Through a Sheet of Glass: The Ethics of Reading in Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*

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Summary

This article explores the epistemological implications of one of the most striking features in Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* ([1988]1997): its systematic frustration of the expectations of its readers. Through an examination of its use of narratorial deception and its skilful deployment of irony, the article argues that the novel prevents readers from occupying a detached position in relation to it and its themes. Particular attention is given to its concern with the provisional nature of human ways of seeing, exemplified by the metaphor of glass that is developed throughout the novel. *Oscar and Lucinda* compels readers to reflect on the subject position they take up in relation to it, and, in so doing, on their implication in cultural systems of knowledge that seek to contain and eradicate what is deemed unruly. The article suggests, ultimately, that the ethical project in *Oscar and Lucinda* is performative in nature, and that its success relies on the extent to which it is able to alert readers to the limitations of their ways of knowing, and, consequently, the importance of respecting the otherness of others.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verken die epistemologiese implikasies van een van die treffendste kenmerke van Peter Carey se *Oscar and Lucinda* ([1988]1997): die sistematiese manier waarop die roman die lesers se verwagtinge in die wiele ry. Deur middel van 'n ondersoek na die gebruik van narratologiese misleiding en die kundige gebruik van ironie, word daar aangevoer dat die roman verhoed dat die lesers 'n afsydige houding inneem jeens die roman en die temas daarvan. Daar word veral aandag geskenk aan die roman se bemoeienis met die voorwaardelike aard van menslike maniere om waar te neem, wat beliggaam word deur die metafoor van glas wat regdeur die roman ontwikkel word. *Oscar and Lucinda* dwing die lesers om te besin oor die subjekposisie wat hulle teenoor die roman inneem, en sodoende oor die implikasie daarvan in kulturele kennisstelsels wat poog om dit wat as wild en onhebbelik beskou word, in te perk en uit die weg te ruim. Daar word te kenne gegee dat die etiese projek in *Oscar and Lucinda* performatief van aard is en dat die sukses daarvan afhang van die mate waartoe dit lesers bewus kan maak van die beperkings van hul kenwyses en derhalwe van die belangrikheid daarvan om die andersheid van ander mense te respekteer.

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Not surprisingly, a fair amount of critical attention has been devoted to the way in which Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* undermines reader expectation – this, after all, is one of this work's most striking structural features. Sue Ryan-Fazilleau, for instance, reflects at some length on Carey's systematic frustration of his readers' expectations of the text. Through this strategy, she concludes, the novel seeks to "provoke awareness of the distress of the subject who is marginalised by imperialist discourse" by placing its reader in a marginal position that is analogous to the one occupied "by Aboriginal Australians whose oppression by the white settlers was written out of Australia's Eurocentric official history" (2005: 12, 24). Presumably, Ryan-Fazilleau would concur with Graham Huggan's contention that Carey's writing produces "incriminated readers", that is, readers who find that the texts implicate them in their cultural critique (1996: 487).

In this article, we seek to extend this argument by examining the broader epistemological implications of Carey's sabotage of the interpretive act in *Oscar and Lucinda*. If, as Huggan proposes, Carey subverts the reader's safely detached position relative to the text's critical concerns, it should follow that his or her existing knowledge structures are challenged, that he or she is confronted with the inadequacy of his or her culture's systems of knowledge. It is, of course, always possible that such a reader could ignore this challenge by arguing, like Tom Wilhelmus, that *Oscar and Lucinda*'s disruptive techniques are simply instances of bad writing, and that the text's ending, for example, gratuitously offends "the lines of plot development the reader has been presented with up to that point" (1988: 552). Conceivably, though, disruptive features, such as this novel's ending, could prompt a more reflexive reader to interrogate his or her own frustration. Were this to happen, such a reader would become aware of the subject position he or she assumes in relation to the novel, and therefore of his or her implication in the knowledge systems with which culture seeks to contain and eliminate the kinds of contingency and unruliness that the novel thematises.

