

Unpacking Castro's Library, or Detours and Return in *The Garden Book*

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a real library . . . is always somewhat impenetrable
Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library"

Near the end of Kafka's largely letter-driven affair with Milena Jesenká he proclaimed that letter writing was an "intercourse with ghosts . . . not only the ghost of the recipient but also with one's own ghost which develops between the lines of the letter one is writing" (229). Brian Castro cites part of this letter as one of his epigraphs to *The Garden Book*, a novel in which the characters, landscape and writing are haunted by, and are in conversation with, ghosts. Kafka continued, and Castro quotes:

Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait. Written kisses don't reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts. It is on this ample nourishment that they multiply so enormously. Humanity senses this and fights against it and in order to eliminate as far as possible the ghostly element between people and to create a natural communication, the peace of souls, it has invented the railway, the motor car, the aeroplane. But it's no longer any good, these are evidently inventions being made at the moment of crashing. The opposing side is so much calmer and stronger; after the postal service it has invented the telegraph, the telephone, the radiograph. The ghosts won't starve, but we will perish.

Letter writing, like the writing of a novel, takes place before an absent addressee. It can, therefore, be seen as an act of faith that gestures towards, or relies upon, some future moment when, by virtue of being read, the text will come into existence. Kafka, who persisted in writing letters as a means of communication, here outlines his lack of faith in the ability of writing to engender or sustain intimacy: the "written kisses don't reach their destination". Not only is the intended recipient absent, the writer too is dispersed by the act of writing, "one's own ghost . . . develops between the lines of the letter one is writing". There are, ultimately, only words; words sent out into the world as a "sort of detour via the other and then returned back to a dead sender" (Castro, "Auto/Biography" 118).

The Garden Book offers a collection of fragmentary detours via eighteenth-century Chinese poetry, Proust, Heidegger, Benjamin, Virgil, Ovid, T.S. Eliot and Baudelaire (to mention a few),¹ in its quest to examine simultaneously a collective literary and social consciousness, and to explore the relationship between writing, history, memory and death. I want to pursue some of these detours because, as Castro writes: “You have to know the detours; [have to know] that the whole idea of any story, like existence itself, is *beside the point*” (7). It is in following these seductively incomplete detours, in appreciating how other texts and writers ghost Castro’s writing, that we become true readers and writers of this text.

At the Sydney launch of this novel Castro, as he mused on the recent decision by commercial publishers to send sample chapters from new books to mobile phones and the need, suggested by the managing director of Harper Collins, to get “authors to write in a truncated way”, described the plot of *The Garden Book* thus: “Woman marries abusive man; meets dashing aviator; things happen”. That woman is Swan Hay (born Shuang He), an Australian/Chinese farmwife and poet. The motherless Swan, raised lovingly in the Dandenong Ranges by her father Baba, the University of Melbourne’s first Chinese Doctor of Philosophy in Latin, marries Darcy Damon, an autodidact, a collector of books and a bigamous Australian bully. The dashing aviator is Jasper A. Zenlin, a wealthy American architect, translator and spy who, with Swan, fathers the primary narrator: a physically-deformed collector of rare books and historical paraphernalia, who tells us his name is “Norman Shih. No-man. Shhhh” (253).

Norman has chosen to be a collector because “collecting”, he tells us, “is a form of knowledge which allows a closer representation of the dead than history or narrative” (7). He understands that “the dead are gypsies”, that they are still active, and that they leave us signs: “Signs which make us what we are” (7). The novel begins and ends with Norman “hunting phantoms”, sifting through “layers and older layers” (1) in search of clues to past lives. Norman seeks not only to unearth the lives of Swan, Baba, Jasper and Darcy, but also to resurrect these characters, to give them voice. He asks us, at times, to listen to what they have to say, and at other times he steps into their silence to narrate events and emotions for us. At another level we have Castro inviting the ghosts of long-dead writers to speak through, and with, his text. The result of this double employment of the *prosopopoeic* trope—a “fictional address from and to the dead” (“Auto/biography” 119)—is a multi-layered narrative of voices, a kind of phantasmagoria. In typical Castro fashion, these conversations with the

dead are at once a playful and a very serious activity. As Jacques Derrida notes:

