

"Your notes are lies mate": Jack Maggs and the Rewriting of a Canonical Text

Shramana Das Purkayastha

The idea of "measuring" and of judiciously "selecting" a particular body of texts is inherent in the originary meaning of the word "canon". Whereas the Greek word "kanon", to which the etymology of the term "canon" can be traced back, means a measuring rod, in the Christian context, the term strands for a catalogue of books in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Literary canon, on the other hand, includes works, that are alternatively called the "classics" and are, at a given period of time, most frequently discussed by literary critics, and taught in higher academic institutions.

However, the process of canon formation is an ideologically fraught one. It is not based, as is often claimed by the defenders of canon, on a culturally neutral evaluation of literary works. The assumption that the canonical classics represent universal human issues of perennial interest has been hotly contested in the critical field. The question as to who measures the worth of the works to be included in a canon, or what kinds of work are fit to be incorporated, or rather, the representation of which reality is being posited as universal have begun to be explored. It has been argued that the ideology of a privileged, empowered class has informed the process of the selection of texts, whereas non-elite, or non-normative, authors, genres, and artistic forms have acquired scant representation. The "Western Canon", as a result, includes works by mainly white, European, heterosexual male authors, eliding those by Black, non-British, working class, female, homosexual individuals.

Canon, therefore, contains within it, in words of John Guillory, "the vicissitudes of social hierarchy" (174) and "canonical choices are historically overdetermined" (195). In recent years noted attempts have been made to unearth the voices that have so far been strategically suppressed in canonical texts, and also to rewrite those texts from the perspective of the periphery. In the present paper, I propose to explore how Peter Carey's Jack Maggs engages with Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* to let the subaltern speak out his own story, as well as to question the very process of writing in order to expose the representational strategies inherent therein.

Dickens certainly is the most celebrated literary figure in the English canon. The ideologies in circulation in the Victorian period got conspicuous manifestation in his works. Hence, predictably enough, in our contemporary times, Dickensian texts have been rewritten and his ideas challenged from multiple perspectives---- feminist, Marxist, queer and postcolonial to name but a few. As George Letissier notes, "from many regards, Dickens is the emblematic figure of Victorian fiction, if not of the Victorian era. As one might expect, many Post-Victorian novels write after, or against him." (113) In Australia especially, the influence of Dickens can be discerned in a number of literary and cultural productions. Texts like Marcus Clark's nineteenth century work *His Natural Life* and Christina Stead's twentieth century novel *The Man Who Loved Children*, for instance, incorporate explicit traces of him. Reworkings on the plot specifically of *Great Expectations* may be found in Michael Noonan's 1982 sequel *Magwitch*, in the Australian Broadcasting Corporations television series *Great Expectations: The Untold Story* (1987) directed by Tim Burstall and in Peter Carey's novel *Jack Maggs* that won the 1998 Commonwealth Prize for Literature (Jordan, 294). To realise the full significance of the last, however, one would do good to interrogate in some detail Dickens' depiction of Metropolitan London's relation with and response to the penal colony of Australia, represented by the convict Magwitch.

The establishment of penal colony in Australia was effected by a decision taken by the British Parliament in 1787 to turn Australia into a place of banishment for criminals and the socially ostracized. Convict transportation to New South Wales began in 1787 and in 1788 the vessels of the First Fleet dropped anchor at Botany Bay.

However, Australia for Britain was not a mere geographical location chosen as a site of punishment. Rather, the European imagination conceived of it as a realm of iniquity, as though the place itself is imbued with the criminality of if its outlawed

residents. The British settlers who voluntarily migrated to Australia often castigated the continent as a "fifth or pick-pocket quarter" (qtd Brittan, 75). Not merely the popular imagination, but even the more scientifically oriented mind of Charles Darwin too saw Australia as a disorderly creation of a witless God. He describes the flora and fauna of New South Wales as "freaks [that] could not have been dreamed up by the same god who designed the northern hemisphere". (qtd Brittan, 75)

Such colonial definition of Australia as, to use the poet A. D. Hope's terms, "a vast parasite robber-state", (qtd Pana, 32) is not simply associated with its status as a penal colony. Rather its origin may be traced back to more deeply embedded socio-economic factors. After the duration of punishment was over, many convicts prospered as businessmen and became prominent members of Australian society. Yet it is not merely the moral impropriety of erstwhile sinners becoming prosperous that repulsed the free British. Most of these convicts originally belonged to the very lowest rungs of English society. The startling economic mobility the penal colony afforded to them threatened the conservative notions of social hierarchy, still held sacrosanct by the British settlers. Legal historian David Neal records that, by the early nineteenth century, liberated convicts "dominated the mercantile class in Sydney, and held more property than the free settlers." (6) The middleclass British settlers found such invasion from the underclass difficult to accept. Australia consequently seemed to them to be a queer place where divine justice did not prevail. As Patrick Morgan notes, for Victorian Britain, Australia represented "not just the other, but the opposite, the overthrowing of the old moral order". (qtd Brittan, 79)

