

IRONY AND THE STATUS OF THE AUSTRALIAN HERO IN *TRUE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG*, BY PETER CAREY

Déborah Scheidt

Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa

ABSTRACT: *True History of the Kelly Gang*, by Peter Carey, winner of the Booker Prize in 2001, is a novel based on the trajectory of one of Australia's most cherished historical figures, the bushranger Ned Kelly (1854-1880). Departing from Northrop Frye's theories on the gradual incursion of irony in Western literature, we examine the manifestation of that literary device in Carey's novel, paying special attention to the crucial role irony plays in the construction of the novel's hero. Irony, according to Linda Hutcheon, is a social practice that necessarily involves text, context and interpreter and the formation of what she calls "discursive communities". Within those communities irony can present itself in different guises. "Verbal irony" is defined by Pierre Schoentjes as the type of irony that occurs within the scope of rhetorical discourse and is a distinctive characteristic of Kelly's style as a narrator. "Situational irony", on the other hand, is not materialized in the narrator's words themselves, but in the manner by which facts are arranged. Our analysis concludes that irony is an expedient that permeates the whole novel, from the title to the main themes and events narrated, influencing even the organization of the narrative focus.

KEY WORDS: *True History of the Kelly Gang*; hero; irony.

RESUMO: *True History of the Kelly Gang*, de Peter Carey, vencedor do Booker Prize em 2001, é um romance baseado na trajetória de um dos mais famosos vultos históricos australianos, o *bushranger* Ned Kelly (1854-1880). Este artigo recorre às teorias de Northrop Frye sobre a incursão gradual da ironia na literatura ocidental para examinar a recorrência desse dispositivo no romance de Carey, dando especial atenção ao papel crucial que a ironia tem na construção do protagonista da obra. A ironia, de acordo com Linda Hutcheon, é uma prática social que necessariamente envolve o texto, o contexto e o intérprete e requer a formação de uma "comunidade discursiva". Nessas comunidades, a ironia pode aparecer sob formas diversas. A "ironia verbal" é definida por Pierre Schoentjes como o tipo de ironia que ocorre no âmbito do discurso retórico, sendo uma característica distintiva do estilo de Kelly como narrador. A "ironia situacional", por outro lado, não se materializa nas palavras, mas na maneira como estas são arranjadas. Conclui-se que a ironia é um expediente que permeia todo o romance, desde seu título até os temas e os eventos narrados, influenciando, inclusive, na organização do foco narrativo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *True history of the Kelly gang*; herói; ironia.



Fig.1*



Fig. 2**

Two of the most peculiar items from the collection of the State Library of Victoria, in Melbourne, Australia are a coarse artefact made of plough shares – a five-piece armour in steel and leather, darkened by time and marked by gunshots in several points – and the death mask of Ned Kelly (1854-1880), the bushranger who devised and wore the armour in a confrontation with the police in 1880, during which he was captured.

The presence of the pieces in a library as national icons appears to confirm Mark Twain's remarks, published in 1897 in his travel memoirs. For Twain (1897).
Australian history

is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is also so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies; and all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises and adventures, the [sic]

incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.

Indeed, Kelly's historical trajectory – the son of a poor Irish convict, such as thousands of others, who had repeated encounters with the police from his adolescence onwards and achieved, despite his conviction and hanging, the reputation of Australia's most famous outlaw (or hero, as it turns out) – can certainly be qualified as atypical. Something that is especially relevant to this work, however, is the fact that the objects mentioned above are now part of the permanent collection of a library (which, incidentally, made a great effort to put the armour pieces together, as they belonged to different collectors), and not of a museum, as it would be expected.

That might be explained by a certain literary ambition demonstrated by Kelly along his career, since he recurrently attempted to supplement his actions with written statements, something uncommon in other Australian bushrangers. After sending letters to representatives of justice and the government denouncing the circumstances that had led him to crime, Kelly expected to see them published in the local newspapers. During one of the gang's robberies, Kelly even tried to find the owner of a printing business to replicate pamphlets. To his great frustration, his own version of facts was never conveyed by the press, a fact that did not prevent at least 32,000 people from signing a document for the commutation of his sentence.

