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Lion or Mouse? The Circus worlds of Salman Rushdie and Peter Carey

Paper presented at the "Fabulous Risk Circus Conference" Wollongong, Decmber 2006.
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It is, I suppose, a truism that circus in an international phenomenon. If we look at the otherwise quintessentially Australian documentary romance of Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Haxby's Circus* (1945), we find that when the small family affair brings in some money, it buys up a menagerie from Malaya, a German lion tamer, a French clown, a Russian ballet dancer, American gymnasts, a Japanese trapeze artist and that the finances come from an Italian dwarf who had clowned for the troupe before making it good in Hollywood movies.

However, there is a distinctly nationalist flavour to the story, based as it is on the author's first-hand experience of the real Wirth's circus and the show circuit of country towns across the Wimmera and Murrumbidgee region. When the Haxby outfit buys up overseas talent, it prides itself on a puritan, if sexist, ethos that is mocked by the Americans as provincial — no public smoking by women, no swearing by anyone — but a code which the Australian reader is obviously intended to take pride in as wholesome. Being an Australian troupe, drinking is of course condoned, but only in between shows. And no one likes the Japanese, it being still close to wartime.

This pull between local pride and international commerce is something I want to look at, as is the connection between circus and literature. My particular interest is in postcolonial cultural dynamics, and Helen Stoddart has observed that the circus has been part and parcel of the mechanics of empire, taking the exotic from distant colonies on tour around the world. Both circus and Orientalism, she notes,

> have their origins in Britain in the 1770s, moving towards increasing global expansion and pre-eminence in the nineteenth century…. the circus borrowed the colonial impulse to travel the world, discovering and exploiting new entertainment markets whilst selling itself in the West through increasingly popular shows. These represented the trophies of Western expansion, often within sensational and spectacular dramas reconstructing aspects of distant landscapes that formed the backdrop to dramatizations of Western military conquests in Africa, the Americas and Asia. (Stoddart 120).

If we look again at *Haxby's Circus*, we can see that it could not exist without Empire. The strong man is painted up as a Negro with a leopard skin loincloth; the horse-riders dress as cowboys and Indians; the dwarf has pretensions to class for having been a court favourite of Indian rajas, and the elephant handler is a sailor of Asian or Pacific bloodline referred to by some as a 'Kanaka'. The roustabout is nicknamed Lord Freddie and turns out indeed to be the simpleton offspring of English aristocracy left to eke out a living in the colonies. It is not hard to see possible readings of the novel as asserting the equality of Australian circus with any metropolitan company, just as it is relatively uncontroversial to see in its performances a discourse of taming the foreign wild and subduing the native, or at least confining the native to an exotic specimen along with dwarves, hunchbacks, and gipsy fortune tellers. This link to the colonial world and its discourses goes back to Andrew Ducrow staging Eastern spectacles at Astley's in London of 1830 and Jules Léotard adding a diorama of events in India to his Paris trapeze acts in

1861, as well as to the cult of physical fitness supposedly developing and proving Europe's superiority in the world (Tait 13).

Peter Carey takes up this colonial function of circus and considers it self-reflexively. In the climate of 1970s awareness of Third World struggles against new modes of imperialism, he examines Australia's post-war turn to Hollywood and "American Dreams", seeing how Prichard's honest country farmers and their suburban counterparts are at once an audience watching the world show and a curiosity at the margins of and on show to the global powers. After a braggadocio epic of national yarning tradition in *Illywhacker*, Carey with bitter humour depicts Australia as a freak show or menagerie, caged for the entertainment of Americans and Japanese businessmen. (This tension between restlessness, escape and entrapment is well analysed by Paul Bradley.) Later, from watching the emergence of activist and proudly local theatre in Melbourne and the re-emergence of a national film industry across Australia, Carey turns again to the circus metaphor to allegorise the neo-imperialist power-plays at work in and around his homeland (Willbanks 15). By this time, however, he has left Australia to work in the belly of the American beast.

