

“Dancing the Old Enlightenment”: *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime

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Reviewers of Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* have tended to be preoccupied with its postmodern form: its continual ironic distancing; the blatant untrustworthiness of its narrator; the confusingly interwoven anti-realist narratives and its dizzying *mise-en-abyme* structure; and its dense pastiche of Francois Rabelais, Miguel de Cervantes, Herman Melville and James Joyce among others.¹ While reviewers have usually and adroitly discussed the novel in terms of its relationship to the canon and in the light of postmodern theory, they often seem to miss something at the heart of the novel, namely Flanagan’s liberal or progressive politics. While anti-realist, abstract experiments in postmodernism are sometimes associated with an often self-indulgent, late-capitalist nihilism, Flanagan’s sojourn in Australia’s colonial past is arguably informed by the same liberal politics that have motivated his political activism: throughout his career, Flanagan has campaigned on and written about a number of issues of national importance. In the past year this has included an article published in the UK broadsheet *The Guardian* in response to the Liberal government’s paternalist treatment of Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, and a lengthy critique of the Gunns’ wood-chipping debate and Government corruption in Tasmania that was published in the national Australian political magazine *The Monthly* and also in pamphlet form for distribution throughout the site of the contestation in the Tamar Valley. His most recent novel, *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006), written in the genre of a spy thriller and marketed towards a popular readership, has been received as an ambitious attempt to intervene in the effects of “The War on Terror”: it attempts to indict the encroachment on civil liberties by official agencies, and to expose the sinister and corrupt allegiances between Western governments and their intelligence organisations, commercial media and even organised crime. The question then arises: why would an author who seems so publicly committed to social

justice and activism choose a densely reflexive, ironic mode of expression in his representation of the Australian colonial past, particularly when postmodern philosophical and theoretical developments are so often perceived as being removed from the realpolitik? ²

It would seem that Flanagan’s decision to represent Australian colonial history in postmodern mode was made in order to reject the dominance of notions of causation and progress in representations of the national past, a dominance encoded in linear historical narratives. Flanagan’s insistent linking of the early nineteenth century to the twentieth century and to the present is not so much an indication of historical causality—the notion that our colonial past has directly determined our national present—but is the expression of a belief that the same universal ideals and positivistic methods of the Enlightenment commandeered to the service of the will-to-power were, and continue to be, the basis of systems of inequality and exploitation in the Australian present. While Flanagan rejects what he sees as the oppressive effects of the Enlightenment, or more specifically the Enlightenment Project, he retains an Enlightenment sense of liberal engagement as a key principle in combating present injustices and inequalities. It is important to clarify here that the Enlightenment Project is not synonymous with the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment Project can be defined as the effect of universal and universalising ideals, instrumental reason, positivistic methods when combined with the material conditions of existence and the individual and national will to power, all of which work to defeat the emancipatory aspects of Enlightenment ideals and social programs.

Traditional linear, realist representations of history, whether historical or fictional, encode powerful Enlightenment concepts such as positivism and the notion that a stable, tangible past is retrievable through scientific method, the belief that the events of history cumulatively build “progress”, and that humankind moves organically towards a greater civilisation, emancipation and enlightenment. If Flanagan wants to challenge these Enlightenment notions that still dominate political and bureaucratic systems and the national collective consciousness generally, a postmodern anti-realist form is best suited to this purpose. In terms of the politics of its form, *Gould’s Book of Fish* can be read as a self-conscious subversion of the classical historical novel, which itself emerged out of the Enlightenment narrative of history which was reliant on empiricist epistemology to determine the “truth” of the past. As Georg Lukacs explains in his influential analysis of the classical historical novel, the Enlightenment conceptualisation of history is inextricably linked to the idea of progress: events occur in linear order, conflicts occur but,

through their resolution, humankind learns and improves (1962). In *Gould's Book of Fish* the eponymous book works metaphorically to represent the colonial past in a postmodern mode which undermines the Enlightenment belief in history-as-progress. Gould's book begins as a set of detailed and scientifically accurate paintings, but he soon transgresses the boundaries of this form, transforming it into a subjective and artistic interpretation of experience. Within the narrative, the material form of the book is fragmented and changing: for Gould, the written text is different every time the book is opened and the pictures shift in a way that resembles the surface of the sea. Like Gould's book, the colonial past and history in general is something that shifts, often according to the motivations of the story teller or reader, unable to be pinned down in any singular sense.