However, while the journalistic discourse told the story mainly from the police and the magistrates' point of view, the so-called bush ballads from popular Australian literature accomplished, still in the nineteenth century, to exalt the deeds and the sad destiny of the bandit/hero until he became a myth.¹ From then on there

¹ Cf. SCHEIDT, Déborah. Cordel e bush ballads: representações da autoridade na poesia popular do Brasil e da Austrália. **Anais do XII Congresso Internacional da ABRALIC**. Curitiba, 2011. Available online at <http://www.abralic.org.br/anais/cong2011/AnaisOnline/resumos/TC0759-1.pdf>. Accessed on 21/02/2012.

has been an intense dialogue between the “historical facts” of Kelly’s life and other media, both popular and erudite, including comic strips, songs, novels, plays, musicals, opera, ballet, films, painting and other art forms. The most celebrated of these works, because of its international acclaim, is Peter Carey’s 2000 novel **True History of the Kelly Gang**², winner of several literary awards, including the Booker Prize (2001).

The fact that, through literature, an obscure 19th century outlaw – who acted in small towns of the interior of Australia, some of which even today have a few hundred inhabitants only – could achieve international fame in contemporaneity, leads us to Northrop Frye’s considerations regarding the ethos of the hero in the history of Western literature.

To build his historical-critical theory of literature, Frye (1973: 33-34) divides literary history into five stages. In the first one, the era of classical literature, mythical heroes (represented by the gods), are, in their essence, superior to the other characters as well as to their environment. In the second stage heroes are superior, not in essence, but in degree, to other characters and their environment. They are the protagonists of medieval romance and belong to the category of legend and folklore, possessing extraordinary qualities that partially suspend natural law. In the stage that Frye calls “high mimetic mode”, epic leaders and tragic heroes are superior to other men, but not to their environment. Their power of action is much higher than that of ordinary people, but they are submitted to the same natural laws and social order as other people.

From the fourth stage on it becomes harder, unless we turn to the resource of irony, to sustain the label “hero”, as the protagonist of the “low mimetic mode” is like

²Published in Brazil in 2002 as *A história do bando de Kelly*.

anyone of us: he/she does not evince any superiority to other characters or their environment. This is the hero of comedy or “realist” fiction in the sense that natural laws can no longer be suspended without loss of verisimilitude. The last stage is called “ironic mode” specifically. The hero of this kind of literature is inferior, both in power and intelligence, to ordinary people. This mode is usually very disturbing to the reader, as the pathetic situations of submission, frustration or absurdity portrayed do not prevent some degree of identification with the protagonist.

Frye’s terminology (“high”, “low”) has a “diagrammatic” function only and does not imply value judgements, but the gradual dilution of the hero’s superiority in Western literature. From the moment writers started to observe the world in a less passionate, more realistic manner, the void spaces left by the shrinking of the hero’s power started to expand and to be filled with irony (FRYE, 1973: 42). It is only through this process that a semiliterate peasant such as Ned Kelly – who describes himself in Carey’s novel as someone who has thick-skinned hands, callused feet and “knees cut and scabbed and stained with dirt no soap could reach” (CAREY, 2002: 35) – and who, moreover, becomes a robber and a murderer along the way, could become a hero of highbrow literature and tell his own “history”.

An analysis of the traditional meaning attributed to irony will invariably lead to Greek comedy and to the *eirōn*, a type-character who simulates his own inferiority to take advantage of his opponents. Aristotle associated irony to the inferior side of truth but it was Cicero who, two centuries later, proposed the definition of irony that would become current: saying something but meaning something else. To Cicero, Socrates – when the latter pretended ignorance to make his interlocutors confound themselves with their own arguments – was the ironist *par excellence* (BARNET, 1963: 352-53).

