

# *Batavia* and the Problem of Truth

Playscript and Exegesis

Patrick Carr

Submitted for the requirements  
of the Masters of Arts (Research)

**Faculty of Creative Industries  
Queensland University of Technology  
2005**



## **Keywords**

Batavia, shipwreck, Jeronimus Cornelius, Torrentius van der Beeck, Holocaust, pragmatic, ethics, pragmatics, Calvinism, Houtmans Abrollhos, accuracy, truth, cultural ownership, Dutch East India Company, Holland, Demidenko.



## **Abstract**

The play *Batavia* re-tells the story of a Dutch East India Company ship, wrecked off the West Australian coast in 1628. In writing *Batavia*, I consider issues of ethics and pragmatics in deciding how best to use or adapt historical sources—choices often between historical accuracy and effectiveness on stage. The playscript illustrates choices made. The exegesis examines the literature surrounding these considerations, and looks at other writers' comments and approaches to the problem. It suggests a pragmatics of playwrighting is well grounded in philosophy and is a more fruitful approach than the traditional 'ethical' approach.



## Table of Contents

<i>Keywords</i> .....	<i>iii</i>
<i>Abstract</i> .....	<i>v</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>Statement of Original Authorship</i> .....	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	<i>xi</i>
<i>BATAVIA</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>Batavia and the Problem of Truth</i> .....	<i>92</i>
<i>Critical Literature Review</i> .....	<i>101</i>
The origins of pragmatism: antiquity.....	101
Christianity and the rise of moral purpose.....	102
Shakespeare as exception.....	103
Continuing the moralist tradition.....	104
The eighteenth century and the rise of authorial pronouncements .....	106
The twentieth century 1: pragmatics, ethics, history, interpretation and truth .....	108
The twentieth century 2: The Holocaust as a test of pragmatics .....	111
<i>Case Study One: Brian Friel's Translations and the quest for accuracy</i> .....	<i>121</i>
<i>Case Study Two: Batavia</i> .....	<i>122</i>
Problems with the history .....	124
Story—the history that was used .....	125
The history left out.....	126
Management of historical representations .....	126
<i>Translations and Batavia</i> .....	<i>130</i>
<i>Works Consulted</i> .....	<i>133</i>



## Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due first to my wife Jane, without whose support this would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Dr Errol Bray who encouraged me to pursue the idea for *Batavia* and whose ‘workshop’ approach to solving script problems was an eye-opener. Stuart Glover, who supervised my exegesis, pointed me in the right direction, asked probing questions and taught me to be measured as well as rigorous. Thanks are also due to the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology, whose facilities made the play development possible and who were willing to experiment with an extraordinarily interesting degree structure.



# *Batavia* and the Problem of Truth

An Exegesis

To give an accurate description of what has never happened is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of arts and culture.

Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*

They pass before us as empty shadows of their age, and we heap curses on their memory while we enjoy on stage the very horror of their crimes.

Schiller, *The Stage as a Moral Institution*

I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.

Catherine Morland on History, *Northanger Abbey*, ch xiv

Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.

Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense*

We live in a time when “truth” is becoming less clear, less tangible, more a matter of interpretation and definition. I see a chair as a solid object for sitting on. A scientist sees something made up mostly of empty space. A philosopher argues about whether it exists at all. “History” is no longer a pre-existing set of “truths”. It is made by the person who writes it. For the morally aware historian, this creates a responsibility. For the creative artist, it opens a door of possibilities.

I first encountered the story of the wreck of the *Batavia* about ten years ago when I read a book called *Island of Angry Ghosts*.<sup>1</sup> It told the story of a group of divers on Houtmans Abrolhos, a cluster of small islands off the coast of Western Australia, who (in 1963) found relics of a seventeenth century Dutch ship. The ship was the *Batavia*. At the time (1629) the Dutch had a rough map of parts of the west coast of Australia, but had no idea what this piece of coastline was attached to. The *Batavia* would be the first documented case of a group of Europeans staying for a time on Australian soil.<sup>2</sup> The book pieced together the history of the wreck of the *Batavia* and of the bloodthirsty reign of one Jeronimus Cornelisz.

The more I read, the more I discovered how unique the story was. The Dutch East India Company exercised such strict control over its ships that mutinies were rare—none before this attempt. The ship was one in a fleet of seven. It was the best ship they’d ever built, and it carried all the wealth needed to finance the company’s trading empire throughout South East Asia. I also discovered a connection with the banned Dutch painter Torrentius van der Beeck. Torrentius has been almost completely erased from history after his work was systematically destroyed by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Edwards, H *Islands of Angry Ghosts*, Angus & Robertson Sydney 1966

<sup>2</sup> Although they camped on an island off the coast, two men were subsequently put ashore on the mainland with weapons and some food and told to make contact with the natives and survive as best they could. No-one knows what happened to them.

Calvinist authorities. Jeronimus Cornelisz was one of his circle in Holland. They were known for their drunken parties, lewd paintings and unacceptable morals. All this suggested an environment of extremes. It was a riveting tale but, I thought, too big, too complex and too inexplicable to stage. Who was this Jeronimus who appeared in history and disappeared again so quickly?

After the wreck, the survivors ended up in several different groups. On one island were a group of armed soldiers. On another, were civilians, sailors and some women. This second group included Jeronimus Cornelisz. A third group, including the ship's captain and the commander of the fleet, set off north along the coastline in a small boat to try to reach Java and bring help. During the three months it took help to arrive, Jeronimus and a small gang came to dominate their island and gradually murdered most of the others.

Over the years there have been attempts to piece together the story of the wreck and subsequent events. All have used the same sources: the survivor's accounts of events on the island, Commandeur Pelseart's diaries and reports, and Dutch East India Company records. There are no accounts by the perpetrators of the crimes. Most were executed. Where there is a report of their version, it is re-told by Pelseart, the man who summarily executed them.

It became clear that if I was to turn this into a play, I would have to invent some of the history. A simple recounting of bloodthirsty events would not be likely to hold an audience. I needed to find some plausible motive behind it all. But how do you make atrocities explicable? I would have to re-create (or invent) the relationships between the key characters. And I would have to construct a plot, since history does not often come naturally structured for drama.

These creative challenges led to concern about the accuracy of the “history” I’d be telling in *Batavia* and to a concern about the extent to which I might be justified in altering the “truth” in order to tell a better story. Would I, in fact, be telling the history of the events, or would it be a “Robinson Crusoe”-like paraphrase of real events? Would it be seen by an audience as history, entertainment, or a bit of both? How had other writers dealt with the issue of inventing history and the consequences therein? And what if the writer says ‘this is true’ or ‘this is mostly true’—does it matter?

Creative writers always change history to some extent. Some even change their identity in order to lend authority in the telling. But how far can it be reasonably changed, and is it justified? In developing the play *Batavia*, history was my starting point, but as characters develop in the writing, they start to drive the plot in ways which don’t necessarily coincide with the record.

Historical subjects present the playwright with the often competing demands of accuracy and effectiveness on stage. When I began writing the play, I thought I had a clear attitude to the problem: I wanted to tell a good story. My intention was to engage the audience, to stimulate them, to excite them, possibly to satisfy them, but ultimately to send them home feeling they’d had a good ride. I am an entertainer, I thought, not a historian: a questioner, not a moralist. Is, however, this an appropriate attitude? What if I was dealing with Adolf Hitler? Could I apply the same standards? Could I paint him as an amiable, if short-tempered chap, who suffered from persecution fantasies and was prone to extreme behaviour? The issues are clearly not trivial. Nor are they specific to theatre.

These concerns, which had to be addressed in the writing of my play, coalesce into a specific question: What are the writer’s obligations to truth and history?

In this paper, through the examination of historical precedent, historical arguments from philosophy and creative writers and my experience in writing *Batavia*, I suggest that for the writer “truth” needs to be pragmatic. Whether the history is recent or remote, writers make decisions about how to represent themselves, what to include in the narrative, what to ignore, what works as it is, and what must be altered to accommodate the exigencies of the play. In wrestling with each of these decisions, the writer is balancing truth against pragmatism. Sometimes the two coincide. Where they don’t, the historian may favour accuracy over efficacy, but a creative writer may lean the other way.

This dilemma must, however, be seen in an historical context. “Truth” has long been an issue for writers but truth issues for contemporary writers are different from those facing pre-Enlightenment and early-Enlightenment authors. The Enlightenment brought a new concern with the truth, linked to both the rise of rationality and Christian-derived ethics of truth. At the same time, authors deliberately made false claims of truth.

By the twentieth century, though, we encounter a curious split in thought. On one hand, in the post-modern turn, writers untether themselves from ideas of fixed truth: questioning the construction of history and truth and the fixedness of meaning in texts. On the other hand, as we can see in recurring debate about the representation of the Jewish Holocaust, we have a heightened anxiety about any departure from at least historical orthodoxy, and perhaps also from the truth. This becomes particularly clear when authorial statements are made about authenticity.