It should also be noted that "the past" of Flanagan's novel, despite its postmodern indeterminacy, does not represent an advocacy of extreme historical relativism. The representation of the colonial past and of frontier contact in the novel is clearly indebted to the work of revisionist scholars such as W. E. H. Stanner and Henry Reynolds: that the Australian frontier was a place of extreme violence and devastation is an idea at the core of Flanagan's novel. The difference between the version of the past represented in *Gould's Book of Fish* and more formally conventional revisionist histories is the representation of history through narrative and language. The postmodern form of this novel challenges the belief that the events of the past can be uncovered in an exact or scientific sense, whereas, in more conventional narrative forms Enlightenment assumptions still tend to work through the politics of its narrative structure.³

The strategy that I explore in my analysis of *Gould's Book of Fish* is the postmodern experimental narrativisation of a colonial past as it is applied to a political critique of the national present. More specifically, interpreting the novel through Jean-Francois Lyotard's detailed discussions of the postmodern sublime⁴ and a theory of bodily experience, I argue that Flanagan employs a postmodern aesthetic as a type of immanent critique in which the postmodern dialectic can be read as an extension of Enlightenment thinking. In the novel the past is shifting and, at least in a positivistic sense, ultimately irretrievable. This signals the notion of history as the postmodern sublime—a space of irretrievable loss and unfulfilled desire at the edges of the margins of history. This complex and abstract approach is grounded in the real through constant reference to bodily experience. While history and the colonial past shift and change in the novel, representations of bodily experience anchor Flanagan's novel in the recognition that real lives, individual and collective suffering,

have often motivated postmodern critique. Underlying the theorising and abstraction of postmodernism is the desire for people's lives, often those from marginal groups, to materially improve.

The idea of postmodernist theory as both a critique and extension of modern or Enlightenment thinking—the immanent critique—is at the centre of the politics of *Gould's Book of Fish*. As Lyotard explains, the postmodern exists in a foetal state within the modern. To avoid the hierarchising will-to-power of modernity requires thinking beyond, around and between, in representation (*Lessons* 74). Similarly, postmodern events—what Lyotard terms *limit events*—erupt out of the modern, occurring when the events cannot be explained by the discursive laws of its time (*Lessons* 25). Therefore, postmodern representations or postmodern events are not necessarily diametrically opposed to the modern, but emerge out of it. This type of critique can be conceptualised as a type of extension of Enlightenment critical modes of analysis, even though the subject of the analysis turns back on the Enlightenment itself. By challenging the ideals and effects of the Enlightenment project, many postmodern texts work to further the emancipatory aims of the Enlightenment, even though they may not subscribe in the same way to the universal. In this way, in dealing with the Australian colonial past, Flanagan's engagement with postmodernism strengthens his liberal, emancipatory aims: the identities of Flanagan the liberal social activist and Flanagan the postmodernist are not as disparate as they might initially seem.

The very frequent critical focus on various Enlightenment tropes in the colonial setting of *Gould's Book of Fish* suggests the degree to which Flanagan perceives that particular modes of Enlightenment thinking—those that express the will-to-power and the scientific method—negatively affected European Australian culture from the beginning of colonisation. Symbols of the Enlightenment appear within the narrative to ironically signal its limitations. One example is the bottle in the shape of the bust of the great rationalist Voltaire, found on the Sarah Island colony. The bottle is highly prized by the Commandant for its associations with the European civilisation which he attempts, insanelly, to replicate on the island. At the same time, the potent French brandy found in the bottle becomes a means for convicts like Gould to escape the terrible daily realities of life in the wilderness under an insane Commandant. Enlightenment symbols, like this Voltaire-shaped bottle show the foothold that the Enlightenment Project gained in this short time. However, instead of civic pride, liberty, justice, and order, there is individual ambition, materialism, greed and also, escapism and despair.