Frye makes use of Aristotle's idea of "appearing to be less" than reality and amplifies some of its implications. To Frye, irony is a technique of "saying as little and meaning as much as possible" or a "pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning" (FRYE, 1973: 40). According to those precepts, the very title of Peter Carey's novel – **True history of the Kelly gang** – is fraught with irony, if we take into account some peculiarities of the English language that are explored in the expression *true history*.

The most obvious of those linguistic particularities is the notorious distinction between the terms "history" and "story" that characterizes the English language.³ A story is a subjective account, its quality is determined by the narrator's wish and ability and it can be true or not. Thus the noun "story" accepts naturally the adjectives "true" and "false". A "true history", on the other hand, seems to be a pleonasm, as objectivity and actual existence are inherent properties of "history".

An extra factor of estrangement is the absence, in the title, of the defining article that normally precedes the noun *history*, which has an effect of removing some of the authority implied by the term and shows, in between the lines, that there might be other acceptable versions. Therefore if, on the one hand, the pleonastic expression intends to reinforce the "truth" of the narrative, some vagueness implied by the absence of "the" seems to point to the opposite direction.

Another element that plays with the objective/subjective qualities of truth is the modality chosen by Carey: a "historical-epistolary-autobiographical" novel simulating a testimonial account left by Kelly himself. The narrative takes the form of letters directed to the daughter the protagonist never met (this addressee was imagined by Carey, as Kelly did not leave any children). The dividing parts of the

³ In most languages a single word refers both to "history" and "story".

plot are also peculiar: they are not done in chapters, but in “parcels”, as the novel consists in the “compilation” of the contents of thirteen groups of letters, supposedly belonging to the Library of Melbourne, each one of them preceded by “notes” made by an editor identified only as “S.C.”.

Some aspects of those notes resemble the work of a historian. The “editor” describes details of the condition of the letters: the origin and type of the paper used, the physical damages presented, the legibility of the documents, and so on. He also tries to authenticate the author’s handwriting and establish the period of Kelly’s life each parcel would refer to, summarizing the events presented in the parcel. In some occasions he even produces value judgments on the events described, such as “unflattering portraits” (parcel 2) or “interesting details” (parcel 3), compromising his presumed objectivity.

Not only the title of the novel, but also the text of the letters is filled with what Pierre Schoentjes calls “verbal irony”, a type of irony that occurs in rhetorical discourse (SCHOENTJES, 2001: 26). Despite the difficulty in pointing it out unequivocally, there are, according to Schoentjes, some indicators that might suggest the presence of verbal irony in written texts (SCHOENTJES, 2001: 162). The naïve gaze of Ned, as a child, watching his mother get ready to take a cake to another of their relatives in jail, for instance, brings together human and inanimate elements, normally hierarchically separated in non-ironic discourse, characterizing what Schoentjes (2001: 171) names “ironic juxtaposition”: “My mother tipped the cake onto the muslin cloth and knotted it. Your Aunt Maggie were a baby so my mother wrapped her also then she carried both cake and baby out into the rain” (CAREY, 2002: 8).

A great deal harsher are the instances of irony in the excerpt below, which target the (contradictory) stereotypes connected to Irish men and the prejudice of the authorities in relation to former convicts:

My mother had one idea about my father and the police the opposite. She thought him Michael Meek. They knew him as a graduate of Van Diemen's Land and a criminal by birth and trade and marriage they was constantly examining the brands on our stock or sifting through our flour for signs of larceny but they never found nothing except mouse manure they must have had a mighty craving for the taste. (CAREY, 2002: 9-10)

Explicitly elevated or flattering words (such as “graduate”) or adjectives that intensify meaning (“mighty craving”) can characterize what Schoentjes identifies as “words of warning” (SCHOENTJES, 2001: 168-9) to the ironic effect. The reinforcement given to the noun “criminal” by “birth and trade and marriage” can also suggest “ironic repetition” (SCHOENTJES, 2001: 169).

