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THE REDEEMED AND THE SELF-REDEEMERS: THE ENDINGS OF CHARLES DICKENS' *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* AND PETER CAREY'S *JACK MAGGS*

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Abstract

The palimpsest, a double-layered manuscript with new writings superimposed on the faded but still detectable traces of old writings, was conceptualized into a metaphor for the products and processes of literary adaptation and appropriation when Genette (1997) theoretically categorized these two layers into hypertexts and hypotexts. For the illustration of the power of this palimpsestic process of literary production, Charles Dickens' Great Expectations and Peter Carey's Jack Maggs offer a great pair of sample texts. Almost functioning as a background prequel to Dickens' canonical work, Carey's retelling of the story following the character Magwitch, renamed as the eponymous Jack Maggs in his own book, constitutes an attempt of post-colonial literary iconoclasm that uncovers and deconstructs the imperialistic assumptions hidden in Dickens. Through this confrontational decentering and recentering, Carey also brings the neglected penal colony Australia to the front and legitimizes its unique status as a newly found home carrying the sense of belonging for the colonized. This essay will explore this palimpsestic post-colonialism in Jack Maggs by comparatively analyzing the endings of the two texts. Basically, it argues that the ending of Jack Maggs contains four hypertextual choices that have been made to reveal Carey's political/ideological stance: the change of narrative voice, the feminist foregrounding of Mercy, the metafictional embodiment of Dickens by the writer Tobias, and the reverse Bildungsroman of Jack Maggs the Australian father.

There were, as in all crooked businesses, two sets of books...
—Peter Carey (1997: p91) *Jack Maggs*

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of this palimpsestic process of literary production, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* offer a great pair of sample texts. Almost functioning as a background prequel to Dickens' canonical work, Carey's retelling of the story following the character Magwitch, renamed as the eponymous Jack Maggs in his own book, constitutes an attempt of post-colonial literary iconoclasm that uncovers and deconstructs the imperialistic assumptions hidden in Dickens. Through this confrontational decentering and recentering, Carey also brings the neglected penal colony Australia to the front and legitimizes its unique status as a newly found home carrying the sense of belonging for the colonized. This essay will explore this palimpsestic post-colonialism in *Jack Maggs* by comparatively analyzing the endings of the two texts (the chosen passages shown in Appendix I and II). Basically, it argues that the ending of *Jack Maggs* contains four hypertextual choices that have been made to reveal Carey's political/ideological stance: the change of narrative voice, the feminist foregrounding of Mercy, the metafictional embodiment of Dickens by the writer Tobias, and the reverse Bildungsroman of Jack Maggs the Australian father.

Firstly, Pip's first person narration in *Great Expectations* and Carey's choice of an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator form one of the biggest and most important contrasts between the two texts. The underlying ideological inclinations they respectively feature culminate in the endings, where resolutions are presented and redemptions achieved. According to Said (1993: pXIII), "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism". In this sense, the fictional authority Pip holds in his first person narration can be understood as an imperialistic tool that only presents a filtered thus distorted reality which fulfills certain self-interests and desires of his. Hence, it is not surprising that the culmination and resolution of the novel do not concern marginalized characters like Magwitch at all. In fact, Pip's disillusionment about the false ideal of gentility and the death of Magwitch are merely parts of his Bildungsroman journey towards his destination, as well as the moral of the story, namely his inner redemption through his reunion with Estella. The first sentence of the ending paragraph "*I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place*" (Dickens, 2012: p554), through its syntactic thematization of the first person pronouns "*I*" and "*we*", stresses Pip's own agency and confidence in his emotional solidarity with Estella. At the end of the day, all the other characters involved in Pip's false great expectations, especially Magwitch and Miss Havisham, are left behind in that "*ruined place*" in Pip's subjectivity after their ancillary role in Pip's internal realization has been fulfilled. The remembrance of the "*forge*" and the reappearance of the "*mists*", the two symbolic motifs marking the idyllic start of Pip's story, suggest a circular return, the only addition to which is his and Estella's "*no parting from*" each other (ibid). In contrast, Carey's choice of a third person narration destablizes the authoritative solipsism of a Victorian young man's interpretation of particular situations, and liberates multiple viewpoints by narrative polyphony (Savu, 2009). Specifically in the ending

