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史 CONTENTS

- 1** Okakura Tenshin and Aesthetic Nationalism
John Clark
- 39** Christian Modernity in Missionary Discourse From Korea 1905–10
Hyae-weol Choi
- 69** Contested Objectivities: Ikeuchi Hiroshi, Kim Sanggi and the Tradition of Oriental History (*Tōyō-Shigaku*) in Japan and Korea
Remco E. Breuker
- 107** In Search of Smokers: A Study of Canton Opium Smokers in the 1930s
Xavier Paulès
- 129** Eating Bitterness: Du Yuesheng and Guomindang Politics in Shanghai, 1945–49
Brian G. Martin
- 153** The Bent Hairpin of Unreason: Brian Castro and Auto/Biography
Brian Moloughbney

Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover illustration Members of the Korean History Compilation Association having a picnic on a Chosŏn 朝鮮 royal tomb (Archives National Institute of Korean History)

Errata In the previous issue of *East Asian History* (No.28), the article 'Index of Mongol and Chinese Proper and Geographical Names in the *Sheng-wu Ch'in-Cheng lu* 聖武親征錄' by Paul Pelliot and Louis Hambis, edited by Igor de Rachewiltz, was inadvertently left off the Contents page. The article commenced on p.45.

THE BENT HAIRPIN OF UNREASON: BRIAN CASTRO & AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

 Brian Moloughney

They have said that we owe allegiance to Safety, that he is our Red Cross who will provide us with ointment and bandages for our wounds and remove the foreign ideas the glass beads of fantasy the bent hairpins of unreason embedded in our minds.¹

On the eve of the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, Brian Castro reflected on his departure from the city many years before:

It is only now that I realise that the rhythm of its nights, the glow of its tiny apartments, the parties, the smells, noises, cosmopolitanism and turmoil of my own family life had always verged on the trauma of business collapses, infidelities, plate-smashing, intrigues, assignations, lies, loud bars and lunatic improvisations of life's grand plan. These were symptoms of family disintegration. It was the reason why they were sending me away. So I would learn to become innocent.²

He was eleven years old and they were sending him to school in Australia. This soon became a form of exile, as declining family fortunes meant no trips home. It would be years before he saw his parents again. Isolation eventually led to accommodation, first with other parachute kids, living off relatives in the school holidays and congregating at Coogee, "the original Chinese surfers." Later it was in the Chinese restaurant community, where many found "refuge from the fears of foreignness."³ But from exile came the writing, his 'Letters to Estrellita.' In recent years, this writing has focused more and more on the family from which he was sent away: "To become innocent in order to inscribe love seemed a naïve undertaking, and I ask myself now, whether or not the separation and all the discipline that went with it was necessary."⁴ This is the bent hairpin of unreason that lies at the heart of Castro's fictional auto/biography *Shanghai Dancing*.⁵

¹ Janet Frame, *Faces in the Water* (London: The Women's Press, 2000 [1961]), p.9. Miriam Lang invited me to test these ideas at one of her conferences, for which I am grateful. Thanks are also due to Duncan Campbell and Mark Seymour who made useful suggestions on how to improve the paper.

² "Arrivals," in Brian Castro, *Looking for Estrellita* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999), pp.15–16 [hereafter *LFE*].

³ *LFE*, pp.44 and 52.

⁴ *LFE*, p.16.

⁵ Brian Castro, *Shanghai Dancing* (Artarmon: Giramondo, 2003) [hereafter *SD*]. For *Shanghai Dancing* Castro won the Vance Palmer Prize and the Christina Stead Prize. The book was also named the NSW Premier's Book of the Year.

⁶ *LFE*, p.27. Further on in this essay Castro argues that the basic premise of the novel is to “make a discovery,” not affirm what is already known; in Frame’s terms, allegiance not to Safety but risk (*LFE*, p.29).

⁷ Wenche Ommundsen has developed a multicultural reading of Castro’s work in a number of essays. See, for instance, “After Castro, Post Multiculturalism?” *Rubicon* 1.2 (1995): 54–61. More recently, Kam Louie has explored both multiculturalism and masculinity in the novels *Birds of Passage* and *After China*: see “Diasporic Chinese Masculinity: Brian Castro and Multicultural Australia,” *Tamkang Review* 35, 1 (2004): 29–56. A.P. Riemer argued the need to read beyond the multicultural in “Castro’s Worlds,” *The Independent Monthly* 26 February 1993, pp.27–28, and Karen Barker has developed many of the issues raised by Riemer in “The artful man: theory and authority in Brian Castro’s fiction,” as well as in the associated interview, “Theory as fireworks: an interview with Brian Castro,” *Australian Literary Studies* 20.3 (May 2002): 231–40 and 241–8.

⁸ *LFE*, pp.105–6. This essay was originally published in Brian Castro, *Writing Asia and Auto/biography: Two Lectures* (Canberra: University College, Australian Defence Force Academy, 1995).

⁹ *LFE*, p.105. See also “Writing Asia,” *Australian Humanities Review* (April 1996), reprinted in *LFE*, pp.157–8; *Birds of Passage* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1983); and *Pomeroy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

¹⁰ Wenche Ommundsen discusses these issues in “Multiculturalism, Identity, Displacement: The Lives of Brian (Castro),” in *From A Distance: Australian Writers and Cultural Displacement*, ed. Wenche Ommundsen and Hazel Rowley (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1996), pp.149–58.

¹¹ *LFE*, pp.116–7 and 119. Earlier in this essay Castro states: “I write precisely because I want to write myself out of an artificially imposed corner. The autobiographical element leads the way because it is the most direct form of transgression. The ‘I’ deliberately invokes multiplicity. Declares itself against authority. Places itself at the juncture of risk.” *LFE*, pp.114–15. *Double-wolf* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991); *After China* (North Sydney:

Like Janet Frame, Castro ignores what ‘they have said.’ His work owes allegiance to *risk*, not safety. It is an endeavour in which he has “relinquished the past as nostalgia for a future possibility which would resist the gratification of immediate understanding and possession.”⁶ Such resistance to the immediate has frustrated some readers, who see in his writing nothing but difficulty. Initial attempts by critics to approach these difficulties through the lens of the multicultural have now been enhanced by a greater appreciation of the rich complexity of Castro’s writing, although this has focused mostly on the influence of European theorists in the shaping of his fictional constructs.⁷ Here I want to concentrate on another aspect of Castro’s work, the way he has used the novel as a form to interrogate many of the issues associated with biography and autobiography, or what he prefers to call auto/biography.