For the contemporary creative writer any discussion of ethics is either meaningless or must embrace the pragmatics of producing a complex output involving choices between truth and effectiveness. Often a writer’s approach to “truth” is not based on

*ethical* considerations but on practical ones. The sensitivity demanded in representing the Holocaust underlines that the more contemporary the play—the more likely there are contemporary investments in the history—the greater the need for a concern with truth. Likewise, the more a play deals with history or issues without direct consequences or a direct interest for those alive today, the greater the leeway for an elastic approach to events.

In the writing of *Batavia*, the approach to this tension was always a practical one. Where choices had to be made, “truth” was one option. This truth was pursued when it provided a satisfactory, practical solution to a creative problem. It was not, however, the final arbiter—effectiveness was.

This exegesis makes a distinction between “truth” and “accuracy”. Historical “truth” I take to mean that which is consistent with the known (or accepted) evidence. “Accuracy” is used as meaning true in its detail. “Pragmatic” will be used to mean making decisions based purely on their practical outcomes. For the playwright, this means in order to achieve effectiveness on stage.

This thesis uses creative practice as its central research strategy—‘Both the written and the creative component of the thesis are conceptualised as *independent answers to the same research question*’.<sup>3</sup> The writing and the documentation of the play *Batavia* is a means of revisiting some of the truth issues facing creative writers. This exegesis examines these same truth issues and acts also as a preface, a way of contextualising the work—a statement of ‘subject and scope ... commenting on techniques employed’ which focuses ‘on a central or contentious issues’.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Milech, B.H. and Schilo, A. (2004) *Text* special issue no.3 April 2004.

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/speciss/issue3/milechsilo.htm>

<sup>4</sup>Krauth, N. (2002) *Text*, 6, 1-17.

This analysis of *Batavia* is itself prefaced by an examination of historical perspectives on “truth” problems. Beginning with the pre-Christian thinkers Aristotle and Horace, I suggest writers were enjoined to take a purely pragmatic approach to their art. With the appearance of Saint Augustine and other Christian moralists, there appears an expectation that writing will uplift or improve its audience. In the Elizabethan period Thomas Heywood saw it as a way of re-inforcing loyalty to the king. Shakespeare stood apart from this as a purely pragmatic writer who used history to suit his practical purpose of dramatic effectiveness. In the seventeenth century, Defoe and later Scott used historical subject matter and built their fictions from these versions of reality. With them, I will suggest, writers began to invent false authorial personas to lend a heightened semblance of accuracy to their work. Shaw followed in the older tradition of using his work to improve, although his intention was social rather than moral improvement. In the twentieth century, Brecht went one step further by arguing that a writer should present solutions to social and political problems. Meanwhile a tradition was developing amongst philosophers and historians which questioned the very nature of “truth”. I will show how this tradition which includes Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Feyerabend have created the basis for a pragmatic (non-ethical) approach to representing history in fiction. Indeed, historians themselves (see E.H.Carr) have contributed to this tradition. In recent times, writers have taken different approaches, with Michael Frayn arguing for effectiveness above all, and Brian Friel being a stickler for accuracy. The proliferation in recent years of false authorial personas (Helen Demidenko, Norma Khouri and others) are in the tradition of Defoe and Scott, but their public reception shows how perceptions of truth issues have changed since the eighteenth century. Likewise, some works of Holocaust fiction will be examined as studies of the difficulty in dealing with contentious history.

A detailed examination of the development of my play *Batavia* will be used to show why and how pragmatic decisions are made for purposes of dramatic effectiveness. It will show the implications for the playwright and for “truth” of shortcomings in the available history. It will document where history was used unchanged, and the nature and purpose of variations from the known history in the writing. I will use this process to think through how a writer can represent history without being untruthful to it.

## Critical Literature Review

### The origins of pragmatism: antiquity

Before the rise of Christianity, writers show no concern with ethics in representation. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, we find a practical manual showing how to construct plays, establish characters, how to move, excite and entertain an audience, and how to make them laugh. He disdains a need for accuracy:

Poetry is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.<sup>5</sup>

His writings on ethics (specifically his *Nichomachean Ethics*), provide little that we'd recognize today as 'ethical'. He reproduces the conventional wisdom of the educated classes of his day. Virtue is attained by habit. One becomes just by performing just acts. His doctrine of the golden mean argues that all virtues are the mid-point between two extremes (e.g. courage lies between rashness and cowardice). He doesn't address the issue of where truth fits into this scheme. We often think of justice as including equality, whereas justice for him involved appropriate proportion: 'the justice of a master or a father is a different thing from that of a citizen, for a son or slave is property'.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle saw ethics as a branch of politics. He thought monarchy the best form of government, and aristocracy the next best. Plato, Aristotle and Nietzsche were happy with a society which confined the best things to a few. Christian ethics praise humility—which Aristotle thought a vice—and condemn pride, which Aristotle thought a virtue. Aristotle on the whole saw virtue as a means (happiness was the end). Christian moralists see virtuous actions as good in themselves, to be valued on their own account. The only classical school of

---

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle *The Poetics* in Dukore, B., F, (Ed) (1974) *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.p.39

<sup>6</sup> Russell, B. (1946) *History of Western Philosophy*, Routledge, London.p.186

philosophy which saw virtue as an end in itself (and therefore similar to the Christian attitude) were the Stoics. They were a God-based belief system.

Likewise Horace talks of practical matters, of how best to contrive a pleasing and impressive result:

the secret of all good writing is sound judgement. The works of the Socratics will supply you with the facts: get these in clear perspective and the words will follow naturally.<sup>7</sup>

It was a matter of giving pleasure. Nowhere is there talk of plays for improvement or for any historical function.

### **Christianity and the rise of moral purpose**

With the appearance of Christianity, things change. Saint Augustine (354-430 AD) was unrestrained in some of his criticism of the ancients, asking ‘is it right that the actors of these poetical and God-dishonouring effusions be branded, while their authors are honoured?’<sup>8</sup> His contemporary Aelius Donatus raises the issue of moral improvement: ‘Comedy employs a story ... which teaches us what is practical in life and what on the contrary is to be avoided’.<sup>9</sup>

This tradition became the norm. By the time of Thomas Heywood, Shakespeare’s contemporary, the intention was quite clear. Of history plays (or chronicle plays, as he called them) he said:

Chronicle plays are written with this aim and carried with this method: to teach the subjects obedience to their king; to show the people the untimely ends of such as have moved tumults, commotions and insurrections; to present them with the flourishing estate of such as live in obedience, exhorting them to allegiance, dehorting them from all traitorous and felonious stratagems.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Horace *The Art of Poetry* in Dukore, Op Cit. p.73

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p.99

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Brian Friel in Friel, B. and Murray, C. (1999) *Brian Friel :Essays, Diaries,Interviews, 1964-1999*, Faber, London. P.119

Heywood sees plays as having a political, as well as a moral purpose. They help in creating certain kinds of citizen and in incorporating them into society.

### **Shakespeare as exception**

Shakespeare stood apart from this tradition. His approach was a practical one. He built much of his work from other sources. Indeed, he possibly never really invented any story. He changed his sources as much as necessary for dramatic purposes. There are many times when his source shows clearly. Compare for example, this description of Cleopatra on her barge from Plutarch:

the poop whereof was of gold and the oars silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes... And now for the person herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, appareled and attired like the Goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture; and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys appareled as painters do set forth God Cupid, with little fans in their hands, with which they fanned wind upon her...<sup>11</sup>

and the Shakespeare version:

The poop was of beaten gold .... The oars were silver  
which to the tune of flutes kept stroke ... For her own person,  
It beggeraed all description: she did lie  
In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,  
O'erpicturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature: on each side her  
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,  
With divers-coloured fans whose wind did seem  
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool...<sup>12</sup>

And on it goes for several pages. Enobarbus' speech, with token interjections from Agrippa ('Oh rare Egyptian!') comes straight from the Plutarch. Here there are no attempts to teach the audience. It is simply a stage piece adapted from historical sources, or in this case, a recently published version of what was recorded as history.