Salman Rushdie, another colonial writing about his country's drive towards self-determination, talks about the cultural construction of a nation in various forms of showmanship: trading on ancient epic tales to validate political movements, wandering vendors of stereoscopic photo views of Delhi, national film-making, storytelling. His narrating protagonist in *Midnight's Children* records how the departing colonial power

pulls a cultural con-job on India's elite, selling them tea parties and sundown drink rituals along with raj real estate, leaving them as a kind of curiosity show of performing monkeys. Towards the end of the book, Saleem escapes his involvement in the war over Bangladesh's independence by joining a circus. This troupe is a working-class collective living in the slums of the national capital until it is bulldozed as a threat to Indira Gandhi's power, just as she cleared slum areas to put on her own circus for the international Asian Games. More recently, Rushdie has returned to his family's origins in Kashmir to base his analysis of regionalist, nationalist and internationalist political violence on folk traditions of circus.

Writers have not infrequently dramatised their art by metaphors of physical performance. Often this claims a kind of public risk that they clearly feel is lacking in a private, sedentary occupation, but we can also think that writing is in fact a physical act of the 'thinking hand' that gives one a stiff neck and so on, and it results, if all goes well, in some kind of public exposure that puts the individual person at risk of being lionised or critiqued through a misleading haze of personae not all necessarily flattering. Thus Yeats speaks of writing poetry as a sort of perilous stilt-walking or animal taming, while Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958) refers to the poet as

> Constantly risking absurdity
> and death
> whenever he performs
> above the heads
> of his audience
> the poet like an acrobat
> climbs on rime
> to a high wire of his own making." ("Constantly risking absurdity")

Such fables of risk abound in children's tales of running off to join the circus, but the dream of adventure dramatised on the poet's page as physical risk attests more to the desire for recognition not generally accorded to the usually safe act of writing and the private adventure of the mind. Salman Rushdie gives us his version of the high wire act in a veiled comment on his own dramatic displays of virtuoso technique:

> Shalimar the clown's signature trick on the high wire was to lean out sideways, increasing the angle until it seemed he must fall, and then, with much clownish playacting of terror and clumsiness, to right himself with gravity-defying strength and skill. Boonyi had tried to learn the trick but gave up, giggling, after many windmilling failures. "It's impossible." she confessed. "The impossible is what people pay to see," Shalimar the clown quoted his father, and bowed as if receiving applause. "Always do something impossible right at the beginning of the show," Abdullah Noman liked to tell his troupe. "Swallow a sword, tie yourself in a knot, defy gravity. Do what the audience knows it could never do no matter how hard it tries. After that you'll have them eating out of your hand." (93)

A different, and perhaps more generally accurate, metaphor for writers occurs in the work of Canadian writer Eli Mandel. For him, the poet's longing to break the fetters of technique and the cage of silence around solitary writing makes him a potential escape artist:

> Houdini
>
> I suspect he knew that trunks are metaphors,
> could distinguish between the finest rhythms
> unrolled on rope or singing in a chain
> and knew the metrics of the deepest pools
>
> I think of him listening to the words
> spoken by manacles, cells, handcuffs,
> chests, hampers, roll-top desks, vaults,
> especially the deep words spoken by coffins
>
> escape, escape: quaint Harry in his suit

> his chains, his desk, attached to all attachments
> how he'd sweat in that precise struggle
> with those binding words, wrapped around him
> like that mannered style, his formal suit
>
> and spoken when? by whom? What thing first said
> 'there's no way out'?; so that he'd free himself,
> leap, squirm, no matter how, to chain himself again,
> once more jump out of the deep alive
> with his chains singing around his feet
> like the bound crowds who sigh, who sigh. (*Crusoe*, 70)

Turning writing into risk continues the Romantic fable of the superiority of the poet as free spirit over the bound crowds of everyday banality. Perhaps in reference to the ironies of deconstructive criticism pulling the rug out from under theoretical underpinnings of criticism, certainly in a context of seeking some kind of balance between imprisoning belief systems and "uncertainties about the nature of the universe" (54), Rushdie envisions a mystic moment of art breaking free of craft, of sublime harmony with the elements despite and even because of theoretical iconoclasm. Shalimar, his high-wire clown, has such a natural feel for his rope that it is like sensing a pathway through the air, and he dreams of escaping the limits of his act to 'fly' by walking unsupported on traceries of sky: "Sher Noman was initiating his son into a mystery. A rope could become air. A boy could become a bird. Metamorphosis was the secret heart of life." (55-6).

