Guilt and trauma: using fiction to respond to the complex crimes of a violent past

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Abstract

“For once in my life I had not been constrained by the severe discipline of history, but had been at liberty to invoke the dilemmas inscribed in my own heart, inscribed there during my childhood, and which had haunted me ever since” (LF 216). Alex Miller’s Landscape of Farewell is a story about the difficulties associated with remembering and recording a painful past. Max Otto, the German narrator, was unable to face up to the possibility that his father may not have been an honourable and courageous soldier fighting for his country during the Second World War, but most likely was involved in the atrocities perpetrated by his country. Through the writing of the massacre of a group of white settlers by Aborigines (based on the Cullin-la Ringo massacre of 1861) from the point of view of a perpetrator, he came to understand that “[g]uilt ... was not the experience only of the heartless perpetrator of a crime, but was a complex and pervasive condition of the human soul” (LF 77) and as a result he was now ready to write his father’s story. But how to write that story remained a dilemma for him. As an historian Max must decide whether he writes it as fiction or history. He is concerned that the story is too emotionally charged for him to write it as history, that he cannot possibly be objective enough, but he also “loathe[s] books that are made up.” This paper examines the way using fiction to tell the violent past “may provide a more expansive space ... for exploring modalities of responding to trauma,” (185) a space that allows for an examination of the complexities inherent within these crimes.

Horatio Wills took up his land at Cullin-la-Ringo in the Queensland central highlands in 1861, where he and his party immediately set about planting a garden and constructing stockyards and huts. Due to recent friction in the area between settlers and Aborigines the men kept their firearms loaded, but they did not consider it necessary to keep their guns with them while they worked, nor did they...
think it necessary to guard their camp. The intense Queensland heat and the strenuous nature of the work soon forced the group to rest in the early afternoon in the heat of the day. On 17 October 1861, eleven days after their arrival, the settlers at Cullin-la-Ringo settled down for their afternoon sleep as usual. While asleep and unarmed a party of approximately 150 Aborigines quickly and simultaneously attacked leaving nineteen people dead, including women and children. Of the three survivors two were away from the camp and the third, John Moore, was sleeping in the trees some distance away. When he realised what was happening he fled the scene and walked to a nearby station to raise the alarm. This is the largest recorded massacre of white settlers by Aborigines in Australia. Apart from the Aborigines the only witness to the killings was Moore; the details of the massacre were inferred primarily from the scene and the injuries suffered by the victims. Depending on the account, the number of Aborigines involved ranges from 50 to 200, which demonstrates the tentative nature of the reconstruction. None of the Aborigines thought to be involved in the massacre were questioned or brought to trial; the revenge was swift and brutal. (Perrin)

The Cullin-la-Ringo massacre is the central story of Alex Miller’s novel Landscape of Farewell. In Miller’s version of the story the Aboriginal account of the massacre has been handed down through his people’s oral tradition by Gnapun, the fictional leader of those responsible for the massacre. Dougald Gnapun, his great-grandson, knows his great-grandfather’s story will be lost unless it is written down, but he is frustrated in his effort to write: “If I can tell the story, why can’t I write it?” he asks. (155) Dougald’s answer to his problem is to tell the story to Max Otto, a German historian and son of a Nazi, who “loathe[s] books that are made up,” (28) for him to write it on his behalf. Max hesitates at first, believing that as an historian he is not up to writing Gnapun’s story. It is a poet that is needed, he says, recalling Nietzsche who argued that “the historian is devoid of the creative spark.” (167)
In the process of turning Dougald’s oral history into a written account, Max discovers that guilt was “not the experience only of the heartless perpetrator of a crime, but was a complex and pervasive condition of the human soul.” (77) This paper argues that fiction may, in Dominick LaCapra’s words, “provide a more expansive space ... for exploring modalities of responding to trauma;” (185) a space that also allows for an examination of the complexities inherent within violent crimes and a space to remember when other avenues, such as public memorial and history, are not available. Those with an oral tradition, those who are politically silenced and those who are forgotten turn to storytelling for a voice. Miller’s Landscape of Farewell not only presents history from an alternative viewpoint but, through the characters of Max and Dougald, is a response through fiction to the legacy of a violent past.