Plutarch's *Lives* had been translated early into Latin. Then in 1559 they were

---

<sup>11</sup> Plutarch trans North "Life of Marcus Antonius", *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* included in the Signet edition of Shakespeare, W, *Antony and Cleopatra*, New American Library, NY 1963

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, Act 2 Sc ii

translated into French by Jacques Amyot. Thomas North took this French version and from it produced his English Plutarch in 1579 (when Shakespeare was in his teens).<sup>13</sup>

### **Continuing the moralist tradition**

As Christianity continued hand-in-hand with political power (at least in the West), so too did the drama. Schiller, writing in 1784, suggested that the stage might prompt the political sphere when it falls short of appropriate moral action:

Laws are flexible and capricious; religion binds forever... Where the influence of civil law ends, that of the stage begins ... in this the stage only aids justice ... there are a thousand vices unnoticed by human justice, but condemned by the stage; so also a thousand virtues overlooked by man's laws are honored on the stage.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, Shaw, a social reformer, was talking about the stage and 'social', rather than 'moral' good. He argued that 'social questions are produced by the conflict of human institutions with human feeling'.<sup>15</sup> He would certainly have included the institution of religion in this. He argued that every social question provides material for drama, but not every drama involves a social question (because that is not the only source of human conflict). To the proposition that the greatest dramatists show a preference for non-political drama, he replied in two ways: Firstly, minor dramatists have this preference, only because they know nothing about social issues, and secondly, the proposition is wrong:

Shakespeare (sic) is full of little lectures of the concrete English kind, from Cassio on temperance to Hamlet on suicide. Goethe, in his German way, is always discussing metaphysical points.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Spencer, T. J. B. (1964) *Shakespeare's Plutarch*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, pp. 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> "The Stage as a Moral Institution" in Dukore, Op Cit p. 441

<sup>15</sup> "The Problem Play", 1895, in Clark, B., H, (Ed) (1970) *European Theories of the Drama*, Crown Publishers, New York. p.444

<sup>16</sup> Ibid p.445.

Shaw thus implied that the portrayal of character betrays the moral purpose of the author. This says more about his approach than it does about Shakespeare.

Brecht shared Shaw's "social improvement" attitude, but was not content to simply highlight a social problem. He explicitly wanted to show (on stage) the way towards fixing it:

The purpose of our investigation was not merely to arouse moral misgivings about certain conditions... (but) to make visible the means by which those onerous conditions could be done away with. We were not speaking on behalf of morality, but of the wronged. These are really two different things, for moral allusions are often used in telling the wronged that they must put up with their situation. For such moralists, people exist for morality, not morality for people.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his contempt for moralists (he specifically eschewed an 'ethical' approach), Brecht clearly believed in "improving" things. This might be in practical matters (social conditions), but there is still an implicit idea of "good" and "better" in this.

Regardless of the philosophical starting points of these post-Christian writers, there appears to be tacit agreement that if literature has a social effect, it should be to improve (in either an ethical or a practical sense) rather than to degrade. This is strangely at odds with much of human behaviour and history.

But the intention to teach or improve a modern audience, or to goad them to action, is fraught with danger. After seeing *Copenhagen*, Werner Heisenberg's son said to Michael Frayn, 'your Heisenberg is nothing like my father'.<sup>18</sup> Frayn comments:

This seems to me a chastening reminder of the difficulties of presenting a real person in fiction, but a profoundly sensible indication of the purpose in attempting it, which is surely to make explicit the ideas and feelings that never quite get expressed in the confusing onrush of life, and to bring out the underlying structure of events. I take it that the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German playwright Friedrich Hebbel was making a similar point when he uttered his great dictum (one that every playwright should have engraved over his desk): "In a good play everyone is right." I assume he means by this not that the audience is invited to approve of everyone's actions, but that everyone should be allowed the freedom and eloquence to make the most convincing

---

<sup>17</sup> Brecht, B. "Theatre For Learning" Ibid p 312

<sup>18</sup> Frayn, M. (2004) *Copenhagen - Program*, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney. P.7

case that he can for himself ... The audience can surely be trusted to draw its own moral conclusions.<sup>19</sup>

### **The eighteenth century and the rise of authorial pronouncements**

The Enlightenment signalled the breakdown of old truths. With it came an interest in new ideas, new discoveries, new places and new social relationships. A new relationship to the idea of “truth” was also developing. Authors began to attempt to manage the truth status of their work. This sometimes involved the creation of false authorial identities and false prefaces to increase the work’s truth value.

In April of 1719, Daniel Defoe published *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. In his subtitle, the author made this claim: ‘The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner, who lived eight and twenty years all alone in an uninhabited island on the coast of America... With an account of how he was strangely delivered by Pirates. Written by himself.’<sup>20</sup> In spite of his claim that it was a true first person record, it was generally known that *Robinson Crusoe* was written by Defoe. Ironically, he was immediately attacked as not being the author because it was held to be ‘entirely compiled from the journals kept by Alexander Selkirk during his twenty-two years’ solitary sojourn in the island of Juan Fernandez’.<sup>21</sup> Defoe had taken a true story as the starting point for a work of fiction. He then claimed the fiction to be true. He didn’t just claim the detail was accurate, but that the story was true. He was subsequently criticised for using a true account of an incident and passing it off as fiction. There is an implication here that

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid p.8

<sup>20</sup> Defoe, D. e. J. S. K. (1870) *The Works of Daniel Defoe*, William P. Nimmo, Edinburgh. P.31

<sup>21</sup> Ibid p.31

his audience took *Robinson Crusoe*'s claims to be a first person account with a pinch of salt.

When Defoe published his *Journey of the Plague Year* (under the name 'E.Nutt') in 1722, he made a similar claim for its authenticity:

A journal of the Plague Year: being Observations or Memorials of the most remarkable Occurrences as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great Visitation in 1665. Written by a Citizen who continued all the while in London. Never made public before. London: E.Nutt. 1722.

Yet Defoe had been four in 1665.

In 1817, Sir Walter Scott claimed for the first edition of *Rob Roy* that the work was a parcel of papers sent to the anonymous editor 'by an unknown and nameless correspondent' requesting that they be 'given to the public'.<sup>22</sup> Rob Roy was a famous public figure from a hundred years earlier. He had claimed leadership of the clan MacGregor, and he and his clansmen waged open war on the Duke of Montrose.<sup>23</sup> Some years later, in 1829, Scott admitted 'the communication alluded to' had been 'entirely imaginary'.<sup>24</sup> Again, we find an example of an author inventing an authorial persona to whom the work is attributed in order to claim the work as "true". It is instructive that when Scott recanted, he didn't say the claim had been "untrue". It had simply been 'imaginary'.

George Bernard Shaw (who also used Plutarch as one of his sources) claimed that his play about Julius Caesar and Cleopatra was interpretation ('let me interpret Caesar in the same modern light'<sup>25</sup>), yet he named the play *Caesar and Cleopatra – A History*. Shaw, who never shrank from authorial pronouncements, then set out to

---

<sup>22</sup> Scott, W *Rob Roy* ed Duncan, cited in Ruthven, K. K. (2001) *Faking Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>23</sup> Thorne, J. O. C., T.C (Eds) (1974) *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, W & R Chambers, Edinburgh.

<sup>24</sup> Ruthven Op Cit p. 43

<sup>25</sup> Ibid p.46

muddy the waters further. In the 'Programme Note' to his play, he makes definite (if slightly impish) claims for the scholarship and accuracy of his version: 'This play follows history as closely as stage exigencies permit' and he includes an extensive list of classical sources. He adds this comment as a coda: 'Many of these authorities have consulted their imaginations, more or less. The author has done the same'.<sup>26</sup>

This tradition of authorial pronouncements has continued and gained momentum in the twentieth century. Michael Frayn's program notes for his play *Copenhagen* provide a detailed essay discussing the sources, the accuracy and the criticisms of his history. He was criticized for the accuracy of his science (which he corrected after the run at the National Theatre in London). But of the history, he argued at some length for its accuracy and plausibility. He did not accept one particular complaint 'that I should have laid more stress on the evils of the Nazi regime, and in particular upon the Holocaust'. He answers that his audience is familiar with this context 'I thought that this was too well understood to need pointing out'.<sup>27</sup>

The troubling relationship between authorial pronouncement and false authorial personas will be examined further in the sections on twentieth century pragmatics, issues of cultural ownership and the Holocaust.

### **The twentieth century 1: pragmatics, ethics, history, interpretation and truth**

Frayn's program note speaks of bringing out 'the underlying structure of events'. But truth in history has always been a matter of interpretation, an issue extensively debated by historians themselves. E.H.Carr, still a beacon of clarity despite subsequent developments, argued that facts are not like a fish on a fishmonger's slab, to be taken home and cooked. Rather they are like fish 'swimming about in a vast and

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid p.306

<sup>27</sup> Frayn, M. Op. Cit., p.7

sometimes inaccessible ocean'.<sup>28</sup> What you catch will depend partly on chance, partly on which part of the ocean you choose to fish in, and partly on what you take with you when you go fishing.

