



# The Empire Writes Back: Deconstructive Paradigms in *Jack Maggs*

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Received: 03 Apr 2024; Received in revised form: 11 May 2024; Accepted: 20 May 2024; Available online: 29 May, 2024

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**Abstract**— In his ‘neo-Victorian novel’ *Jack Maggs*, Peter Carey seeks to retell Charles Dickens’s classic *Great Expectations* from the postcolonial perspective. *Jack Maggs*, a stand-in for Dickens’s Magwitch, is shaped into the protagonist in Carey’s work, which telegraphs the author’s close attention to marginalized groups in British society. By endowing the silent ‘other’ with the opportunity to speak, Carey attempts to deconstruct the hegemony of the Anglo-centric narrative and reshape the unique cultural identity of Australians, which simultaneously embodies the self-reflexivity of his literary practice.



**Keywords**— *Jack Maggs*, Peter Carey, Neo-Victorian Novel, Postcolonial Rewriting.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In his article published in *Studies in the Novels*(1997), Dana Schiller coined the term ‘neo-Victorian novel’ to categorize contemporary novels set in the Victorian era. However, according to scholars like Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, it is not solely the Victorian setting, but a self-consciousness ‘engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians’ that more serves as the focus of the novel(Heilmann and Llewellyn 4). In other words, with the aim to participate in and reshape the Victorian culture, neo-Victorian novels are naturally endowed with a sense of reflexivity.

Among these novels, colonial issues become the common subjects. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, ‘it should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English’(Spivak 243).

Spivak’s words reveal that, during the process of colonizing and dominating the world, nineteenth-century England gradually established its glorious image. However, this authority has been successfully built at the expense of the countries being colonized, which nowadays urges people from these once ‘mysterious’ places to rewrite the ‘orthodox’ history. Many neo-Victorian novels have been produced mainly for this purpose. By recoding the imperial experience, they provide the silent ‘other’ oppressed by the authoritative discourse with chances to speak and express themselves. In his novel *Jack Maggs*, Peter Carey offers us an excellent example of this strategy.

In Carey’s writing, Abel Magwitch, a marginalized character in Dickens’s novel, is transformed into the heroic protagonist, *Jack Maggs*. Although in a similar situation, *Maggs* is no longer an object passively being described, but a subject capable of narrating his own story. Bringing to bear the deconstructive paradigm on the authoritative discourse, Carey revises the age-old version of colonial

history offered by the empire, contributing to the establishment of a unique Australian cultural identity within the postcolonial context.

## II. 'ITS METAPHYSICAL ASSOCIATIONS WERE OF HELL': THE COLONIAL IMAGINATION IN THE DISCOURSE OF EMPIRE

In his work *Postcolonial Criticism*, Bart Moore-Gilbert recalls the initial impression of Australia in the eyes of Europeans, 'its metaphysical associations were of hell, unnatural inversions (for instance of the seasons) and imprisonment' (Moore-Gilbert 197). As an exile for British criminals, Australia was imbued with colonial imagination. In Charles Dickens's classic novel *Great Expectations*, the texts concerning Australia constitute a typical illustration of this feature. For instance, Magwitch would rather sacrifice the superior living environment in Australia and risk his life to return to England, just for a glimpse of the 'London gentleman' brought up by him:

'This is the gentleman what I made! The real genuine One! It does me good fur to look at you, Pip. All I stip'late, is, to stand by and look at you, dear boy!' (Dickens 263)

It can be inferred from his words that, for Magwitch, only a gentleman coming from London can be called a 'real genuine one'. Nevertheless, he is ignorant of a more important fact: it is these so-called 'gentlemen' that make him a displaced man. Just as Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, 'the prohibition placed on Magwitch's return is not only penal but imperial: subjects can be taken to places like Australia, but they cannot be allowed a "return" to metropolitan space, which, as all Dickens's fiction testifies, is meticulously charted, spoken for, inhabited by a hierarchy of metropolitan personages' (Said xvi). In fact, the sentence of a lifelong banishment is a deprivation of 'Englishness'. When a convict is exiled to the marginalized geographical space, he is simultaneously expelled from the sphere of dominant culture.