Shalimar is a rope-walker. As such, in an English-language novel, he is framed by European intertexts such as Nietzsche's figuring of aerial actors as representing liberty, the human spirit transcending mundane ties: "The male rope-walker is Apollonian in a higher order of being, but he ultimately falls after his release from the hell of false beliefs" (Tait 36). In Rushdie's version, the Apollonian balance of a reasonable sharing community collapses under the impact of globalised wealth and terror, and Shalimar

descends into a Dionysian violence that is the more terrible for being iron-like and relentless. However, the associations of transcendence lead the writer himself into a moment of magic realism that overbalances what is an already teetering act. The title of Rushdie's novel has a double meaning: the clown is both the man, Shalimar, who turns to political violence from motives of personal revenge, and, since Shalimar is the name of the famous gardens that give the vale of Kashmir its legendary aura, it is also Kashmir, pratfalling in tragic farce for the world's horrified entertainment. While we might admire the awful dedication of a terrorist to his vocation and see some horrific absurdity in the random slaughter of innocents, the link between terrorist and clown is not exactly a comfortable equation, and when a book relying on its wry to passionate commentary on real regional and global violence resorts to having its un-clown-like Shalimar rope-walk into the air to escape from an American prison, the story overreaches itself.

Salman Rushdie himself tends to play the acrobat-clown who defies death by juggling on a high wire of satiric fable, ridiculing the puritanical decree of drab uniformity with the colourful tatters of a harlequin and signalling the tragedy of violent power in Pierrot face-paint and pratfalls. The combination of balancing, mutability, daring the impossible makes artists, for Rushdie, born subversives. As his latest book illustrates, however, subversion can fall in various ways: overreaching into passionate love, or refining into a hard purity of terror. The circus is an affront to fundamentalist life-denying solemnity, but it is also the home of idealists; and idealists can be dangerous people. They take our everyday and turn it into fabulous risk, not as the illusionist trick of a magic show, but as

an extreme extension of our taming of pets, our trivial pratfalls, our ordinary balancing acts.

Like the circus performer, the writer always has the apparatus on display, and there is always some risk in pushing it to extremes, though we may think that this does not entail the kind of risks taken under the big top. In some circumstances, though, the writer/artist can adopt the fabulous to obfuscate risk (something that seemed to work for Rushdie in *Shame* but failed notoriously in *The Satanic Verses*). Equally, the risks involved may be anything but fabulous in their dreary or brutal actuality, though their outcome may well put the writer into fable. The very banal life of the prisoner awaits some poets (like Ana Akhmatova or Wole Soyinka) who do tread a kind of tight-rope, or writers who writhe in confines of tyranny or exile to configure the possibility of freedom (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for example). The prospect of a painful and humiliating death (as for Ken Saro-Wiwa, Victor Jara, Ana Politkovskaya) looms over those whose art speaks publicly against injustice. There is also the less life-threatening, but professional risk of a writer's public exposure with each book released. Again, Rushdie speaks of this indirectly in the wonderful fable of international photo-journalism, operatic love and rock stardom, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, where the lover/ artist puts reputation and soul on the line in each performance. We might say that Rushdie himself demonstrates the fabulous risk he writes of, when he rises to ever higher international exposure, moves to New York and crashes and burns with his novel *Fury*.

Peter Carey, somewhat in the same mode as Rushdie, has put himself onto the high wire of international literary showtime, also promoted by the Booker Prize and his move to the 'centre ring' of New York. Coming from white Australia, he does not run the same risks as an Indian of Muslim background, but he has mocked a few sacred cows of his own and incorporated aspects of dramatic performance into his writing, much like the poets mentioned already. In *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* he allegorises the arcane rituals of American high society that lie behind the easy-going image of US free-market individualism — rules of pecking order that remain always dangerously inscrutable to those not born into their world (365-7).