Nietzsche also saw truth as a moveable feast, a 'host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions'.<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche is the link between Aristotle's pragmatics and the twentieth century philosopher/historian Richard Rorty. Rorty argues that the search for truth, which runs from the Greeks through the Enlightenment is an attempt to find sense in existence by turning towards objectivity and away from solidarity. This search for truth has traditionally been seen as good in itself (not unlike Christian moralists on virtue). The truth they seek is truth as a correspondence to reality, what Nietzsche saw as 'an attempt to avoid facing up to contingency ... to escape from time and chance'.<sup>30</sup> Rorty sees this sort of truth as 'merely an expression of commendation' for what people see as well-justified beliefs. Nietzsche and Rorty both see this search as driven by fear. It is fear of not having something solid, something transcending existence to hold on to. For Rorty, the pragmatist:

suspects that the hope that something resembling us will inherit the earth is impossible to eradicate, as impossible to eradicate as the hope of surviving our individual deaths through some satisfying transfiguration.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Carr, E. H. (1964) *What is History?*, Pelican, Harmondsworth. P.23

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, F "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" in Cahoon, L. E. (2003) *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, Blackwell, Malden P. 112

<sup>30</sup> paraphrased by Rorty in "Solidarity or Objectivity" in Cahoon, Op Cit P.453

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

Nietzsche (says Rorty) ‘thought the test of human character was the ability to live with the thought that there was no convergence’.<sup>32</sup> That is, no move towards such a thing as ‘truth’.

The extreme example of a non-ethical (and purely pragmatic) approach to truth is the stance of philosopher Paul Feyerabend. He argues that reason is not necessarily a good arbiter of truth. Reason is simply a tradition—one of various traditions, neither good nor bad in its own right. Traditions are only seen as “good” or “bad” by comparison with other traditions e.g. rational/irrational, advanced/”primitive”, humanitarian/vicious:

‘Objectively’ there is not much to choose between anti-semitism and humanitarianism. But racism will appear vicious to a humanitarian, while humanitarianism will appear vapid to a racist.<sup>33</sup>

His argument continues: a free society is one where all traditions have equal rights and equal access to centres of power. A tradition gives meaning to the lives of those who participate in it (the search for meaning that Nietzsche and Rorty addressed). So to give different traditions equality is not only right but useful.

Feyerabend’s approach is a useful one for the pragmatic playwright. A fascist or an anti-Semite on stage must have something to engage the audience. It is Hebbel’s dictum that ‘on stage everyone is right’. The truth of a situation becomes the understanding of it. Rorty’s idea that the search for truth is an attempt to make sense of existence is the key to the pragmatic approach. Truth will always be a moving target. Some degree of understanding is a more feasible goal. If an author’s intention is to condemn a fascist, then he/she should write an essay and put the argument.

Michael Frayn addresses the issue directly:

I can see all the problems of exhibiting Hitler on stage, but I can’t see any point in attempting it at all if he is simply to be an effigy for ritual humiliation. Why should

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Feyerabend, P. (1978) *Science in a Free Society*, NLB, London. P.9

we be asked to endure a representation of his presence if he doesn't offer us some understanding of what was going on inside his head from his own point of view?<sup>34</sup>

The opposing attitude is put by Robert Manne when writing about Helen Demidenko/Darville's *The Hand That Signed the Paper*: 'In a truly civilized country a book like this would not have been published'.<sup>35</sup> Robert Manne's pieces on Demidenko are a call for an "ethical" approach to the marshalling of elements in a creative work. George Steiner, who has extensively explored Holocaust issues in his theoretical, philosophical and fictional works, said his work was more and more an attempt to discover:

whether and in what rational framework it is possible to have a theory and practice of understanding (hermeneutics) and a theory and practice of value judgements (aesthetics) without a theological re-insurance or underwriting.<sup>36</sup>

I argue that most systems of ethics are underpinned by a religious (or other mystical) framework. The alternative to a resort to transcendent values is pragmatism. Otherwise the discussion becomes meaningless. Wittgenstein put it this way:

I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.<sup>37</sup>

Wittgenstein's 'tendency in the human mind' is what Rorty calls the need for convergence. It is the cause of the widespread acceptance of religion and in turn the call for drama to improve or uplift. The alternative is pragmatics.

## **The twentieth century 2: The Holocaust as a test of pragmatics**

A pragmatic (non-ethical) approach presents few difficulties to the creative writer when the history being represented carries little emotional baggage for

---

<sup>34</sup> Frayn, M. Op.Cit. p.8

<sup>35</sup> Manne, R. (1996) *The Culture of Forgetting*, Text Publishing, Melbourne p.2

<sup>36</sup> Ibid p.8

<sup>37</sup> from his *Lecture on Ethics*, 1929, included in Cahoon, L. E. (2003) *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, Blackwell, Malden.

the audience. The true test of such an approach is how it might deal with events which are historically proximate,<sup>38</sup> emotionally charged, and fiercely contended.

Just how difficult this area can be, is seen in the case of David Irving. Although a professional historian, he was refused entry to Australia to publicly put his case and answer criticism. Irving's interpretation of history might have been readily debated and dealt with by his peers. Instead, political muscle was used to control the debate.

The standard (i.e. generally accepted) version of Holocaust history might be true (in the sense that I defined the word) but is not necessarily accurate. A simple example of moulding a version of history (in this context): the figure for Holocaust survivors at the end of the Second World War was generally put at 100,000 (US Holocaust Memorial Museum). However, recent re-definitions have led to a growing number of 'survivors'. It now includes anyone affected by anyone who survived (or fled from) Hitler, or anyone whose 'pain is authentic'. The Israeli Prime Minister's office recently (2000) put the number of 'living Holocaust survivors' at nearly a million.<sup>39</sup> One further example of this "version of history"—the argument that the Nazi holocaust is uniquely evil—how does one measure such a thing?

The publication in Australia of *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (by 'Helen Demidenko') and the ensuing events highlight many of the issues involved. The strength of response on both sides of the debate illustrates the battle for control of the history and of its representation. On one side were those who believed that showing Jews as causing the Ukrainian famine and Jewish Communists as persecuting Ukrainians was anti-semitic. In response, David Marr spoke of 'the philistines who

---

<sup>38</sup> By 'historically proximate' I do not just mean 'recent'. A massacre of aborigines a century ago might carry similar emotional weight for those concerned as holocaust issues do for victims, or, for example, the continuing storage of aboriginal body parts in overseas museums.

<sup>39</sup> The references to these figures can be seen in Finkelstein Op Cit pp 81-83.

[...] wanted to censor books'.<sup>40</sup> He didn't care whether "Demidenko" was anti-semitic or not. Only the text interested him. Robert Manne demanded an authorial condemnation of her characters.<sup>41</sup> This was primarily a moral, rather than a literary, response. Jill Kitson (one of the Miles Franklin judges) said they were concerned only with the book's literary qualities and Manne responded that by this measure we could have a literary masterpiece redolent with 'pervasive anti-semitism'. For him, 'rarely had the divorce between literary and human values been expressed more starkly or crudely'.<sup>42</sup> The question is not whether anti-semitism matters, but whether "anti-accuracy" matters.

Earlier there had been cases which presented the converse of Demidenko's take on history. *The Painted Bird* by Polish émigré Jerzy Kosinski purported to be an accurate first-hand account of a Holocaust survivor. He invents his wanderings throughout Poland during World War II. He paints the peasants he 'encountered' as virulently anti-semitic. In fact his family had been harboured during the war by a Polish peasant family, knowing they were Jews. The book was full of sexual sado-masochistic torture supposedly perpetrated by Polish peasants on Jews. Kosinski invented nearly all these episodes.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, Elie Wiesel in the *New York Times Book Review* called it 'one of the best' indictments of the Nazi era. Cynthia Ozick said she 'immediately' recognized the author's authenticity as 'a Jewish survivor and witness to the Holocaust'.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, *Fragments* by Benjamin Wilkomirski (1996) is an

---

<sup>40</sup> Manne, R. Op Cit p.33

<sup>41</sup> 'No-one saw how dangerous was the absence .. of a clearly defined and morally unambiguous authorial voice' Ibid p.52

<sup>42</sup> Ibid p.89

<sup>43</sup> retold in Finkelstein, N. G. Op Cit, p. 55 ff.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Ironically, this is the same Cynthia Ozick who in her *Portrait of the Artist as a Bad Character* (p.93) admitted that a 'novelist promises to lie and the reader promises to allow it' (quoted in Ruthven Op Cit p.44)

invented Holocaust memoir, full of sadistic Nazi guards, climaxing in an orgy of violence.<sup>45</sup> This was presented as ‘recovered memory’.

The presentation of Adolf Hitler on stage is a further test of the pragmatic approach. Michael Frayn’s argument (quoted previously) is that Hitler must be allowed to put the best possible case to allow some understanding of him. Setting him up as a target for abuse is, from a pragmatic point of view, ineffective.

George Tabori’s play *Mein Kampf* has enjoyed enormous success in Germany since its 1987 premiere at the Vienna Akademietheater. Tabori is Hungarian born, of Jewish ancestry, and his father was killed by the Nazis in a concentration camp.<sup>46</sup> He was born in 1914, and is a resident director at the Berliner Ensemble. He broke the taboos (in Germany) about treating the Holocaust on stage. His jokes make the catastrophe palpable—‘after you, Mr Mandelbaum!’ his father is supposed to have said at the entrance to Auschwitz’ gas chamber.<sup>47</sup> The play tells how Hitler, then an unsuccessful artist at a Viennese men’s shelter, meets the Jewish bible salesman, Schlomo Herzl.