Conjuration is anxiety from the moment it calls upon the dead to invent the quick and to enliven the new, to summon the presence of what is not yet there. This anxiety in the face of the ghost is properly revolutionary. If death weighs on the living brain of the living, and still more on the brains of revolutionaries, it must then have some spectral density. To weigh is also to charge, tax, impose, indebt, accuse, assign, enjoin. And the more life there is, the graver the specter of the other becomes, the heavier its imposition. And the more the living have to answer to it. To answer for the dead, to respond to the dead. To correspond and have it out with obsessive haunting, in the absence of any certainty or symmetry. Nothing is more serious and more true, nothing is more exact than this phantasmagoria. (*Specters* 108)

I want to outline a few of the ways in which Castro answers for and responds to the dead by focusing on the figure of Swan because, as Norman tells us, Swan “is the armature of my search” (314).

A multitude of texts haunts *The Garden Book*. Castro consciously draws our attention to his intertextual allusions because he wants us to hear the insistent return of other voices: “These repetitions and recurrences place us in a universe where there are no longer original models, but images and doubles with a talent for appearing and disappearing” (315). The novel most obviously glances towards the painters and writers who once lived in the Dandenong Ranges: Norah Gurdon, William Dargie, Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Louis Esson, Vance and Nettie Palmer, C.J. Dennis, Jeannie Gunn and Ivan Southall. Castro admits to writing *The Garden Book* as part of a challenge to prove he could write a “gum leaf novel” (Sydney Launch). In a significant departure from his earlier writing, there is at times an almost concrete writing, and celebration, of place in this novel. There is also a concern about how modernity and progress destroy nature and potentially silence the resident ghosts, in this instance the indigenous dead. The intertextual conversations, however, ensure that the narrative is both a scathing indictment on Australia’s xenophobic history and, more broadly, a literary meditation on writing, translation, inheritance, haunting and memory.

So we have Darcy “Remembering things past” (64) and thinking about “Swan’s way. About the straightness of her posture, the way she carried herself” (76). As readers we can skate over these humorous quips, or we can read with a heightened sensitivity to issues relating to obsessional or addictive love, to desire, loss, the sensuous nature of memory and the

relationship between memory and time. We remember the ache of the young Proustian protagonist for the night-time kisses of his mother, a remembrance that makes Norman's abandonment, and consequent writing of his mother, all the more poignant. Norman may appear to be more detached than Proust's narrator but with that narrator in mind we appreciate more fully that Norman's research masks an intensity of memory and desire for the mother undiminished by time and maturity. As in Proust, the past is experienced dynamically as the sensual present. Like Proust, Castro writes in a musical language suffused with lyricism and bodily pain, a language which allows his characters, particularly Swan, to exist outside of time: Swan "disliked the preoccupation of others with real time . . . She found the collapse into time shameful" (91). She goes for long walks with Jasper "during which she read him poems in Chinese, translated them to him and he in turn translated them again, and in this way they spoke to each other out of time, with everything just beneath the surface—great emotions, great disasters, great anachronisms" (208).

Baudelaire, the poet of excess who (like Swan) explored the world of alcohol, opium and sexual experimentation, the poet who (like Castro) was preoccupied with the relationship between Eros and Death, the poet who, in remembering his passion for his deceased mother, "conceived once again *a desire for death*" (*Selected Letters* 169), punctuates the manuscript repeatedly. At university Swan is "immersed" (90) in Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Aupick, the French publisher of her poems, is named after Baudelaire's father-in-law; a footnote informs us that we can find the facsimiles and details of the correspondence between Swan and Jasper in a volume titled *The Conquest of Solitude* (237). Beyond these games, however, Swan can be read as the once-caged, stumbling swan of Baudelaire's poem, whose white feathers become soiled with filth as she drags herself around the modernised Parisian landscape:

. . . I saw

a swan that had broken out of its cage,
webbed feet clumsy on the cobblestones,
white feathers dragging in the uneven ruts,
and obstinately pecking at drains,

drenching its enormous wings in the filth
as if in its own lovely lake, crying
'Where is the thunder, when will it rain?' . . .

that straining neck and that voracious beak,
as if the swan were castigating God!