In the following comment about the funeral of Red Kelly, the narrator's father, there is an apparent lightness in the treatment of one of the most relevant events of the human life cycle: “Now were your grandpa's poor wracked body finally granted everlasting title to the rich soil of Avenel” (CAREY, 2002: 39). Irony, here, comes from the “simplification” or the “decrease of the complexity of the real world, reducing the number of data enclosed by the gaze and covering up certain connections” (SCHOENTJES, 2001, 172, my translation).

Those few examples evince the fact that verbal irony is one of the distinctive characteristics of Kelly's style as a narrator. Another modality of irony, which is not

materialized in the words themselves, but in the manner by which the facts are presented – situational irony (SCHOENTJES, 2001: 15) – is also constantly felt along the novel. The very conception of the book – based on the simulation of the authenticity of the letters, but from the point of view of a narrator profoundly involved in the facts and determined to propose a revision of history (to his favour) – turns the work into a great ironic charade.

In the episode below, for instance, Carey recreates a significant episode of Kelly's "official" biography: at the age of 10, he had saved another boy from drowning during a flood, having received, from the boy's family, a green sash (the colour green is a reference to Kelly's Irish ancestry).⁴ But at the same time as the courage and physical prowess valued by 19th century Australian society (as we shall see further down) are starting to be identified in young Ned, his true heroic/ironic destiny is also foretold:

At the very hour I stood before the scholars in my sash the decapitated head of the bushranger Morgan were being carried down the public highway – Benalla – Violet Town – Euroa – Avenel – perhaps it would be better had I known the true cruel nature of the world but I would not give up my ignorance even if I could. The Protestants of Avenel had seen the goodness in an Irish boy it were a mighty moment in my early life. (CAREY, 2002: 32)

The boy enjoys his "mighty moment", ignoring the cruelty of the world, something that the adult and experienced narrator, troubled by his own consciousness as much as by the police, can no longer achieve. If the narrator, looking at the scene retrospectively, but still hopeful and unaware of his own future, attributes irony to it,

⁴ Historically, the sash had special meaning for Kelly and was found underneath the armour by the doctor who looked after his wounds. Today it is displayed at the Benalla town museum.

Carey's readers, familiar with the historical background surrounding the composition of the novel, and having in mind something that would never be contemplated by Kelly – the haunting images of his head in plaster – can certainly add a new layer of irony to the events.

This is where we come to Linda Hutcheon's reflexions about irony as a social practice that "happens in discourse, in usage, in the dynamic space of the interaction of text, context, and interpreter" (HUTCHEON, 1984: 58). To Hutcheon irony, in spite of the intentions of the ironist, depends, ultimately, on the interpreter. As we saw in the above example, the experiences and the background of the reader affect both the interpretation of the situation as ironic or not and the "properties" of the irony:

[T]he whole communicative process is not only 'altered and distorted' but also made possible by those different worlds to which each of us differently belongs and which form the basis of the expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions that we bring to the complex processing of discourse, of language in use (HUTCHEON, 1984: 89).

Therefore Hutcheon suggests that the discursive communities to which readers belong allow irony to happen. Not recognizing a fact or utterance as ironic would not be, according to that conception, a matter of (lack of) intelligence, as many critics have posed along the centuries, but a matter of contrasting interpretations, due to the different discursive contexts from which participants come from (HUTCHEON, 1984: 95). That is illustrated in the excerpt below, in which Ned tries to defend his mother from the assault of a drunken uncle:

With all my weight on his great hairy head I struggled to settle him.

You mutt he cried striking me across the head so hard I landed on the floor I were winded the sparks flying like blowflies inside my brain.

Them my mother flung wide her door. You leave him alone you effing mongrel.

Whoa Ellen whoa now. He tried to take her by her forearms but she easily broke his grip. Said she I aint a horse.

I rushed him from behind and punched him in the kidney but he swatted me away and pushed my mother back into the bedroom and there he trid to htrow her on her bed.