The setting is reminiscent of the end of George Steiner’s *Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (subsequently turned into a play by Christopher Hampton<sup>48</sup>). The premise of the novel (and play) has Hitler surviving the war by using a double, only to be captured in recent times and held in the South American jungle while his captors decide what to do with him. Throughout the piece, characters describe a litany of atrocities committed by the Nazis on Jews. Hitler is a frail old man who has little to say until the end. In the final speech of the piece (which runs for five pages in the

---

<sup>45</sup> This a much commented-on case e.g. in “The Man With Two Heads” in *Granta* no. 66. For a fuller list of references see the section on this book in Finkelstein Op Cit p. 57 ff.

<sup>46</sup> Goethe-Institut 2004, [http://www.goethe.de/kug/kue/the/thm/en120587\\_pr.htm](http://www.goethe.de/kug/kue/the/thm/en120587_pr.htm)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Hampton, C. and Steiner, G. (1983) *George Steiner's The portage to San Cristobal of A. H.*, Faber, London.

play) he gives an extraordinary explanation of how he came to think as he did. When he was young, staying in a doss-house, he met a Jacob Grill, son of a rabbi from Poland, who taught him about ‘the chosen people. God’s own and elect amid the unclean’.<sup>49</sup> The speech is repeated in the play:

Your teaching. A chosen people. Chosen by God for His own. The only race on earth chosen, exalted, made singular among Mankind. Grill taught me ... My promise was only a thousand years. Grill said, to eternity, lo, it is written here. In letters of white fire. The setting apart of the race, like unto no other. ... Your invention. One Israel, one Volk, one leader. ... From you. Everything. To set a race apart. To keep it from defilement. To hold before it a promised land. ... My racism was a parody of yours, a hungry imitation. What is a thousand-year Reich compared to an eternity of Zion? It was the Holocaust that gave you the courage of injustice, that made you drive the Arab out of his home, out of his field, because he was lice-ridden and without resource, because he was in your divinely ordered way...<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the play, the audience have been primed (by the relentless retelling of atrocities) to see Hitler as the worst possible human being. Then he turns to his accusers and says ‘how are you and I different?’ Hitler is not presented as just a mindless butcher. He is the other side of the same coin as his accusers. But the speech cannot be read independent of the person who wrote it. Had it been written by a non-Jew, it would probably have been vilified. As it was, it caused considerable outrage. This makes it difficult ground for the pragmatic writer.

The Hampton/Steiner play is for much of its length a fairly tedious piece. This, I suggest, is because effectiveness has been sacrificed for accuracy. The long litany of atrocities might be true, but it has a numbing effect and causes the reader or audience to glaze over. The play only comes to life when the Hitler speech begins.

It is fair to say Steiner wrote the speech with some passion. It links his thinking about literary criticism, linguistics, history, the Holocaust and humanism with his personal history as a Holocaust survivor. He insisted:

---

<sup>49</sup> From Steiner *Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, included in: Steiner, G. (1984) *George Steiner A Reader*, Penguin, Harmondsworth. P.273

<sup>50</sup> Hampton, C. and Steiner, G. Op Cit, p. 67 ff.

The new-critical isolation of the literary text from its historical, ideological, social and biographical context seemed to me didactically ingenious but essentially false. This ... therefore argues the central role of metaphysical, religious, political concerns in literature. It calls for the observance of the organic relations between a poem, play or novel and the social, temporal and linguistic (in the sense of the history of the language) realities which are its matrix.<sup>51</sup>

The argument in his Hitler speech was prefigured in his book *Language and Silence* when he wrote:

Nationalism is the venom of our age... Every mob impulse in modern politics, every totalitarian design, feeds on nationalism, on the drug of hatred which makes human beings bare their teeth across a wall, across ten yards of waste ground.<sup>52</sup>

When Steiner writes of Hitler, he does so with the rights of an insider—an issue that will be revisited in the section on cultural ownership.

A further (and recent) example illustrates the ongoing difficulties raised by this subject matter. In 2004, the film *The Downfall* was released in Germany, depicting in graphic detail the last days of Adolph Hitler. It shows him as ‘a tired, sometimes sympathetic man, and as a considerate boss with a tendency to shout’.<sup>53</sup> It has caused heated debate in Germany ‘about whether it is legitimate to show Hitler as a human being rather than a monster’. One complaint was that it went too far in making him human. This goes straight to the nub of the issue for the dramatist: the writer is faced with the choice between portraying him as an evil monster (and satisfying certain expectations) or looking for a way to make him explicable (or at least convincing in the context). There was further criticism of the film’s minor inaccuracies about those last days. As in the Demidenko case, the criticism was about accuracy but the objection was to the portrayal of the people. Even though the film tells the story from the point of view of a secretary involved in the events, it is criticized for confusing victims with war criminals.

---

<sup>51</sup> Steiner, G. (1984) *George Steiner A Reader*, Penguin, Harmondsworth. p.8

<sup>52</sup> Ibid p.232

<sup>53</sup> Boyes, R. (2004) ‘Film of Hitler’s End Stuns Germans’ In *The Weekend Australian* Sydney, p. 17.

In each of these examples Hitler is not presented as unalloyed evil. Instead, the author tries to put him in some sort of context. Artistically they attempt to bring him alive, to make some sense of him as a human being. They show the strength of the pragmatic approach. But they share with the “Demidenko” book a hostile public reception—something which a pragmatist will be aware of.

The consequence of this difficulty for the writer is that he/she must accept the antipathy an unpopular characterisation will provoke because of the contribution of the pragmatic approach to the quality of the work.

### **The Twentieth Century 3: Cultural ownership and the difficulties of representation.**

Over the last thirty years or so a growing number of authors have followed in the footsteps of Defoe, by creating false authorial identities to add authenticity to their work. This growth has been in step with developing notions of cultural identity. Indeed, the evidence suggests a causal connection.

The Darville/Demidenko book involved just such authorial duplicity. The persona of “Helen Demidenko” was created by Helen Darville. It was meticulously created: ethnic blouses, Ukrainian dancing, the occasional Ukrainian phrase, false family history, the book was submitted to the publishers under the false name, and was first offered as biography,<sup>54</sup> not fiction. It was all utterly false.

The literary merits of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* have been extensively debated. Andrew Reimer points out that it was judged ‘in the light of the standards

---

<sup>54</sup> Lynne Segal, an editor who worked on the book wrote ‘There was no doubt in my mind that it was non-fiction. The author acknowledged that she had transcribed taped memoirs of various members of her family. In fact, the surname of the characters was Demidenko’ Quoted in Manne, R Op Cit p.38.

and preoccupations of contemporary literary life'.<sup>55</sup> It was seen as the first novel of a young writer. It was published at the height of the ascendancy of identity politics and "Helen Demidenko" appeared to be a young, ethnic female,<sup>56</sup> sharing her family's (tragic) experience. The book was part of a package, the other part of which was the author. It was published as fiction, but valorised itself by claims to be "accurate" history.

In 1976 *The Education of Little Tree* was published in the United States.<sup>57</sup> Its author, Forrest Carter, told of his childhood and youth, brought up by Cherokee grandparents in a Tennessee log cabin. It became a non-fiction success story, received an award from the American Booksellers Association, was set as reading on university courses on culture and was sold on Native American reservations. It was made into a film. In 1991, the author was exposed as Asa Earl Carter, 'a Ku Klux Klan terrorist, right-wing radio announcer, home grown American fascist and anti-semitic'<sup>58</sup> who successfully re-created Native American history and culture. After its exposure, the book became a fiction bestseller.

In 1987 Virago Press in the United Kingdom published *Down the Road, Worlds Away* by Rahila Khan. These were stories for teenagers about the daughters of Asian immigrants trying to negotiate the cultural differences between life at home and what goes on at school in the Midlands. They purported to be written by a Asian woman. Three weeks after publication, it was revealed they were written by a white

---

<sup>55</sup>Reimer, A. (1996) *The Demidenko Debate*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney. P.142

<sup>56</sup> Goldsworthy described it as 'a kind of multicultural affirmative action prize' in Goldsworthy. *The Dewogging of Helen Demidenko*. P.32

<sup>57</sup> Carter, F. (1976) *The Education of Little Tree*. London, Futura

<sup>58</sup> Pringle, H. (1999) In *The Australian*. Sydney. p.15

Englishman (and parish priest in Brighton) named Toby Forward, who wrote the book because he believed the subject deserved exploration.<sup>59</sup>

Likewise in Australia, Aboriginal culture has been successfully but falsely re-created. In 1994 Leon Carmen (a white male) published a novel *My Own Sweet Time* under the name “Wanda Koolmatrie”, claiming to be a Pitjantjantjara woman. It was published by Magabala Books (an Aboriginal publishing house in Alice Springs) and won an award for a novel by an Aboriginal woman. Before Leon Carmen there was Colin Johnson, who gained a reputation as Australia’s first Aboriginal novelist with his 1965 book *Wild Cat Falling*. In 1988 he changed his name to Mudrooroo Nyoongah. Later his sister revealed there was no Aboriginal heritage in their family.