While events like those involving the Commandant's brandy are represented in a humorous and hyperbolic way, Flanagan's exploration of the effects of the Enlightenment Project in this context is consistent with more traditional historical studies that support the idea of the Enlightenment Project taking hold in an accelerated form in colonial Australia.

If colonialism was ideologically bolstered by various scientific and social projects of the Enlightenment, it follows that colonies were founded as a type of Enlightenment laboratory. In *The Enlightenment in Australia* (2002), John Gascoigne gives a detailed explanation of why this was particularly the case in colonial Australia and highlights the importance of Enlightenment ideas and systems in the formation of an early Australian ideology, politics and material conditions of existence. According to Gascoigne, it was easier to put Enlightenment policies (including those concerning criminality and class structure) into practice in the penal colonies as there were no existing (European) traditions or structures established in Australia (7): British Enlightenment thinkers such as the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, famous for the promulgation of "the greatest good for the greatest number", were particularly influential (10-12). It is important to note that some Enlightenment initiatives, especially humanitarianism, were important in protecting the rights of both the convict and Aboriginal population. However, the difficulty of policing activities on the frontier because of the geographical and material conditions of the colony resulted in what could be interpreted as the limit events of the early colony or frontier, such as the decimation of local Aboriginal groups or the brutal, exploitative conditions and corruption of convict settlements. Taking these factors of early settlement into account, it seems likely that the effects of the Enlightenment project were felt earlier in the Australian situation, especially on the frontier, than they were in Europe, where the Enlightenment Project is most often associated with the events of the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ Therefore, in responding to the accelerated Enlightenment foundations of the Australian settlement, Flanagan is both shaping his critique to the peculiarities and specificities of the Australian case and commenting on the far-reaching effects of an Enlightenment Project that continues to shape national culture in the present.

One of the ways in which Flanagan's novel critiques the Enlightenment Project is through contesting the primacy of reason by insisting on the realities of bodily experience. "Dancing the old Enlightenment" is a phrase used by the protagonist, William Gould, as a euphemism for engaging vigorously in sexual acts. In its continued emphasis on the body and on physical

experience, the novel rejects the Enlightenment concept of reason as the basis of historical progress by insisting on other forms of knowledge; it grounds this postmodern mode, with a tendency towards play and abstraction, firmly in the real. The novel makes extensive use of bawdy imagery and explores the extremes of physical experience to expose the limitations of the metaphysical and universal ideals of the Enlightenment. The importance of the body as a source of knowledge is attested to by recent trauma theory, which argues that the body works as stable referent—a category by which the material basis of experience acts as an anchor for the “truth” of human existence (Douglass 12). Through representing the realities of physical deprivation on the Sarah Island and by making visible the remnants of traumatised bodies (including tagged and classified Aboriginal bones and the preserved, tattooed skin of executed convicts), there is a recognition of the reality of certain events—such as genocide—that occurred on the Tasmanian frontier. While the “truth” of numbers dead, the motivations and exact manner of death can never be known in a scientific way, a recognition of the incontestable reality of violence against the body and of the ensuing psychic trauma of such violence grounds Flanagan’s critique. Although *Gould’s Book of Fish* engages to a degree with Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, its representation of the colonial past, as evidenced in the records room scene, requires engaging with a much darker aesthetic in order to give expression to the loss and unfulfilled longing that an honest search for history entails.

Enlightenment concepts of history are also critiqued in the novel by its aesthetic of the postmodern sublime, which it uses for political purposes. This aesthetic is formally enacted through *Gould’s Book of Fish* to foreground the ways in which Enlightenment empiricist epistemology, its ideals of truth, liberty and equality, have been commandeered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for unintended and unethical purposes and to offer an alternative, postmodern concept of history, in which uncertainty, unknowability and unrepresentability can be seen as liberating and progressive political ideals. Lyotard’s concept of the postmodern sublime draws heavily on the Kantian notion of the sublime. The idea at the centre of the Kantian sublime, according to Lyotard, is unknowability—the combination of pleasure and pain when the imagination can conceive of an idea, but not the presentation of it (*Postmodern* 78). This is the major difference to the more widely recognised British concept of the sublime as explained by Edmund Burke and associated with the British Romantic poets, in which confronting the sublime involves conflicting feelings of wonder, awe and terror—a response often inspired by nature. Lyotard’s postmodern sublime takes the Kantian notion of unrepresentability and combines it with what