No you aint a horse. You is a bouley maiden (CAREY, 2002: 44).

At that stage of the novel the reader already knows that Ellen Kelly has a rather active sexual life and even if he/she does not know the meaning of the Australianism “bouley” it is evident that the term “maiden”, a compromising word in its own terms, is being used in an offensive – and thus ironic – way, by the uncle: it is one more of Schoentjes’s “words of alert”, used antiphrastically and adapted to the traditional definition of irony.

A new ironic dimension is pointed out in the next paragraph, in which the reader, with the narrator’s help, finds out something about the 19th century Australian discursive community to which Ned, his mother and his uncle belong: “I knew what this meant as did my mother. The bouley maiden is the cow which will not take the bull” (CAREY, 2002: 44). Ned’s intervention secures a specific ironic interpretation for his utterance.

Indeed, regular novel readers can detect the irony in the position of the hero of **True History of the Kelly Gang**, even when they do not know much about Australian history. After all, Kelly’s status as a “noble robber” corresponds to a worldwide phenomenon termed “social banditry” by Eric Hobsbawm. The concept

itself is highly ironic, as the kind of country bandit referred to by Hobsbawm (1976: 11) is simultaneously seen as a criminal by the State and hero by the people.

Several of the traits of the noble bandit are also applicable to Kelly as a historical figure and are even more emphasized by Carey's fictional version: Kelly's introduction to criminality is due to persecution from the authorities and his mission is the robinhoodean ideal of repairing injustice by taking away from the rich. The noble robber, like Kelly, is deemed invisible and invulnerable and uses violence moderately, resorting to killing when that is the last remaining option. He is protected and supported by the people and his defeat is invariably due to betrayal (HOBSBAWM, 1976: 37-8).⁵ Indeed, when reviewing the reasons for the defeat of his teacher in crime – the bushranger Harry Power – Carey's protagonist comes to the conclusion that "[t]he bush protected no one":

It had been men who protected Harry and it were a man who betrayed him in the end. Harry always knew he must feed the poor he must poddy & flatter them he would be Rob Roy or Robin Hood [...]. Harry were not captured because the traps suddenly learned his trails and hideouts he were arrested when he put a lower price on his freedom than the government were prepared to pay. The sad truth is the poor people's love is cupboard love and all it took £500 for the police to be led directly to his secret door (CAREY, 2002: 298).

In addition to the dynamics of social banditry, some knowledge of the conditions underlying the colonization of Australia is useful to help the reader better understand some aspects of the discursive communities involved and the Australian penchant for irony as a national trait. A fondness for the understatement inherited

⁵ Ibid, p. 37-8.

from the British, as well as black humour as a mechanism of self-preservation against the cruelty and injustice of the penal system, has certainly contributed to the Australian ironic vein (LEWIS, 1987: 15).

Besides, the inhospitable conditions of the Australian continent, with droughts and floods that often depleted herds and crops, soon taught pioneers, as Tom Moore puts it, that there were two options: laughing or crying. A combination of pragmatic realism and rejection to self-pity made Australians, as a matter of fact, choose the former (MOORE, 1971: 174-5).

Similarly, the inclusion of heroes in the imagination, history and literature of Australia has had a peculiar trajectory.⁶ To a popular poet in the 1840's the lack of European history in the colony did not allow for the existence of heroes: "The woods have never rang with War's loud crash,/ No chivalry has swept the silent plains;[...] Here are no storied tombs, nor sculptured shrines,/ On which we read a Saint, or Hero's praise" (apud INGLIS, 1993: 320).