The latest example is Norma Khouri’s *Forbidden Love*<sup>60</sup>, which re-tells the so-called “honour killing” of Khouri’s best friend Dalia, and of Khouri’s childhood and young adulthood in Jordan. When challenged on its authenticity by Jordanian women’s rights activists, Khouri replied ‘I am truly offended by your request to label *Forbidden Love* fiction’.<sup>61</sup> She was later to add ‘*Forbidden Love* is a memoir. It is my memoir, documenting my life ... I do not believe that I am in any way misleading anyone’.<sup>62</sup> The book was subsequently exposed as untrue. The author had lived in Chicago since the age of three and left in 1999 when the FBI wanted to question her.<sup>63</sup>

In each of these examples, convincing fiction had been created, as in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*. But Defoe lived before culture and history became a matter of “ownership”. By the late twentieth century, empathy had become ideologically suspect, an invasive act, the stalking horse of cultural appropriation. The extremes of

---

<sup>59</sup> Recounted in Ruthven Op Cit p.23

<sup>60</sup> Khouri, N. (2004) *Forbidden Love*, Random House, Sydney (subsequently recalled and withdrawn from publication)

<sup>61</sup> Knox, M. and Overington, C (2004) In *Sydney Morning Herald* (July31-August1) Sydney, pp. 25.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

this view began to pervade bureaucracies. In 1991 the Canada Council's Advisory Committee for Racial Equality defined 'the depiction of minorities or cultures other than one's own, either in fiction or non-fiction, as 'cultural appropriation', and recommended that no writer culpable in this respect should receive a Government grant'.<sup>64</sup>

Cultural gatekeepers had set themselves up for a fall. By creating insiders with ownership rights to history, they invited false authorial representation and writers stepped up to fill the need. There arose a class of fiction where the writing was so accurate it was taken as truth and where the author used his/her persona to lend further weight to its truth claims. Darville stumbled at the "accuracy" hurdle. The history she wrote was questioned. These other examples pass the accuracy test, even though they were fiction.

These cases highlight areas of difficulty for the creative writer. Truth in representation does not require that history be told by a cultural insider. However when dealing with minority cultures (whether indigenous or ethnic) a writer must be aware that these groups can have a sense of cultural ownership and that outside cultural gatekeepers—whether they be publishers (in the case of "Rahila Khan"), cultural commentators ("Demidenko") or journalists (Khoury)—might demand insider identity of the writer.

These recent examples also highlight the pitfalls for a writer when making authorial claims about historical accuracy. Whether the claims be true or false, they will invite scrutiny—the more contentious the history (or the greater the interests staked in it), the greater the scrutiny. They suggest to the pragmatic writer a need to

---

<sup>64</sup> Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties*, 209, 210, quoted in Ruthven *Op Cit* p.27

avoid such statements and to avoid engaging in debates about “accuracy”. In extreme cases, the debate can eclipse the original work.

### **Case Study One: Brian Friel’s *Translations* and the quest for accuracy**

Irish playwright Brian Friel is an example of a writer with a careful concern for accuracy of detail. In writing his historical play *Translations*, he took great care over period detail and subsequently engaged in a public debate with a professional historian about it. His play is a fiction (unlike *Batavia*) but the background history is not, and it serves to enhance the play’s truth value.

Friel did not set out to write an invented story. He had been considering various (slightly nebulous) historical ideas: a play set in the first half of the nineteenth century; a play about Catholic emancipation; a play about colonialism; a play about the death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English. Then he made two accidental discoveries—his great great grandfather had been a hedge-school master.<sup>65</sup> This led him to read more about the hedge schools. His second discovery was that the first trigonometrical base for the ordnance survey of 1828 was near his house. He then read more about the ordnance survey and the resulting standardisation of place names. He began a play about Colonel Colby, the prime mover of the ordnance survey. This approach was not working. He read a book about the scholar and orthographer John O’Donovan, and tried to put him at the centre of the play. Finally, he abandoned these approaches and wrote a play about a drunken hedge-schoolmaster, which incorporates all the earlier themes—particularly how the “standardisation” of descriptive Irish place names meant their replacement by English, as it did everywhere else in their culture.

---

<sup>65</sup> ‘Hedge schools’ were small, local, often one-teacher schools, sometimes conducted in a barn. They taught in the Irish language, and in Latin.

After the play appeared, Friel was corrected by Irish academic (and author of one of the books Friel had read), J.H. Andrews, for having soldiers on the survey carrying bayonets. Andrews pointed out soldiers on survey were required to hand in their bayonets at that time. Friel admitted his error and pointed out two others. He'd had Donegal renamed in 1833, when in fact it happened in 1835, and he'd placed a real character (Yolland) in Donegal in 1833 when he hadn't actually joined the Survey Department until 1838. Not content, Andrews published a subsequent paper<sup>66</sup> with further examples of where Friel had taken liberties with history.

Friel believed that working with history imposed both advantages and responsibilities. The advantages include the 'established facts' which give the work its accessibility. The responsibility is to 'acknowledge those facts but not to defer to them'.<sup>67</sup> But Friel was being overly deferential himself. He fed the debate by replying to Andrew's bayonet criticism. His detailing of two very minor inaccuracies by implication claimed historical accuracy for the rest. Then Andrews came back with his paper.

Friel's approach differs from mine in Batavia in that I took a true story and altered the detail as necessary, whereas he invented a story but set it against an accurate historical background and used studiously authentic detail.

### **Case Study Two: *Batavia***

The detail of my version of the Batavia story differs in places from the history, but is largely consistent with it. My primary aim was to create a story and characters that were understandable, convincing, and entertaining. My intention, however, was to be

---

<sup>66</sup> 'Notes for a Future Edition of Brian Friel's Translations', *Irish Review*, 13 (1992-3), pp 93-106,

<sup>67</sup> Friel, B. and Murray, C. (1999) *Brian Friel : Essays, Diaries, Interviews, 1964-1999*, Faber, London. Pp. 118-9.

as true to history and as accurate as my primary aims allowed. Where history provided suitable material, it was used unchanged. Where truth and plausibility parted ways, effectiveness triumphed over accuracy. I saw history as my starting point and my guideline, not as a straitjacket.

I could not, however, avoid the political dimension to the story. The overwhelming forces driving the lives of those involved in these events were the pervasive influence of Calvinism and the relentless profiteering of the Dutch East India Company. Religion and politics were hand in glove at the time and each supported the other. Indeed, the relationship was symbiotic. Profit, worldly success and status were the outward signs of one who was saved. Profit followed from good standing with the Lord. Material failure was a sign of eternal damnation. Wealth, power and piety thus went hand in hand.<sup>68</sup> The achilles heel of this self-serving set of beliefs was that Calvinism preached that nothing one did in one's life could improve the prospects for the soul in an afterlife. This life simply mirrored one's eternal standing. This religious/political context gave me some understanding of what an unsuccessful person might have felt. Condemned in the next life, without prospects in this life, why would such a person not take any wealth or pleasure they could?

Like Shaw and Brecht, I saw the political implications of the story. However, unlike them, I had no intention of moving anyone's belief, even though I would be critiquing both capitalism and Calvinism in showing Jeronimus as their product. Although I was managing the available history in the interests of story, it would not be in order to improve people, or to demonstrate right and wrong (as with St. Augustine, Heywood or Schiller). If there was a political purpose, it was to turn the

---

<sup>68</sup> I also recognized the echoes in our own time, when material success or failure are often used as the measure of a person's true worth.

situation around and look at it from different angles, in order to gain an understanding of what was happening. It was the pursuit of understanding, not of outcomes.

### **Problems with the history**

There are clear shortcomings with the documented record of the Batavia. As with all history, the “first hand accounts” reflect what the participants chose to record, what they wanted recorded, and perhaps what they thought they witnessed. In spite of these shortcomings (and because of the meticulous record-keeping of the Dutch East India Company), we have a picture of events, and even some insights into the type of people involved.

The history we have is that of the victors. Commander Pelseart kept a log of the voyage, which was sometimes close to a diary. He gives varying accounts of the death toll on the island. He blamed the Captain for what happened (as the instigator of the plot) even though the Captain was not on the islands. There is no transcript of the interrogations of those dealt with (i.e. executed) on the island. The Dutch legal system relied not on evidence but on confessions, so there is no attempt to record evidence from witnesses. Pelseart’s journal was compiled to be read by the directors of the Dutch East India company and so was presumably contrived to serve his best interests. It was not written in Pelseart’s own handwriting (which we have from a letter),<sup>69</sup> so was probably written up by one of his clerks.