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One image, near the Louvre, will not dissolve:
 I think of that great swan in its torment,
 silly, like all exiles, and sublime,
 endlessly longing . . . And again I think
 of you, Andromache, dragged off
 to be the booty of Achilles' son,
 Hector's widow now the wife of Helenus,
 crouching blindly over an empty grave! (*Les Fleurs du Mal* 90-91)

We too see Swan in all her torment, powerless against her fate, exiled from love, companionship, her buried daughter and living son, exiled ultimately from herself. We hear repeatedly that Swan is “unhoused” (117, 312) and, while “unhousedness” and exile are celebrated in Castro’s *oeuvre* as being necessary for writing, Swan’s exile and isolation in this racist, suspicious, patriarchal environment are simply destructive. She is the creative spirit crushed, the vilified Chinese outcast and imprisoned in a country trying to “write itself under the rubric of race” (309). If we align Swan with Andromache, her suffering and sacrifice take on an epic dimension. On a lesser note, as Baudelaire’s swan, she can never seriously entertain the option of fleeing her imprisonment to join Jasper in Paris. For Swan there can be no happy ending: she must remain “like all exiles . . . endlessly longing”.

Baudelaire’s poem also calls to mind Norman and the nature of his search:

I think of orphans withering like flowers;
 of those who lose what never can be found
 again—never! (*Les Fleurs du Mal* 91)

And that loss is palpable throughout the text. While for most of the narrative Norman resurrects for us a passionate, creative Swan, he admits finally: “I remember very little of my mother” (309). He has only a “blurred image of an attractive woman” and his “earliest memories . . . are neither memories nor imagined experiences but images rooted in the unconscious which can only be brought to light in a dream or when one is very ill with fever” (308-9). He asks: “Did she really exist?” (310).

Significantly, Darcy comes across a “tiny volume of poems by the eighteenth-century Chinese poet He Shuanqing” (67). That is all we are told. Did He Shuanqing exist? If so, who was she? Is this volume relevant to Castro’s narrative? The similarity of the poet’s name to Swan’s—Shuang He—sends the reader off on yet another detour. In pursuing this trace we discover a substantial body of contemporary scholarship dedicated to the life and poetry of He Shuangqing, an eighteenth-century farmwife who wrote poetry

in pollen on leaves. In Elsie Choy's study, *Leaves of Prayer* (1993), we find an effusive, romantic rendering of the "tragic" life that befell the "chaste", beautiful, gifted He Shuangqing, married at eighteen to a brutish, illiterate farmer and dead at aged twenty-two. Choy celebrates the way in which He Shuangqing transformed her suffering into poetry and documents how this poet came to be an important figure in Chinese literature. She is convinced that He Shuangqing was a real person. Choy also celebrates the "sensitive and compassionate" scholar and poet, Shi Zhenlin,² (whose existence is not under question), who befriended He Shuangqing and transcribed her twenty-one poems into his notebook, later published as *Xiqing sanji* (1738).³ Choy rightly claims that without Shi we would never have known of He Shuangqing or her poetry.

Like Castro's character, Jasper Zenlin, however, Shi has also been accused by some critics as being a fabricator, of constructing a fictional poor woman poet for his own literary purposes. In *Banished Immortal* (2001) Paul Ropp details his initial (naïve) fascination with He Shuangqing's life and poetry, and tells how he came, through discussions with other scholars of Chinese literature, to question her very existence. And here we are on familiar Castro territory: ghost writers, writers who may or may not be ghosts. The jury is still out and probably always will be in the matter of He Shuangqing's existence but it is not her existence or otherwise that matters. We have the poetry. And *The Garden Book* now joins the literary conversation about her life, her poetry, and about conditions in China for peasant women in the eighteenth century.