When the "heroes" imposed by the imperial system – English aristocracy, the generals Wellington and Nelson, the judges that sentenced convicts – started to be replaced by locally-born heroes, those inevitable came from lower ranks in society and their distinguishing mark was their ability to survive in a hostile environment, on an everyday basis. Besides being despised by Europeans as rude and uncultured, the first rightfully Australian heroes stood out in their communities as being excellent gunners, swimmers or horse riders, fearless individuals who were able to keep their

⁶ A more detailed exposition of the incursion of the national hero in Australian history and literature can be found in SCHEIDT, Déborah. *All the difference in the world: aspects of alterity in three novels by Patrick White*. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras). Curitiba: UFPR, 1997. p. 80-83.

good humour when facing the most adverse conditions and who did not lose their dignity even in the face of death itself (CLARK, 1985: 61).

The model of hero constructed by Carey certainly follows those guidelines. Besides the heroic deed, properly, that granted him the green sash, Ned as a boy drops out of school to help his widowed mother take care of their farm: “My hands was blistered bleeding I could chop down 5 trees in one day” (CAREY, 2002: 57), boasts the protagonist. One of the most cherished abilities for currency lads (an ironic self-referential term used by the first native born Australians: “currency” refers to paper money printed locally, less valuable than the “true” British pound sterling) is their horse-riding prowess. Ned also excels at that skill and at the age of thirteen already has his own business, raising and taming horses (CAREY, 2002: 55), an occupation that will render him his first period in jail, unfairly accused of having received stolen horses.

Of course, Carey takes the chance to fill his narration with descriptions of brawls, contests, ambushes, escapes, sieges and other adventures of the sort, in which Kelly and his mates can parade their intelligence, courage and physical abilities against the dominant authorities and the squatters (as the owners of large amounts of land are called in Australia).

Along the novel Carey is very much concerned to establish an ideological purpose for Kelly and the discursive community to which he belongs:

And here is the thing about them men they was Australians they knew full well the terror of the unyielding law the historic memory of UNFAIRNESS were in their blood and a man might be a bank clerk or an overseer he might never have been lagged for nothing but still he knew in his heart what it were to be lashed for looking a warder in the

eye and even a posh fellow [...] had breathed that air so the knowledge of unfairness were deep in his bone and marrow (CAREY, 2002: 312).

The central episodes of the “official” history of the Kelly gang are all represented in the novel: the siege of four policemen’s campsite in Stringybark Creek where three of them were killed and the gang was formally outlawed, the bank robberies in Jerilderie and Euroa, that culminated with the siege of Glenrowan, in which the gang made use of the famous armours and was betrayed and caught by the police. Other developments in the novel are inspired by theories that are not universally accepted, such as Kelly’s apprenticeship with the bushranger Harry Power. There are also openly fictional events, such as Kelly and Mary Hearn’s romance and the birth of their daughter.

Graham Huggan (2008: 186) sees the novel as a “sequence of highly entertaining picaresque adventures”, in which Kelly plays a double, tragicomic role as a (mock) memorialist and legendary hero. For Huggan, Carey’s aim is to deliberately dissolve the borders between oral and written discourses, between historical and fictional sources, keeping a “dynamic version between competing versions of the historical past”. This perspective points to what Hutcheon calls the “positive and constructively affirmative” function that irony can have in contemporary literature, as a “powerful tool” in the fight against hegemonic positions, in spite of the destructive function normally attributed to it (HUTCHEON, 1987: 27).

Indeed, Carey’s main preoccupation seems to be that of giving a voice to Kelly, a voice supported by (but not limited to) historical research. The main inspiration for the creation of the character and for the form and style of his narrative is the “Jerilderie letter”, a 56-page manuscript that, like the armour and the mask, is

part of the collection of the Victoria State Library. The letter was dictated by Kelly to his friend and partner in crime Joe Byrne in February 1879, when the gang was getting ready to rob the bank of a town called Jerilderie.

