Chasing My Tale

Alex Miller

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Abstract
Apart from chasing my tale I don't know what I'm doing. And I mean this in a very general way indeed. I've never been at all clear about what I'm doing. I can't be highly articulate about my writing. Andrew Riemer, the Sydney academic and critic, who is also a personal friend, told me that as a result of the publication of The Ancestor Game I'm now considered to be a revisionist historian by certain of his colleagues at Sydney University. When I read history at Melbourne University in the sixties with Marion Gibbs I learned, or thought I learned then, from that very great teacher, that all history is revision.
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Apart from chasing my tale I don’t know what I’m doing. And I mean this in a very general way indeed. I’ve never been at all clear about what I’m doing. I can’t be highly articulate about my writing. Andrew Riemer, the Sydney academic and critic, who is also a personal friend, told me that as a result of the publication of *The Ancestor Game* I’m now considered to be a revisionist historian by certain of his colleagues at Sydney University. When I read history at Melbourne University in the sixties with Marion Gibbs I learned, or thought I learned then, from that very great teacher, that all history is revision.

So I’m not sure what being a revisionist historian means, but I do know it doesn’t follow from a conscious intention of mine. My life, though I’ve always tried to disguise this fact, has been rather aimless. I’ve clung to the suggestion of a thread of sense that writing sometimes seems to offer me, perhaps the way some people cling to a religion they have never really learned to trust. Beyond this uncertain thread of sense, I don’t know why I write or why I do anything else. I have, I’m afraid, a very strong affiliation with futility. Even now I feel a bit ashamed of admitting this. I look at the books I’ve written, and instead of drawing a satisfying theoretical position out of them, I wonder how I ever came to write them.

When I do write, however, when I’m working on a book and have reached the stage where it has fully engaged me, I feel that I don’t need to worry about the problem of meaning. I feel I’ve left that awkward, social demand behind. The business of writing fictions seems to me to be setting up barriers to intelligibility in the external sense, in the sense in which present reality is conducted, that is, and in which empires are understood to crumble and peoples to become post or neo-colonial or some other thing.

Who has not heard writers say — who, if they are honest, have not themselves said at some time, such things as, ‘We have written about the migrant experience. Now we have moved on from that. We have left that behind.’ Or, ‘The realist novel is dead. The Dickensian novel can no longer be written. The novel has become the playground of ideas.’ And so on. Pronouncements about the future that are annulled the instant someone produces a book that does freshly again those very things that one has claimed have been done with for ever. When this annulment of some portentous pronunciamento occurs those of us who care about the novel
rejoice that once again it proves its resilience as the means for telling any kind of story about humankind we care to tax it with in any kind of voice we care to tax it with. As novelists we celebrate our liberty. We celebrate the fact that the novel keeps on surviving in all its elaborated forms, Dickensian and realist as well as magic-realist and post-modern. Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*, which is the only Latin novel that has come down to us intact, is magic-realist. Which seems to some people a very modern thing. Apuleius’s novel was written in the middle of the second century of the Christian Era. Reading it we are reminded that *nothing* is new. We keep learning the same lesson over and over and forgetting it over and over: the lesson that we are a language species and that language will do and re-do anything we ask of it. The lesson that language underwrites our realities. That language is the first step in the process of making the things of our imagination tangible. Nothing is finished with. Not the migrant novel or the realist novel. It has all been done before and it will all be done again, and again, so long as we go on. The human species is also a migrant species. We have always travelled. In our wanderings we are forever coming across our old tracks and speculating on the perplexing nature of the creature who must have made them. In the strange place we are stillled by the presentiment of familiarity and we know that we have been there before. Home, indeed, may be for many of us no more than this fleeting intuition. A singular truth (which we do not often acknowledge because to do so kindles in us feelings of overwhelming futility) is that there is no place left that has not been visited by us and that there is nothing to be done that has not already been done by us. Round and round the mulberry bush, that’s where the novelist is going. Chasing his tale ... as ever.

In our essentials, in our natures, morally and spiritually, we are today no further advanced than we were when Apuleius wrote his novel in the middle of the second century of the Christian Era. The illusion of present reality, however, is always to insist that we are going somewhere, that there is a destination and that the day that is to follow this day will be different from this day. It is for this reason, in order to sustain our confidence in the illusion of a present reality that is taking us somewhere, that we invest our energies so heavily in innovation and change.

But really it’s always questions without answers. The deeper we go into our material the more complex and irresolvable the contradictions of our material appear to us; and the more complex and irresolvable they appear, the more beautiful and alluring the material becomes for us, the more it casts its charms over us. It is not to resolve these paradoxes by making their structures of meaning intelligible that one can work as a novelist, but only to contemplate them in their irreducible splendour.