In the years following the events (during the 1600s), there were some published tales of the Batavia’s adventures, third-hand accounts which at best might have been passed from mouth to mouth. After that, little was done before Henrietta Drake Brockman was drawn to the story in 1963 and published a book called *Voyage to*

---

<sup>69</sup> Dash, M. (2002) *Batavia's Graveyard*, Orion Books, London p.286.

*Disaster*.<sup>70</sup> This was followed three years later by the book that caught my attention (*Islands of Angry Ghosts*).<sup>71</sup>

There is, however, little light shed on the characters of Jeronimus or Lucretia. Jeronimus was able to exercise an extraordinary degree of control over people and events on the island, so we can deduce he had some charm, manipulative skills or was able to terrify people for some reason.

### **Story—the history that was used**

The outline of events in the play is roughly consistent with the record: Jeronimus was involved in a heretical sect with the painter Torrentius van der Beck. In a period of Calvinist conformity they indulged themselves to the point where they attracted scandal. Jeronimus had little choice but to leave Holland. At the time, a fleet of seven ships was being readied to sail to the Dutch trading port of Batavia in Indonesia. The leading ship of the fleet was also called “Batavia”. Jeronimus signed on as ‘Under-merchant’, a senior bureaucratic position in the Dutch East India Company. At the time the Company was full of people escaping their pasts. But it was a rigorously run and ruthless organization which put its profit above all. The twin backgrounds to the story are Calvinism and the Dutch East India Company. The ship did put in at the Cape of Good Hope. There had been tensions between the Captain and Commander Pelseart before this. The Captain did raise the ire of the commander by disobeying him and becoming drunk and abusive in Capetown. Lucretia was in fact raped during the voyage. There was a conspiracy to take the ship, which was pre-empted by the shipwreck. These events were all used in Act One of the play.

---

<sup>70</sup>Drake-Brockman, H. (1963/1995) *Voyage to Disaster*, University of WA Press, Nedlands.

<sup>71</sup>Edwards, H. (1966/1979) Op Cit.

Beyond the shipwreck, I have made looser use of real incidents. We know that Jeronimus was largely responsible for the reign of terror which followed. Pelseart did set off for Batavia in a small boat with the captain and some survivors. The voyage is said to be one of the triumphs of survival in a small boat (thanks to the captain's skills), rivalled only by Bligh's survival after he was set adrift.

### **The history left out**

In the second act, I had to simplify events because the record shows people on three islands—too many for the stage. On the main island was Jeronimus with the majority of survivors. The soldiers who made it ashore camped on a second island. A few of the people made it to a third island. Word leaked back to the soldiers of events on the main island. Jeronimus and his gang made several attempts to negotiate with the soldiers, followed by two attacks on the soldiers. The second of these was a disaster, leading to the capture of Jeronimus, who was put in a deep pit and kept there until Pelseart returned. Pelseart held a kangaroo court on his return, executed as many as he thought appropriate, recovered what goods he could, and returned to Batavia. He also put two minor offenders ashore on the mainland (where there was a freshwater stream) with a gun and tools and suggested they make themselves known to the natives. We know nothing more of them.

### **Management of historical representations**

The effective telling of the story demanded that I manage the available history in order to achieve my ends (to convince, to entertain, and to critique). The story had to be clear, engaging and satisfying. I decided that dealing with three different groups of

people in three locations with a cast of five<sup>72</sup> would have been too complex, and the story too diffuse.

The story I was telling in Act Two was the growing domination of Jeronimus and the consequent slaughter of many of the others, and the progress and arrival in Batavia of the boat, followed by the return of Pelseart to salvage what he could and punish the offenders. The story on stage also required that the main characters be continued through Act Two. In Act One, the key characters had been Jeronimus, the Captain, Pelseart, Zwaantie (Lucretia's maid) and Lucretia. With Act Two, I settled on two locations as manageable (Jeronimus' island, and the boat travelling north). I placed Pelseart and the Captain with Zwaantie on the boat, and Jeronimus and Lucretia on the island. I also needed extra characters for the re-telling of the complex events on the island. I settled on a Predikant (a Calvinist preacher) as a good offset for the values I'd given Jeronimus (there had been one on the island) and I gave Jeronimus two cronies, Alert Jansz and Jacob Pietersz. Jansz was a boatswain who had been one of the conspirators aboard ship and a fairly hardened petty criminal, and Pietersz was a young, not very bright cadet soldier.

In summary, the play *Batavia* departs from recorded history in three significant ways: there were times I had to fill out the available record; times when I changed the record for dramatic effect; and there are inventions which have no relation to history.

Filling out the record is common for any writer of historical fiction. The action of Act Two is based on reported incidents. For example, the killing of the boys (Scene 26) is true. We also have on record that Jeronimus had some children killed while he entertained their parents to dinner. In my version, the Predikant and his wife are in

---

<sup>72</sup> I settled early on a maximum cast of five actors, in order to make it economically feasible to stage.

Jeronimus' tent when Jeronimus calls to Jansz 'Bring in the children'. Jansz throws their heads into the tent in sacks.

I also used several scenes with an inquisitor in Batavia. This allowed me to show developments as seen from Java, show how the Predikant was received, and keep the audience up to date with that part of the plot. The inquisitor's speeches are an accurate reflection of the East India Company's view of events. So this device both suited my dramatic purpose and accurately retold the history.

The character traits of Jeronimus, Lucretia, and the Predikant are largely my invention. So too the relationships between Pietersz, Jansz, the Predikant and Jeronimus. Was Jeronimus a fervent opposer of the ideas of Calvinism or just a bloodthirsty thief, seer or psychopath? I don't know. My purpose was to make dramatic sense of the events as we know them.

There were also times when I had to change the known history for dramatic effect. Showing a catalogue of horrors ending with the capture and execution of Jeronimus would have made a weak (predictable) second act. I therefore decided that Lucretia should be the survivor of the story, and that she should have a relationship with Jeronimus. As far as we can tell from the historical records, Lucretia was the only one who lived to an old age, but she was not involved with Jeronimus and the reasons for her survival can only be guessed. By putting the two together I had an ongoing relationship, a new source of tension and someone in whom the audience could invest some sympathy. I had a survivor. I also took the idea of a pit (used in reality by the soldiers) and placed the Predikant in it. This allowed Jeronimus to demonstrate his dominance, his contempt and his cruelty. These pragmatic decisions were based on the history, but were not historically accurate.

There are also inventions in the play which have no connection with the known history. The character of Zwaantie is one. She was invented for the story. This was done for two reasons: to put an extra female in the cast (there had been a dozen or so women on the ship with several hundred men) and to create more links between the characters, thus allowing extra possibilities for drama. In Act Two, I invented the device of the pole, on which strips of cloth are tied. It has no counterpart in history. This resulted from responses to early versions of Act Two, where readers said they found the rush of events confusing. A time frame of several months is telescoped into the events of the act. Incidents happen, characters change, and the situation develops rapidly. I felt the confusion was coming from there being not enough sense of time passing between scenes. In Act One I use the device of the calling of the watch to signal the progress of the ship. I needed a similar device, appropriate to the island for the same purpose in Act Two. I wanted a visual, not a spoken one, and my first thought was some way to show them keeping track of passing days. This was a little too obvious, but we tried a workshop with actors to see what could be made to work. It became clear that placing a pole outside Jeronimus' tent and having key characters fill in time by tying bits of rag to it worked. The key to its success, however, was not explaining to the audience (or, as it happened, to the actors) what it was about. Most felt it was a body count. It served the purpose of showing the passing of time. It also had the bonus of buying a little time between scenes for actors to change character for the next scene. This purely pragmatic development had no counterpart in the history but is not inconsistent with it.

### ***Translations and Batavia***

During the development process for the play, I went through similar changes of focus as Friel. When I first discovered Torrentius the painter, I went off at a tangent, researching him and his sect in great detail, wondering whether here might be the better subject. I was wary of making Jeronimus the centre of the play. He was too off-putting for an audience. So I re-read *Richard III*. I looked at the portrayals of de Sade (by Peter Weiss and Christopher Hampton). I looked for “Hitler” plays. But it was Jeronimus’ story. There was no escaping it.

I part company with Brian Friel when it comes to the “truth” of the history we deal with. My interest is not in whether the colour of the uniform is right, or whether they carried muskets that year (my survivors had some muskets but I guessed that they were useless because of rust). My concern is with the overall thrust of events, not the minutiae of the military historian. I leave it to the historians to argue about which way a kerchief was tied. I am more interested in the swirling soup of Calvinism, Capitalism and survival.

