Preface

Peter Carey’s arrival on the literary scene in the mid-1970s coincided with a period of momentous change in Australian culture and, more specifically, in the world of Australian letters. Many of Australia’s foremost writers followed the example of Patrick White, who was famously “determined to prove that the Australian novelist is not necessarily the dreary, dun colored offspring of journalistic realism” and led the way to a “‘new wave’” of Australian prose writing. Authors like Michael Wilding, Murray Bail, and Peter Carey and Frank Moorhouse at the time seemed to find it increasingly hard to accommodate the experience of their changing environment to the narrative tradition of writers like Lawson, Furphy and Paterson. With their formal experiments and innovations in terms of subject-matter, the then literary avant-garde rebelled against the restrictions of the formulaic bush tales that had predominated in Australian fiction and overshadowed even the innovatory creative achievements of writers like White and Christina Stead. In order to overcome the creative impasse, they started to look abroad – to South America, for example, and the continent’s magical realists and fabulists (Garcia Marquez and Borges have been mentioned again and again), or to North America’s postmodernists John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon and even back to Jack Kerouac and the Beats.

Peter Carey was at the fore front of this movement of opposition against the “‘well rounded tale’ and the bush-realists ‘nationalist’ tradition in Australian
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fiction.” Reflecting on these years in a recent interview, Carey explained that at the time he found Australian literature “dull,” hence “developed a strong passion to make it new and fresh.” The experimental fantasy and science fiction of his short stories, which – in terms of style and subject-matter represented a clear departure from the established literary tradition. Craig Munro, for example, hailed him as “the most spectacular talent to emerge in the 1970s,” while Brian Kiernan (who saw Carey writing “pure fictions à la Borges”) and Bruce Bennett who described Carey as a “true tabulator” praised him as a herald of the new Australian literature. Against the background of Australian literary history, the terseness and economy of Carey’s early prose, the vague and apocalyptic settings that lack the recognizably Australian features of the traditional literature of the time, signified a radical departure from the “barren anecdotal realism of the local literature.” It also meant, significantly, a shift from the local to the international.

While Carey abandoned the genre of short fiction after his second collection (War Crimes, 1979), the short stories do not stand apart from the rest of his fictions, for it is here that Carey first explores a wide range of concerns which have since reappeared again and again in his novels. All his novels stand for a critique of the excesses of capitalism or ‘late capitalism’, as one would have to say, with an eye to Carey as a post modernist writer (e.g., in “War Crimes”); fictional investigations into topical political questions such as the effects of American cultural imperialism (“American Dreams”) and of totalitarianism (“Kristu-Du,” “The Fat Man in History”); and finally, stories like

Carey’s generic turn from short to long prose allowed him to enlarge his post-modernist narratorial instrumentarium, which he had given first and sometimes extensive test-runs in the short stories, in the more generous space of the novel. Metafiction, for instance, resurfaces in practically all of his full fledged fictions, most notably in *Illywhacker* (1985), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), *Jack Maggs* (1997). The possibilities afforded by the novel form permit Carey to explore fully the critical potential of this self-consciousness. It is through his narrators’ self-awareness that he addresses such issues as the constructedness and arbitrariness of reality (past and present), that he puts doubtfulness in place of self-evidencies and old certainties, and that he constantly interrogates notions of truth and authenticity.

And, in a context where linguistic constructs of all kinds are debunked, grand narratives (whether religion, imperialism, or ideologies such as the doctrine of racial superiority) are equally exposed as dangerous and often times misleading. These narratorial tactics serve a strategic cause. They help to prepare the ground for a critical interrogation of some of the most controversial issues in the Australian political fabric. In the short stories, vague settings Australia featured as an idea or a concept rather than as a concrete place. Carey dealt with issues of a quite general and frequently universal nature – Australia was often only metaphorically implied. In the novels, however, Australia is insistently true, and is heated by the same debates as its extra-fictional model.
Careyesque features such as self-consciousness, playing with reader expectations, a concern with authenticity and fakery, an obsession about lies and truths, all fall into place as components of a fictional discourse on controversial issues of Australia’s past and present – many of which are political potatoes of the hottest kind. Carey has proved to be a particularly astute observer of the political dimension of life. As Nicholas Birns rightly points out in his contribution to this volume, few novelists, and very few of his level of quality, have registered the political developments of the last forty two years as keenly as has Carey (Gaile, 2005). Political under currents even run through the most playful of his fictions. Seemingly harmless episodes take on wider significance vis-à-vis issues like history, identity, reconciliation, or tax evasion.

Carey’s most recent novel, *My Life as a Fake*, for example, is concerned with the psychological effects of an unnatural birth, of contested parenthood, and of denied love – conditions all of which, by implication, also apply to Australian history. *True History* grants the readers glimpses into the psyche of a nineteenth-century Irishman, whose “brave parents was ripped from Ireland like teeth from the mouth of their own history,” and who himself was driven to outlawdom by the injustices of the British colonial administration.