Our purpose in this article, then, is to explore some of the ways in which the act of reading *Oscar and Lucinda* may perform its very themes. We conclude our exploration by briefly considering what Anthony J. Hassall has referred to as Carey's "unfashionable concern with morality" (1998: 72), the propensity of his writing, as Paul Kane puts it, to turn "the postmodern to humanist concerns" (1993: n.p.). Our argument, however, is that Carey's ethical project in *Oscar and Lucinda* is ultimately performative in nature: its efficacy depends entirely on whether or not the novel manages, in rendering the reader suspicious of society's common beliefs and forms of understanding the world, to invest him or her with a sense of respect for the otherness of the other person.[1] As it is deployed in this article, the term

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1. Throughout this essay, we refer generically to "the reader" or to a homogeneous "we" in tracing the ways in which Carey's novel stages its

"ethics" signifies precisely the individual's awareness of such alterity, of that which exceeds, and so lies beyond, the generic and generalising discourses that shape perception from within the political domain of culture.[2]

A key figure in the disruptive and frustrating unruliness that the reader encounters in *Oscar and Lucinda* is the novel's narrator. Far from being a "marginal presence", as Kirsten Holst Petersen claims (1991: n.p.), he is a lively presence throughout the work, a kind of trickster figure who constantly sidles up to us conspiratorially, only to reveal how thoroughly we have been duped right at the very end when he suddenly, and with apparent relish, undermines all the expectations he has generated. From the first sentence of the first chapter, we are drawn into what feels like a relationship of genial companionship with this narrator, who frames the story of Oscar Hopkins and Lucinda Leplastrier with an anecdotal childhood memory of his mother's obsession with proving the religious and colonial nobility of her family's heritage to every clergyman within sight of "the sacred glass daguerreotype" of Oscar, her grandfather (Carey 1997: 1). As the novel progresses, the ingratiation continues as the reader is plied with more anecdotes of the narrator's childhood and family life, which punctuate the story of Oscar and Lucinda.

It must be added that this alignment of narrator and reader is certainly not limited to the frame narrative. Due to the former's constant intrusions on his nineteenth-century tale from his twentieth-century perspective, it is an equally prominent feature of the story he tells. In other words, Carey places his narrator on a different temporal plane to the narrative he recounts, and thereby invests the novel's structure with an ambivalent, dual temporal perspective. This is a technique notably used by John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and, well before him, by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*. It will be remembered that Hawthorne frames the tale of Hester Prynne, which is set in the 1640s, with a putatively autobiographical preface in which he presents us with a persona of himself – that is,

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reception. As we proceed, it will become clear that the text both encourages and undermines such generalising appellations.

[2] Arguably, it is Emmanuel Levinas who is most famously associated with this conception of ethics. In writing of the human subject's encounter with the other, Levinas conceives of an "unrelating relation" between "separated beings", that is, a relationship that is forged with the singularity of the other being, and which is therefore not mediated by the generalising media of language and discourse (1991: 295). For Levinas, the corollary of such an encounter is the subject's self-sacrificing responsibility for the other person. Since this notion of a substitution of self for the other falls outside the ambit of our discussion, we have chosen to use the word "respect" in referring to the effect on the self of its encounter with alterity.

"Hawthorne" the Custom-House Surveyor of circa 1839-1840, who reflects on his ancestors and their "antique customs" (1988: 8-10, 23). Importantly, "Hawthorne" does not disappear at the end of the preface. In the guise of the editorial, omniscient narrator, his intrusive presence is palpable throughout the main narrative and so sustains the dual temporal structure inscribed by the preface. Similarly, in *Oscar and Lucinda*, the twentieth-century narrator constantly interposes himself between the readers and the nineteenth-century characters and events of which they read.

In both novels, the effect of this technique is to distance readers from the world they read about and to align them with the narrator. As is evident from his use of the first-person plural pronoun, Nathaniel Hawthorne's narrator addresses the readers of *The Scarlet Letter* as his contemporaries, an association that effectively dissociates them from the seventeenth-century characters. It is worth noting that this temporal "distance" has an epistemological corollary: Hawthorne's narrator understands that the times have changed, that the readers he addresses see and know the world differently to the characters of which they read. Indeed, the "Hawthorne" of the preface realises that he, as "A writer of story-books", would have been despised by his Puritanical ancestors (p. 9). The implication is, of course, that this is also true of the readers of such "story-books".

In Carey's novel, the narrator's often humorous and sometimes patronising asides and comments on the characters' thoughts or behaviour compound this temporal "distancing" effect. We begin to feel ourselves drawn into an alliance with him, and he invites us likewise to condescend to the characters or, indeed, even to laugh at them. In wryly describing Theophilus Hopkins's naive and rather amusingly wistful conception of Devon, for example, the narrator observes:

> This was Devon, near Torquay. To pretend – as Theophilus did – that this was almost tropical, is like referring to a certain part of Melbourne as "the Paris end of Collins Street". It is quite reasonable if you have never been to Paris, but once you have been there you can see the description as nothing more than wishful thinking.
>
> When I visit Devon I see nothing tropical.
>
> (Carey 1997: 22)

The way in which comments like these align readers with the twentieth-century narrator's "modern" perspective and thereby distance them from the nineteenth-century characters' perspectives is even more apparent in the former's observation that "Half of Theophilus's congregation still believed that the sun danced when it rose on Easter morning, and many claimed to see a sheep dancing with it" (p. 23), and in his comment that Theophilus "did not doubt that Satan spoke through novels" (p. 177). As in *The Scarlet Letter*, then, the very act of reading *Oscar and Lucinda* divorces readers from the characters they read about.