he sees as a traumatised postmodern consciousness that exists after certain events of the twentieth century, particularly events caused by the violence and genocidal tendencies of totalitarian regimes. Instead of awe and terror, the most powerful feelings are those of immense loss and of an unfulfilled desire for ontological certainty. The postmodern sublime has been applied to history in three main areas: literary theory, which includes Lyotard's theory of the postmodern sublime; historiography, which includes Hayden White's theory of the historical sublime; and the postmodern historical novel. White's thesis, explained in *The Content of the Form*, aligns with Lyotard when it sets out to expose the limitations of the rationalist and positivistic scaffolding of Enlightenment history by critiquing its realist narrativisation. White argues that the utopian potential of history can only be reached through an engagement with history as the sublime, in all its horror, ecstasy and ultimate unknowability. Flanagan's novel is an example of those postmodern historical novels where an aesthetic of the postmodern sublime challenges the Enlightenment linear construction of history—some other notable examples of this genre include J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*. As with Lyotard, White, and many postmodern historical novels, the foundations of history are not dislodged for the sake of an abstract intellectual exercise but to unsettle national and hegemonic systems of power that rely heavily on the past as a unified entity to bolster limiting and oppressive political and legal systems.

The connection between the postmodern historical novel and the postmodern sublime has been explored in Amy Elias's *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Elias investigates the genre of the metahistoriographical romance (her term for the postmodern historical novel) and its important political role, and she discusses the importance of the postmodern historical sublime in her examination of the action of history in the European and colonial past. Elias explains, for example, that in the search for history, the gaze is directed outward from the centre or the self to the borders of history where less is known or has been recorded (see Figure 1). In conventional history the borders are identified, information is uncovered through positivistic methods and history is eventually perceived in its totality. With postmodern metahistorical narratives, by contrast, when one nears the edges of history one realises that the borders are fluid and can neither be reached nor expressed. One encounters the sublime and, in turn, is directed back towards the centre in an attempt to understand the limitations contained in the narrativisation and linguistic expression of history, then back out to the margins again to discover the history of the Other and so on. History, once affected by the postmodern sublime, particularly in the postcolonial

metahistorical romance, moves in a type of pendulum motion where ultimate meaning is endlessly deferred and notions of margin and centre are in a state of constant reversal. The pendulum motion replaces the straight line of progress and attempts to dislodge the political hierarchies that it supports.

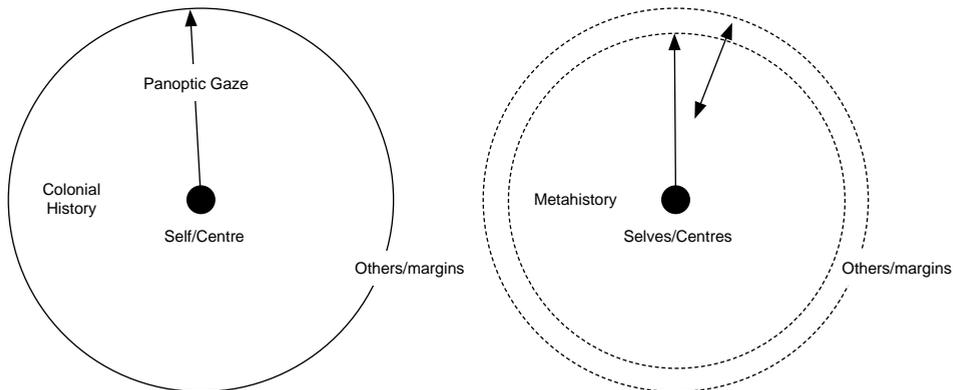


Figure 1: The Operation of History in Colonial and Metahistorical Narratives (Elias 201). Johns Hopkins University Press have been approached for permission to use this figure.