All these ideas are reflected in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. The moral abhorrence against convict's money is expressed more than once in the novel. Pip resolutely rejects his social ambition when he learns that his secret benefactor is an Australian convict. This decision on his part is presented in the novel as a marker of Pip's honesty and the text remains oblivious to any implication of ingratitude that may be made out of it. The criminal's money, however honest the means of its acquirement may be, must always be abhorred by a conscientious Englishman. Moreover any association with the convict is to be deemed degrading for a gentleman of unsullied reputation. Throughout the initial sections of the novel, Pip is shown to be suffering self-reproach for having once helped Magwitch escape. Even though Dickens depicts Magwitch rather sentimentally as more sinned against than sinning, he also at the same time clarifies the point that Magwitch is not fit to dwell in England as a respectable

citizen. Till the end of the novel, Magwitch is labelled as a criminal. At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that Pip's sympathy for the convict is projected, not as an expected filial affection born out of his gratitude towards his benefactor, but rather as an exceptional love for a character most unworthy of it. Pip's rather patronising pity for Magwitch serves only to ennoble the Dickensian hero and never to redeem the convict.

Peter Carey in many of his interviews has frequently expressed his disgruntlement with such stereotypical portrayals of Australian figures. The representation of Magwitch seemed to him to be grossly inaccurate. In an interview given to Ramona Koval, he said: "this man is my ancestor... this is unfair". (Carey, 667) In *Jack Maggs*, therefore, he strives to break open the canon by inverting all the hierarchical binaries--- between the conscientious and the criminal, between civilised London and immoral Australia, between centre and periphery--- that the Dickensian text set up. Depriving Pip of his privileged narrative vantage point as is found in *Great Expectations*, Carey in his novel allows the convict to narrate his own life history and thus lay greater claim to the reader's sympathy. He transforms Magwitch and Pip into Jack Maggs and Phipps, respectively. Carey uses a third-person omniscient narrator, but the text also includes multiple letters written by Jack Maggs to Henry Phipps where the former's voice predominates. The eponymous protagonist turns out to be, not a convict always to be so stigmatised, but rather a wronged man with as much right to be admired as any other person.

I would like to start by comparing the beginnings of *Great Expectations* and *Jack Maggs* in order to illustrate how Carey destabilises Dickens' construction of Magwitch's character. From his very first appearance in *Great Expectations*, Magwitch is inalienably ascribed with the identity of a convict. Dickens introduces him as "a fearful man, all in coarse grey with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head". (Dickens, 4) Magwitch with his dishevelled appearance gets immediately silhouetted against the civilised London represented by Pip. The iron on his leg renders him readily recognisable as an ostracised criminal. Contrasted markedly with this is the note of ambiguity Jack Maggs opens on. Maggs here has not been affixed with a predetermined identity. The reader, along with Maggs' fellow passengers in the carriage, is led to make conjectures about his identity. He is variously assumed to be a bookmaker, a gentleman farmer, or a servant of a richman's household. Carey thus seems to expose Dickens' narrative technique as reductive; Dickens depicts stereotypes, rather than human personality in all its exhilarating

complexity.

Moreover, throughout *Great Expectations*, Magwitch appears to be a grotesquely dehumanised character not eligible for social inclusion. He is robbed even of an intelligible language of self-articulation. Dickens' description presents him as a mute beast, hunted and wounded. "A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud and lamed by stones... who limped and shivered, and glared and growled". (Dickens, 4) Towards the end of the novel, when Dickens delineates the scene of Magwitch's death, the convict is portrayed as a "hunted wounded shackled creature" (Dickens, 398), seen through the eyes of the rational, civilised Englishman, Pip.

Peter Carey, on the contrary, lends Jack Maggs not merely the voice to narrate his story, but also the ability to write and challenge Britain's stereotypical representation of Australia. Maggs' letters to Phipps constitute a body of resistant literature that defies and deconstructs the colonisers' ideologically biased definition of the colonised. The narrative of Peter Carey's novel together with the internal metanarrative of these letters builds up a multi-layered counter-discourse to the canonical text. The letters serve to reveal the humane side of Maggs' personality, never permitted in *Great Expectations* to shape our perception of Magwitch's character. We read about Maggs' love for Sophina, his partner in crime and his intimate friend in adolescence. His desperate yearning for maternal affection is emphasised in Carey's text. It is this longing to be accepted as a son to Mary Britten that had originally urged the immature Jack Maggs into committing his first burglary. So ardent was his desire for familial love that he was heedless of the moral implication of his actions, as long as those actions would make him be regarded "useful" by Ma Britten. Besides these letters, the main text of the novel too includes multiple instances of Maggs' humane feelings. Unlike Percy Buckle who despite having once sheltered Mercy Larkin as a sort of adopted daughter later develops an oppressive sexual relationship with her, Jack Maggs betrays a more tender affection for the girl. The lustful liaison between the maid and her foster-father seems incomprehensible to Maggs and all his physical gestures evince a paternal kindness towards Mercy: "His eyes were soft and brown, all their hardness gone... he lifted his poor mishappen hand and stroked her hair... she felt how he pitied her. He did not embrace her but continued gently to stroke her hair..." (159). This sensitivity displayed by the "convict" throws the vulgar perversion of the so-called honest Englishman into a sharp relief. The Victorian conceptualisation of Australia as a place of blatant immorality is turned on its head as the residents of metropolitan