In fact, the interpretive act inscribes ironic distance between readers and characters. As is usually the case with irony, such distance is premised on a disparity in knowledge: from our twentieth-century- or twenty-first-century vantage, we join the narrator in seeing and laughing at the quaint foibles and ways of knowing the world of the nineteenth century. The form of irony here involved constructs for the reader a position of relative superiority and sophistication in relation to the characters. Since this position is exempt from its own scrutiny, the novel's irony tends toward closure, authority, clarity and stability. Whenever the narrator uses or implies the first-person plural pronoun, it is precisely this apparently fixed position, and the evaluative attitude that it enables, which is invoked and affirmed.

All in all, then, the readers of the novel are invited into what appears to be a candid and privileged relationship with the narrator, which is also a position of knowledge and therefore of power. In trusting him, we are led to believe that the story we are reading is one over which we might exert some kind of control through apprehension, foresight and even advance knowledge: we expect that Oscar will float triumphantly into Boat Harbour; Lucinda will finally reveal her true feelings to him; the two lovers will be reunited; and, with the cruel Mr Jeffris out of the way, all will be right with the world. We expect, in other words, a nineteenth-century ending (see Ryan-Fazilleau 2005: 15-16). Our expectations, however, prove to be wholly erroneous. While Oscar reaches Boat Harbour, he does so only to be immediately seduced by Miriam Chadwick – who, rather than the expected Lucinda, is revealed to be the narrator's true great-grandmother – before drowning in the Bellinger River. Lucinda, who loses her fortune to Miriam as a result of a wager with Oscar, finds herself in penury but, as the narrator offhandedly and vaguely notes, becomes somewhat famous in her own right for her involvement in the labour movement. Thus, the two protagonists, whose story we have followed for hundreds of pages, are summarily and carelessly dismissed. As Ryan-Fazilleau observes:

> [Readers are] extremely disappointed by the terrible fates that befall the two protagonists [they] had identified with, all the more so since the story seemed to be shaping up for that end beloved of Australian readers: the victory of the underdog. [They] also feel [... they have] been cheated because this ending breaks the tacit rules of the code [they] believed [they] had identified as the one governing this narrative. This holds true whether [readers had] identified the code as Victorian (where the protagonists generally end up marrying), as a post-colonial writing back to the English canon (where the colonial characters are supposed to win out in the end despite imperial oppression), or simply as a popular neo-realist novel (where the heroes generally live happily ever after).
>
> (Ryan-Fazilleau 2005: 15)

Our thwarted expectations, moreover, are not unjustified. Besides apparently having taken us into confidence, the narrator seems to make implicit promises to us, which Ryan-Fazilleau describes as narrative "red herrings" (pp. 16-17). The novel's title is the first of these. Its union of their names implies that, for all the vicissitudes of their relationship, Oscar and Lucinda will end up together. This possibility is further suggested by the fact that the narrator dwells for hundreds of pages on these two characters, describing their respective childhoods and the development of their relationship in painstaking detail. In contrast, only two short chapters are spent describing Miriam Chadwick before she seduces Oscar in Chapter 108. Incidentally, that chapter's title, "Oscar and Miriam" (p. 422), seems to parody the novel's title, and thus to mock readers who have drawn false conclusions from the latter. Added to this are the many verbal hints given to us by the narrator that Oscar and Lucinda are destined to unite. In Chapter 50, for example, he tells us: "In order that I exist, two gamblers, one Obsessive, the other Compulsive, must meet" (p. 187). While it is certainly true that Oscar and Lucinda must meet so that Oscar might journey to Boat Harbour and encounter Miriam, this is a rather underhanded statement that seems designed to manipulate the reader into expecting an outcome which the novel later subverts.