section, the descriptive language, combined with its objective tone, accentuates the factuality/actuality of the Maggs family's success and happiness in Australia. Also highlighted in this factuality is the ironic truth that in contrast to the fictional authority of the first person narration, it is the lack, or rather the non-necessity, of self-generated rhetorics, that most convincingly proves the success of individuals as recorded by history. For example, the frequent usage of passive voice such as "*were known to be*", "*is remembered*" and "*was not begun*" etc. creates a quasi-documentary language that validates the truthfulness of the story (Carey, 1997: p327-328). Yet at the same time, subtle foregrounding of individual agency is secured by the emphatic pattern applied in sentences like "*it is only natural that they...*" and "*it is Mercy who is remembered best...*" (ibid).

Secondly, both endings present a come-back of female roles and their redemptions, but a comparison of the two reveals the fundamental difference between them. In her come-back, Estella begs for Pip's forgiveness and acceptance: "*Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends*", and thus her redemption is ultimately secured by a feminine passivity that only serves to fulfill the male protagonist's romantic desire (Dickens, 2012: p553). Corresponding to the aforementioned argument on narrative voice, it can be said that Estella never breaks free from her objectified existence, neither in her being "*shown*" to people with "*the jewels*", nor in her being absorbed into Pip's narrative to complete his own redemption/story (ibid: p310). In contrast, the conclusion of Carey's book foregrounds Mercy Larkin, now Mercy Maggs, whose role in the story so far has been less than minor compared to that of Estella in *Great Expectations*. However, in his post-colonial reclamation for Australia as a place of usurpation and regeneration, Carey utilizes the deconstructive and emancipatory power of feminism to complete his palimpsestic retaliation against British imperialism and the patriarchal confinements embedded within it. In the end, it is Mercy who reminds Jack Maggs of the importance of his family in Australia, it is Mercy who has become the most virtuous and successful woman in the novel, it is Mercy who survives her husband and bears witness to Tobias' manipulation of truth, and indeed, "*it is Mercy who is remembered best*" (Carey, 1997: p327). Her fertility and maternal love form a drastic contrast to all other female characters who are associated or troubled by abortion and death, and her active engagement, demonstrated by powerful actions such as "*oversaw*" and "*supervised*", in the construction of the mansion and the library, presents her entrepreneurial/managerial capabilities and intellectual spirits. Moreover, the very final paragraph detailing her habitual excisions of Tobias' scurrilous fiction shows mutually reinforcing feminist and post-colonial defiances at their zeniths. As Snodgrass (2010: p78) claims, the ending "comprises a female comeuppance to a despoiler of women as well as a rejection of lies perpetrated by the mother country against Australia", and not to mention embedded in this is also Carey's repudiation of Dickens as the spokesman for the English. Unlike Estella, Mercy's rise from a English

prostitute/maid obsessed with her miserly master to a successful Australian woman is the best attack on the social Darwinism at the heart of British imperialism.

Thirdly, the presence and development of Tobias Oates the writer, as the metafictional embodiment of Dickens, makes *Jack Maggs* more than a retelling of *Great Expectations* as its intertextuality extends to the domain of historical/biographical reality. The ending of *Jack Maggs* subsumes and consequently usurps the ending of *Great Expectations* in the sense that it records how Tobias/Dickens alternates/alternated the different versions of the ending and their deviations from 'the truth'. Though throughout the book the similarities between Oates' story and Dickens' biography are manifest (Taylor, 2009), the exact time markers 1837, 1859 and 1860 in the end complete the allusive relation between *Great Expectations* and *The Death of Maggs*, and subsequently between the actual writer and the fictional writer. In addition, the retention of the name Maggs in the title of Tobias' book is significant as the word 'maggs' derives from the English street slang 'magg' for 'pilfer' or 'shoplift' (Snodgrass, 2010: p178), and combined with the contrast between the fictional punitive death from burning and the actual contented death in bed, it exposes the kleptomaniac nature of Tobias'/Dickens' imperial storytelling. Tobias manipulates narratives as a revengeful catharsis against Jack Maggs, as he himself is revenged against by Mercy's aforementioned excisions; similarly, *Jack Maggs* is Carey's post-colonial revenge against the absence of Australia and of the perspective of the colonized in *Great Expectations*. As a self-conscious writer that he is, Carey also sacrifices his own fictional authority in support for multiple variations of truth in doing this.