Elias’s model of the movement of history in representations of the colonial past in the postmodern historical novel—pendular as opposed to linear—while useful, is inadequate for an understanding of Australian settler experience. In the early Australian settler colonies the various positions of metropolitan centre, settler, criminal/convict, and Indigenous Other complicate the back and forward pendular motion of Elias’s model that relies on the binary of self and Other. What I want to suggest through a discussion of *Gould’s Book of Fish* is that in the Australian settler condition there is more action and interaction at the borders of history—near the edges of the sublime—than is suggested by this idea of the pendulum motion of history because of the existence of different groups of Others. Most Australians in very early colonial Australian history occupied the position of criminal, class or racial Other, and there was often conflict and competition between these groups—the centre was represented by those few in the settler metropolises or frontiers who were the representatives of European authority. I would argue that in the Australian settler context, as represented in *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the action of this history moves back and forward while remaining at the edges of history and it does not always fully swing back to the centre.

Of all the episodes in the novel, the “records room” section of the Gould’s narrative makes the most direct reference to Enlightenment systems and

scientific methods as applied to history—"the barbarity and horror of the settlement written as order and progress" (318). The central narrative of *Gould's Book of Fish* follows the experiences of petty thief, forger and conman, Gould, including his transportation to Tasmania (which occurs twice). Much of the action occurs on the notorious penal settlement of Sarah Island where Gould suffers at the hands of the megalomaniacal Commandant, his sadistic and corrupt underlings, and at the hands of other desperate criminals who, like Gould, are attempting to survive in whatever way they can. In the later part of Gould's narrative he discovers, explores and reads through the Sarah Island records room. He escapes from the prison, taking many of the ledgers, registers and books with him in an attempt to find a famous bushranger, Matt Brady, so that they can start a revolution. The records room consists of meticulously maintained records of the crimes and punishments of the inmates, lists of figures that calculate the economic details of the colony, letters written to and received from the Governor in Hobart, a written history of the penal colony, a library of histories and publications resulting from scientific cataloguing projects, and physical "specimens" (jars of preserved, tattooed skin) of punishments carried out. Awaiting execution, Gould discovers a possible escape route through the roof of his cell that leads to the records room. He reads through the texts, discovering much fabrication in these official, supposedly objective, documents.

The failure of the records to accurately record events reveals more generally the limitations of official records and conventional historical publications in representing the past in any full sense; it demonstrates the necessity of approaching the past through the historical sublime. In Gould's own search for the past (the recent past in his case) all he finds are lies and inadequacies. This turns the search back to interrogate the method which, although scientific, is anything but disinterested and objective: it clearly serves specific political interests. The physical and ideological location of Gould's enterprise, on the frontier—the outer reaches of "the civilised"—doubly complicates the search. In the metropolitan centres there are laws and systems in place to limit or hinder blatant abuses and lies like the ones that exist in the records room about the penal colony.⁶ On the frontier, in the realm of the Other, no such limitations exist, making the frontier a shifting, shady area in the search for history. In this records room scene Gould discovers a sense of history as the postmodern sublime: history cannot be understood in a positivistic sense and can only be approached through an imaginative or artistic space. Further, as a type of unconscious countermove to the work of convict record keeper extraordinaire Jorgen Jorgensen, Gould continues to express the realities of his own lived

experience of Sarah Island through the paintings and musings of his “book of fish” to which he adds the record room story.

The body (as stable referent) works in this scene both to spatialise history and to signal the Enlightenment underpinnings of colonial Australia and twentieth-century Europe. Through the images of jars of tattooed skin, Flanagan uses the motif of the body to link the Sarah Island context to the Nazi’s final solution holocaust, drawing attention to the similarities that exist between the Australian frontier and iconic limit events of the 1940s. The striking image of the flayed tattooed skin refers specifically to the events in the death camps of the 1940s. The skin (as well as the shrunken head of a Jew) were used as evidence of Nazi atrocities in the Nuremberg trials and were considered at the time proof of the degeneration of the German perpetrators into barbarism (Douglas 42). This powerful parallel—linking this event to the early penal settlements and the Australian frontier—is made to also foreground that the Enlightenment project underpinned both genocidal initiatives, suggesting that this type of event, which did not occur in Europe until the twentieth century, occurred much earlier in Australia where, as already noted, certain aspects of the Enlightenment took effect in an accelerated way. The recurrent use of these types of historical parallel indicates the spatialisation of history: events which repeat themselves at different junctures in history and at different locations.⁷ The action of spatialised history is similar to the movement toward the postmodern sublime, where the movement of history works through repetition and deferral. In the records room section of the novel a clear parallel made between the racial genocide, enforced labour and brutal executions and murders of the early colonial Australia, which were then repeated on a larger scale in the twentieth century, make the notion of history as a narrative of progress towards a state of enlightenment and emancipation seem ludicrous and ethically inadequate.