In a public lecture delivered in Canberra in 1995 Castro suggested what he meant by this term:

Against genre classification, the generic function I’ve used most of all is a form which is not only unstable in itself and which has undergone intense transformation, but which has the potential to transgress the furthest. This is the auto/biographical form. The slash is already an implosion of multiple forms dividing the conjunction of prefixes and yet allowing the crossing over between self, life and writing.⁸

This desire to resist genre classification has meant that his novels were read in ways he did not expect. For instance, his first novel, *Birds of Passage*, in part about Chinese migrants to Australia, was mistakenly read as confessional, a disguised autobiography, so in his next novel, *Pomeroy*, he deliberately incorporated aspects of his own family life, only to find that many readers saw these as simply too fantastic to be related to anyone’s personal experience and thus they interpreted the novel simply as a cynical attempt to get into the profitable crime fiction market.⁹ Castro shuns the singular. In all his novels the perspective constantly shifts between characters, while the consciousness of individuals is fractured, conveyed in different registers and different voices.¹⁰ With *Double-Wolf*, Castro inverted the relationship between Freud and his most famous patient, the Wolf-man, so that instead of seeing the Wolf-man through Freud’s eyes, we see Freud through the eyes of the Wolf-man. This was an “attempt to place the slash between auto and biography in the way Freud had done.” In this and subsequent novels, Castro continued to develop this trope to the full: “crossing the borders at will, [...] I became accustomed and confident enough now to write in a form which precluded the assumption of a ‘unified subject.’”¹¹

/Allen & Unwin, 1992); *Drift* (Port Melbourne, Vic: W. Heinemann, 1994); *Stepper* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 1997). And for an example of the critical debate that Castro’s novels can generate, see Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s

/review of *Stepper*, “A Novel for the Nineties,” *Meanjin* 56.2 (1997): 256–62, and the riposte by Aimée Mazza in *Meanjin* 56, 3 and 4 (1997): 743–4.

While Castro has always “been intent on ‘writing’ himself into the fabric of his fiction,” he has become much more explicitly engaged with this endeavour in recent years.¹² In many of the essays in *Looking for Estrellita* he explores the relationship between self, life and writing. It is never entirely clear who Estrellita is. Perhaps she was a cousin, slightly older, the first love of his life, or perhaps she is a fictional embodiment of loss, the ‘little star’ that is made to stand for all those he misses when his parents send him away to school in Australia—perhaps both. It is to Estrellita that he first writes, and in writing develops his vocation. She appears as a character in the early novel *Pomeroy* where she is also a lost love. In a sense, then, ‘Looking for Estrellita’ stands for an engagement with writing, but also the quest for family and the love he was sent away from when he was eleven.¹³ And in some ways, Estrellita’s novel, *Pomeroy*, prefigures Castro’s most recent work, *Shanghai Dancing*, which is a fictional family biography set mainly in Shanghai, Macau and Hong Kong in the period before and after World War Two. It reaches back through imaginative traces to the ports and cities of overlapping empires, to seventeenth-century Brazil, Goa, Nagasaki, the Philippines and Liverpool, and forward to Paris, to the British retreat from Hong Kong in 1997 and the complications of life in contemporary Australia.

In making this move to more explicitly auto/biographical forms of writing, Castro notes how he became increasingly interested in the ways in which “the facts of one’s life are constituted rather than discovered [...] I was interested in the processes of distillation and sedimentation, not in terms of fact or fiction, but in terms of narrative and memory.”¹⁴ His experience of growing up at the intersection of various countries, cultures and languages had made him skeptical of standard definitions of autobiography that portrayed it simply as a “retrospective prose narrative by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular, on the development of his personality.”¹⁵ Castro was suspicious of the notion of a unified, coherent self that underlay autobiographical writing that proceeded from this kind of definition. In an interview given during the writing of *Shanghai Dancing*, he noted that in the process of exploring his family’s origins in Shanghai in the 1930s he found that parts of his own life would surface and it was these “occasional eruptions” which confirmed to him “that a true autobiography can only emerge in this way.”¹⁶ In this article I explore Castro’s engagement with auto/biography through the essays in *Looking for Estrellita* and his novel *Shanghai Dancing*.

* * *

A man has as many personalities
as he has ancestors.¹⁷

If ancestry does indeed shape personality, then Castro has been richly endowed. He tells us that he was born “from a confluence of six different nationalities and at least three different religions.”¹⁸ Despite the efforts of

¹² Andrew Reimer notes that in the earlier novels this was achieved “not necessarily by way of specific autobiographical details, but by endowing his characters with something of the predicament and perplexity Castro himself may have experienced in his explorations of Australian life.” See Reimer, “Castro’s Worlds,” p.27.

¹³ *LFE*, pp.10–11 and 15.

¹⁴ *LFE*, pp.101.

¹⁵ Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” in *On Autobiography*, ed. P.J. Eakin (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.4, discussed by Castro in *LFE*, p.121.

¹⁶ Ouyang Yu, “An Interview with Brian Castro,” in *Bastard Moon: Essays on Australian-Chinese Writing*, ed. Wenche Ommundsen (a special issue of *Otherland Literary Journal* 7 [2001]), published separately (Melbourne: Snap Printing, 2001), p.81.

¹⁷ Asclepius, *Poet Triumphant: The Life and Writings of R.A.K. Mason (1905–1971)* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2004), p.10.

¹⁸ *LFE*, p.148.

¹⁹ Vinay Lal, "The bittersweet sweets of modernity: Cricket and the South Asian sensibility," in his *Of Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi. Essays on Indian History and Culture* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2003), p.206.

²⁰ *LFE*, pp.151–2.

²¹ Ouyang Yu, "An Interview with Brian Castro," pp.76–7.

²² *SD*, p.243.

²³ "I went to school with Indians, English, Fijians, Pakistanis, Chinese, Iraqis, Filipinos and everyone else in between," *LFE*, p.149.

Chinese nationalists to re-shape the fractured imperial structures they inherited into a modern nation-state, the treaty ports along the China coast, the worlds in which the Castro family moved, kept alive the transnational features of empire (British, Portuguese, French, German, Japanese and Chinese). Nation-states are a relatively recent historical phenomenon, yet we have become almost incapable of thinking beyond them, "as if any other form of community is inconceivable." The transformation of pre-national communities into nation-states required the suppression of diversity in pursuit of unity. Everywhere people whose inheritance included multiple linguistic, religious and cultural identities were moulded into singular entities, "speaking the same language, adopting the same dress, declaring their affinity with one religion, or otherwise rendering themselves into one species, under one flag and one national anthem."¹⁹ This myopia is, in part, what Castro writes against. It also accounts for some of the difficulties people experience in reading his work.

In these treaty ports, in Shanghai, Macau and Hong Kong, the impact of Chinese nationalism was moderated by the older imperial cosmopolitanisms that had produced the Castro family. This is what Castro has said of this early period in his life:

I was born literally between states, on a steam ferry between Macau and Hong Kong. My father had come from a long line of Portuguese, Spanish and English merchants who settled in Shanghai at the turn of the century intent upon exporting anything and everything to Europe. [...] On my mother's side there were even stranger juxtapositions. My grandmother was from Liverpool. She took a sailing ship and landed in Kwangtung in the early part of this century in order to convert the Chinese to Christianity. She was a boat-person who dreamt of a Christian Utopia, but her mission was a failure. Instead, she married a Chinese farmer from a little village, and it was a union from which my mother was born. My Liverpoolian grandmother spoke fluent Cantonese, and I was brought up in a household which used a mixture of English, Cantonese and Portuguese.²⁰

He doesn't read Chinese, but spent the first period of his life speaking mainly Cantonese, which he claims to still speak "at a ten year old's level." He also claims not to have been influenced by Chinese literature, "but of course I have absorbed much of it by hearing it read to me as a child by my mother."²¹ His father, in contrast, expected him to learn European languages, especially French and English, the two languages in which he continues to feel most at home.

On one side of the Castro family there was the predominantly Portuguese influence, with its affection for empire and its passion for modernity, while on the other there was a fusion of "British stiff upper lip and Chinese self-effacement."²² At school in Hong Kong he encountered even greater diversity, the children of the overlapping imperial networks that coalesced in the city.²³ Then, in 1961, came the rupture, when he was taken out of this

life and dispatched to boarding school. Australia could not help but seem mundane and monocultural in comparison with his family and with life in HongKong. In the early 1960s “Australians still seemed to be looking through an empty knothole in the fence at the world.”²⁴ Those early years in Australia must have been a torture.