Finally, as their respective disillusionments have led them, the protagonists of both stories complete their Bildungsroman journeys in the endings. But while Pip does so by returning to his place of origin—the marsh country and the forge—with an ambiguous view of his future, Jack Maggs displays much more determination and agency in forming a new hybrid identity in his Australian home. Pip and Jack Maggs are both victims of post-birth abortions, connected in their misery resulting from abandonment: Pip is an orphan abandoned by his parents and society, and Jack Maggs is a colonial subject ostracized by his motherland. In the ending of *Great Expectations*, Pip has been taught to value affection and conscience over social advancement, but his return to the origin is only physical as Joe and Biddy's marriage marks a new beginning in the household that to some extent excludes Pip; he remains an orphan, and his reunion with the other orphan in the story, though with a tinct of hopefulness, presents a future as nebulous as the evening mists rising from the marshes.

In contrast, Jack Maggs' post-colonial Bildungsroman is an active compensation for his abandonment, and the ending consolidates his sense of being/belonging by completing

Bhabha (2004)'s sequence of the post-colonial identity formation: mimicry→ambivalence→hybridity. As Snodgrass (2010) suggests, Maggs' journey is a reverse Bildungsroman where the grown-up revisits the land of birth to learn a lesson. It starts with Maggs' idealized identification with England and his despise for and dismissal of fellow Anglo-Australians: "...*I am a fucking Englishman* (Carey's own italics), *and I have English things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin...*" (Carey, 1997: p57). His mimicking desire is so strong that it persists even in the later part of the novel: "*I'd* [Maggs] *rather be a bad smell here than a frigging rose in New South Wales* (ibid: p230). However, it is already clear in his early encounters in the Percy household that this idealistic mimicry is doomed to fail. For instance, when the rumors about his real identity as an ostracized convict transpire, he is suspected and labeled as a "murderer", associated with vocabularies and concepts such as "*bolter*", "*nasty*", "*prison*", "*scoundrel*", "*offence*", "*rob*", "*hurt*" and "*curse*" etc. (ibid: p86-88), all of which show his immediate victimization by the Victorian British people's partial knowledge about the penal colony and their imperialistic stereotypes about the colonial subjects it holds. Ironically, the persistence of Maggs' mimicry mentioned before can be interpreted as a defense mechanism against such victimization and othering, the underlying essence of which might just be a desperate attempt at denying the ambivalence he has felt towards himself being the colonized who want to become his colonizer but never get accepted. This ambivalence simultaneously culminates and ends in his confrontation with his beneficiary Henry Phipps. As the most significant symbol of Maggs' monetary and emotional connection to England, Henry Phipps' quasi-patricidal attempt at killing Maggs is the most powerful wake-up call for him to realize the futility of his mimicry and to abandon this ambivalence that stands in the way of his finding a new self (Heinke, 1994). The ending presents his final arrival at hybridity, in embracing which he views Australia not as the wasteland of verminous trashes anymore but as a homeland full of familial love and social possibilities. Perhaps the memory of being beaten by Ma Britten will not fade away easily, but Maggs certainly fulfills his revenge and claims his victory in becoming the perfect Australian father instead—fertile, productive and successful. In addition, the fact that he never read "*That Book*" by Tobias renders the writer's imperial attempt at blame/revenge futile and pathetic (Carey, 1997: p328). Indeed, even though Pip and Maggs have both gone through their disillusionments and Bildungsroman lessons, at the end of the day Maggs and Mercy are rewarded with their self-redemptions that resemble much more the idyllic happiness possessed by Joe and Biddy: they are "*both clannish and hospitable, at once civic-minded and capable of acts of picturesque irresponsibility*" (ibid: p327), and it is this critical/satirical pairing of the most righteous characters in *Great Expectations* and the formerly repressed convict that well demonstrates Carey's palimpsestic vindication and celebration of Australia and the Australians.