In the records room Gould has horrific, ghostly visions of skulls: a skull of the respected leader of a local Aboriginal tribe, Towtereh; the skulls of tortured and executed convicts; the skulls of children. They stare and accuse. This space outside of rational, even conscious experience is that of the postmodern sublime: a realm of unfulfilled desire and of terrible loss. This gruesome motif of the skull evokes not only those killed on the Australian frontier, but other limit events and genocides of modernity.⁸ What Gould has read and seen—the half-truths, deceptions and lies of history combined with the real suffering of horror represented through the body—now demands a specific response, that of bearing witness. “Witnessing” has been described

as a nagging presence (Douglas 48): it repeats and echoes. This is similar to the notion of haunting that is used as a metaphor in the novel. Gould feels as if:

those awful flayed skulls were advancing and receding—with their awful red bone sticking through as if they had been gnawed by dogs—as if they wished me to make the past right. Something that was totally beyond my powers [. . .] Those fearsome shades would not leave and were begging of me what was impossible. (325)

Some time after this vision Gould does attempt “the impossible”, and tries to “make the past right” by attempting to take the records to the bushranger and reputed revolutionary Matt Brady so that together they can challenge the “official” history. He attempts to stand witness, to tell his story, to have justice served and history re-told for the benefit of the survivors and the dead. In trauma and witness theory, it is claimed that telling one’s own story of deprivation or terror offers the possibility of healing or *working through* (Douglass 44). In this section of the novel, Flanagan attempts to deal with a problem at the heart of the individual and collective relationship to the Australian colonial and frontier past: what happens with enduring trauma when there are no witnesses left? Flanagan seems to suggest that, in the absence of effective acts of witnessing, there is no ethical way to achieve closure and that the repeating memory of a violent colonial past is inescapable.

If the remote locations of the colonial frontier are sites where the effects of the Enlightenment project are accelerated, including the eruption of violent limit events, the frontier is a time and place that should be interrogated in order to provide insights into the national present—in particular, ideologies surrounding race. At the centre of the relationships between individuals and groups in *Gould’s Book of Fish* is the notion of complicity: the way that material conditions and brutal, corrupt state-imposed systems of discipline undermine any allegiances, enforcing individualism, self-interest and isolation as a condition of existence. The records room episode abounds in various types of complicity amongst the various abject groups of Sarah Island. Representatives of these groups include: the old Danish record keeper, Jorgen Jorgensen—once a revolutionary back in his home country—but who now betrays his fellow convicts by misrepresenting the degree of their suffering in the official ledger, registers and histories of the island; the Aboriginal tracker, Tracker Marks, who leads the redcoats to bushrangers and escaped convicts; the convicts who decapitate and preserve the heads of Aborigines who were murdered or who had died of imported diseases; and Gould himself, who admits that he has remained alive only because of his ability to sell information about other convicts. Throughout

the novel, Flanagan represents colonial, frontier Australia as a brutal place where the colonial system involves everyone in oppression of others. This is a place where “convicts flogged convicts, pissed on blackfellas & spied on each other, that blackfellas sold black women for dogs & speared escaping convicts, that white slavers killed and raped black women, and black women killed the children that resulted” (443). What happens here is not the proud nation-building of official histories. These complicities are not recorded or even uttered, are not preserved in narrative like those well-worn pioneering stories of national myth. This is the repressed or silenced history that we can never know holistically, that we can only approach. The interactions of these groups of Others on the outskirts of civilisation and at the edges of history further complicate the action towards the historical sublime. Instead of the straight back and forth pendulum of the Elias model, where the historical gaze is directed from the self to Other and back, in the Australian settler context the gaze moves outwards, there is more action at the edges of history. In this space on the margins, different types of Others (the convict class Other, and Aboriginal race Other to name just two) each act on behalf of the colonial centre in oppressing, exploiting or exterminating the Other and then in surrounding these events with lies or silence. This makes a positivistic history even harder to retrieve and, in turn, reinforces the need to engage with the past through an aesthetic of the postmodern sublime.