Peter Carey might be labelled an exhibitionist. He has put a country town on public show as a miniaturised model (*The Fat Man in History*), set a nation of characters on display in a tourist zoo (*Illywhacker*), floated a glass church up a colonial river (*Oscar and Lucinda*), indulged in demonstrations of mesmerism (*Jack Maggs*), and examined the drive to have one's art work hung around the world (*Theft*). Carey has used metaphors of card playing for the hazard of life and writing (*Oscar and Lucinda*), forgery (*My Life as a Fake*), banditry (*The True History of the Kelly Gang*), spinning lies as the art of both storytelling and constructing history (*Illywhacker*) and so on. He has attacked comfortable white narratives of triumphalist settlement of a new land (*Illywhacker, Oscar and Lucinda, Ned Kelly*), of Australian suburbia as a middle-class promised land (*The Tax Inspector*). In amongst his seemingly orthodox engagement with the key moments of Australia's cultural history, however, he has consistently questioned the imposition of imperialist power. In his historical fiction, this has been the sleight of hand of the

ideologies and narratives of British Empire, but right from the first collection of short stories in 1964 with its literal lifting the lid on Australian suburbia ("American Dreams"), he has questioned the influence of the beast in whose belly he now lives.

At the end of *Illywhacker*, Australia turns into a large caged exhibit, on show for the benefit of Japanese and American money. The colonial age of exhibiting captive natives from South Africa, the Americas, the Pacific, culminating perhaps in the St Louis Exposition of *** has taken on a neo-imperialist aspect determined by global corporate power. This is overtly, though still allegorically dramatised in Carey's least discussed and perhaps most political and inventive novel, *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. In a mix of South African history, Pacific Islands geography and US imperialism, he takes up in fabular mode the risky metaphor of circus life.

Carey's most recent novel, *Theft*, looks at the international art world, but continues to dissect the dubious morality of global consumption as led by the moguls of Japan and North America. In a sense, this is a safe bet for attracting naively nationalist Australian readers comforting themselves by blaming 'those bastards' over there, but it remains a sort of high-wire balancing act for a writer performing on the international stage and based in the big top itself. This becomes a metaphor for the neo-imperialism of America in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. Voorstand, a sort of Dutch-based Pilgrim Fathers utopia preaching animal liberation (n10, 57), has become a political and economic power, subverting the culture and self-government of nearby, smaller Efica. The symbols of

Voorstand's hegemony are the Sirkus —Mad Max's Thunderdome crossed with Disneyland — and a folklore of animals, especially Bruder Mouse.

Tristan Smith is an albino dwarf with a hare lip and crippled legs (31-2, 67), born into the role of privileged antagonist, court jester. (It is hard to avoid comparison to Oskar in Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* and there are echoes of Rushdie's narrator Saleem Sinai from *Midnight's Children*.) His appearance inspires pity and horror (37), but his size prevents him becoming a fully tragic hero; instead, he tells his story of growing up in his mother's radical theatre troupe from the edges of the action as a critical observer and mascot. He uses the strength in his arms to build a spider-like climbing act, linking him to the trickster Anansi figure from West African and West Indian fable and the wild man of European myth (73-5). Tristan is born in Efica to a Voorstand mother who actively supports Efican working-class self-determination in her alternative theatre company (6, 8). and an Efican horseback performer who leaves to find fame and precarious fortune in the Saarlim Sirkus.

Efica has been colonised in the past by both British and French in search of blue shellfish (34) and red cactus dye for Europe's textile industry — resources that have given their colours to the two political parties, one a labour-based nationalist party, the other a business-based party collaborating with Voorstand. Efican circus is a small-scale affair, it includes *voltige* horseback tricks (40-1), tumbling, a human wheel who recites a comic version of 'Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow while spinning around the stage and grinning (105), bits of Ibsen and Brecht, and folk theatre skits (64). Its language is soft

and its attitude self-mocking (51), it enacts a “Sad Sack Sirkus”, clowning, parodic, at once assertive of difference and diffidently acknowledging the dominant artform it attacks (103). In a passage redolent of Australia’s post-1970’s renaissance of cultural nationalism — the period in which Carey made his reputation — Efican provincialism is rhapsodised:

> Here in the islands of Efica there were circus, theatre, horses, solitude, conflict, battles you could imagine might be won. Here, working for peanuts in a shitty little tent on the edge of the crumbling coast of Inkerman, playing to hatchet-faced oyster farmers, you could forget the franchised Sirkus Domes and the video satellites circling above the ozone layer, and you could imagine that theatre could still change the destiny of a country. In Efica you could have the illusion of being a warrior in a great battle, and when you toured you lived with the others who shared the same illusion. When you toured, you performed as if art mattered. Doing agitprop under a petite tente you were inventing your nation’s culture. (77)