Carey first saw the text of the letter in the 1960's⁷ and in the next 30 years, in which his novel matured, he became increasingly intrigued by the human being behind the voice. For him, the Jerilderie letter became the “character’s DNA” and the entrance door thorough which he was able to “inhabit” Ned Kelly. The style of the letter, with its vivid images and sporadic presence of commas and periods, were another detail that impressed the author, especially because when he read it for the first time, he had had recent contact with the Irish literary voices of Joyce and Beckett, whose writing also took liberties regarding punctuation (CAREY, 2001). Carey’s imitation was so successful that some inadvertent readers went to the Melbourne Library in search of the manuscripts that the supposed editor described in the novel, stirring the debate concerning the “legitimacy” of historical novels (Marques, 2011).

Indeed, the simultaneous treatment of historical and fictional data is a matter addressed by Carey himself:

The problem of imagining Ned Kelly is that we have these fragments of the story that we know so well, almost like the Stations of the Cross in a way. There's this bit and that bit and that bit. But we really have no idea what happened between this bit and that bit. And of course what is between the fragments is a man's whole life, 90% of it. Incredible. So

⁷ A facsimile of the original manuscript is available online at [http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/primo_library/libweb/action/getItAction.do?indx=8&ct=getit&doc=SLV_VOYAGER1636991&vid=MAIN&vl\(freeText0\)=jerilderie.letter&ct=search&fromLogin=true&fn=search&indx=1&frbg=&srt=rank&tab=default_tab&mode=Basic&dum=true](http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/primo_library/libweb/action/getItAction.do?indx=8&ct=getit&doc=SLV_VOYAGER1636991&vid=MAIN&vl(freeText0)=jerilderie.letter&ct=search&fromLogin=true&fn=search&indx=1&frbg=&srt=rank&tab=default_tab&mode=Basic&dum=true), accessed on 25/07/2011.

there's a huge pleasure in imagining the 90% that is consistent with the 10% of fragments. In following this, in interrogating the fragments, it doesn't contradict the known 'facts'. [...] You might not like the way I imagine it but you will have to agree with one thing – we have insufficiently imagined our great national story (CAREY, 2001).

That was the genesis of Ned Kelly, the storyteller, from the outset obsessed with telling his own version of facts, i.e. the “true” version:

I lost my own father at 12yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false.

God willing I shall live to see you read these words to witness your astonishment and see your dark eyes widen and your jaw drop when you finally comprehend the injustice we poor Irish suffered in this present age (CAREY, 2002: 7).

The protagonist's attraction to the written word comes from his childhood and Ned recalls how, at the age of nine, he was moved when he was given his first pencil: “At school we used the slates but I never touched a pencil and was most excited to smell the sweet pine and graphite” (CAREY, 2002: 10). Later on, one of his ambitions as a student is to become the best “ink monitor” of his class, which only happens after a year, when the teacher “had no choice for everybody with an English name had taken a turn” (CAREY, 2002: 28).

Both events are froth with irony, if we take into account that the first pencil is given to the protagonist by a policeman and the deference that Kelly shows for scholarly achievement and the erudite culture he did not have access to, ultimately causes his downfall. The traitor of the Kelly gang in the siege of Glenrowan was, historically, Thomas Curnow, a teacher who was allowed to leave the hotel where the gang was keeping hostages. In Carey's version, Curnow wins Kelly's trust by entangling him in his scholarly talk, inflating his literary ego, ennobling the gang's actions with Shakespearean verses, but, mainly, by promising to revise "the grammar" of his manuscript.⁸

Kelly's literary ambitions are also responsible for some of the peculiarities in the novel's narrative spectrum. As a testimonial narrative, Norman Friedman's terminology is well suited to describe the type of narrative adopted by Carey. The main characteristic of Friedman's "I as witness" is that the "author has surrendered his omniscience altogether regarding all the other characters involved, and has chosen to allow his witness to tell the reader only what he as an observer may legitimately discover" (FRIEDMAN, 1955: 1174). Therefore it might seem surprising (or implausible, as some critics have thought⁹) that the narrator, in some occasions, should describe facts beyond his scope of his gaze:

Moonlight shone on the centaurs Dan Kelly & Joe Byrne
their iron helmets were strapped to their saddles as they
galloped down the centre of the public road [...].