I knew I was perceived as unnatural. I was forced almost immediately toward definition [...] And for a pedigree like mine which asserted complication as a matter of course, the road was going to be neither linear nor easy. Furthermore, as a ‘hybrid’ (as much as I detest this agricultural terminology) I was never going to be valorised as ‘authentically’ anything.²⁵

There is here the common diasporic dilemma of strangeness, but it is compounded in Castro’s case by the way his ancestry obstructed any desire for definition. In his recent book on diaspora literature, Amitav Kumar writes about this dilemma, noting that he is always going back to the moment when he was going away.²⁶ This is an issue that Castro has wrestled with long and hard. In his case the going away was exacerbated by age and isolation. And the greatest hurt was rejection by his family. Very quickly words like ‘home’ and ‘family’ disguised deep wounds.²⁷

There were others at boarding school who shared something of his experience, Chinese boys whose parents were in Singapore or Malaysia, New Guinea or Macau, but who were also “street wise and confident.” Castro claims that school Australianised them. Nevertheless their very appearance meant they remained outsiders: “Suddenly someone would ask where you’re from and you are brought up short. Twice or three times a day.”²⁸ This grew worse once the relative protection afforded by boarding school came to an end, although there were other havens that offered comfort. To get through university he worked long hours in Chinese restaurants in and around Dixon Street, Sydney’s Chinatown, where there was “a tightness, a group loyalty,” amongst his fellow restaurant workers. But he found himself alienated from the clannishness of these Chinese communities. After all, he was no more authentically Chinese than he was authentically Portuguese. In fact, he wasn’t authentically anything. He writes:

To become an outsider in this kind of society is not easy. It is like biting the hand that feeds you. Yet at one stage in my youth I remember making the conscious decision to unshackle myself from this culture as well as from the predominant Australian one. I became a minority within a minority.²⁹

This was his retreat into the life of a writer. The letters to Estrellita were now a passionate vocation, even if to begin with they had to be supported by school teaching and other

²⁴ *LFE*, p.14.

²⁵ *LFE*, p.10. “Identity oversimplifies humans. It denies the hybrid, as trees can’t.” Les Murray, “Cool History,” *Poems the Size of Photographs* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002), p.74.

²⁶ Amitav Kumar, *Bombay, London, New York* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p.16.

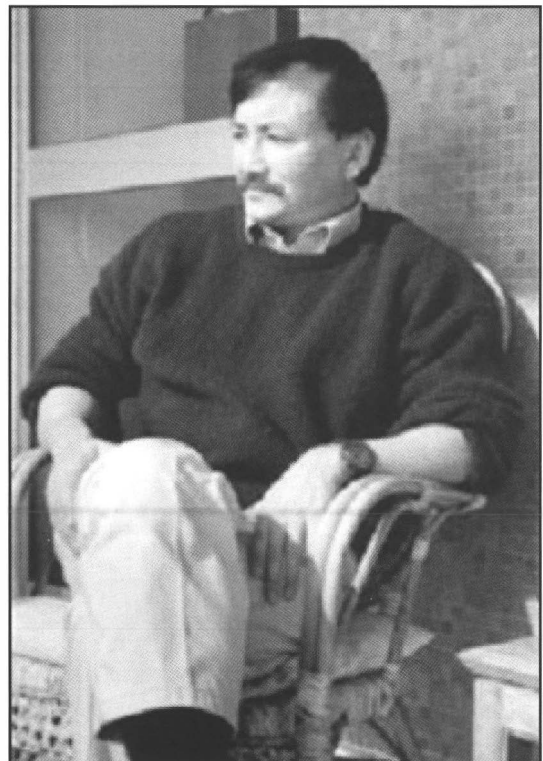
²⁷ Following Jean Starobinski and Anthony Paul Kerby, Susanna Egan argues that crisis lies at the heart of all autobiographical writing. See *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Castro himself has written about the link between damage and writing in his essay “Lesions,” *LFE*, pp.179–202.

²⁸ *LFE*, pp.44–5.

²⁹ *LFE*, p.52.

Figure 1

Brian Castro



³⁰ *LFE*, pp.81–4.

³¹ “Postcard: Marienbad, mid-May 1916,” *Franz Kafka: Letters to Felice*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, trans. James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p.468.

³² Kafka read Yuan Mei in Hans Heilmann’s popular collection *Chinesische Lyrik vom 12. Jahrhundert vor Chr. bis zur Gegenwart* [Chinese poetry from the twelfth century BC to the present] (Munich: Piper, 1905). In his study of Kafka’s letters, Elias Canetti suggests “the only writer of the Western world who is essentially Chinese is Kafka,” a view which, he tells us, was shared by Arthur Waley. See *Kafka’s Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, translated by Christopher Middleton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974), p.94. Similarly, Jorge Luis Borges has argued that Han Yu (韓愈 768–824) was one precursor (out of four) for Kafka: see “Kafka and his Precursors,” in *Other Inquisitions, 1937–52*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (London: Souvenir Press, 1964), pp.106–7.

³³ *LFE*, p.84. Here is the English translation, from Heilmann’s German version of the poem “In tiefer Nacht,” included in *Letters to Felice*, p.60:

“In the cold night, while poring over my book
I forgot the hour of bedtime.
The scent of my gold-embroidered bedcover
Has already evaporated,
The fire in the hearth burns no more.
My beautiful mistress, who hitherto has
controlled
Her wrath with difficulty, snatches away the
lamp,
And asks: Do you know how late it is?”

The original, “Han ye” 寒夜, written in 1749, reads: 寒夜 讀書忘卻眠, 錦衾香燼爐無煙, 美人含怒奪燈去, 問郎知是幾更天. It can be found in Wang Yingzhi 王英志 ed., *Yuan Mei quanji* 袁枚全集 [The Collected Works of Yuan Mei] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1993), vol.1, p.106. Rolf Goebel discusses the significance of this poem for Kafka in *Constructing China: Kafka’s Orientalist Discourse* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997), pp.52–64.

³⁴ The central character in *Stepper* was modelled on both a real German-Soviet spy, Richard Sorge, and Castro’s own father.