The theatre-circus collective of Tristan’s childhood conveys most of its political satire through Uncle Remus-like figures from Efican folk poetry: Bruder Rat and Oncle Duck (55), though many of these turn out to be adaptations of Voorstand culture absorbed over time via the mass communication systems of the larger power. Voorstand is a richer, more ruthless world in which socialistic ideals are scorned as mere illusions. Its Sirkus celebrates the individual and rewards luck, it sacrifices its performers in the interests of excitement after building them into international celebrities and it is plugged into tourist sales and media networks (50, 162, 164-8). It is colonising the islands of Efica: apart from the economic and political ‘fixing’, Efican caves are full of Voorstand communication cabling (33) and its politics is managed by the fictional equivalent of the CIA. Carey has in mind the rumours associated with the ‘dismissal’ of the Whitlam government (Willbanks 15-16).

Circus lends itself to allegorically doubled texts. To cite but one theorist, Tanja Schwalm, "unlike the carnival, the circus is both the world *and* the world turned upside down; it is both the everyday and the extraordinary." It is a 'heterotopia' of various acts, and contending interests (Schwalm 84-5). For the novelist, this multiple form entails certain risks. The apparatus of fable needs to be both conventional and simple enough for the reader to see the connections to the moral. Bears need to be cumbersome and a bit thick, donkeys stubborn, hares fast for the story to work. They might take on human qualities as well, as in some children's fiction, so that the bear becomes a slow scholar, the donkey a grumpy labourer, the hare a slick salesman, etc. But make them more complicated than that and you endanger the clarity of the theme. When, as in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, you create two societies with their own languages and histories, both mixes of recognisable regions of the world that are not in themselves overly familiar to most of the likely readers, and pepper your prose with coined words and footnotes (including a detailed history of Ducrow, a famous clown of Efica), you run the risk of spoiling readers' enjoyment of the fiction on the one hand and distracting them from the real-world messages carried in the allegory on the other.

Frank Herbert's *Dune* can get away with an entirety of fictive invention because it is a science fiction fantasy that does not pretend to more than some very general extrapolations from/to present earthly existence. Peter Carey's novel exists to show us the dynamics of post- and neo- colonial power but sets up so many trapezes and wires that we can find it hard to concentrate on the 'acrobat' characters who dramatise the theme for

us. It would not hurt to let a nappy be a nappy and a tropical downpour a monsoon; we don't need to have the dictionary reinvented for us into 'bandocks' and 'moosones' for us to get the flavour of a fictional country and appreciate that it is fictional. (Possibly it is Carey's realisation of this that leads him into what for me is the underwhelming non-fabular historical realism of his Ned Kelly novel.) However, as in *Dune*, we get used to the invented world and it is the epigraphal material that turns out to be as significant as the main narrative. Footnotes accumulate to tell us that Tristan narrates while on the run to explain himself to a Voorstand public and in doing so reveal to that people the nature of its cultural and political regime. Tristan has fallen foul not just of the espionage network of Voorstand by entering as an illegal migrant fuelled by rage at the assassination of his mother (222) and desire to meet his father (346-9), but by entering the Sirkus and subversively taking on the form of its icon the mouse, he has committed cultural sacrilege and been demonised. He is now a terrorist of the collective mind of power, demonised as an irrational non-human object (411, 414). It is not an accident that when mutant Tristan is given a voice via Voorstand microchip technology, his first lines are from Caliban (377).

The other risk attaching to the fabular world of Carey's novel is Rushdie's risk of the acrobat in overreaching. In *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* so many aspects of imperialism are put on show that the final impression is of a blur rather than a sharp analysis. Bits of South African apartheid mix with American surveillance technology infiltrating Australia. Traces of French colonialism in the Pacific (New Caledonia most probably) or the Indian Ocean (Mauritius? Madagascar?) cross with white treatment of

Aborigines in Australia. In a way, the complexity is a means of offering points of connection to as wide a range of readers as possible, and is potentially itself the theme, in so far as the book is about global networks of power. The risk of the fable, though, is that of the juggler who tries to keep all those plates spinning at once or too many balls in the air. Either some get dropped or we can't apprehend them all together, even though we might appreciate the scale of the attempt.