I suppose I believe a novel is like a painting or a piece of music at least in the sense that it cannot be explained but can only be experienced. And this is one of the ways in which the concept of a work of art still remains
useful to us, by enabling us to avoid (at least on the immediate level of appreciation) categories such as revisionist history and postcolonialism, categories which appear to explain things that don’t require explaining on the immediate level of appreciation. To reveal these enormous wells of ignorance in ourselves. When we’ve completed the logical structures of our theories we have camouflaged those wells of ignorance, we haven’t dealt with our ignorance or explained it, or moved on from it to a new and more enlightened place. We have cast a net of theory over our ignorance. The function of theories and ideologies, which are necessarily predicated on the insistence that we are going somewhere, that we are proceeding to the fulfilment of movements and tendencies whose ends are discernible in our present condition, is to support the necessary illusion of present reality. The art of the novel, viewed as post-colonial literatures, for example, seems to be about discourses in which power is being transferred from one cultural context to another. Viewed in this light the novels themselves seem to be about this process that is going on and that will one day, presumably, result in a fully empowered novel that is no longer post-anything but is fully present to itself and to its cultural realities. On the immediate level of appreciation, where we transcend our own individual and separate lives, where we transcend present reality, the novel is not going anywhere. It is here that art deals with. With us, here now. Art doesn’t predict. Art isn’t going anywhere. There is nowhere for it to go.

We can talk about art or we can talk about theories and ideologies. Art deals with now, theories and ideologies deal with change and the process towards something other than and different from now. The art of a thousand years ago is still dealing with now. Now is timeless. We can use art to illustrate our theories and ideologies but art is not itself an illustration of these things. Logical constructs only make it seem as though it is. Logical rigour, on which theoretical projections about the future must rely for their coherence and shape, pushes the issue of futility and meaning into the future. It postpones the problem of meaning. I’m not a philosopher but I think we can probably construct a theory out of any thought or idea, or even out of an emotion, if we are rigorous enough in our application of logic to its elaboration. Language will stand the strain. There is no doubt about that. Even this affiliation with futility could be theorised as an aspect of our age’s fascination with the so-called unstructuredness of much of natural phenomena; which is a view that our new technologies of looking have revealed to us. I had dinner with James Gleick in September – it was the occasion of the Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards and he and I were guests of our publisher, Penguin, at the same table. And while I was sitting there talking and listening and eating the smoked salmon and drinking the slightly too-sweet chardonnay, I thought about James Gleick’s books: Chaos & Genius. And I imagined him writing another book. I could see the finished book, the single word FUTILITY in
gold lettering on a white cover. The book inscribed the end of futility. The end of the struggle for meaning. We no longer needed to wonder if there was a god or not. The grand unified theory of futility: meaninglessness and faith made intelligible. I do Mr Gleick a great disservice, of course, by naming him in my fantasy. He ate his dinner in complete ignorance of my terrible thoughts.

What is the *The Ancestor Game* about?

*The Ancestor Game* - Freedom and belonging; lunch with Huang Yuanshen and his image of the child with the kite.

It is possible to speak accurately about *The Ancestor Game* as revisionist history. It is possible to see it as offering the view that in the formation of Australian society the displaced have been not so much the victims of the cultural process as its ironic progenitors. It is not inconsistent with what is in the novel to do this. Revisionist history deals in the currency of cycles of growth and decay. All establishments live with the anxiety of their replacement squad arriving before they are ready to relinquish their posts. Everything that theorises results in something revisionist and is therefore itself subject to revision. I’ve read Milan Kundera’s *Immortality* and have enjoyed his discussion of how we might learn to die decently after death, but I am more intuitively responsive to John Berger when he says, *For an artist there is no such thing as a period of transition. [The artist] faces his subject as if it were timeless.* (That’s from Berger’s 1958 novel *A Painter of Our Time*. Mine’s the Pantheon Modern Writers edition and the quote is from page 148).

Story is to the novelist what drawing is to the painter; it is the most fundamental and most difficult of the skills. I don’t think of story as a simple thing, as merely implying a linear narrative that goes along a set of tram tracks from its beginning to its end. Story is as complex as drawing. Both are conceded with significant simplification from the infinity of possibilities. Those critics who talk about story as if every writer is born with a ready facility for it understand nothing about writing. They have not tried to make a story reveal itself to them through the opaqueness of material. Because the successful story is a successful simplification they imagine it has been simple to produce. They should try to draw like Rembrandt, who could suggest not only the whole figure but the entire character with one line. And of course a clever audience will understand this very well. The challenge for Rembrandt was the same as the challenges for the novelists of the Commonwealth today I think. The challenge was then and it is now and will always be, as far as I understand anything, the challenge of the fact. The English painter Francis Bacon called it the brutality of fact. The problem is always what to leave out. The problem is never what to invent. It is not necessary to invent anything. There is already too much. The novelist deals with fact. With accurate observation.
Fiction is not invention but is the process of making subjective the alien fact and of communicating its subjectivity within the artful carapace of story. Fiction is engaging meaning in the subjective life, so that one is not overwhelmed by futility.

The novel retells again and again the story of the person who is marooned on some kind of island of metaphor and who comes upon the tracks of another self. Which might be the story of two people who fall in love or it might be the story of two warriors who fight each other, or two kingdoms, or several kingdoms or peoples who challenge each other for occupation of the ground. But always it is the story of the isolated self seeking to transcend its isolation by becoming the other, the other self, through the communication of the subjective reality of the self. When we were children we all asked of someone close to us the awesome question, What is it really like to be you? The novel continually elaborates this question. But it doesn’t get any closer to answering it. The novel isn’t going anywhere. It is standing here looking at these strange tracks and wondering what it is like to be you, which is really wondering what it is like to be me.