As a result, although Magwitch can use his considerable financial resources to break away from the geographical restrictions, he is unable to shake the authority of the imperialist culture and be truly accepted as a member of English society. This truth is not only

revealed in his tragic end but implied in Dickens's way of depicting him. For example, in Magwitch's first appearance, Dickens makes an observation of him with the eyes of Pip, 'I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food; and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog's way of eating and the man's. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog' (Dickens 22). At the moment Magwitch ventures back to London and meets Pip, Dickens again depicts his rude and greedy style of eating, 'Some of his teeth had failed him since I saw him eat on the marshes, and as he turned his food in his mouth, and turned his head sideways to bring his strongest fangs to bear upon it, he looked terribly like a hungry old dog' (262).

By comparing the convict with the dog, the author seemingly aims to direct readers to establish an imaginative connection between the two. Arguably, if the implicit prejudice conveyed in the latter paragraph can be attributed to the bad atmosphere amid London upper class, which has changed Pip's frame of mind, there is no doubt the observation made by Pip as a child in the former passage, reflect 'the certain narrative position and moral judgement' of Dickens (Wang 67). Even faced with the huge difference in both strength and physical constitution, the sight young Pip set on Magwitch still embodies a condescending attitude. Within this unbalanced power landscape, Magwitch, as a 'savage' outcast, is forced into the object being watched, whilst the power of evaluation lies in the hands of the actual observer who hides behind the protagonist's innocent eyes—the imperial world represented by Dickens himself. The animalistic nature of Magwitch depicted in the novel, thus conceived, is not so much a manifestation of his 'primitive' instincts as a stereotype about the powerless people within the net of imperial discourse. During the process of being constantly othered, Magwitch actually experiences the state of aphasia: he can only be described and evaluated, but never speak for himself.

Throughout Dickens's writing, the authority of empire often contrasts sharply with the submission of the other. At the geopolitical level, the British Empire occupies the center of the world, while Australia is, by contrast, as Mr. Wemmick describes it, a 'deep' space understood to be 'on the opposite spot of the

globe'(Dickens 161). It is imagined as a jail in the vacuum: once Magwitch is exiled there, he has to disappear from the main storyline. Even if he plays the most important role in Pip's rise in British society, Magwitch's presence can merely be hinted at through Mr. Jaggers. It is only when Magwitch again risks his life to set foot on the land of London that his identity as Pip's biggest sponsor is finally revealed. Similarly, although Pip's journey to the East to work in Herbert's mercantile trade and stand on his own feet serves as one of the most indispensable parts of the character's spiritual growth, Dickens applied only two paragraphs to give a very rough description of this part. It seems that these places exist only to meet the needs of the Anglo-centric narrative. Under British hegemony, the image of the colonized 'others' becomes something that can be molded at will. It can be both a notorious prison and a great wish-granting factory.

Therefore, for the center occupied by the empire, the question that counts is not so much about what the periphery is, but rather what significance its existence can contribute to the center. In his classic work *Orientalism*, Said points out, 'as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made'(Said 5). According to Said, the existence of the West indeed depends on the East: through imaginatively constructing the so-called 'East', the 'West' can define itself oppositely. By the same token, if there is no such thing as the periphery, then the center dissolves. As a result, it is owing to the 'primitive and mysterious' Australia that the 'civilized and advanced' British Empire can exist; it is also because of the 'rude and barbaric' others like Magwitch that the genteel London gentlemen come into being. In the writings of imperial writers, these dichotomies implying colonial imagination can be found everywhere, shaping readers' perceptions in an invisible and nuanced way.

### III. FROM MARGIN TO CENTER: THE DECONSTRUCTIVE PARADIGM IN JACK MAGGS

In an interview, Peter Carey confesses his attitude towards *Great Expectations* as well as other works of Dickens: 'I was a bit slow in coming to Dickens for all

sorts of reasons, but there's no doubt that what that book encourages you to do—what so many of the books we grew up reading encourage you to do—is to take the British point of view.'<sup>①</sup> By presenting a glorified image of the empire, this perspective implants Western-centric views into the readers' value systems, thus ideologically encouraging their complicity with Western hegemony. Faced with the prejudice revealed in these influential works, Carey's intention of rewriting is clear. He not only needs to deconstruct the old system, but also to establish a new one.