There is a risk in the fable being addressed to a Voorstand reader (6). This happens when Carey has moved to the US, and so needs to get at a new, powerful market as well as to keep his Australian readers. The double readership is a principal cause for the doubleness of the book's fabular mode (seen also in its binary Efica/Voorstand structuring). Tristan is always apologetic and distancing when he retails the disparaging views of his Efican world, but of course, the danger is that Voorstandish readers will not feel any sympathy for that world or recognise the image of themselves presented to them by an admittedly bizarre and compromised narrator (Willbanks 14). The danger is that the *real* readers of any 'Voorstandish' origins will be even less likely to see the point because of the complexity of its fabulation and their fabled lack of knowledge of the outside world, and (like the socially committed theatre of Tristan's upbringing) the book will end up preaching to the converted 'Efican' readership, who will be sufficiently familiar with the message not to need the sugar coating/ protective cover of fable. They may also be disheartened at the vision of political protest being confined to a fairly ineffectual subversion under cover of a clowning Mickey/Bruder Mouse disguise in the centre ring of the hegemonic culture. Carey, in conversation with Ray Willbanks, indicates that his

doubled narrative frame allows for an optimism that the story itself does not immediately communicate. (It is a problem Rushdie also addresses in relation to *Midnight's Children*)

> My novels tend to end at a speed that is a little breathless…. I feel that probably for the first time in my longer work I have an ending that opens up like a set of doors opening. The ending suggests that Tristan Smith has matured in the process of the story, that he will have, in fact already has had, a rich and rewarding life. (Willbanks 12)

Nonetheless, this is one of Carey's most stimulating creations; it can be enjoyed as a tale of filmic dramatic qualities, but it has the intellectual content that makes it a rich exemplar of theories of postcolonial cultural politics: of mimicry, othering, orientalism, nationalist opposition versus complicit subversion, and so on. Carrie Dawson has already made a useful analysis of the book along these lines. The footnote to the opening of Book Two from Tristan's polemical writings makes a point about economic controls of the entertainment industry remarkably prescient of the more recent debate over Australia's so-called Free Trade Agreement with the US:

> If we let ourselves imagine this is solely a question of military defence, we are deluding ourselves. Our greatest defense is our culture, and the brutal truth is — we have none. The terms of our alliance with Voorstand means we are prohibited (for instance) from placing a 2 percent tariff on their Sirkus tickets to subsidize out theatre. They call this unfair trade, yet we know that every ticket we buy to the Sirkus weakens us, swamps us further, suffocates us. If we wish to escape the vile octopus, our escape must be total. For some time we will need to be poor, defenceless and, yes, bored. (231)

There is the uncompromising Puritanism of a Taliban reformist in this text that the 'later' voice of Tristan modifies through his apologetic clowning shape-changing and reflective persona. Like Rushdie, Peter Carey offers a complex amusement that is also attempting serious social analysis, and, as in *Shalimar the Clown*, it is the circus metaphor that holds

its many small acts (freak show, horse riding, clowning, high-wire, spectacle) together as one big show — or at least as a competition between the one big show of Sirkus and the little nomadic "flea circus" performances of Efican troupes (117) that are sideshows to the main global event.

Peta Tait has suggested that via the self-critical reforms in contemporary circus, the circus has not become a sideshow, but rather, the sideshow has entered into the circus ring (Tait 138). If we look at Carey and Rushdie, themselves moving to metropolitan stages to do their literary cartwheels, and in the process showing up the conflicts and dramas of new nations and distant places and how they interpenetrate global spaces, we can perhaps see a vision at once terrifying and holding strange potential — a transformation in which the all the 'sideshows' of world politics, the clownish tragedies of remote locations and exotic passions, become the main event, revealing the things we have taken for granted and pointing to a new, difficult, fabulous risk of renewal.

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Pocket Oxford Dictionary defines 'circus' as a ring or "a travelling show of trained horses &c." Tristan's mother trains in the theatre's only circus act: riding tricks on horses. The Voorstand Sirkus, on the other hand, harking back to its religious idealist origins, outlaws animal acts altogether. Nonetheless, it does allow for giant models of its culture heroes — a duck and a mouse — to roam its cities.

