and of reality itself through the manipulation of words is magnificently exposed in the novel through the mysterious “Registry” which keeps the records of the life on the island. The Danish clerk, Jorgen Jorgensen, official voice of the Empire responsible for the archive of the penal colony, in telling his “tales” is moved by “repressed desires to betray the world in a more fundamental way, as he felt the world had once betrayed him by not being a book” (p. 286). His fictional reconstruction of the life in the colony obliterates the real sufferings experienced by human beings, epitomized in the images of jars containing the convicts’ preserved tattooed skin and of barrels full of the natives’ severed heads: “The world, as described by Jorgen Jorgensen in those blue-inked pages, was at war with the reality in which we lived” (p. 318), Gould claims. In his narratives he reinvented “all the barbarity & horror of our settlement as order & progress” (p. 318) thanks to the power of the word. Gould’s unauthorized,

subversive counter-narrative through his sketchy notes and paintings stands witness to the story from within, dismantling with its shifting nature any pretence of objectivity, but testifying with his personal, though unreliable and elusive narration, the real life of the desperate outcasts on the island, condemned to a hellish place of violence and degeneration.

The “openness” of the text, elusive and ever-changing as an oral narrative, is emphasized by the multiple levels of re-remembering and re-writing upon which *Gould's Book of Fish* is constructed. Slipped through time eluding the control of the official master narratives, though written out of Gould's first-hand experience, the book is however the fallible reconstruction of Sid Hammet's memory. If its unstable quality, with holes and fissures which can be differently filled in, calls into question the objectivity of the historical discourse itself (Pons 2005, p. 70), the novel however aims at offering a picture of reality as concrete and true as possible through the experience of individual and collective suffering, deployed in the detailed descriptions of torture, of the most perverted and insane forms of violence both against the body and the psyche of the oppressed. It is this silenced, shameful history that Gould is determined to stand witness to. In the “Record Room” he is confronted with a falsification of history in the official documents. From the shelves skulls of tortured human beings, collected as specimens for “scientific research” aimed at demonstrating the superiority of the white race, seem to stare at him “as if they wished me to make the past right” (p. 325), begging to “appease their endless suffering that went unremembered & unrecounted” (p. 325). Gould's attempt to redress the past right is doomed to failure. He escapes from the prison bringing with him the official records in order to organize a revolution headed by the mythical bushranger Matt Brady:

I worried that unless I did something, the lies I now dragged behind me would one day be all that remained of the settlement, & posterity would seek to judge those who had gone before [...] through the machine of the Commandant's monstrous fictions! As though they were the truth! As though history & the written word were friends, rather than adversaries! (pp. 346-347).

Brady's nature of an ordinary, selfish runaway rather than a revolutionary saviour will soon be revealed in the pages of his clichés-ridden diary and Gould's expectations of subverting the system by “telling the truth” thanks to the help of the convict hero will be partially shattered. At the end of the story the papers responsible for the falsification of history and for the construction of the glorious myths of the Australian legend are exposed as the comfortable inventions of a community in search of stable roots and of a respectable collective identity. In a incisive and effective scene they symbolically fuel the funeral pyre of an Aboriginal tracker: Twopenny Sal, the black woman, and Gould, the white convict, dance and sing around the fire in a symbolic act of retrieval and reaffirmation of their subjectivity, no longer entrapped by the classifications and stereotypical representations of the colonial master narratives supportive of the system of oppression and debasement of its many “others”. In a definite representative gesture of defiance, Gould gets rid of the “entire untrue literature of the past which had shackled & subjugated me [...], that had so long denied me my free voice & the stories I needed to tell” (p. 375). He re-appropriates his right to narrate his story in order to get free from the constraints and the traps of official false representations of himself reclaiming his own independent voice. Jorgensen's distorted and manipulated narratives depict a history that “would accord with expectation and not reality” (p. 317), a history at the service of the colonizers, functional likewise for the construction of the founding myths of the nation, inevitably constructed upon erasures and removals in a guilty collective amnesia. The horrors of the life on the frontier for all

the persecuted and the marginalized by the System are cancelled from official accounts. The violence of such an act, perceived by Gould as an insult to the sufferings of so many human beings, turns against its agent: Jorgen Jorgensen dies buried by the heavy books which contain his fabricated version of the colonial life on Sarah Island, stifled by the weight of its lies and falsifications.

6. Conclusion

The power of the word to conceal and alter reality constructing and deconstructing individual and collective identities is constantly exposed in the multiple narratives which intersect and stratify in the novel. If Australia, as Flanagan states, “is never a fact, but a dream each of us must make anew everyday” (Flanagan in Bradley 2003, p. 4), he invests literary writing with the crucial responsibility of investigating and re-imagining the world through a different use of language free from the constraints of conventional and stigmatized systems of thought. Stemming from the writer’s belief that “the only way people can go forward is by walking back into the shadows of the past” (Flanagan in McMahon 1998, p. 94), the retrieval of a still “unredeemed past” to be recognized in “our fellow humans suffering” (Flanagan in Bradley 2003, p. 4) plays a fundamental role in strengthening mutual support and understanding in the present for the construction of an alternative future of true partnership.

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