Both He Shuangqing and Swan wrote their poetry on leaves. The use of leaves by Chinese poets is not without precedent.⁴ Choy suggests that He Shuangqing's choice of pollen and leaves demonstrates her "unconventional . . . creative, resourceful" (20) nature. Swan's use of leaves, and her insertion of them into other texts, makes her poetry literally intertextual. She offers Jasper one explanation, albeit obliquely, for her choice of material: "*Schopenhauer . . . wrote that to read (pages in order) is to live; to leaf (at random) is to dream. Leafing is experiencing death—a dispersal of oneself*" (242). While we are pleased for Norman's sake that Jasper appropriated, translated and arranged for the publication of Swan's poems, "her swan songs" (234), Swan herself wanted "to have written 'nothing' . . . She didn't want there to have been a 'story' about her" (241-42).

Interestingly, Choy suggests that He Shuangqing chose to write in pollen, rather than ink, because she wanted to leave nothing of herself or her writing behind. Thanks to scholarship the poetry has survived and continues

to be read. Indeed as Ropp suggests: “Now that Shuangqing’s origins are being questioned as never before, her poems and song lyrics are probably better known today than at any time in the twentieth century. Her place as a Chinese cultural icon is secure” (239). It would seem that reading elsewhere, pursuing detours as a means of returning to the present, is an effective means of preserving art against the potentially destructive forces of modernity. In keeping with these ideas of intertextuality, and the invitation for readers to read elsewhere, I want to add another leaf to this text, or another voice to this textual conversation, via a poem by Rosemary Dobson:

“Translation Under the Trees”⁵

Wine to drink at a plank table,
Poems blowing about,
Some we stalk like Li Po and the moon in the stream,
Some we put under the carafe.

Pollen brushed from the table
Flies off to make forests
In faraway countries;
May change a landscape.

Poems blow away like pollen,
Find distant destinations,
Can see new songs
In another language. (41)

Here we see the potential of writing, in this instance poetry, to scatter like pollen to distant places and to create new writing, new meanings. It does not matter whether Castro is familiar with Dobson’s poem or not. This detour is the kind of strategy his writing celebrates, writing which invites, however ambiguously, further reading. As Norman hints: “The leaf, still barely holding together, would then become another detour” (142).

Of course, there is another important literary female figure who wrote on leaves: the Sibyl of Cumae. In Virgil’s *Aeneid* the Sibyl, a virgin priestess, foretells the future by writing prophecies on oak leaves:

After she has written her prophecies on these leaves she seals them all up in her cave where they stay in their appointed order. But the leaves are so light that . . . the slightest breath of wind dislodges them. The draught from the door throws them into confusion and the priestess never makes it her concern to catch them as they flutter round her rocky cave and put them back in order or join up the prophecies.
(70)

In the *Aeneid* we have yet another story of (impossible) love, desire, loss, betrayal, abandonment and war. If we read the *Aeneid* in conversation with

Castro's text we are returned to Andromache's grief and contemplate once more the meaning and experience of exile. We connect the passionate, abandoned Dido engulfed by her funeral pyre with the isolated, abandoned Swan rushing confusedly into the fire that consumes her. In *The Garden Book* Swan operates as the "armature" of Norman's search among the ghosts of the past. In uncovering her he also recovers his father, Jasper. In the *Aeneid* the Sibyl is Aeneas' guide through the world of the dead. It is only through her intervention that Aeneas is permitted to look once more on the shade of his father.

The rhizomatic literary appearances of the Sibyl can lead us on other adventurous detours before we return to Swan. The Sibyl reappears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where she relates her failed attempt to outwit Apollo and now, seven hundred years old with three hundred years of life to go, anticipates her future where she will "shrivel to almost nothing . . . till no eye can see me, / And I am known by voice alone" (343). Like Swan she is abandoned to her fate, taunted by the ignorant and ultimately longs for death. The Sibyl's voice is resurrected in the revised epigraph to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", a poem that, like *The Garden Book*, not only rails against the destructive aspects of modernity, but is also dense with literary allusions and structured on memory and desire. Eliot's reader must explore the meaning and symbols buried in his poem in order to understand the grotesque and painful irony of the Sibyl's condition. In pitting the wise Sibyl (who is structurally ignored in the poem) against the false prophetess Mme Sosostriis, Eliot satirises the ignorant and unfeeling nature of modern society. His double time frame of past and present, coupled with his use of literary allusion, operates in a manner similar to Castro's narrative to suggest not only that wisdom can be learned from the past if we are open to hearing and seeing it but also that the present is renewed from the voices of the past.