Guilt and shame impose a silence on those like Max and Dougald who are the descendents of perpetrators:

We may not ourselves have participated directly in massacring our fellow humans – and surely no sane person will hold the children responsible for the murders committed by their fathers – but our troubling sense that we are guilty-by-association with their crimes is surely justified by our knowledge that we are ourselves members of the same murdering species as they. (21)

This silence, imposed by family and country, has resulted in the “inability to memorialise the deeds of ... [their] fathers” (166) through the act of writing. The novel explores the difficulty of recording these complicated issues as history and the opportunity that fiction offers for working through and coming to terms with the past. Max and Dougald share complex emotions and a complicated place in history – guilty-by-association, victim and bystander – but the shared experience of a traumatic inheritance and the silence surrounding their past offers the opportunity to speak and to listen and to see that we are all implicated in each other’s traumas as Cathy Caruth argues. Through Miller’s
characters the silence that surrounds the perpetrators of violence and the need to tell their stories is opened up.

Silence and secrecy are common to the losers in history; but the need to memorialise loss is not restricted to the heroes and winners. “And wasn’t it our dismay at finding ourselves on the losing side of it that had rendered us mute?” asks Max. (121) “Defeat is a great silencer. To explain it we must accuse ourselves, or we must lie.” (122) According to several websites visiting the grave of Horatio Wills is one of the exciting things tourists can do in Queensland. But where are the graves of the three Aborigines who were murdered in the mistaken belief that they had stolen sheep; murders that led to the massacre of the Wills’ party? And where are the graves of those Aborigines murdered in revenge? Omer Bartov argues that the “polarity between the portrayal of war as an occasion for humanity to express its nobility, and its perception as an opportunity for human savagery, is ... deeply embedded in culture and civilisation.” (117) But as Max reflects: “How we are to speak of defeat is less obvious to us than how we might boast of our heroism and our glorious victories.” (121) Heroism and glorious victories are the things of nationalist stories and history; fiction is the place to explore the experiences of the individual and of human savagery.

Both the victors and the vanquished have stories in need of preservation and ghosts to be laid to rest. The winners have the parades and the memorials and a place in history but the losers, even those losers like Dougald who are also victims, often have none of these avenues to remember and mourn, but literature offers a space to confront these complex issues. However, there are many who argue that there are limitations to the way some events can be represented. Berel Lang objects to using figural language to describe the Holocaust, considering that only the literal can be used to adequately describe such horrors. His objection is that the author comes between the event that is represented and the representation of it. Like Max the historian, there is the concern that by writing about crimes such as genocide and massacres in fiction there is the risk of humanising “the motives of the perpetrators of the massacre” and that maybe “fiction dissolves the pain too readily.” (228)
Hayden White, on the other hand, argues that there are no limitations to the way stories can be told provided the facts are not distorted. (1999) The idea of only preserving those parts of the past that can be told as literal excludes those whose stories have been handed down through an oral tradition or as memories and family myths. White argues that interpretation “can proceed only by departing from whatever passes for literal … language.” (1999: 127) To adhere only to the literal is to deny many people a voice. As we know from the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre there are times when the facts don’t tell the whole story. The facts tell us that 19 people were murdered but they don’t tell us the context in which this massacre occurred. Was this massacre part of an ongoing state of war? At what point does warfare become atrocity? Gnapun’s story is ambiguous – was his an act of glorious nobility or human savagery? In literature these questions can be posed without the need to give an explicit answer.