A rereading of the novel, however, reveals that the statements made by the narrator that hint at a happily-ever-after ending for Oscar and Lucinda are, like that mentioned above, always ambiguous. Furthermore, one actually finds clues that point to the true ending of the novel (see Larsson 1999: 179-80). In the aftermath of the young Lucinda's attempt to tame her doll's wayward hair, for instance, the narrator describes how, because of her parents' anger, "the air was filled with a violence whose roots she would only glimpse years later when she lost her fortune to my great-grandmother and was made poor overnight" (Carey 1997: 66-67; see Larsson 1999: 180). The narrator has therefore given us glimpses of the truth from the beginning, yet the timing of these revelations is such that the information with which we are provided means little to us when we receive it. As Ryan-Fazilleau argues, "[t]his is narrative 'cheating' insofar as the real outcome is actually foreshadowed, thus protecting the author against subsequent charges of insufficient narrative preparation but in such a way that it does not prevent the reader from jumping to the wrong conclusion later in the story" (2005: 16; cf. Larsson 1999: 179-181).

It thus emerges that Carey's narrator has, indeed, tailored the story to suit us, but that it has been carefully prepared not as entertainment or mollification, but as a *trap*, designed to frustrate us. What Margarete Rubik says of Carey's short fiction in this respect applies equally well to *Oscar and Lucinda*:

> Carey and Borges both delight in offering us deceptive scripts for reading texts, deliberately misleading both the fictional characters and the reader into projecting a familiar text or world schema to make sense of the unfolding plot and hence narrativising an elaborate but ultimately false explanation for the action. The ending, however, can only be understood in terms of an entirely unexpected new schema and thus comes as a shock of surprise.
>
> (Rubik 2005: 170)

In short, we have been duped.

Perhaps adding insult to injury, we realise that, for all the feeling of camaraderie engendered by the private anecdotes and confidences of childhood and family we have had shared with us, we actually do not even know such basic information as the name or sex of the narrator. While Petersen has unquestioningly assumed that the narrator is male (1991: n.p.), an assumption reinforced by the writers of this article's use of the masculine pronoun in referring to him or her, there is little evidence in the text to support this unequivocally. Even the solitary reference to him or her as "Bob" by Kumbaingiri Billy (Carey 1997: 413), is undermined, as Ryan-Fazilleau points out (a point she then proceeds to ignore), by the fact that the narrator "gives us no indication of whether this is his [or her] real name or just a nickname Kumbaingiri Billy gives him [or her]" (2005: 26). In other words, Kumbaingiri Billy's naming of him or her adds to, rather than reduces, the narrator's nominal and sexual indeterminacy by raising the possibility that the name that has been used may be generic, as in the phrase "as true as Bob", or simply a nickname that does not necessarily indicate a specific gender. Why else is it dropped only once in a narrative that is several hundred pages long? The fact of the matter is that the novel asks us to ask this question without providing us with the means of answering it. We simply do not, indeed cannot, know.

There are many further examples of such enforced agnosticism. We now realise, for instance, the sheer impossibility and speciousness of much of the information with which the narrator has provided us. How is it possible for this first-person narrator to tell us the innermost thoughts of characters he or she has never met? The intimate facts with which we are presented, such as the salinity of the characters' tears (Carey 1997: 309), the size and shape of Calvitto's penis (p. 143),[3] and the drowning Oscar's final perceptions and thoughts (pp. 430-432), become rather ridiculous in the light of this recognition. The narrator, if anything, actually draws attention to his or her role as narrator by telling us stories of his or her own life and by intruding on the story of Oscar and Lucinda. By giving us impossible information through arrogating a third-person omniscience, he or she effectively advertises both his or her fictionality and that of the account. Or, at least, this is what Carey does. *He* lays bare what has really been obvious all along, namely that his narrator is a device that mediates our access to the fictional world. To use the novel's dominant metaphor, Carey exposes the fact that his narrator is the distorting lens through which readers view the fictional world, the glass in the "sacred glass daguerreotype" of Oscar (p. 1).

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[3] Interestingly, in Faber's 1988 edition of *Oscar and Lucinda*, the character Calvitto bears the name Tomasetti. The Chapter 74 of subsequent editions, that is, "A Degree from Oxford", is also missing from this Faber edition, which probably replicated the University of Queensland Press first edition. As Hassall notes, "There are two texts of *Oscar and Lucinda*. The original, published by University of Queensland Press in 1988, inadvertently omitted what should have been Chapter 74 'A Degree from Oxford'. UQP editions from 1994 ... include this additional chapter, and so run to 111 chapters in all" (1998: 219n.1).