³⁵ Kendrick Smithyman *Auto/biographies* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1967)

activities. He tells of hiding under the desk at the end of the school day, “to recuperate from classroom theatrics,” and how it was only many years later that he realised this was part of the process of becoming a writer. This brings to mind again Janet Frame, at the school down the road from where I sit and where my daughters go each day. Faced with inspection of her classroom teaching Frame fled, running away and never going back. It would be many tortuous years before she found the space, the emptiness, to write. Castro links his own hiding beneath the desk to this same desire for emptiness, “for the extreme exhilaration one experiences when released from *idea*, from classification, from conceptualizing.”³⁰

It is here that a diasporic or multicultural reading of Castro’s work reaches its limit. Immediately following this discussion of the desire for release from classification, Castro reminds us of another writer’s letters, and how Franz Kafka told Felice “Indeed, I am Chinese.”³¹ This claim challenges the conflation of race and culture that Castro continually confronted, but it also suggests something more. In these letters, Kafka uses Chinese poetry, especially a poem by Yuan Mei (袁枚 1716–97), to raise the dilemma he felt when confronted with the choice between the affection and intimacy Felice offered and the need for solitude in order to write.³² Castro argues that for Kafka Chineseness was “not geocentric,” not linked to ethnicity or skin colour, but indicative of a “Silent receptivity. Which is neither individual nor unique.” Referring indirectly to the Yuan Mei poem that entranced Kafka, Castro continues: “One closes the shutters against the storm and lights a hurricane lamp in order to write. A reaching over to the other side of creation; the death of one’s self.”³³

Slowly Castro’s own search for emptiness would bear fruit, and, many years later, with six published novels behind him, he turned to this early life in Hong Kong and began to explore the family from which he was ejected all those years before. Fragments of this life surface in the essays in *Estrellita* as well as in some of the earlier novels, especially *Pomeroy*, and also *Stepper*, but they provide little indication of what will be encountered in *Shanghai Dancing*, arguably Castro’s richest novel to date.³⁴

* * *

In my younger days ...
What eager lies am I
now about to confect?³⁵

We begin with a family tree, a self-confessed Furphy, a necessary fiction that provides structure in a novel that is deliberately episodic and disorienting.³⁶ It can re-orient readers, helping to guide them through the maze of this almost too fantastic family life. The two branches of the tree converge in the person of António Castro, the narrator of the novel, apparently named after a half-brother who died of malnutrition at the age of two.³⁷ Sometimes we meet him as ‘António’, at other times as ‘he’ or ‘I’, and his quest through

the traces of the past provides the connecting thread around which the novel is constructed. But, of course, the quest is confusing and contradictory, “everything in the past, in history is always wrapped in a tissue; of words, of memories, of lies.”³⁸

The novel begins with António's birth on the ferry between Macau and Hong Kong, but then quickly moves to the present, 40 years later, and his return to Shanghai in search of traces of his family, the family that sent him away into exile all those years ago. This is prompted by the death of his father and the photographs and legacies of a life he inherits: “I took my father's photos with me, trying to reconstruct a story. Find the missing pieces. I was a bit of a disorientalist.”³⁹ This is his archive, and together with memory, and the stories heard as a child, this is all he has to go on as he tries to make sense of his family. Arnaldo, the father, the flâneur and jazz musician, figures large in these early parts of the novel, as the narrative moves back and forth between António's search and Arnaldo's life in pre-war Shanghai, before he was forced to flee to Hong Kong where António would be born.

Wrapped inside António's search through Shanghai for traces of his father there is another story. António remembers waking one night in Hong Kong to see his father flailing with a truncheon at an intruder—out the window. The intruder fell ten floors onto a Coke sign, and died on the pavement below: “It wasn't long,” relates António, “before I was sent away.”⁴⁰ Castro (author) plays with the multiple meanings of *shanghai* as he builds the narrative. There is *Shanghai-dancing*, the attainment of disorientation and instability, or, in naval slang, a term for syphilis. Back in Shanghai again, we learn of the birth of a half-brother, born just as the Japanese invade, at the very moment his father's fortune begins to disappear before his eyes. There is a philandering father with syphilis and a cocaine-addicted mother, not António's, one of the father's earlier wives. She gives birth to a premature baby boy, but dies in the process. The boy is damaged, with severe impairment. As they flee the city, the child is left behind. Perhaps Arnaldo brought the boy to Hong Kong after the war. António remembers the smelly, long-haired dwarf that lived on the roof of their building in Hong Kong: “We called him Marbles. On account of the fact that he didn't have any. What he had was a cleft palate, a dwarf's hump and a simian arm reaching to his knees.”⁴¹ Then Castro gives us the first *shanghai* I ever knew, long before I heard of China; Australasian slang for a catapult. The boys in António's school could see Marbles from the roof of their building and in between classes would entertain themselves by firing slingshot pellets across at him. In Shanghai, trying to make sense of all these stories, these memories, António comes to the realisation that perhaps Marbles was his half-brother. And, of course, it is just after Marbles dies, trying to escape the flailing truncheon wielded by his father, that he is sent off into exile in Australia. Did his father murder his half-brother? What is the relation between Marbles' death and his own exile? And inheritance: “I have a strong suspicion that everything my father left, has been left to this

/1992), title page.

³⁶ “And my family tree is a Furphy, to use that Australianism which I love because it is literary.” “The Memoir and Me,” a talk broadcast on Radio National, 4 June 2003, <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s870765.htm>>.

³⁷ Jane Sullivan, “Castro and the Friction of Fiction,” *The Age*, 22 March 2003, <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/03/21/1047749940284.html>>.

³⁸ *SD*, p.3. The quest is a common trope for the auto/biographical endeavour. See, for instance, A.J.A. Symons, *The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography* (Harmondsworth, Mdllx.: Penguin Books, 1940) and Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (Harmondsworth, Mdllx.: Penguin Books, 1985).

³⁹ *SD*, p.12.

⁴⁰ *SD*, p.4. There are echoes here from the early pages of *Pomeroy*—the philandering father, a cocaine addicted wife, the truncheon and the Coke sign. See *Pomeroy*, pp.11–23.

⁴¹ *SD*, p.25.

⁴² *SD*, p.29. At the Sydney Writer's Festival, in conversation with Emily Smith, Castro described the shape of the book as a form of "jazz improvisation." "The melody is laid down as a kind of pattern and you spiral away from it and come back." <<http://www.writersfestival.uts.edu.au/conversation/castro.html>> (30 May 2003).

⁴³ *SD*, p.89.

⁴⁴ *SD*, p.49.

⁴⁵ *SD*, p.46.

dark shadow. That was the beginning of my breakdown; the hallucination of phantom brothers; the affliction of marbles." He cannot be sure of any of this. But a line has been cast (*Shanghai Dancing* again), a central part of the melody has been laid down, and he will keep coming back to it throughout the novel.⁴²

This is only one of a multitude of overlapping stories that run through the novel, none of which are presented in terms of a clearly resolved this-then-that narrative. Rather, we get the quest and the process of trying to hook all the traces together, but not in a way that produces a single argument, a single storyline. Nothing is ever as certain as that. From the Furphy tree we know that Arnaldo had children to two other women before marrying António's mother, while she had also been married before and had had two daughters before he was born, so he has half-sisters on both sides of the family. All tell him different stories, and those on one side have not spoken to those on the other side for years: "it was always prudent for you to get the story from the opposing half, in order to cover, as it were, the objective premises. All these halves, however, do not make a whole."⁴³

As well as these differing versions of events heard from family members there are his own memories from those early years of his life in Hong Kong, and the stories he was told or heard indirectly from others. Here the most important figures are his father and his maternal grandmother, the Liverpoolian Dora Siddle.

Granny sat you on her knee and sang *Ride a Cock Horse* and played *This Little Piggy Went to Market*, and then she would thunder: *Up the Yangtze without a rudder!* You would clap, for this was the prelude to another instalment. [...] You sat on her heavily bandaged knees [...] and felt the poultice of narrative draw out its strange languages, doubts and perverse shudderings ...⁴⁴

These were the stories of her trip to China in 1910, the experience of revolution and a growing disenchantment with the Baptist butcher who had encouraged her to become a missionary. All he has now is a small photograph of her as an adult, with wire-rimmed spectacles and tightly bound hair, yet he captures beautifully the passionate young woman behind the facade, attracted by the physicality of the butcher and desperate to escape the constrictions of Liverpool. Mission gave her a way out.