On another level Swan is yet another manifestation of the absent woman who haunts all of Castro's writing. Significantly, however, she is not just any woman: she is the absent mother. While Jasper comes to feel "no pressure for her presence" (239), describing her variously as "a reified text" (239), "a silent movie" (244) and "the inaccessible woman . . . the blank page of impossible desire" (102), and while Norman insists "The notion of Mother is already an absence, a dispersal of itself in an eternal detour and return" (314), the lyric intensity of Castro's writing of Swan ensures that the reader feels something quite different. In both this text and *Shanghai Dancing*, Castro uses the prosopopoeic trope to write the absent mother, but whereas in the earlier novel she is written largely through absence and silence,⁶ in *The Garden*

Book the writing powerfully and relentlessly probes the intimate details of Swan's life: her thoughts, her desires and her destruction. In the writing of Swan, Castro encourages the reader to experience empathically how it might have felt to be an addictive, creative, depressive Chinese woman in this xenophobic country between the Wars. The writing of Swan, in contrast to Kafka's despair of letter-writing, sustains a compelling intimacy that makes us care.

In *The Garden Book* Swan features, as the figure of the mother in Nietzsche's corpus features, as "the ultimate addressee in the phantasm" (Derrida, *The Ear of the Other* 53). Like Nietzsche, Castro "is writing for those who have gone before and those who are yet to live" (*The Ear* 53). After Norman has mounted the public exhibition which renews interest in Jasper's poetry (poetry appropriated from Swan), he returns home to unpack and arrange his library "whereupon riffling through the diary . . . a pressed leaf falls out . . . thus marking the spot of time on the road which can never lead us back, where ghosts which have broken loose are now wandering" (315). In that fragmentary leaf, and in the leaves of Castro's text, the ghosts of the past are welcomed back, not as *revenants* but as *arrivants*.⁷ They have something to tell us about our past, our present *and* our future.

Through the return of Swan, and of Baba, *The Garden Book* offers a cautionary tale about the value of diversity and the destructive forces of conformity and racism operating in Australia both in the past and now. Castro wants his readers to remember and reconsider the cultural and social history of an Australia in the grips of the White Australia Policy. "This book", he has stated:

in a very Benjaminian sense, is about collecting . . . not only leaves, but the pine cones, the spiky seeds of our subconscious history . . . collecting as a form of practical memory which rouses us to assembly. The collective memory of those who experienced a particular epoch and who suffered, however ambiguously, the errors of its time, cannot be denied. (Sydney Launch)

It is largely through Baba, a "third generation Australian" whose "grandfather came from South China" (85), that we come to comprehend and feel the devastating consequences of racism. Despite his Ph.D in Latin from the University of Melbourne, Baba's English is deemed to be "suspect". He is denied his position as teacher, denied "the right to be naturalised . . . the right to own property" (85) and, crucially, he is denied the opportunity to travel freely, to detour and return: "*They have passed a law. Former domiciles are the only category for Chinese admissions to Australia. Those who leave the country have*

to possess re-entry permits issued prior to 1905" (87). We recognise disturbing similarities between Australia's migration policies then and now. Baba states: "This country will never outrun its history . . . Not while it hangs onto symbols and icons; people are united by other things; hospitality, for example. You'd have to be blind not to see that. The nation was shrinking through simplification; it was hemming them in, hunting them down. It made them all skinny" (154).