What is at stake in such narratorial deception is the issue of knowledge. In exposing the impossibility of his narrator's omniscience, Carey draws our attention to the conventionality, which is to say the culturally inscribed nature, of positions of knowledge and authority not only in narrative art but also in culture in general. At issue in this novel is the local and historical nature of knowledge. This emphasis is equally evident in Carey's subversion of reader expectation: through rendering visible our expectations of the novel, which have been generated by the narrative conventions that he installs only to undermine, this writer reveals that we approach that which we read with advance knowledge, that our experience of the individual text is regulated by the codes of the literary system. In effect, Carey, in confronting us with our expectations of his novel, requires us to reflect on the cultural position from which we seek to know it. That is, he requires us to reflect on the mediated nature of our encounter with *Oscar and Lucinda*.

In having his narrator set a trap for us, then, Carey forces us to become aware of our position relative to the text, and to recognise the role that our own assumptions of knowledge – and therefore pretensions to authority – have played in our deception. We realise that it is through *our* interpretations of deliberately ambiguous, wholly indeterminate facts, *our* willingness to laugh at the characters when the narrator has invited us to condescend, that we have been caught out. Indeed, as already noted, in laughing at the characters, we believe that we join the narrator in his or her laughter. We are invited to believe, that is, that we share an ironic contract with him or her that is premised on common values and knowledge that distance us from the world of which we read. Moreover, we act as though these values and systems of knowledge are stable and timeless. Carey's subversion of his narrator's perspective renders ironic precisely this ironic distance by undermining the shared values and knowledge systems on which it depends. Ultimately, then, there is nothing stable or closed about the position of knowledge that the novel's use of the first-person plural pronoun inscribes. Far from exempting this position from its purview, the novel's irony eventually ironises it. The final irony is thus that we are forced to laugh at the presumption of our laughter and condescension.[4]

This meta-ironic move is further evident in the specious temporal stability of the community invoked by the word "we". We are in fact never part of the "we" to whom the narrator constantly appeals. While the time of narration is the 1960s, the novel was only published in 1988. Not even its first readers would therefore have been part of the temporal community signified by the first-person plural pronoun. By inscribing dissonance between the form of the shifter "we" and the community it apparently invokes, the novel incorporates into its very structure the ever-shifting time of its reading. It installs not so much a dual temporal perspective as multiple, constantly changing temporal perspectives.

Should the novel destabilise the reader's reading in the manner described, the event of its reading would have performed its dominant theme: that is, the ephemeral and inconstant nature of human ways of seeing. In the text, it is precisely this theme that is developed by the aforementioned metaphor of glass. Glass functions as a trope for how the values, attitudes, ideas and discourses in our historical, cultural contexts mediate and shape our perceptions of the world and others. Indeed, the novel makes it clear that glass, although transparent and almost invisible, is a deceptive medium. As much is intimated in the narrator's following description of Lucinda's understanding of this substance:

> [G]lass is a thing in disguise, an actor, not solid at all, but a liquid ... an old sheet of glass will not only take on a royal and purplish tinge but will reveal its true liquid nature by having grown fatter at the bottom and thinner at the top, and ... even while it is as frail as the ice on a Paramatta puddle, it is stronger under compression than Sydney sandstone ... it is invisible, solid, in short, a joyous and paradoxical thing, as good a material as any to build a life from.
>
> (Carey 1997: 111)

While glass may masquerade as a transparent and trustworthy solid, it is, in reality, constantly in flux. Moreover, it is a medium: that is to say, it mediates and distorts perception.

This point is particularly evident in Carey's variant on the glass motif, that is, the strip of celluloid that Oscar uses to manage his hydrophobia on his voyage from England to Australia. In order to cope with his fear of the sublime uncontrollability of the ocean, he divides a strip of celluloid into squares which mediate his view by lessening the immensity of the sea: "He could view it one square at a time, thus containing it. What was terrifying in a vast expanse would become 'quite manageable'" (pp. 156-157). Oscar's synthetic strip of celluloid serves as a metaphor for the processes through which the invisible and artificial values and knowledge systems in the culture in which the individual is located mediate and locate his or her perception of the world.

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[4] To the best of our knowledge, there is no study of irony that treats the manner in which this trope ironises its own epistemological premises. Having said that, we admire Johan Geertsema's discussion of the ironic relationship between representation and alterity (1999).