It was being God-possessed, she was thinking. Nothing comes without it. *Entbusiasmus*. The state of being filled with the spirit. Each day, each breath, each leap, each word, *yes*, she said, and for the first time his eyes melted into creases and she sighed with the ecstasy of the curious and the requited. *Cathay*, she said, feeling it twirl around her tongue, *Cathay*. She needed only to say the word and knew she had pronounced her past life dead.⁴⁵

Once she gets to Cathay she is drawn to the Chinese, who would convert

her (rather than the other way round), and eventually she leaves the Liverpool butcher and marries Castro's maternal grandfather, Virgil Wing, another dark spectre that haunts António as he tries to make sense of his family.

Later Virgil went with Dora back to Liverpool, where there was still a thriving Chinatown and where he studied plastic surgery. If China was in disarray, then the face Liverpool showed Virgil "destroyed the emblems and the pennants, tore a large hole in the tapestry of the Greatest nation on Earth, dissolved its awe and aura which Dora had etched minutely and repeatedly on his brain."⁴⁶ Back in China, and then later in Hong Kong, they grew steadily apart. What had attracted could no longer hold. "Dora Siddle read the dictionary, scrabbling for justice and precision and Virgil Wing turned inward, seeking out spiralling currents in himself. The moment of greatness was lost for both." Virgil worked for the Guomindang, "determined to change the face of China," and made packets of money, which he managed to transfer to Hong Kong before the Communists took control. Dora lived on into her nineties: "My grandmother had all the time in the world. It already seemed she was going to die slowly, of memory."⁴⁷ After her death she was taken back to Liverpool to be buried, but no longer with Virgil. Instead, she had spent the last years of her life with another product of empire, Mr Auberon Untebele, her Nigerian friend who reads Franz Fanon (but that is another story). One of António's many tasks is to accompany Untebele's body to Liverpool, where his ashes can be spread over Dora's grave.

On his father's side there was no shortage of storytellers.

Most of his side of the family were liars. But then you could never say *that* categorically because every now and again you would come against the truth. A hot beast, the truth. Bull-headed, with sharp horns. The truth-appeasers were on my mother's side. They never said anything about themselves. Dull-disposed, they made their money and kept it. But on my father's side ... full-scale fabrication.⁴⁸

Many of his best memories are of his father at the piano, with uncles and cousins sitting on the veranda of the home in Hong Kong, telling stories of the Portuguese side of the family. There is the combination of Jewish and Catholic elements here, the Jewish great grandfather and the Catholic great grandmother, a *conversos*. The great grandfather comes to Shanghai in the nineteenth century, along with the other Sephardic Jews who were to make such an impact in the colonial ports of the British empire, especially Bombay and Shanghai. These were people like Sir Victor Sassoon, who built the famous Cathay Hotel, and the Kadoories, all of whom feature in the novel, along with other more infamous Shanghai identities, such as Du Yuesheng. As a free port, Shanghai became a magnet for Jews fleeing persecution in the Soviet Union and Europe, particularly as things moved closer to the Second World War. They congregated in the International and the French concessions,

⁴⁶ *SD*, p.128. On Liverpool's China connections see the finely textured auto/biographical essay by Gregory Lee, "Paddy's Chinatown, or the harlequin's coat: a short (hi)story of a Liverpool hybridity," in his *Chinas Unlimited: Making the Imaginaries of China and Chineseness* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), pp.79–112.

⁴⁷ *SD*, pp.58, 72 and 138.

⁴⁸ *SD*, p.32.

⁴⁹ Marcia Reynnders Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001). For a study of Shanghai during the 1930s, that world of 'splendid modernity,' see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁵⁰ *SD*, p.68. For the Housman poem, see XXVII, "The Welsh Marches," *A Shropshire Lad*, in A.E. Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. and introduced by Christopher Ricks (London: Allen Lane, 1988), pp.51-2.

⁵¹ *SD*, pp.177 and 179.

⁵² *SD*, p.223.

⁵³ *SD*, p.351.

those worlds within a world, and it is here that this side of Castro's family made their living, in warehouses and shipping. His father's pre-war career as a jazz musician was based on squandering the money generated from importing opium or any other commodity that could be bought or sold in this great spectacle of 'splendid modernity.'⁴⁹

As António imagines the lives of these people, mostly through the stories told on the veranda when he was young, each segment of the story begins with a 'what if' an 'imagine', a 'suppose', and a 'picture this' to indicate what is going on here. This is storytelling, but then, of course, the stories people tell themselves shape the way they understand their lives and the ways in which they act in the world. The auto/biography unfolds as Castro tries to make sense of the material he has inherited from the family, a bunch of his father's photographs, some memories and lots of overlapping, contradictory stories. He travels to the various cities where they lived, to Shanghai, Macau, Hong Kong, Liverpool, trying to make these traces come alive, but they always refuse narrative clarity. Things are always subject to challenge. There are different versions of events, and different versions of people.

Again and again António's quest circles back to Arnaldo: "a line from Housman crept into my head: *When shall I be dead and rid of the wrong my father did?*"⁵⁰ Unlike António's savvy Chinese grandfather, Virgil Wing, Arnaldo lost all his money as a result of the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 and the Communist takeover in 1949. He fled to Hong Kong, only to be interned by the Japanese, along with most of the family. After the war he never had much luck in his attempts to re-ignite businesses, and family fortunes continued to decline. Hence António's exile and isolation in boarding school in Australia, "where with my emerald-green fountain-pen I write on interminable afternoons when the others are thumping the football around." Hopes of a return to Hong Kong soon fade. In a letter from home, which he reads and rereads when the lights are out, he is told that he could not come back: "My father was out of work again and I had been abandoned."⁵¹ Later, at university, he receives more of the same, but perhaps there was a purpose to it.

If you come back here, my father once wrote in a letter from his room in Kennedy Town [...] you'd be working in a fish market, and you'd last all of two days. Those letters were long and hard but they stuck in my mind with all the pain of a red-hot branding iron. He had nothing else to leave me.⁵²

Both his parents would eventually come to Sydney, but only many years later, when he was an adult. "I knew neither of them," and both felt out of place.⁵³ Arnaldo arrived in pinstripes and spats, looking a lot like Truman Capote or a Chicago gangster, expecting Sydney to be like Hong Kong. He hates the way everyone disappears from the city at 5 p.m.—the emptiness of it all disorients him. That is, until he discovers the TAB, and begins to feel at

home, settling into his old habits: gambling, alcohol and extramarital liaisons. He had come to Australia to die, but he would do so on his own terms.

Antônio's mother, Jasmine, is even more dislocated. Alienated by language, she hides behind her 'Chineseness.' Castro devotes some of the most tender moments in the novel to his depiction of his mother. In Shanghai she used to model for Levers, and during the war in Hong Kong it was her ingenuity that kept her daughters and stepdaughters alive during the worst of the Japanese occupation. But the past, and her close family, hold terrors she cannot escape: "she was a strong-willed girl who let everything happen to her and could never make herself understood."⁵⁴ Much of her day-to-day family life required that she keep the terror at bay, but it was never easy. For Arnaldo the past was malleable: "The only use of the past is to get a future out of it."⁵⁵ But for Jasmine every moment held hidden horrors that Arnaldo would never understand. He complained that she embarrassed too much. This was, "of course, the condition of the pre-war Chinese woman. She was supposed to be shy and modest."⁵⁶

Shyness and modesty covering an embarrassing lack. Of education, empowerment. She was easily embarrassed. This was charming; the blush, the retirement to a dark corner, the coquettish glance. She could easily embarrass. This was more serious. She could never be on parity with a Western man. A Western man's baggage of oriental delights included tumult in a woman's demeanour. In my mother's case, this tumult was the result of a memory of horror. In her embarrassment, it was necessary to forget, to hide, to cover up, before she started screaming; before she embraced her terror.⁵⁷

She danced to forget herself (*shanghai dancing*, again), to distance herself from these memories, but she refused to be touched. "A repression of the body is a repression of memory. My mother is embarrassed to touch, to kiss, to show any emotion that betrays either the code of familiarity or the code of horror."⁵⁸ It was only later, in Australia, with the onset of Alzheimer's that her life became easier. The terror of the past disappeared along with her memories.