Flanagan’s representation of the complicities of the national past is another expression of its Enlightenment foundations, where the principle of self-interest underlies the functioning of social and economic systems. The Sarah Island system, where self-interest has overridden any sense of liberalism, perhaps works as a portent for the outcomes of Enlightenment systems in the present time. Flanagan encourages an interesting comparison between the Australian colonial past and the present day. Whereas the complicities and moral compromises of colonial times were often required for survival, now, individually, and sometimes as a nation, Australians continue to identify with the position of Other—outsider, victim or underdog—but this is a status many Australians can no longer rightfully lay claim to. As Ann Curthoys has explained, white middle-class Australia’s continuing claims to victim status may work to deny the role played by just such Australians in the persistent oppression of indigenous and racial Others (2-3). In our contemporary “relaxed and comfortable nation”, can white Australia really claim a meaningful connection to the disenfranchised Other, such as the convict, bushranger or pioneer of our national folklore? Gould’s remarks at the end of the novel link the deeply ingrained complicity of the Enlightenment Project

of the past to the present. They also, paradoxically, work as a very liberal call for engagement and emancipatory social change:

we all make our accommodation with power, & the mass of us would sell our brother and sister for a bit of peace and quiet. We've been trained to live a life of moral cowardice while all of the time comforting ourselves that we are Nature's rebels. But, in truth we've never got upset and excited about anything: we're like the sheep we shot the Aborigines to make way for, docile until slaughter. (442)

Gould's mission to drag a pallet of the doctored Sarah Island records miles through the wilderness in order to start a revolution with the bushranger Matt Brady, inevitably fails. Moreover, it seems revolution is impossible in a place where power and exploitation wind so intricately through different social groups, creating enmity, and where self-interested individualism inhibits the formation of meaningful communities. The political force of *Gould's Book of Fish* lies in its potential as immanent critique: the Enlightenment systems of past and present are scrutinised and criticised in order to further liberal, emancipatory aims.

The motif of dancing is used at the end of the records room episode both to reinforce the limitations of rationalist, Enlightenment accounts of human experience and to express the emancipatory nature of physicality and bodily experience. Gould's journey with the colony's records comes to an end when he encounters an Aboriginal woman known to him as Twopenny Sal, the Commandant's maid and mistress and Gould's former lover. Gould's relationship with Sal while they were both on Sarah Island offered him rare moments of pleasure and a sort of transcendent connectedness through shared physical experiences of drinking, smoking, and sex. In this final scene, Gould awakes one morning to find Sal throwing his records and books on the funeral pyre of Tracker Marks and joins Sal and her children in the dance of mourning. This is a dance of profound loss that connects firmly with the notion of the past perceived as postmodern sublime. In what is also an inversion of the twentieth-century Nazi book burnings, the destruction of all of these limited and false histories—Enlightenment histories—becomes an unburdening; an expression of freedom for both Sal (racial and gendered Other) and Gould (class Other). As Gould and Sal sing, cry, and dance, they—for this moment at least—perform a sublime ritual of grief and joy that purges them of the oppression of Enlightenment history and offers an expression of pre-modern, individual subjectivity that, in itself, is a form of resistance to Enlightenment systems of categorisation and control:

with her and the children I danced so many things that lay so deep within my soul it felt like a purifying fire itself. It was joy and it was

sadness and it was inexplicable [. . .] We were dancing something beyond words. (377)

As Gould's records and histories fuel the fire, he embraces the physical as the site of resistance and resilience. In giving up the records, ledgers, and histories, Gould accepts that the notion of “saving” history is ultimately impossible as, even when every effort is made to construct a “true history”, it will continue to shift and change. He relinquishes that “entire untrue literature [. . .] that had so long denied me my free voice & the stories I needed to tell” (375). In the final scene of the records room episode, Gould's revelatory experience is something like that of the postmodern historical sublime; a realm of loss and unfulfilled desire exists at the edges, in the space of Other. This is only experienced though an aesthetic space which is outside reason and, perhaps, outside language.