Still retaining the basic structure of its prototype, *Jack Maggs* narrates the original story from a novel angle. After making a fortune in Australia, Jack Maggs, a once exiled convict, ventures back to London to look for Henry Phipps, whom he has dedicated his life to fostering. To this end, he first serves as a footman under Mr. Buckle, and later falls victim to the deception of Tobias Oates, becoming a subject of his study of the criminal mind and trickery. However, while Maggs endures hardships in the quest for his foster son, Phipps goes into hiding. Reluctant to meet his benefactor, he even attempts to shoot Maggs in collusion with Mr. Buckle. After the conflict, Maggs finally recognizes the true nature of this so-called 'London gentleman', returning to Australia to start a new life there.

At the level of the plot, Maggs, the protagonist of the story, is a stand-in for Magwitch, with Phipps an equivalent of Pip; And the writer, Tobias Oates, is a parody of Dickens himself. Confronted with the hostility of people around him as well as the threat of laws, Maggs is undoubtedly in a tough situation similar to Magwitch's. However, there exists a clear difference between the two, which resides in their agency. In Carey's story of redemption, Maggs is endowed with the right to speak for himself: In his letter sent to Phipps, Maggs confesses the reasons for becoming a criminal. Born as an orphan, Maggs has no choice regarding his path to survival. At the age of a child, he is made known that he has been raised for an economic purpose, just 'like a hog or a hen'<sup>②</sup>. His foster mother, Mary Britten, trains him up as a thief to

<sup>①</sup> Ramona Koval, An Interview with Peter Carey, Broadcast on Books and Writings on Friday, 12 September 1997.

<sup>②</sup> Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs* (Leicester: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.106. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

bring a constant source of income to her family. In the course of committing theft, Maggs falls in love with his accomplice Sophina. In the end, to take the blame for Sophina, Maggs confesses his crime to the judge, but instead of saving his beloved, he is banished to Australia.

From his confession, it is clear that Maggs is not, as the judge puts it, 'a thief by nature' (p. 276), but born into an environment that offers him nothing but a life of crime. Carey's writing is not intended to justify the character's illegal behavior of stealing, but rather to deconstruct the *essentialism* embedded in the imperial ideology. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster points out, Dickens's people are 'nearly all flat' (Forster 108). In his writing, a good man won't easily turn bad, while a bad person also finds it challenging to become good. That is, the goodness and badness of his characters are predetermined by their innate natures, and mainly epitomized in their physical features. Even if contaminated by the evils of high society in his later years, Pip, as a 'handsome' and 'good-natured' boy, is eventually able to get rid of the bad influences and return to the right path; In contrast, one's ugly appearance always serves as a symbol of his or her dubious morality. Bentley Drummle, 'an old-looking young man of a heavy order of architecture', is seemingly destined to treat Estella badly. And when it comes to Magwitch, his crime-oriented behavior is also matched by the 'rude' and 'primitive' appearance.

In Carey's work, his portrayal of multi-dimensional characters undoubtedly challenges such stereotypical thinking. Although Maggs, owing to his aggressive looks, is considered to be 'some kind of rascal' at first glance (p. 55), he is indeed a man of thoughtfulness and determination. Whether it's assisting Constable, with whom he has always had differences, in retaining his job or demonstrating a strong sense of self-sacrifice to save Sophina, the integrity displayed through these actions gradually overrides the initial impression left by him, and also earns him the favor of Mercy. On the contrary, Oates, who seems to be the most cultivated and well-mannered in the novel, is a liar and a hypocrite. In daily life, he spares no effort to uphold an image of kindness and compassion, 'the death of children had always had a profound effect on him. When the young victims were also the children of poverty, it produced in him a considerable rage' (p. 130).

However, as the text develops, the real reason for Oates' repeated visits to the slums is finally revealed: the material and inspiration for writing, the copyright and income from the work, these are the things that matter most to Oates. As the embodiment of Dickens in the story, Carey's characterization of Oates undoubtedly reflects a subtle irony of this well-known author's contrasting performance between his realm of social life and literary creation.