These stories and Castro's attempts to gain some imaginative grasp of them fill up the remainder of the auto/biography. It is cast as a novel, yet in the telling Castro reveals much about himself and his family. As he says, he is "not recalling a life, but inventing a suitable site for how one feels about life." To those anxious about the truth of all this he suggests that "any irritable reaching after fact and fiction is way off the point," because the vital element of any writing "is essentially to portray a way of seeing things; a perspective; to tell a story where truth and meaning come into existence not in real life, but in the writing itself."⁵⁹

⁵⁴ *SD*, p.215.

⁵⁵ *SD*, p.66.

⁵⁶ For readings of Castro's work that foreground gender, see Kam Louie, "Diasporic Chinese Masculinity," and Rosemary Sorensen's review of *After China* in *Meanjin* 52.4 (Summer, 1993): 778–83.

⁵⁷ *SD*, p.241. Another fictional auto/biography (and novel) that has a terrible secret at its heart which can only be approached through indirectness and dissimulation, through the cultural imaginary, and where there are different versions of events and different versions of people is Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996).

⁵⁸ *SD*, p.242.

⁵⁹ Castro, "The Memoir and Me."

⁶⁰ Bill Manhire, *Under the Influence* (Wellington: Four Winds Press, 2003), p.33.

⁶¹ “The myth of autobiography is that the story is singularly formative, that the gesture is coherent and monologic, that the subject is articulate and the story articulable, and that the narrative lies there waiting to be spoken.” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Introduction,” in *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.9.

⁶² Max Brod, ed., *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, trans. Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg (Harmondsworth, Middlx.: Penguin, 1964), entry for 16 December 1911, p.140.

⁶³ James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press), pp.285–6. This is a fascinating book about the tension between life and narrative, and the place of memory in autobiography. Beckett and Kafka figure large.

⁶⁴ Stephen Owen, “The Self’s Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography,” in *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shih Poetry from the Late Han to the Tang*, ed. Shuen-fu Lin and Stephen Owen (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.73.

⁶⁵ *SD*, p.28.

⁶⁶ *SD*, p.255.

The past seems empty until you turn and stare at it. I find myself short of sequence and narrative—the and then of my own life defeats me—but the clutter of moments is everywhere.⁶⁰

This is now a familiar dilemma for the auto/biographer.⁶¹ Castro wrestles with it as he tries to give meaning and shape to his fragmentary archive. Kafka wrestled with it too. In his “plan for autobiographical explorations” he sought to construct himself from the clutter of moments, “as one whose house is unsafe wants to build a safe one next to it.” But what would happen if this was not possible and all one ended up with was one half-destroyed house and one half-finished house?

What follows is madness, that is to say something like a Cossak dance between the two houses, whereby the Cossak goes on scraping and throwing aside the earth with the heels of his boots until his grave is dug out under him.⁶²

There is no refuge here. It has been said that with autobiography “a self is created in the stories it tells to and about itself.” But Kafka found the fragments would not generate narrative coherence; they could not be ordered to create a self, a “new house for dwelling.”⁶³ They would not yield a clear sense of beginning, middle and end. This dilemma was long known in Chinese life writing, but the search for narrative coherence was, until recently, always less pressing than in Western autobiography. As Stephen Owen notes, the written life was often no more than a sequence of “mere contingencies, mere happenings.” For many the self-edited collected works was the preferred form of auto/biography, where “editorial exclusions, arrangement, and juxtapositions created a species of interior history, not narrating a life-story, but letting a life story unfold in the author’s sequence of responses.”⁶⁴ Although the cultural reservoir that Castro draws on is predominantly European, perhaps in *Shanghai Dancing* we are closer to this Chinese sense of auto/biography than we are to the Augustinian tradition that for so long shaped Western life-writing.

Castro builds *Shanghai Dancing* through a concatenation of chapters, most of which are short and fragmentary, like memory. Form is shaped to serve content. Different melody lines are laid down, and as the narrative builds these begin to interact, overlapping and intersecting to produce something that is much more than the sum of its parts. Some chapters take the form of a ‘Pillow Book,’ a private journal “in which to record stray thoughts and impressions; a form of free association called ‘following the brush.’”⁶⁵ Other chapters pick up one line of the melody and let it run for a while. For instance, in ‘Empire’ Arnaldo dreams of Shanghai, his own Shanghai: “Like all dreams, there is always a precise map of the location, and I can see the streets of Shanghai ... his *Passagenwerk* ... unfurl before his drooping glasses like a divine emanation.”⁶⁶ We roam with him through the roads, lanes and avenues—the arcades—that he frequented and in doing so encounter the

people and events associated with each. Like Kafka, Walter Benjamin is one of Castro's precursors and he appears again later, also indirectly, as a "stayer," one of those who did not get out when war loomed and then only went when pushed, "from Berlin to Paris to the Spanish border only to commit suicide."⁶⁷ One of the longest and most powerful chapters deals with the war years in Hong Kong, where we encounter the Japanese occupation through the different perspectives of inhabitants. The narrative thread is interrupted with brief 'oral histories,' stories from a wide range of people who lived through these years and who reflect on their experiences. It is, as Castro tells us at the beginning, "A chapter in which other people have their say."⁶⁸

Memory is at the heart of the challenge posed by auto/biography. As James Olney notes, autobiographers often begin with unremembered experience: "I was born on such and such a date in such and such a place," which immediately "renders impossible the assertion of *I* in the recalling of these unrecalled events."⁶⁹ In his exploration of the imbrication of memory in autobiography, Olney suggests we think of memory as comprising three aspects. At its simplest, there is that we learn by rote and then recall in perfect order whenever we like. There is also the memory of experiences that come to us through our senses and which we store away and consciously return to, although there is much less chance that when we do so these experiences will remain in the form they were when we first encountered them. Finally, there is the memory that is an integral part of our inner worlds, part of what is often termed our 'self-schema.' These three aspects to memory are inter-related, and it is rarely possible to disentangle one from the other.⁷⁰ Earlier, Vico also constructed a threefold image of memory, which Olney draws on, but which is articulated in a rather different manner:

Memory is the same as imagination ... [It] has three different aspects: memory when it remembers things, imagination when it alters or imitates them, and invention when it gives them a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement and relationship. For these reasons theological poets call memory the mother of the Muses.⁷¹

It is this Vichian formulation of memory, where it shades into imagination and invention, that helps us understand *Shanghai Dancing*. At one stage Castro was going to call the book 'Running *from* the Family.' They had been stalking his memory for years.⁷² The writing, as it allowed memory to build through imagination and invention, involved a clearing away of the clutter.