Some aspects of the past are not recorded in history, but nevertheless they have a place in our national story and our understanding of the past. Rather than perpetuating their silence because history has no written documents from which to draw, they can have a voice through the imagination of the fiction writer. Max argues that: “Belonging, home, the meaning of such things is not to be settled through argument and the presentation of evidence, or even facts. Such things are enigmas and their truth is not rational but is poetic, their uncertainties not resolvable into facts and proofs.” (42) Gnapun’s story is told as a true story and Max gives the written version the sub-title: “A true story by Dougal Gnapun,” but Max thinks of the story as a work of fiction. Although he believes he has been entrusted to preserve the truth of Dougal’s story it is Max who has “enacted” it on the page, investing much of himself and his imagination in it in the way that Lang argues against writing stories of atrocity. As an historian Max knows that what he has written is not an historical account but is nevertheless a “true” story. Prior to the nineteenth century it was thought that the “imagination no less than the reason had to be engaged in any adequate representation of the truth,” according to Hayden White, and it is only with the rise of the professional historian that the idea of the imagination as a “hindrance to understanding reality” came into being. (1985: 123) It is
the imagination that gives us access to the emotions and motives of those involved in crimes such as massacres and genocide.

The inevitable comparison of Australian massacres and possible genocide with the Holocaust will always occur, but regardless of the statistics and the definitions it was our fellow humans who were responsible for both. In writing the story of Gnapun Max discovers that he has identified himself with the perpetrator of a massacre. Because this is a positive experience Max is perplexed. “It was a puzzle to me how I could have composed his story with such a sense of innocent detachment from the crimes, and yet with an intense belief in the emotions of the motives that had brought those crimes about.” (216) In literature we can explore those aspect of our past that perhaps do not quite fit our national story, including comparison with the Holocaust. The motivation of ordinary people to commit extraordinary crimes has slowly become the topic of German fiction since 1945. For Germans writing about their experience of the Second World War it is necessary to explore the emotions and motives of those involved rather than relate the events. When the perpetrator is part of your personal past it is necessary to investigate the why and the how rather than the what. Demonising the perpetrators in history prevents us from confronting the all too human aspects of the violent past. As Max says we are all members of the same murdering species. Nationalist stories promoting silence and forgetting prolong the pain; writing about a painful past does not dissolve the pain but offers a way of coming to terms with the past. There is, however, a risk of creating empathy for the perpetrators of violent crimes. Max asks: “Suppose one day the descendants of those massacred innocents should come upon my story and see in it a celebration of what had taken place?” (229) This raises the question of who can tell the story of the violent past. Should limit events only be told by the victims? What happens when there are no survivors to tell the story? Max, the German son of a Nazi, turns out to be the perfect person to write the story of an Indigenous Australian perpetrator. Sometimes it is difficult for a nation to reflect on a past that has been brutal and violent and there is comfort in versions of the past that gloss over or distort these aspects of our history. In Australia the lack of historical records surrounding events such as the
Cullin-la-Ringo massacre has given some comfort to those who would deny that we have anything to feel shame about.

Dominick LaCapra argues that “[s]omething of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence.” (2001: 49) And Postone & Santner argue that this trace of the past that remains for the “children and grandchildren of survivors” means they have “obligations of memory” which “call for elaboration and interpretation.” (1) History is revised and re-written as new evidence is found and new approaches are needed, but when the traces of the past are nothing more than ghosts that haunt; the imagination is needed to confront these ghosts. Max had been able to lose himself in the writing of fiction. He says: “For once in my life I had not been constrained by the severe discipline of history, but had been at liberty to invoke the dilemmas inscribed in my own heart, inscribed there during my childhood, and which had haunted me ever since.” (216) Although Max was only a child during the war his failure to help a gypsy girl he met only hours after she had witnessed the murder of her family has haunted him ever since. While he may not have known about the larger atrocities being carried out in his country, he knew the gypsy girl had very recently seen her family murdered, but still he failed to help her. “You are not forgotten,” Max says, but in reality without some enduring record of her existence she will be. (261) Now many years later it is not her death that Max regrets but not knowing her name; her death was inevitable. But who is there to remember those like the gypsy girl, and Max’s uncle the German farmer and Gnapun who “loved [their] land and lived and died alone for the sake of it?” (267) Dougal and Max are both old men, unafraid of dying, accepting its inevitability; however, they are conscious of what they take with them in death. Dougal says: “My fear is that I will die suddenly and it will be lost. What I fear is to lose the truth of this thing.” (156) The failure to record the truth leaves “a gap in the unconscious, an unknown, unrecognized knowledge” the effects of which “can persist through several generations and determine the fate of an entire family line.” (Rashkin, 1988: 39)
Max says: “I possess two unreconciled histories of my father in my imagination – or is it in my memory? One is of a good soldier who leads his men into battle with courage; the other is of a dimly seen figure engaged upon unspeakable acts in a place where the light fails to penetrate.” (103)