It seems likely that part of Flanagan's motivation in *Gould's Book of Fish* for dismantling Enlightenment notions of a stable, unified history was the desire to construct a polemical response to the conservative side of the debate over the national past, known as the History Wars (a debate carried out volubly by the historian Geoffrey Blainey, social commentator Keith Windschuttle, and the Liberal Prime Minister John Howard). It seems as if Flanagan is reasserting an idea that many prominent Australian scholars and public intellectuals, such as William Stanner, Robert Hughes, and Henry Reynolds, have long accepted about the national history: that we know enough about the past, penal colonies and systems of colonialism the world over to accept that Australia's founding decades and subsequent frontier conflicts were times of violence and institutionalised terror. Flanagan's novel suggests that to whitewash this by over-emphasising heroism and pioneering achievements is to make a past of lies. By representing the past as knowable only through something like the postmodern sublime, Flanagan gives expression to a set of ideas that should be at the centre of Australian society and should, in particular, inform official dealings with Indigenous Australians. That is, while the past can never be known in a full, unified sense, it is nevertheless a past of loss and should be approached through an aesthetic space on the edges of Enlightenment thinking. The novel speaks to the complicities and complacencies of contemporary society in a very liberal call for social change, inspired by Enlightenment ideals such as equality and emancipation. Flanagan's politics echo that of historiographer White when he writes that we need an alternative, non-linear form of history: “that alone can goad human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with meaning for which they alone are fully responsible” (72).

Gould's Book of Fish is an effective instance of storytelling that is necessarily self-referential, fragmented, anti-realist, ironic but grounded in "the real" through the body. In rejecting the traditional narrativisation of the past in two of its most accepted and traditional forms—Enlightenment linear history and the historical novel—Flanagan calls for a more suitable form of storytelling to represent the past: a self-conscious, postmodern mode—a "clandestine rainbow of tales"—that both delights in the act of telling and also gives expression to the loss and unfulfilled longing of modern existence.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example the reviews by Clark, Craven and McFarlane.
- 2 For a detailed argument about the politically ineffective and "removed" nature of the postmodern critical theory see Bronner's *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*.
- 3 Flanagan seems to suggest that the best way of dealing with this founding narrative of terrible displacement and loss is through this type of postmodern artistic representation, a process reflected in a number of other postmodern texts that deal with the losses from modernity and colonisation such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Salman Rushie's *Midnight's Children* or Kim Scott's *Benang*.
- 4 Lyotard developed his theory of the postmodern sublime in major works and articles written during the 1980s and 1990s: these texts include *The Postmodern Condition*, "Complexity and the Sublime" (1989), *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991) and *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994).
- 5 One of the first postmodern theoretical responses to the Enlightenment project, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, bases its key arguments about the "failure" of aspects of the Enlightenment and the triumph of the Enlightenment project on the existence of the extreme, violent events of the early twentieth century, particularly those that occurred in Europe.
- 6 Gascoigne expands on this in his study by suggesting that efforts were made to limit the brutalities of the frontier and of penal colonies. While it was the humanitarian developments of the Enlightenment that inspired these efforts, they had a limited effect on the outskirts. Gascoigne cites the example of the Myall Creek Massacre. While white men were hanged for the murders, it seems that they were genuinely unaware of the degree of wrongdoing involved in the mass killing of Aborigines. This suggests that these types of attacks often occurred on the frontier and that there was little sense of judicial or moral consequence attached.
- 7 While the idea of the spatialisation of history has been developed by a number of postmodernist theorists, the notion of history working as a type of repetition, conceptualised as a horizontal plane, rather than a progression, conceptualised as a vertical plane, was first explained by Foucault in *The Archaeology of History*.

- ⁸ The images of skulls seem to work as a reference to the genocide of the Cambodian killing fields, where a mass of human skulls have become an iconic image associated with the event.

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