Bradley:

"places that are simultaneously metaphorical and visceral"

"His worlds are dreamscapes where patterns and images of transformation and imprisonment recur, and his characters, invariable complex, contradictory and untrustworthy, move restlessly in search of escape."

Swift's Gulliver/ Tristram Shandy

"Carey sees culture as a sort of prison, like the birdcage in *Illywhacker*, a prison that the storyteller, whether novelist, ad man or historian, has a part in constructing. A sense of confinement underpins the restlessness of his characters." (664) But if the writer makes a prison, he can also unmake it, even though it in the process is making him as well. The writer needs the ring in which to perform; he can induce us to forget its presence for a while; he can draw our attention to it and thus to the artifice of his act; he can hide inside any number of costumes, but, like the ending of one of the Feu Follet's Shakespearean plays, once the narrator steps forward to speak to the audience, doffs his fancy dress, and steps off the stage, the show is over.

Once inside the mouse suit, Tristan "is free as never before, his new appearance making him noy just acceptable but desired. But at what cost to his own identity?" (665)

If the expatriate is made more aware of his own culture by virtue of being alienated from it, he has also to put on a clown act to pass in his new environment.

Carrie Dawson takes up the compromised and duplicitous situation of almost all the characters in Carey's novel. Tristan's mother is a Voorstander championing Efican self-determination; Bill Millefleur is an Efican who goes to work for the Voorstand Sirkus; Tristan's companion when he goes to Voorstand is not a man, but a woman in disguise who is an Efican but working as a secret agent for Voorstand intelligence (205); Tristan himself, is a dwarf Efican masquerading as the giant mouse-icon of Voorstand culture. She reads the novel as both a critique of academic scholarship (205) and an exploration of Said's idea in *Orientalism* (202-3) that the other is controlled by making it over into a travesty, an impostor, a false self and the possibility that such a discursive imposture can work the other way to destabilise any idea of a fixed original selfhood. There are comments implied about the ridiculous habit of white Australians pretending to British customs such as the white Christmas, and living as imitation Americans. I suspect a basic Australian anti-intellectualism behind some of the digs at the academic thesis machine (209), but there is as well a serious message akin to some critics of postcolonial theory,

that scholarship on writers and poetics can be a cover for imperialism or simply an ineffectual political irrelevance. And since the book is to a degree metafictional, the theme of complicity and imposture bleeds from inside to out to implicate the writer as well.

The colony is depicted as "a flea circus"

postcolonial identity in its very resistance to hegemonic culture is caught in the terms of its opposition and in oppositionality; only subterfuge and acceptance of interwoven cultures provides a way out, though it is not a clear route. On the way, "history is imagined into fiction and presented as theatre such that there can be no recourse to a prediscursive 'real' that is not constructed. Significantly, the performances put on by Carey's fictive Feu Follet do not demand or invite the willing suspension of disbelief. The cables, lights, and various props… are revealed in order that the stage on which the nation's culture is 'invented' may function as a medium in which to foreground the apparatus through which the culture of a colonised people comes to be staged as dependent or derivative." (207).

"any identity, Efican or otherwise, is enacted in the inter-articulation of what are often constructed as oppositional or incommensurable narratives." (206)

not a straight allegory, since the two locations are blurred and "have no recuperable referents" (209)

When we come to the end of the history cum autobiography, what we are left with is not a sense of the actor-author-terrorist-historian-simulacrum behind the mouse-mask, but a recognition of the masks that we have worn in our bid to perform a reading of a colonial history that is also our own." (210).

TAIT

Archaos and beyond picked up and demonstrated the sexual aspects of circus, bending once again the gender conventions that had polarised in the fifties. It also exposed the cruelty inherent in clowning, freak shows and animal taming by removing animals, parodying deformity, showing social deviance, running amok with chainsaws and so on (Tait 122-3)

The complicity that Peter Carey investigates is implicit in circus economics. The 'alternative' Cirque du Soleil, while coming from a regional and national base in Montreal, Canada, kept itself afloat by performing in Disney World and Las Vegas (Tait 128). Circus Oz, declaring its nationalism in its title, in flying clowns dressed as cockatoos and its alternative style in shows of punk aerialists and aggro-femmes,

becomes both colonial consumer product and globalised hybrid as it tours around the world and takes on people and ideas from other companies. (Tait 135-6).