Australian history is like Max, with two unreconciled histories of courage and unspeakable acts and versions of the past that are a mixture of memory and imagination. And like Max there is an obligation to memory to reconcile those two histories. There are times when it takes courage to hear the story from the point of view of the other in history. It also takes courage to confront those aspects of the past that are painful. “It’s not a sin to have regrets ... It’s only a sin to deny having them so we don’t have to do anything about them,” Dougald’s niece, tells Max. (49) The issue of humanising the deeds of the perpetrators is only one of the reasons that cause Max to hesitate to write his father’s story as fiction. He also fears that the fictionalising of these deeds will promote acceptance which “is surely an early stage of forgetting,” (228) and thus, rather than memorialise he will achieve the opposite, forgetting. I argue that acceptance, rather than promoting forgetting, actually promotes remembering. As Hayden White argues, it is only through an interpretation of an event is it possible to know “not only how to describe and explain such an object but whether it can be adequately described or explained at all.” (1999: 126)

By the end of the novel Max is preparing “to venture into the darkness” of his “family’s silence” to write about his father’s experiences as a German soldier in the Second World War. But still he cannot decide whether to write the story as history or fiction. He asks: “what else might it become but a fiction?” It is too emotionally charged to be written as history and it is fiction that offers a space for multiple possibilities in which to respond to crimes and trauma. Most of us draw back from humanising the perpetrators of horrible deeds as this brings those perpetrators too close to us as fellow humans. Literature, with its ability to create empathy between reader and character brings us face to face with the human reality that all crimes are committed by our fellow humans. But literature also provides a space to respond to this inherited trauma without the pressure of politics and the law; a necessary space to confront the past in multiple ways. As Paul Ricoeur says a “society
cannot be continually angry with itself.” (501) Because fiction brings us closer to the emotions and motives of the perpetrator Max holds on to writing his father’s story as history which allows him to continue to hold his father and his deed’s at a distance. However, he worries: what if “the facts of [his] father’s story were so dire they refused to yield to the poetics of fiction?” Why does Max think a poet is needed to tell Gnapun’s story but that his own violent past may not yield to poetics? Surely both stories require the poets touch, as White argues, “conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information.” (2005: 149)

However, perhaps some things cannot be, and should not be, written as fiction. W G Sebald in his lecture On the Natural History of Destruction claims that “fiction pales” before the “informative value of ... authentic documents,” advocating a documentary style to describe events that are “incommensurable with traditional aesthetics.” (Sebald, 2003 61) Sometimes there are no authentic documents from which to tell the story, does that mean those who were undocumented are to remain silent and silenced? Literature offers a shared space where violence and trauma, secrecy and silence can be opened up, a space where we can speak and listen to each other, a unique space less reliant on documentation and more able to explore the humanity of our past.

Miller brings together characters and problems that could never be brought together in the pages of history. Two men who carry with them the ghosts of their pasts and are themselves marginalised within history’s pages. The gypsy girl, Dougal’d’s father and Max’s uncle represent those other groups whose stories remain largely untold. The juxtaposition of an Indigenous Australian, more often viewed as the victim of colonisation, and the descendent of a Nazi as both inheriting the deeds of their fathers and the parallels between the German farmer and his connection to and love of the land with Indigenous Australians break down the idea of a national culture having exclusive rights to guilt and shame and the need to come to terms with the past. Where else but in fiction could these disparate players with common concerns be brought together? Where else could those “brave and gifted souls ... find their voices?” (227)
Bibliography