Suddenly it doesn't matter about archives and memory, the swill of recall, evidence, letters, the public and the private. The human genetic pattern, evolved over thousands of years, still subjects us to real experience as the partial beginning of all invention. Halfway there, things begin to be erased.⁷³

The writing is part of the process of engaging with memory and trans-

⁶⁷ *SD*, p.280. "Literatures in the minor key have always attracted me and for much of the 1990s I read everything I could by those Europeans who spent the first half of this terrible century salvaging civilisation from barbarism and then surviving it" (or not, in Benjamin's case), *LFE*, p.79.

⁶⁸ *SD*, p.294.

⁶⁹ Olney, *Memory and Narrative*, p.6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.60–75.

⁷¹ Section 819, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans., Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp.313–14. As Edward Said notes, "the line between the actual events and the modifications of one's own reflective mind is blurred in Vico, as it is in the numerous authors who were influenced by him, like James Joyce." See Said, "Erich Auerbach, critic of the earthly world," *Boundary* 2 31.2 (2004): 16.

⁷² Comments made in conversation with Emily Smith at the Sydney Writer's Festival, 2003. The reference is to Michael Ondaatje's auto/biography *Running in the Family* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1983).

⁷³ *LFE*, p.216.

⁷⁴ *SD*, p.3. Castro has long had an interest in photography. *LFE* includes the work of the photomontuer Peter Lyssiotis, and Castro contributed text for both Lyssiotis's *The Lingerie Catalogue and a Gardener at Midnight*. He also wrote the essay "Volées" included in John Young's *Pine's Edge* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2001).

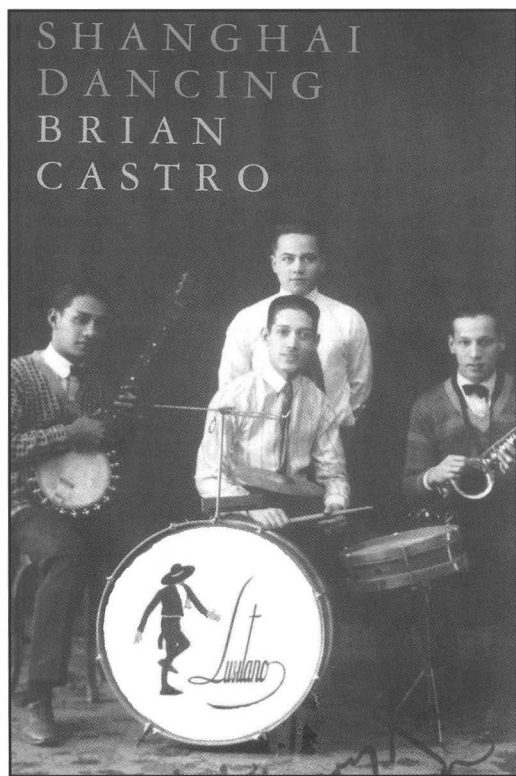
⁷⁵ These *blue* writers include "Kafka and Canetti, Broch and Bernhard." See "Blue Max," *Heat* 3, new series, p.120. This essay is a lovely tribute to Max Sebald. See also Castro's more recent essay "Through a Glass Darkly: Thomas Bernhard and W.G. Sebald," *Heat* 7, new series, pp.71–91. The notion of blue writers is developed by William Gass in *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Boston, Mass.: David R. Godine, 1976).

forming it into something else, a writing out and transformation through imagination into story.

Interspersed throughout the text are fragments of Castro's archive, the material basis for António's quest (which is, of course, also *our* quest). There are several copies, different versions, of his father's last will and testament (more Furphies), excerpts from newspapers, consular documents, personal letters, maps, songs, and photographs—particularly photographs. There are a large number of photos scattered throughout the text, at times almost on every page. Some of them, street photographs and postcards, are familiar to anyone who has a passing interest in Shanghai. These are a product of the public domain, but there are other photographs that are clearly part of Castro's personal archive. He has inherited these family photographs and from them he tries to build the melody of domestic life, a life so abruptly terminated all those years ago. "Sometimes you suffocate when you think of the past; of a life that never was, flashing up in sepia."⁷⁴

Figure 2

Brian Castro, *Shanghai Dancing* (*Artamon: Giramondo*, 2003)



There are obvious similarities between the nature and placement of the photographs in *Shanghai Dancing* and the way another of Castro's *blue* writers, W.G. Sebald, employs images in his books.⁷⁵ In one of his essays on Sebald, Castro suggests that in works like *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn* photos "form the border between life and death, signifying in silence, but possessing a mnemonic power in their textual spaces. They are, in some sense, a mental self-portrait, more personal than the text." In both this description of the mnemonic power of these images and in his evocations of Sebald's writing Castro seems almost to be describing his own world:

these semi-invented memories, these *mémoires imaginaires*, are formed by accretion, collection, addition and supplementation [...] How would one classify something that is neither novel, travelogue, memoir, history nor photography, but which is a combination of them all?⁷⁶

Like Sebald, Castro collapses the generic distinctions thought to separate history from biography, autobiography from fiction.

The cover for *Shanghai Dancing* is a photograph of the dance band *Lusitano*, a name which derives from the Latin word for

⁷⁶ "Blue Max," pp.123–4. W.G. Sebald *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: New Directions, 1999 [1990]) and *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: The Harvill Press, 1998 [1995]). David Sornig explores

/these issues in "Picturing the Story: Image and Narrative in Brian Castro and W.G. Sebald," *Text* 8.1 (April 2004), <<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>>.

'Portuguese'. The man standing behind the drummer, who re-appears in many of the other photographs scattered throughout the text, and especially in all the photos of dance bands, is obviously Castro's father. But none of the photographs have captions. They do not give up their stories easily. As part of the quest, we are allowed to relate them to the text in the best ways we can. Just like the other fragments of the archive scattered throughout the book, there is no prescribed way to read or interpret them. We are not told what they mean, who they depict. But there is a suggestion of why they are included. Opposite the first full-page photograph in the book, between the Furphy tree and the beginning of the text proper, is a quotation from Kafka: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds."⁷⁷

* * *

From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truth and memories of truths and its direction always towards the third place where the starting point is myth.⁷⁸

This first sentence of Janet Frame's *To the Island* suggests that auto/biography involves something much stranger and more profound than any simple ordering of the events of a life. As Antônio remarks towards the end of *Shanghai Dancing*, "I believe it is the rhetoric of autobiography, to conceal as much as to reveal. False exculpation."⁷⁹ Lurking behind this is Paul de Man's famous argument that has sparked so much debate over the nature of autobiography.

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?⁸⁰

Castro's own experiences in dealing with issues like narrative and memory made him suspicious of the automatic relationship that is often assumed to exist between autobiography, or biography for that matter, and truth. This doesn't mean that he believes that autobiography is inevitably a form of fiction, just that "when it comes to a distinction between the written life and the lived life, fact and fiction become meaningless categories."⁸¹

⁷⁷ "One photographs things to get them out of one's mind. My stories are a kind of closing of one's eyes." Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. Goronwy Rees (London:

/Derek Verschoyle, 1953), p.34. Perhaps the 'classic' example of the inter-relation of photography and auto/biography is Roland Barthes' *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard

Figure 3

Janet Frame



/Howard (London: Papermac, 1977), but see also the essays in the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* 40.3 (Fall, 1994) devoted to "Autobiography/Photography/Narrative."