Carey has, in the eyes of his worldwide audience, come to represent Australia as Salman Rushdie does India or Margaret Atwood Canada. His long career, his popularity with reviewers and his appreciation by critics, along with his occasional involvement in current political debates have all contributed to making him a literary heavy weight. When it comes to his fame, comparisons
with Patrick White are unsurprisingly frequent. Patrick White, winner of the 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature, was the first writer in Australia’s literary history to achieve truly international fame. Carey can indeed claim to be the legitimate heir to White’s standing in the world of Australian literature. Carey’s reputation as one of the foremost Australian fiction-writers has likewise been made, or substantiated, to a considerable degree by literary prizes. He has won every major fiction award in Australia (the Miles Franklin three times), as well as major international prizes such as the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize (for *Jack Maggs*) and the Booker Prize, which he even won twice for *Oscar and Lucinda* and *True History*. In the public perception of the literary phenomenon ‘Peter Carey’ the Booker stands out. There is, for example, hardly an essay, review or news item on Carey that fails to mention his double victory. Apart from cementing his position as one of the most highly regarded writers in the Commonwealth, Carey’s two Bookers have also greatly enhanced the reading of public’s awareness of Australian literature in general.

Throughout his career, Carey has received ample attention from literary critics. There are four monographs, seven dissertations, dozens of chapters in academic publications, and a couple of hundred articles in scholarly journals and reviews in major world publications. Scholars from diverse quarters of the academy have dwelt on Carey (next to literary critics, mainly film critics, political scientists, historians, and fellow fiction-writers). Overall, his works have proved to be particularly approachable through late-twentieth century critical theories, mainly postcolonial and postmodern. Scholars from post-
colonial studies have been intrigued by his texts because of their decolonizing agenda. The novels critically examine political and cultural aspects of colonialism, consider the individual caught in the throes of coloniality, and bring up the issue of the genocide committed by white Australians against the indigenous population. Readings of Carey’s novels along the lines of post-colonial theory have time and again focused on their subversive potential; and have endeavored to examine how Carey tests the validity of Western grand narratives and cultural conventions, particularly narrative ones. They have accordingly scrutinized the writer’s strategy of undermining Western conceptions of reality (for example, through what is commonly dubbed ‘magicalrealism’), of the novel form (his parodic rewriting of a classic Victorian novel in *Jack Maggs*, for example), of conventions to do with point of view and narratorial authority. Post-modern approaches have shared some of these interests, but have specialized in the element of playfulness that materializes in Carey’s fictions in the figure of trickster narrators, in deceiving interactions with the reader, in the element of parody and intertextuality, in metafictional strategies, and in his use of historiographic metafiction. With their focus on language and the linguistic constructedness of categories foundational to the Western world, post structurally influenced analyses have considered the way Carey handles the dichotomies of reality and fantasy, truth and fiction, authenticity and fakery. One might think that certain staleness now-a-days permeates this preoccupation with truth and untruth that the wars about linguistic essentialism and Western profundity have been fought—that such finely
differentiating post-structuralist knowledge persists merely as an intellectual indulgence. But binary thinking in categories of true and false continues to be operative in the popular imagination, perhaps today more than ever. There is a conspicuous congruence between the ascendance of the aforementioned ‘postist’ discourses in literary studies and Peter Carey’s emergence as a writer. His novels constitute a peculiar mix of both postmodern and postcolonial strategies, reminiscent of the ‘pocomo blend’ that has been detected in Salman Rushdie’s novels. Carey’s fictions have, accordingly, often been discussed in critical terms that combine postmodern and postcolonial reading strategies. While for critics the novels resonate with an awareness of postcolonial and postmodern concerns, the author himself is far less ready to subscribe to any such discourse. Although Carey has acknowledged his interest in post-colonial theory, explicitly so in the case of Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, he certainly does not approach his literary subjects from the angle of theory. As Carey illustrates just that he is a writer of the postmodern age, with a postmodern intellectual’s hyper-awareness of the dangers of master-narratives and totalizing rhetoric. The same holds true for his view of post colonialism. Carey grew up in a former settler colony; his senses sharpened from personal experience. And while it is true that many of his novels address postcolonial issues in Australian culture, his fictions— as Bill Ashcroft argues with respect to *Tristan Smith*— enter critical discourse as writings that invite not only postcolonial readings, but also a ‘‘reading’ of contemporary cultural relations. It doesn’t simply propose a reading; it is a reading and, as such, enters, rather than exposes itself to, the field of theoretical
discourse. Carey’s membership among postcolonial writers remains ambiguous, understood as a counter discourse aimed at resistance and change, the label ‘postcolonial’ would become problematic because of Carey’s implication in the very system he sets out to criticize. Even Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Abdul Jan Mohamed, Homi Bhabha, Peter Nazareth, all of whom were born in the former colonies, chose to teach and conduct research in the West.