England seem no more conscientious than those of the penal colony.

So far we have discussed how Peter Carey in his novel breaks the canonical silence of characters marginalised in Dickens' text and subverts, in order to reconstruct, the identities produced therein. At this juncture, analysis of Cary's portrayal of the character of Tobias Oates will reveal how he critiques the very process of literary creation. The canonical writer does not represent culturally and contextually neutral human reality as is generally believed. Rather, the reality he projects is a constructed one, often inaccurate, created in conformity with the received ideologies of a particular era and society.

Charles Dickens has been presented as a character in many Post-Victorian texts, with the focus being on the novelist's personal life and literary art. C. E. Bechhoffer-Robertes' 1928 novel, entitled *This Side of Idolatry, a Novel Based on the Life of Charles Dickens*, delineates the private relationship of Dickens, in order to deconstruct the popular conception of the writer as a Victorian paterfamilias. (Parey, 192) However, Peter Carey intends no such iconoclasm when he projects Dickens in his *Jack Maggs*. Rather he seems more eager to convey a metafictional commentary on the art of literary representation. He creates a fictional alter-ego for Dickens, named Tobias Oates. Oates is a promising novelist, who hypnotises Jack Maggs to make him disclose in his stupor dark secrets about his convict past, which is later to be used as raw material for Oates' novel. When Jack Maggs realises Oates' true intention and how far he has been burgled of his jealously guarded secrets, he aggressively attacks the writer.

At one level, Tobias seems to represent the intrusive imperial gaze. In his excitement of becoming a voyeuristic observer of Maggs' mind, Oates says:

"What a puzzle of life exists in the dark little laneways of this wretch's soul, what stolen gold lies hidden in the vaults beneath his filthy street... it's the Criminal Mind... awaiting its first Cartographer."(90)

The very act of cartography, as ethnographer Ralph Cintron observes, is associated with the imposition of authority (Fulkerson, 30) The cartographer is accorded a vantage point as an intelligent rational individual who sees and maps a territory. While the imperial mapmaker is a conscious, individuated person, the native residents belonging to a territory are all reduced to an anonymous conglomeration of statistics. Cartography entails an act of epistemic violence by which indigenous conceptualisations of territorial

space are overwritten with new maps and foreign place names. Jack Maggs' mind undergoes a similar process; for Tobias, his mind is a tabula rasa on which the preconceived identity of a criminal is to be inscribed. The Australian's mind in the process gets projected as innately inferior to the Englishman. Criminality is represented as biological, rather than socially induced. The hierarchical binary between moral England and immoral Australia is hence irreversible.

On another level, Carey suggests that the characters found in a canonical text are often stock stereotypes, created in consonance with their conceptualisations in a particular time and culture. The seemingly "universal, human experience" a canonical text is believed to capture, is actually the experience of a select group, socially, economically or culturally privileged. The alternative versions of reality that the marginalised social or gender groups may provide, are trivialised as the members of those groups are either caricatured or sentimentalised. Tobias Oates, as his sister-in-law Lizzie Warriner reflects in the novel, "had always had a great affection for Characters..." (81). A canonical writer, Carey affirms, "constructs" a character according to his private ideology as well as to those of his contemporary society, rather than objectively describing real individuals. The process of the creation of a canonical work is denuded of its halo in Carey's novel. Instead, Dickens' commodification of the life of the socially marginalised, without their conscious consent, is presented as unethical in Jack Maggs. More than once in the text, Tobias is called a thief. After reading the manuscript of his novel *The Death of Maggs*, Maggs calls the writer "A damned little thief" (279)

In the light of this comment, Maggs' aggression towards Oates seems to present the former as a recalcitrant subject resisting the sensationalisation of his private history. When Maggs thunders--- "your notes are lies mate" (232)--- the reader too realises the portrayal of Magwitch in Dickens' canonical novel to be but a strategically constructed "lie". Dickens distorted truth and never let the micronarratives of disempowered people be emergent. Peter Carey's Jack Maggs invokes this repressed voice to reveal literary canon's claim to ideological neutrality to be a hollow sham.

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