Since they are perspectival – they proceed from a position within culture – our ways of knowing are consensual, local and provisional rather than absolute, universal and timeless. By extension, they contain, and so exclude and distort, that which they enable the individual to comprehend. When Oscar sails up the Bellinger River, he sees the Australian landscape through the walls of the glass church. Tellingly, though, the narrator's emphasis falls on what Oscar does *not* see, that which the values and forms of understanding symbolised by the glass church in fact preclude him from seeing: "He saw nothing. The country was thick with sacred stories more ancient than the ones he carried in his sweat-slippery leather Bible. He did not even imagine their presence" (p. 416). The point is that what is subsequently referred to as "those cruel and lofty ideas" that Oscar brings up the river with him elide these presences (p. 430). This, too, he fails to see. Just as the insects trapped in the glass church and floating up the Bellinger River with him cannot see the glass walls that entrap them, so too Oscar is unable to see the ideas that mediate his perceptions.

Oscar, however, is not simply the bearer of this ideational baggage. The glass church from which he views Australian space is described as a "bird-cage church" in which he is locked (and in which, it may be added, he ultimately drowns) (p. 417). Throughout the novel, ordering systems are depicted in carceral terms. When she views Oscar floating up the river, Miriam Chadwick does so "from her cage of deep mourning" (p. 333), from within the patriarchal conventions that require women to withdraw from society for long periods of time to mourn the death of their husbands and close relatives. Similarly, Lucinda feels entrapped by her mother's opinions, that she is "inhabiting a cage" (p. 68), even though these opinions are altogether more enlightened than those of the deeply patriarchal society in which they live. Carey's point is that our epistemic systems cut us off from, and therefore preclude us from participating in, the world-in-itself, the very world that they supposedly render comprehensible. Through reducing and containing the world-in-itself, these forms of knowledge in fact render it inaccessible. The novel thus suggests that the world to which we relate and in which we participate is one that has been constructed by the reductions and distortions of these forms. We relate to this constructed world precisely through being divorced from the world-in-itself.

Like Oscar, then, we are locked in our cage and see through its glass walls darkly without ever coming face to face with that which we perceive. And yet it is exactly because there is no way out of the cage we inhabit that it is imperative to notice the cracks in its walls. Unlike Oscar and the insects in the glass church, we must understand what glass is. To this end, when Carey sabotages our expectations and calls attention to our occupying a certain position and having a certain perspective in relation to the text, he is, in effect, forcing us to see the "glass" through which we view the text and, if we cannot truly see it, at least recognise its mediation of our perceptions. He seeks therefore to render visible the glass walls of the cage from within which we read.

What is at stake here is not simply the reading of literature, but the hermeneutic nature of social relations in general. Nowhere in the novel is this clearer than in the scene in which Lucinda views her factory workers: "She watched them as through a sheet of glass, as we, a century later, might look down on the slums of Delhi as a jumbo jet comes in to land" (p. 125). In reading this passage, we view the glass through which Lucinda views the world. This is, of course, the implication of the fact that, when she witnesses the workers from whom she is separated by both class and culture, she is "repulsed by them just as she [is] moved by them" (p. 125). Very importantly, the passage does not allow us to think that we occupy a neutral position from nowhere: Lucinda's detachment from and distaste for the workers is likened to what *we* may experience in gazing down at the slums of Delhi from the porthole of an airplane. We have here a description of the worldly attitudes and values that we inevitably bring to our perception of Lucinda's perceptions. Through this simile, the novel reveals its awareness that that which it assumes of its implied reader in terms of class and culture (which includes race) is neither innocent nor neutral. In short, readers, in viewing the glass through which Lucinda views the workers, are required to view the glass through which they themselves view the novel and the world.

Proceeding as it does from a localised position, reading is an exercise in containment and cultural translation. Indeed, it is an implicitly violent act. In this respect, it is noteworthy that one of the principal reader-figures in the novel is the explorer Jeffris. This character is a fairly stereotypical coloniser-figure from whom readers are able to distance themselves with relative ease and even a measure of condescension. For him, the wilderness is a place to be violently chopped back and tamed, as are the aboriginal people he encounters. Curiously, though, some time into his exploratory expedition into the Australian wilderness, this character experiences a sense of satisfaction with his progress:

> Mr Jeffris was content. He had not made a great exploration ... but he had done sound work, which would serve as evidence of his ability to lead other expeditions. He had put names to several largish creeks. He had set the heights of many mountains which had previously been wildly misdescribed.
> (Carey 1997: 399)

The tools of his violent subjugation of the wilderness are thus not simply the gun but also scientific knowledge and language. Like Mary Louise Pratt (1992), and numerous others, Carey is aware that the scientific expedition and the knowledge modes that accompanied it were heavily implicated in the containment of colonial space. He is also aware of the importance of language in this regard. Hence, in his depiction of Jeffris's expedition, this writer emphasises, in Bill Ashcroft's words, "[t]he importance of naming, the alienation from place, the significance of the journal, indeed of writing itself in the control of history, the demonization of the indigenous inhabitants, the power over representation" (2001: 135; see also Petersen 1991: n.p.). Jeffris approaches what he deems to be wilderness from a position within a particular culture's linguistic and epistemological systems. He recuperates what he encounters within the culture of which he is a part. That is, he reads the "wilderness".