⁷⁸ Janet Frame, *To the Island, An Autobiography* (Auckland: Vintage 1994 [1982]), p.7.

⁷⁹ *SD*, p.325.

⁸⁰ "Autobiography as Displacement," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.69. Castro engages with de Man in his essays: see *LFE*, pp.119–20.

⁸¹ *LFE*, p.117.

⁸² See, for instance, Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

⁸³ *LFE*, p.205.

⁸⁴ H. Porter Abbott, "Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories," *New Literary History* 19.3 (1998): 602. Carolyn Steedman suggests otherwise, arguing that "written autobiography has to end in the figure of the writer." See "History and Autobiography: Different Pasts," in *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992), p.47. See also her *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986).

⁸⁵ David McCooley, *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.189. McCooley does not discuss Castro's writing.

⁸⁶ *LFE*, p.206.

⁸⁷ *LFE*, pp.206 and 223.

⁸⁸ Sullivan, "Castro and the Friction of Fiction."

⁸⁹ Ivor Indyk explores the issues of disinheritance and grief in his review of *LFE* in *The Australian Book Review* 217 (December 1999/January 2000)

Much of the interest shown by literary critics in autobiography over recent years, especially in the wake of de Man, has been focused around a number of core questions that relate to the issue of truthfulness, or the lack thereof.⁸² Castro is well aware of these issues, and much of his writing on auto/biography comes out of engagement with such criticism. To quote him again:

One winter not so long ago, I began to write what I called an 'autobiography'. I didn't call it that to impress anyone. I wasn't making any claims about truth and lies and real events. I knew that the word *autobiography* carried a freight of meaning it didn't really deserve: real life; true stories; family secrets. Writing, of course, makes oxymorons of these. I knew all autobiographies were highly inventive acts of dissimulation which sometimes had real or unfortunate consequences [...] An 'autobiography', however, does make some claims. Claims about oneself, one's family, lineage, history. This is usually done within the 'grammar' of an accepted system, a cultural norm imposed by families, societies, nations.⁸³

It is the element of *risk* in writing that interests Castro, and with auto/biography that risk relates directly to its referential nature. In the words of H. Porter Abbott, all autobiographies, like all histories, are "corrupted by the present."⁸⁴ They lack finality in the sense that they are contingent and dependent on the changing face of the future. Not only that, "writing autobiography involves an understanding that people's narrative lives are interconnected."⁸⁵ When you write a life, you develop particular versions of stories, versions that are open to dispute from those with whom your life intersects, those with other versions of these stories.

This tension in auto/biography, between both the aesthetic values of the endeavour and its moral implications, constitutes the element of risk that Castro talks about. It is "precisely because writing doesn't arise from absolute freedom and lack of constraint," and "precisely because both aesthetic value and moral value are richer in opposition, when in tension with loyalties," that auto/biography compels.⁸⁶ But the consequences of this are that "in order to write, you have to live with the constant threat of disinheritance," the distancing from self and family that comes with the writing.

In the end, it is a working around a subject in order to get beyond it, and having turned and turned about, to find yourself disowned by it is also to discover its own autonomy. Autobiography is disinheritance.⁸⁷

Behind it all there was anger: "I was very angry at being chucked thousands of miles away." And his response, becoming a writer, distanced him further. "The Portuguese word for writer, *escritor*, is very similar to 'shithead.' It's a term of abuse."⁸⁸ Mixed in with the anger and disinheritance is grief, a consequence of the deep ambivalence towards family, kinship, and of the self-scrutiny of the auto/biographical enterprise.⁸⁹

Novelists and historians often come to blows over what constitutes the proper nature of biography and autobiography, as was highlighted recently

when the novelist Damien Wilkins reviewed a biography of Janet Frame by the historian Michael King. The biography is a fine example of standard literary biography, and, like much biography nowadays, it is very long—nearly 600 pages. But the reviewer argued that, as with most biography, its eyes are bigger than its belly. “It has a voracious appetite but it swallows little of what it puts in its mouth.” Comparing it to Frame’s own autobiography, the reviewer suggested that in his search to order Frame’s life, the biographer tends to “smother the nuances.”⁹⁰ In defence of Michael King, it could be argued that because of the evidence-bound biography we are better able to appreciate the imaginative power of Frame’s own autobiography. Nevertheless, biography of this sort can often seem like a “kind of drill procedure—and then this, and then this.” The “lesson in lessness,” demonstrated so artfully in the autobiography,

is not one that biography, with its hunger, its hoovering of every tidbit, can hear very well [...] What would a biography look like if it didn’t suggest, above all, immense composure and certainty? It would look, of course, like fiction.⁹¹

Castro shares this concern about the ‘will to order’ that guides much biographical and autobiographical writing. Reflecting on his father he notes how “it is a biographer’s nightmare ... finding reasons for things for which there are none.”⁹² Resisting this will to order and wanting to allow the possibility for both writer and reader to be pricked by Frame’s bent hairpin of unreason, Castro was drawn toward this crossing of genres, towards the auto-slash-biography form.

* * *

If you tell it, it might have happened
like the legend. If you don’t tell it—what?⁹³

The stories in *Shanghai Dancing* have been haunting Castro for years. He had to tell them. The challenge was to find the language, where words and grammar could be pushed beyond their normal limits, and where the writing was out there at ‘the edge of the alphabet.’⁹⁴ As Castro says, in a good story the showing “disappears into an exceptional use of language, entrancing and hypnotic.”⁹⁵ In this sense, *Shanghai Dancing* is a ‘good story’, both a disruptive novel and a powerful auto/biography. It was finished long before it was published. Agents and publishers distrusted readers, wanting “things ‘clarified’. The word that was used was ‘signpost’. I thought, hang on, this book is about dissociation! So I walked away before I was kneecapped.”⁹⁶ This meant the novel sat waiting until Ivor Indyk got his new publishing house Gramondo up and running. In the meantime Castro has moved on to other things. A new novel, *The Garden Book*, was published in 2005.⁹⁷ It is most unlikely that he will again draw on his ancestry in the way that he did

⁹⁰ Damien Wilkins, “In the Lock-up,” *Landfall* 201 (May 2001): 25–36 (quotes at pp.26 and 28); Michael King *Wrestling With the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame* (Hammondsworth, Middlx.: Penguin, 2000).

⁹¹ Wilkins, “In the Lock-up,” pp.29, 35–6.

⁹² *LFE*, p.70.

⁹³ Anne Kennedy, *Sing Song* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003), p.32.

⁹⁴ Janet Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet* (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1962).

⁹⁵ Castro, “The Memoir and Me.”

⁹⁶ Sullivan, “Castro and the Friction of Fiction.”

⁹⁷ Brian Castro, *The Garden Book* (Artamon: Gramondo, 2005).

⁹⁸ *IFE*, p.257.

for *Shanghai Dancing*. Those ghosts have now been laid to rest, not so much as a result of the typhoon off Macau that marks the climactic moment of the novel but more as a consequence of the writing itself. At the end of *Looking for Estrellita* he reflects on this engagement with auto/biography:

What I discovered about my ancestry I could never have invented. It was a shock, but it showed that one was claimed. Out there was the music of chance, unheard by others, and it necessarily provoked risk in its exploration. It fell to the jug-eared to reproduce it, to hear the strains of cross-pollination and to send it out by daring all as a form of wild desire. That is ultimately the measure of the advancement of both an imagination and of a society.⁹⁸

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