#### IV. 'TO MYTHOLOGISE AUSTRALIA IN ITS OWN TERMS': NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

From venturing to England to returning to Australia, the different choices of Maggs reveal a fluidity in his identity. Upon his return to London, Maggs finds himself shut out by Britten. Confronted with Britten's questioning of his intentions, he replies with an extremely assertive attitude, 'that is what I want. My home' (p. 5). As an exile returning to his homeland, Maggs has anticipated the cold reception and self-deprecatingly refers to himself as a 'cockroach' (p. 128). Even so, he clings to his original identity, 'I am a fucking Englishman, and I have English things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong' (ibid.). At this point, he still has illusions about the empire, and desires to clear his name as well as be accepted back into mainstream society. However, Mr. Buckle's malice and Oates's deception join to immerse Maggs in pain, and the gun aimed at him by his proud 'son' Phipps becomes the last straw. Just as Meyer Abrams notes in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the development of the protagonist's mind and character into maturity often requires 'a spiritual crisis', 'which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world' (Abrams 193). Maggs's cognitive development follows the same trajectory. After realizing the true nature of the so-called 'London gentleman', he returns to Australia with Mercy, and settles there as a person of 'Australian descent'.

The experience of Maggs is not only a personal attempt to seek identity but also a metaphor for Australia's search for national identity. Maggs's morbid obsession with the London sphere epitomizes Australia's cultural inferiority complex in the face of empire, 'although the

countries of the former “British” Caribbean are, like Australia, now “independent” territories, they remain, at least in part, tied to Imperial history and its collusive textuality’ (Moore-Gilbert 208). Classic texts that carry the imperial ideology continue to influence contemporary Australians, displaying the ‘ideological and psycho-social dimensions of colonialism’ (Jin 124). The disconnection between a politically independent entity and a culturally vulnerable status has become a daunting problem for Australians. Carey’s rewriting classic literature is an effort to change this situation. When it comes to the idea behind *Jack Maggs*, Carey avers, ‘we carry a great deal of self-hatred, denial, grief, and anger, all unresolved. It took a long time before I could think of exactly how I might use these passions to fuel a novel. Then one day, contemplating the figure of Magwitch, the convict in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, I suddenly thought THIS MAN IS MY ANCESTOR. And then: this is UNFAIR!’ (Ho 124). For Carey, the most important purpose of writing is to reveal the unequal power distribution lurking beneath the seemingly equal national sovereignty. Upon his return to London, Maggs claims, ‘I come here for the culture... the opera, the theater, I got a lot of time to make up for’ (p. 5). In the eyes of the uneducated Maggs, the imperial life is a superior option for filling in the gaps of his knowledge, without realizing the model itself is the cause of his misfortunes. In some ways, this is also an allusion to the intricate relationship between colonies and their former masters in the post-colonial era.

For Maggs, the journey of searching for his ‘son’ is also a process of searching for spiritual roots. After disenchanting the ‘civilized’ and prosperous imperial life, he finally recognizes the truth: his son is not the London gentleman, but the children of New South Wales who are closely related to him by blood. At the end of the story, Maggs chooses to return to Australia and start a new life there. This arrangement reflects Carey’s desire to ‘mythologise Australia in its own terms’ (Hassall 135), which also reveals his confidence in the future of the nation: Australians will eventually prove themselves along with their community, and establish an independent cultural identity in their land.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the process of rewriting *Great Expectations*, Peter Carey not only reveals the imperial ideology implicitly embedded in the classic text, but subverts and reconstructs it to its foundation. Although Maggs is a stand-in for Magwitch, there exists an essential difference between the two. Compared with the marginalized Magwitch, Maggs is no longer the voiceless ‘other’ under the control of authoritative discourse, but has the power of speaking and takes the initiative to narrate his own story. To a certain extent, Maggs’s journey of searching for his ‘son’ mirrors the process of Australia’s search for cultural identity, embodying Carey’s concern for national identity and the spirit of independence. As Anthony Hassall points out, ‘to create a national repository of their own’, Australians should ‘(re)claim and (re)write those English stories which constituted their first meta-narrative, as well as invent new ones’ (134). In this sense, Carey’s rewriting highlights his mission and responsibility as a contemporary Australian writer and demonstrates a postmodern reflexive consciousness of literary creation.

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