It follows that while readers are initially lulled into detaching themselves from this violent and decidedly unpleasant character, they are ultimately aligned with him. As the structuralists point out, a basic feature of interpretation is precisely recuperation: a culturally determined operation of making legible and scrutable the otherness of the literary text (see Culler 1975: 134-37; Freund 1987: 82).[5] We attempt to make the text bearable by seeking to suppress from view that which threatens displacement. When we read of Jeffris's commerce with colonial space, we thus enact that of which we read. When we read of Jeffris's violent acts of settlement, we read of what we are doing as we read. So, even though its portrayal of reading may at first distance readers from nineteenth-century characters like Jeffris, the novel ultimately, and ironically, collapses this distance. Again to use Huggan's word, it "incriminates" readers in the activity of which they read. It is exactly this parallel premised on performance between readers and characters that is exposed by Carey's use of a misleading narrator. In resisting our attempts at controlling it by frustrating our expectations of it, this unruly novel makes us profoundly aware of the assimilative nature of the activity in which we are engaged. We become aware that reading requires us to make sense of the disparate elements and ideas that the text presents to us. In other words, it requires us to name, order and so exclude.

It is not only readers who are refused the comfort of distancing themselves from Jeffris's violence – or, more precisely, are allowed that comfort only to experience the discomfort of having it dispelled. While altogether more sympathetically portrayed than Jeffris, Oscar, as we have seen, is also shown to be a coloniser of sorts in his voyage up the Bellinger River, in the course of which he fails to see the "sacred stories" already inscribed on the landscape. As Ashcroft shows, this voyage allegorises, albeit parodically, "the allegory of imperial history itself: the classic journey of civilization into the wild on its historic mission to bring light into the darkness" (2001: 131). Moreover, Oscar himself, although deeply troubled by the slaughter of the Kumbaingiris by Jeffris's company, commits an act of linguistic and discursive violence when he renames Kumbaingiri Billy's aunt "Mary, for Magdalene" (Carey 1997: 413). We would do well to remember that, very early in the novel, the narrator alludes to Oscar's colonising tendencies. In speaking of this character's boyhood habit of ordering his buttons, the narrator notes that "[h]e drilled these buttons as other boys might drill soldiers. He lined them up. He ordered them. He numbered them" (p. 9). To comprehend is to order, to contain, to exclude, to domesticate. In fact, this notion of the inevitability of hermeneutic violence is directly articulated in the portrayal of Lucinda who, we are told, "is always at war with herself" about her "habit" of tidiness (p. 67), her propensity to neaten, tidy, tame and contain. Since there is no position outside of culture, beyond the positions that it inscribes, we are all to a lesser or greater extent, imperialists.

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[5] This argument obviously intersects with Stanley Fish's thesis that we read from within interpretive communities, that our interpretive perceptions are communal (1976).

Yet this kind of inescapable imperialistic attitude is precisely what *Oscar and Lucinda* works systematically to undermine. Carey's use of point of view is pertinent here: the narrative is characterised by a combination of multiple voices and perspectives. Entire chapters are told from the points of view of characters as different as the Kumbaingiris and Mr Jeffris, and sometimes as insignificant to the plot as Mrs Cousins and Mrs Burrows. Furthermore, Carey renders almost every episode from a variety of perspectives. When Oscar drifts into Boat Harbour in Chapters 105, 106 and 107, for instance, we see his arrival from the points of view of Miriam, Oscar, the young Kumbaingiri Billy, and the Reverend Dennis Hasset. As already intimated, we even momentarily witness the event from the perspective of the insects trapped inside the glass church: "There were bush-flies inside the church. They did not understand what glass was. There were also three blue-bellied dragon-flies. For one hundred thousand years their progenitors had inhabited that valley without once encountering glass. Suddenly the air was hard where it should be soft" (p. 418).