The main objective of the present thesis titled ‘A Self-Conscious Literary and Historical Representation: A Study of Peter Carey’s Fiction’ is to explore the synoptic view and examine the thematic concerns of Peter Carey fiction. The aim of this study is to demonstrate how certain thematic and structural patterns run through the fiction of Peter Carey. While the present attempt is not to enforce a reductive reading or to fit his fiction into a framework, a detailed reading of his fiction reveals certain concerns intentions of the novelist, predominantly the construction of an Australian identity. The identity evolves out of Australia's historical processes. The matrix out of which Carey constructs Australian identity largely stems from the convict penal heritage of the first wave of English colonists. The early English convicts, for the sake of survival in inhumane surroundings were adept at fabricating lies, and in time turned out to be adroit too at the art of story-telling or spieling. The history of the nation created in Carey's fiction is trapped in the prison of the past, the penal past. However, the nation's history rendered aesthetically in Carey's fiction is largely based on models of truths and lies, i.e. truth value is suspended in a bid to debunk the narratives of colonial histories. Carey does take cognizance of the
Australian Aborigines. There is definitely a consciousness of their rich cultural past which was destroyed by the English colonizers. The contribution of the immigrant peoples to the construction of national identity too is reflected in his fiction. The spectre of the penal past from which the Australian cannot escape and the realization that he no longer belongs or is acceptable to England, forces him into accepting the new landscape and conjuring a heaven out of hellish circumstances. The thesis states that the aesthetic rendition of Australian National Identity in Peter Carey's fiction is best echoed in Australia's historical processes.

In Chapter One titled ‘Literary Evolution’, an element that looms large is that of powerful resistance of fixations of any kind, be they of the land of Australia, its peoples, or even Carey's own fictions. Though Carey's novels lend themselves to a neat postcolonial and post-modern reading, Carey refutes any post-colonial or post-modernist concerns. He refuses to be fixated into any mode of writing. For example, he is "wary of being labeled a magic-realist."

Carey's, the postmodernist practice is most suitable for denouncing the many lies told about the nation. On the other hand, his fiction does not offer a neat reading of the truths of the nation. Lies and truths are intermingled in many fabulations, the real and the fantastic are amalgamated. Many a time, Carey has been criticized for writing from the 'outsiders' position as he writes from New York. However, more than seeing this as a hindrance, Carey works this outsider position to his advantage, stating that it affords him objectivity. The view of an outsider is more detailed and more enlightening, opines Carey. “In Carey's
situation, the outsider and the insider juxtapose before each other. Being born and raised in Australia, Carey carries first-hand information about his home land and time and again. He acknowledges that his fictional project has been the invention or discovery of his nation. Thus his project propels him into the nation's historical past so as to comprehend its present.

Chapter two speaks about Historical Narration in the novel *Illywhacker*. Carey’s *tour-de-force* sweep through roughly 150 years of Australian history, is – like all the fictions that followed – radically different from its predecessor in terms of subject-matter and narrative form and style. With its emphasis on building and architectural metaphors as well as its narratorial self-consciousness, the novel offers itself for a reading in post structurally influenced terms, as Brian Edwards does in his contribution to the volume. In his essay, he considers the novel as “an exercise in bricolage,” a demonstration of postmodernist playfulness, where history “receives a deconstructive shot” and established notions about authorship are delicensed.

Carey revisits quite a few of the literary-theoretical concerns of *Illywhacker* in Chapter III Exploring Australian Self Consciousness speaks about the novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, but packages them in an entirely different narrative form. Lyn McCredden and Ansgar Nünning both address concerns in *Oscar and Lucinda* that had already animated *Illywhacker*’s potential for cultural criticism: namely, the question of how European discourses fare when transplanted to the Antipodes. While Nünning explores the postmodern and postcolonial concept of history underlying the novel and shows how Carey,
through formal, thematic and theoretical manoeuvres, renews the genre of the historical novel as such and re-examines received notions of Australian history, McCredden analyses how Carey handles ‘sacredness’ in the context of a novel that is largely informed by the postcolonial view of Christendom as an essentially alien presence in the Australian context.

In Chapter IV titled as Great Expectations speaks about a novel *Jack Maggs*, both Maggs in *Jack Maggs* and Magwitch in *Great Expectations* return to be reunited with the young men who had been so kind to them at the time of their attempted escapes. Both men have a desperate need to establish themselves within their original place of birth and within Victorian society and to reinvent themselves as Victorian gentlemen, mainly by way of association with the young gentlemen they regard as their adoptive sons. This concept of Victorian gentleman is a crucial one as it features in both *Great Expectations* and *Jack Maggs*. The characters (Pip, Magwitch, Jack Maggs and Henry Phipps) in both novels delude themselves about the definition of what a Victorian gentleman is. They all deny their origin or true identity which leaves them with no frame of reference to build a new future. They all fall prey to 'false expectations' but are then able to function within their context once they realize and acknowledge their authentic identity and gentility.