In summary, through close readings of the two endings, this essay has discussed four major hypertextual choices Carey makes in his palimpsestic criticism against British imperialism and his post-colonial celebration of Australian hybridity. First, the application of the third person narration challenges the fictional centrism of *Great Expectations* and emphatically strengthens the actuality of the success/happiness of the Maggs family in Australia. Second, in contrast to Estella's feminine passivity, Carey's Mercy demonstrates much more agency and enthusiasm in her maternal love, managerial talent and intellectualism, and thus adds a powerful feminist force of defiance to Australia's post-colonial struggle against British imperialism. Third, the metafictional exposé of Oates/Dickens reveals the larcenous and manipulative nature of imperialistic storytelling, by which Carey stresses that the key quality of truth consists of alterities and variations. At last, it has been argued that while Pip's Bildungsroman leads him to an altered past and a nebulous future, Maggs creates his own vindictive/vindicating Bildungsroman in his active embracing of a post-colonial hybrid identity and in his subsequent becoming of a successful Australian father. Therefore, as the endings reveal, while Pip and Estella may be redeemed in their suffering, in casting Jack as the prototypical forebear of the Anglo-Australian, Carey refuses colonial mislabeling by depicting his protagonist as "*a **self-redeemer**, a testament to Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection*" that forms one of the core ideologies of Victorian literary canon like Dickens (Snodgrass, 2010: p131).
Word Count: 2190

Appendix I: The Ending of *Great Expectations*

Dickens, Charles. (2012) *Great Expectations* (Penguin English Library 2nd Edition). London: Penguin Books Ltd. P553-554

'I have often thought of you,' said Estella.

'Have you?'

'Of late, very often. There was a long hard time when I kept far from me, the remembrance of what I had thrown away when I was quite ignorant of its worth. But, since my duty has not been incompatible with the admission of that remembrance, I have given it a place in my heart.'

'You have always held your place in my heart,' I answered. And we were silent again, until she spoke.

'I little thought,' said Estella, 'that I should take leave of you in taking leave of this spot. I am very glad to do so.'

'Glad to part again, Estella? To me, parting is a painful thing. To me, remembrance of our last parting has been ever mournful and painful.'

'But you said to me,' returned Estella, very earnestly, ' "God bless you, God forgive you!" And if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now - now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends.'

'We are friends,' said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.

'And will continue friends apart,' said Estella.

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists where rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw the shadow of no parting from her.

Appendix II: The Ending of *Jack Maggs*

Carey, Peter. (1997) *Jack Maggs*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd. P327-328

The Maggs family were known to be both clannish and hospitable, at once civic-minded and capable of acts of picturesque irresponsibility, and it is only natural that they left many stories scattered in their wake. Yet amongst the succeeding generations of Maggs who still live on those fertile river flats, it is Mercy who is remembered best, not only for the story of how she lost her wedding finger, not only for the grand mansion on Supper Creek Road whose construction she so pugnaciously oversaw and whose servants she so meticulously supervised, but also for the very particular library she collected in her middle age.

The Death of Maggs, having been abandoned by its grief-stricken author in 1837, was not begun again until 1859. The first chapters did not appear until 1860, that is, three years after the real Jack Maggs had died, not in the blaze of fire Tobias had always planned for him, but in a musty high-ceilinged bedroom above the flood-crowded round his bed, the old convict met death without ever having read 'That Book'.

For this lack, Mercy compensated. She read The Death of Maggs, first as it appeared in serial, then again when the parts were gathered in a handsome volume, then again when the author amended it in 1861. Finally, she owned no fewer than seven copies of the last edition, and each of these is now (together with Jack Maggs's letters to Henry Phipps) in the collection of the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Of the seven volumes, six are cloth, one is leatherbound, and this last is signed: To Mercy from Captain E. Constable, Clapham 1870.

The Mitchell's librarian has noted on each index card the 'v.rough excision' of that page which reads:

Affectionately Inscribed
To
PERCIVAL CLARENCE BUCKLE
A Man of Letters, a Patron of the Arts

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