⁸ Curnow takes Kelly's manuscript with him, leaving the reader to speculate on the identity of the "editor" of the novel, S.C., as being a descendant of Curnow's.

⁹ See, for instance, KINSELLA, John. "On Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*." Available online at <http://www.johnkinsella.org/reviews/carey.html>, accessed on 03/08/2011.

The same cold moonlight shone in the bush behind Glenrowan where me & Steve Hart was helping each other into our ironclad suits it also shone in Marvellous Melbourne flooding through the high window of my mother's cell (CAREY, 2002: 348).

The narrative voice, in this episode, deems itself gifted with the same omnipresence as the moonlight, with access to the Police Commissioner's residence:

This historic might were so bright even if Commissioner Standish had extinguished every lamp nothing could escape my intelligence he were my creature now I knew his heathen rug his billiards table I knew the smell & appearance of his friends and when the Constable come knocking on the Commissioner's door I did not have to be there to know what the message said.

The Kellys have struck they murdered Aaron Sherritt our informer (CAREY, 2002: 348).

The narrative voice even goes beyond inferring the facts that changed the course of the protagonist's life to imagine itself inducing them:

The Commissioner thought he were the servant of Her Majesty the Queen but he were my puppet on a string he ordered the Special Train as I desired he summoned the black trackers and called for Hare & Nicolson who thought themselves famous as the capturers of Harry Power they never

imagined they would be captives in a drama devised by me
(CAREY, 2002: 348).

It does not seem to suit Carey to simply fictionalize Kelly's live, "filling in the blanks" in between the historical facts and imitating his writing style. He goes a step beyond, transforming Kelly, in some relevant passages, into a sort of "editorially omniscient narrator". This mode of first person narrative focus described by Friedman (p. 1171) grants the narrator the (ironic) power of totally dominating the material by seeing the story from "any or all angles at will". That seems to imply that the power to write his own history somehow compensates for the impossibility of changing it, or repairing the injustice and authoritarianism he considers himself a victim of (one of Kelly's inglorious fights consists in trying to free his mother from jail, where she has been sent together with her newly-born daughter). Alternatively, a reading that takes irony into account can reveal the virtue of a seeming "narrative defect."

Carey takes advantage of a national history that sounded like a lie to Mark Twain¹⁰, giving a peculiar and complex treatment to a historical character. **True History of the Kelly Gang** extrapolates the traditional classification as a "historical novel" to include terms such as "historical impersonation" (QUINN, 2001) and "literary ventriloquism" (HUGGAN, 2008: 186). His protagonist embodies both the growing tendency of the Western hero towards irony professed by Frye and distinctively Australian ironic traits. Irony, in its different forms of manifestation is present in the title of the novel, in the protagonist's status, in the events recounted, in

¹⁰ Twain's quote figures as an epigraph in Carey's 1985 novel **Illywhaker**.

the story telling oral register and even in the organization of the novel's narrative focus.

The book ends with a kind of postscript to the collection of letters, in which the editor expresses his outrage at the ironic destiny of someone he considers the true hero of Australian history, the betrayer Thomas Curnow. When he escaped the siege to the hotel and informed the authorities about the removal of the rails that would have thrown the police train off course on its arrival in Glenrowan, Curnow would have accomplished what many did not have the courage to do. And yet, he needed to be escorted by the police all the way to Melbourne, where he received special protection for over four months. S.C. complains that “[t]his was a curious treatment for a hero, and he was called a hero more than once, although less frequently and less enthusiastically than he might have reasonably expected” (CAREY, 2002: 364).

S. C. also describes Curnow's incredulity regarding this particular aspect of the newborn Australian identity:

What is it about we Australians, eh? He demanded. What is wrong with us? Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might not we find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and a murderer? Must we always make such an embarrassing spectacle of ourselves? (Carey, 2002: 364)

The final irony, though, seems to be in the fact that Australian literature has finally surged in the international scenario, thanks to that same horse-thief and murderer.

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