Castro's writing has always engaged obliquely with ethical concerns but there is a sense in these direct addresses from Baba, and the harassment of Swan, that the narrative, while remaining true to more abstract questions of writing, memory, desire and death, wants us to think deeply and urgently about the consequences of the politics of fear currently operating in Australia. Castro cautions: "As we all learned from the story of the Garden of Eden, Utopian happiness amongst the trees and ferns will always prove illusory. And it is only when we are driven from the Garden that we mourn and appreciate its virtues" (Sydney Launch).

And here we are returned to Castro's first epigraph, taken from W.H. Auden's "For the Time Being":

*O where is the garden of Being that is only known in Existence
As the command to be never there, the sentence by which
Alephs of throbbing fact have been banished into position,
The clock that dismisses the moment into the turbine of time?*

Auden's melancholic poem, set in the bleak post-Christmas period of war-torn Britain, is dedicated to his mother who died in 1941. Castro's choice of these four lines as his epigraph demonstrates that his interest lies not in the poem's theological exploration of the seemingly paradoxical incarnation—the infinite in the finite, eternity in time—but rather in the relationship between language, knowledge and history. In this passage Auden suggests that we only know about the "garden of Being" because we are denied it. The narrative of the Garden was written in retrospect, during exile, as an allegory to explain history and God. The consequence of our banishment is mortality, existence in a temporal world. To be expelled from the Garden is to be thrown into history. There can be no return and there is only language, inadequate language, to express our sense of loss.⁸ Norman knows how difficult it is to articulate that loss: "I have recorded swarms of suffering. I have heard the cries of those in agony, have seen their faces, their burning in the forks of trees" (315). He also appreciates that as a being in the world he must strive always to close, or at least understand more fully, the gap he perceives between words and experience. But as Professor Henry,

Swan's university lecturer, explained earlier to her, the project to "uncover a primordial, perhaps 'perverse' intercourse between word and thing" could only happen "when God has left the building" (91).

In the closing moments of *The Garden Book* Norman follows God "outside" where, he assures the reader, he will continue to examine "layers and layers of what there is still to be discovered" in his garden of language "where all is accident" (316). Because he is both a true collector, in the Benjaminian sense, and a scholar he understands, as Castro and Derrida understand, that much of that discovery will come from responding to, and speaking with, the ghosts of the past:

If he loves justice at least, the "scholar" of the future, the "intellectual" of tomorrow should learn it from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other of oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (Derrida, *Specters* 176)

The Garden Book offers us as readers the opportunity to enter into dialogue with a number of ghosts in the hope that in talking with them we will grow bold imaginatively and learn how to live justly.

NOTES

- ¹ In her keynote address at ASAL 2006 Jennifer Rutherford offered a reading of *The Garden Book* in conversation with Lacanian psychoanalysis and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The paper is to be published in *Heat*.
- ² Later in the narrative we are told that Norman, having decided Jasper was his father, changes his name to "Shih Zenlin, after a noted scholar and poet in eighteenth century China" (310).
- ³ According to Choy, Shi acted "all the time as a big brother or confidant [*sic*], listening to, and sharing, the inner thoughts of a young woman caught in the net of tragedy" (19).
- ⁴ Buddhist sutras were at one time written on palm leaves.
- ⁵ This poem is the seventh poem in a series of twelve poems, "The Continuance of Poetry", written in memory of David Campbell.
- ⁶ Like the typhoon, which operates as one of the metaphors for the structure of *Shanghai Dancing*, the mother's death sits in silence, "a dead calm at the centre" (63) of the narrative.
- ⁷ As Derrida has noted: "a *revenant* is always called upon to come and to come back, the thinking of the specter, contrary to what good sense leads us to believe, signals toward the future. It is a thinking of the past, a legacy that

can come only from that which has not yet arrived—from the *arrivant* itself” (*Specters* 196).

- ⁸ Auden’s aleph is the scriptural angel with the flaming sword who stands guard to prevent us ever returning to the Garden of Eden. Castro’s aleph is Swan: “She was the Aleph in the alphabet. A letter no one knew how to pronounce anymore” (164). We could always follow another detour knowing that the Aleph is the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

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