The effect of this heteroglossia is a relativisation of not the events themselves but each position, including the reader's. Indeed, we cannot *not* forget that it is from our own glass cage that we read of these characters viewing from their glass cages Oscar viewing his surroundings from within his glass cage. The variety of views presented draws attention to each human subject's positioning in society and therefore to the local, circumstantial and culturally specific nature of knowledge. So, for example, even as readers are invited to judge Miriam as a callous, scheming mercenary with palpable designs on the unsuspecting Oscar, the narrator contends that "it would be unfair to judge her harsh and scheming. It is important to look instead at her options" (p. 333). In so doing, he or she requires readers to historicise and so adjust and revise their initial judgement by observing that this character's machinations are exacted by her marginal position in an intensely patriarchal society.

Carey therefore succeeds in placing the individual reader's point of view in perspective, as it were, for, in relation to the others represented, it becomes but one among many rather than a privileged position of authority or the point at which all positions are united. Indeed, the disparate accounts that emanate from these positions *cannot* be contained and consolidated; instead, we must acknowledge the relative validity of them all. Given that knowledge is located in culture and that it is impossible to occupy a position of omniscience outside of culture, it is our ethical responsibility to see the cracks in the glass cage from which we view the world. To do so is to recognise that the panes of glass through which we see are fluid and always in the process of changing their shape and form. Not to do so is to ignore the destructive capability of glass, the fact that, as the lament sung by Odalberee the Narcoo, declares:

> *Glass cuts.*
> *We never saw it before.*
> *Now it is here among us.*
> *It is sacred to the strangers.*
> *Glass cuts.*
> *Glass cuts kangaroo.*
> *Glass cuts bandicoot.*
> *Glass cuts the trees and grasses.*
> *Hurry on, strangers.*
> *Hurry on to the Kumbaingiri.*
> *Leave us, good spirits, go, go.*
>
> (Carey 1997: 397)

Through seeing the cracks in the glass, then, one places oneself in relation to an otherness that one cannot know and which therefore interrupts one's ways of knowing. One acknowledges the provisionality of one's forms of knowledge. To know what glass is, is to recognise the ironic disjunction between these forms and that which they seek to know. Indeed, the metaphor of the cracked glass suggests that it is the individual's responsibility to become an ironist: to be constantly aware of the extent to which contingency interrupts and so renders ironic our ways of knowing. Carey's argument in this regard is fairly similar to that of Richard Rorty, who describes the ironist as a person who is "sufficiently historicist" to "face[] up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires" (1989: xv). Of necessity, an ironist experiences "radical and continuing doubts" about what he or she believes because the forms through which he or she seeks to comprehend both the world and himself or herself are fluid and therefore in constant need of "redescription" (pp. 73-74). An ironist, Carey would possibly wish to add, is someone who accepts not only that there is no way of ever knowing reality shorn of presupposition, but also that the very attempt to know it renders it unknown.

Where Carey differs somewhat from Rorty, though, is in the ethical corollary of this ironic stance. Curiously, the latter does not explain his view that ironic awareness leads to the recognition that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (p. xv). He does not explain why, for example, one should be kind rather than cruel.[6] Conversely, the tropes in Carey's novel acknowledge precisely the harm, pain, and institutionalised cruelty attendant on our ways of knowing the world. Lucinda, for instance, conceives of her habit of tidiness in pathological terms as "the disease of neatness" with which she has been infected (Carey 1997: 67). And, in the context of the novel's principal metaphor, our awareness of the cracks in the walls of the cage we inhabit is precisely the knowledge that glass cuts, that our epistemic structures routinely reduce that which they purport to know and, in the process, enable physical violence. Due to our recognition of their destructive capacity, then, we can no longer suspend disbelief in our knowledge systems and thus come to see the importance of tolerance. As conceived of in *Oscar and Lucinda*, tolerance is not a value premised on a bland and condescending pluralism – which is nothing other than a mode of colonialism of the paternalistic variety, and therefore itself a form of intolerance – but rather an active attitude grounded in the negative capability and humility that emanate from a recognition of the limitations of one's ways of knowing and therefore of one's limitedness. To be tolerant, in this understanding, is to be like Lucinda, that is, "always at war" with one's "neatness".

For Carey, it would thus seem that moral progress is not to be understood in terms of "the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (Rorty 1989: 192). If there is to be ethical progress, it has to derive from a refusal to extend the range of "we". What is required, instead, is respect for strangeness, an ongoing attempt to interrupt one's involuntary reduction of otherness through incorporating it into the same, the "we". To invoke the novel's metaphorical vocabulary one last time, one must begin to understand what glass is, and, consequently, learn to see the cracks in the walls of one's own glass cage. Ultimately, therefore, one must strive to remain always at war with one's habit of neatness.

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[6] For an insightful reading of Rorty's ethics, see Foley (2008).

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