It was the writing of the play *Batavia* that caused me to examine these issues of truth and accuracy, and the writing of the play itself became an exploration of them. It led me to the conclusion that pragmatism can often be the final arbiter of the “truth” in a work, although “truth” and accuracy of detail are not the same thing. *Batavia* is a case study in how accuracy can be combined with (what I hope is) effective in a pragmatic way.

Truth has long been an issue for writers, although attitudes and responses to the issues have changed. Brian Friel is an advocate of accurate detail, George Steiner of values and Michael Frayn of effectiveness. From a pragmatist’s point of view, Shaw

probably steered the least dangerous course by claiming his work as accurate invention.

All representation, all narratives, all characterisation involve some degree of falsehood. But an author who attempts to guide the moral response of the modern audience risks losing them. Any “stacking of the moral deck”, any blatant misrepresentation, risks undermining audience interest. This is a pragmatic, not a moral argument, about the use of history.

Regardless of whether a character being represented is a “good” or a “bad” human being, on stage they must be presented in a way that makes them comprehensible to the audience. As Michael Frayn said, the character must be free to present the best possible case for him/herself. In this, Hitler is no different from Jeronimus in *Batavia*.

Where the history is recent or contemporary, there will be more vested interests in the representation. So the more recent the events, the more accurate the history must be in order to be convincing. Here the Holocaust differs from the events in *Batavia*.

Where there is a cultural defensiveness about non-authentic authors, a pragmatic writer would do well to avoid authorial statements or claims, for when authorial statements are made about authenticity, greater scrutiny follows—whether it be Helen Darville/Demidenko or Brian Friel.

The handling of events in *Batavia* is less likely to cause controversy than the representation of Adolf Hitler, for I have the luxury of a subject that is neither recent nor well documented. This is a pragmatic response to the issue. I make no claims for historical accuracy beyond those outlined here. The story I tell is true, if not necessarily accurate. However my observation that a pragmatic playwright is best served by avoiding authorial comment is one I have singularly failed to follow in the writing of this exegesis.



## Works Consulted

- Albert, S. P. 2002. From Murray's Mother-in-Law to Major Barbara: The Outside Story. *SHAW The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, 22, 19-65. (accessed July 23 2004, from Muse database).
- Barker, C. 1996. *Forms of Heaven: Three Plays*. London: HarperCollins.
- Barker, H. 1997. *Arguments for a Theatre*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Barker, H. 1990. *Collected plays*. London: J. Calder.
- Booth, W. C. 1988. *The Company We Keep: an Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boyes, R. 2004. Film of Hitler's End Stuns Germans. *The Weekend Australian*, September 18-19, 17.
- Brenton, H. 1994. *Plays: One*. London: Methuen Drama.
- Brenton, H. 1982. *Hitler Dances*. London: Methuen.
- Cahoone, L. E. 2003. *From Modernism to Postmodernism*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Carr, E. H. 1964. *What is History?* Harmondsworth: Pelican.
- Carter, F. 1979. *The Education of Little Tree*. London: Futura.
- Cixous, H. 1997. Theater, History, Ethics: An Interview with H el ene Cixous on The Perjured City, or the Awakening of the Furies. *New Literary History*, 28, 425-456. (accessed July 7 2004, from Muse database).
- Clark, B. H, Ed 1970. *European Theories of the Drama*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Coleman, P. 2000. *Obscenity, Blasphemy, Sedition. The Rise and Fall of Censorship in Australia*. Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove.
- Dann, G. E. 1999. Davidson's Theory of Truth and Its Implications for Rorty's Pragmatism. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 53 (2), 458-461. (accessed September 27 2004, from ProQuest: Arts database).
- Dash, M. 2002. *Batavia's Graveyard*. London: Orion Books.
- Defoe, D. ed. John S. Keltie. 1870. *The Works of Daniel Defoe*. Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo.
- Drake-Brockman, H. 1963. *Voyage of Disaster*. Nedlands: University of WA Press.

- Dukore, B. F, Ed 1974. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Edwards, H. 1966. *Islands of Angry Ghosts*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Embodied Memory: The Theatre of George Tabori*. 2004.  
<http://www.uiowa.edu/uiowapress/feiemem.htm> (accessed September 13 2004).
- Feyerabend, P. 1978. *Science in a Free Society*. London: NLB.
- Finkelstein, N. G. 2000. *The Holocaust Industry*. New York: Verso.
- Frayn, M. 2004. *Copenhagen—Program*. Sydney: Sydney Theatre Company.
- Friel, B. and Murray, C. 1999. *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, Interviews, 1964-1999*. London: Faber.
- Goethe-Institut, 2004. *George Tabori*.  
[http://www.goethe.de/kug/kue/the/thm/en120587\\_pr.htm](http://www.goethe.de/kug/kue/the/thm/en120587_pr.htm) (accessed September 13 2004).
- Goldsworthy, P. 1996. The Dewogging of Helen Demidenko. *Voices*, 6 (2), 113-119.
- Hampton, C. 1988. *Quills*. London: Faber.
- Hampton, C. and Steiner, G. 1983. *George Steiner's The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* London: Faber.
- Jenkins, K. 2001. *On "What is History?"* London: Routledge.
- Khouri, N. 2004. *Forbidden Love*. Sydney: Random House.
- Knox, M. and Overington, C. 2004. An Imaginary Life. *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 31 - August 1, 25.
- Krauth, N. 2002. The Preface as Exegesis. *Text*, 6 (1), 1-17. (accessed May 17 2004, from Pandora).
- Machan, T. 1996. Indefatigable Alchemist: Richard Rorty's Radical Pragmatism. *The American Scholar*, 65 (3), 417-425. (accessed October 7 2004, from ProQuest: Arts database).
- Manne, R. 1996. *The Culture of Forgetting*, Melbourne: Text Publishing.
- Maude, U. 2004. Modernism, Narrative and Humanism. *Modernism/Modernity*, 11 (1), 193-196. (accessed September 13 from ProQuest: Arts database).

- Milech, B and Schilo, A.2004. 'Exit Jesus': Relating the Exegesis and Creative/Production Components of a Research Thesis. *Text*, Special Issue No.3, April 2004.  
<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/speciss/issue3/milechschilo.htm> (accessed Nov 17 2004)
- Parker, D. 1994. *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, J. 2000. *Contested Knowledge: a Guide to Critical Theory*. London: Zed Books.
- Pringle, H. 1999. Little Tree Obscures a Great Big Lie. *The Australian*, May 17, 37.
- Ragg, E. P. 2002. Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and Literature*, 26 (2), 369-397. (accessed October 7 2004, from ProQuest: Arts database).
- Raphael, T. 1999. Staging the Real: Breaking the "Naturalist Habit" in the Representation of History. *Theatre Topics*, 9 (2), 127-139. (accessed September 27 2004, from Muse database).
- Reece, G. L. 2001. Religious Faith and Intellectual Responsibility: Richard Rorty and the Public/Private Distinction. *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, 22 (3), 206-221. (accessed October 3 2004 from ProQuest: Arts database).
- Reimer, A. 1996. *The Demidenko Debate*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Roach, J. R. 2001. Responses to "Choices Made and Unmade". *Theater*, 31 (2), 96-105. (accessed September 14 2004 from Muse database).
- Rorty, R. 1991. *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R., Schneewind, J.B., Skinner, Quentin. 1984. *Philosophy in History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Russell, B. 1946. *History of Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- Ruthven, K. K. 2001. *Faking Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Samuel, R. and Thompson, P. 1990. *The Myths We Live By*. London: Routledge.
- Savran, D. 2001. Choices Made and Unmade. *Theater*, 3 (2), 89-95. (accessed September 14 2004 from Muse database).
- Shakespeare, W. 1963. *Antony and Cleopatra*. New York: NAL.
- Shakespeare, W. 1965. *Henry V*. New York: NAL.

- Shakespeare, W. 1965. *Richard III*. New York: NAL
- Shaw, G. B. 1971. *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw Vol 2*. London: Max Reinhardt.
- Spencer, T. J. B. 1964. *Shakespeare's Plutarch*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Steiner, G. 1984. *George Steiner: A Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Steiner, G. 2001. *Grammars of Creation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tawney, R. H. 1962. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Gloucester: Peter Smith.
- Thorne, J. O. and Collocott, T.C. Eds. 1974. *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*.  
Edinburgh: W & R Chambers.
- Turner, V. 1982. *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*. New York:  
Performing Arts Journal Publications.
- Walder, D. 2004. *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ward, A.W and Waller, A.R. Eds. 1974. *Cambridge History of English Literature Vol  
IX: From Steele and Addison to Pope and Swift*. Cambridge: Cambridge  
University Press.
- Weiss, P. 1968. *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as performed  
by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de  
Sade* . London: J Calder.
- Winright., T. 2000. Solidarity and the Stranger: Themes in the Social Philosophy of  
Richard Rorty. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 53 (3), 718-719. (accessed October  
12 2004 from ProQuest: Arts database).