



The Bath Fugues

Brian Castro

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Brian Castro's fictionalized Pessanha: Camilo Conceição's place in *The Bath Fugues*

DAVID BROOKSHAW*

ABSTRACT: The central focus of the article is an interpretation of Brian Castro's novel, *The Bath Fugues* (2009), and in particular the role of one of its central characters, the poet Camilo Conceição, a fictional re-creation of the Portuguese poet Camilo Pessanha, who lived in Macau from 1894 until his death in 1926. The article traces themes in this novel back to the author's central preoccupations expressed in his previous work, namely issues surrounding identity as a plural and mobile concept, the hybrid nature of identity, the importance of storytelling, and the relationship between fiction and reality, invention and truth.

KEYWORDS: Brian Castro; Macau literature; Australian literature; Postcolonial studies

Over a literary career spanning more than thirty years, Brian Castro has frequently used his cosmopolitan upbringing to highlight, often in an apparently playful way, the issue of identity in a globalized world, and in the particular context of Australia, his adopted country. Castro arrived in Australia in 1961, at the age of eleven, when the policies associated with limiting immigration from Asia, and encouraging it from Europe, though gradually being dismantled, were still in operation. In his novels and essays, Castro takes issue with Australian essentialism based on its narrowly Anglophone, Anglo-Celtic cultural values which it has traditionally projected to the world. His novel, *The Bath Fugues* (2009)¹, is no exception. Indeed, it is an elaboration on themes examined in previous novels, from *Pomeroy* (1990) through to *After China* (1992) and *Shanghai Dancing* (2003)².

The title of the novel plays on the two uses of the term 'fugue', namely its description of a musical composition relying on a set of contrapuntal techniques and involving imitation, repetition, and thematic recurrence. A fugue typically has three sections, rather like the acts of a play: an exposition, a development, and a final section containing the return of the subject in the fugue's tonic key. In the manner of a fugue, Castro's novel is built up on three interlinked and interwoven novellas, the central one, 'Walter's Brief', reconstructing the life of Camilo Conceição, a character modelled on Macau's most famous poetic resident, Camilo Pessanha.

The term 'fugue' also has a psychological connotation. At its most basic, it is a flight of fancy, but as one of the characters explains, it relates to "a flight from one's own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality... a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress in a neurotic, during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the person's outward behaviour may appear rational" (Castro, 2009: 71). Ultimately, this sense of the word is as important to the novel as the musical term describing its technique and structure. The novel's title is a play on the Bach Fugues, and is justified by the fact that the characters in the novel are prone to flights of fancy while relaxing in their baths, chief among them, Conceição,

*An emeritus professor at the University of Bristol, who has written widely on the literatures of the Lusophone world, and translated a number of its writers into English. He is the author and editor of many studies, among these, *Perceptions of China in Modern Portuguese Literature*, and the organizer and translator of the anthology, *Visions of China: Stories from Macau*. His most recent translation is of Mia Couto's novel, *Woman of the Ashes*.

Professor emérito da Universidade de Bristol, escreve amplamente sobre a literatura do mundo lusófono e traduziu vários escritores para o inglês. É autor e editor de diversos estudos, entre os quais, Perceptions of China in Modern Portuguese Literature, e organizador e tradutor da antologia, Visions of China: Stories from Macau. Recentemente traduziu o romance de Mia Couto, Mulheres de Cinza.

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who dies in his while in his final, opium-induced trip.

The first section of the novel, ‘Beckett’s Bicycle’ has as its central character, Jason Redvers, describing his relationship with various other protagonists, most notably his former lecturer and mentor Walter Gottlieb, his lover and former wife Marie de Nerval, whom Gottlieb inherits from him, and the enigmatic Fabiana Martins, on whose estate in the interior of New South Wales, Redvers finds refuge after Gottlieb’s death. Redvers has appeared in other guises in Castro’s previous novels: here, he is a sixty-year old son of Macau, who has lived most of his life in Australia, but has travelled widely, and lived for many years in France, working in restaurants to fund his spare-time activity as a forger of paintings. After serving a prison sentence for this, he is rescued by Gottlieb while on a trip to France, who gets him a proper job as an attendant in an art gallery. There are echoes of Castro’s earlier somewhat rakish protagonist, Jaime Pomeroy, who had embodied the power of imagination and the gift of storytelling, as well as the flight from the constrictions of identity labelling. Redvers, for his part, has a literary predecessor: he is the grandson of the poet, Camilo Conceição, whose story is purloined by Gottlieb from his protégé’s family memories and turned into his own novel. Already, then, this first fugue considers the links between imagination and theft, creativity, originality and forgery, as well as memory, truth and fiction. Indeed, as Gottlieb contemplates putting an end to his own life as his fugue draws to a close, he ponders on whether his re-creation of Conceição’s life may not be the forgery of a forgery, putting into question his academic reputation: “Had I not interrogated Redvers, absorbed his memory, found out all I could in order to glimpse the palimpsest of Conceição? Had Redvers knowingly lied and I blindly followed, or had he lied blindly and I followed knowingly?... Please be assured I have staked my life on my credibility and my research.” (Castro, 2009: 256)

The second fugue, ‘Walter’s Brief’, is Gottlieb’s account of the life of Camilo Conceição. Elements of the real-life Pessanha appear – his illegitimate birth, his departure for Macau in 1894 as a judge, his fraught relationship with Ana Osório de Castro (appearing here as Hannah), his cohabitation with Silver Eagle and her daughter, Nickel Hawk, in Macau, the birth of his son by the latter, who turns into the fictional Jason Redvers’s father, and his descent into the opium addiction that

ultimately killed him. Other elements belong to Castro’s (or Gottlieb’s) creative ‘translation’ of the life we know: Pessanha’s debt to French symbolism is translated into Conceição’s stay in Paris as a young man, his ambiguous republicanism rendered into Conceição’s meetings in Paris with republican exiles and anarchists.

Conceição’s hectic and disorganised lifestyle, the mixture of respect and shame with which he is viewed in colonial society, his collecting of Chinese artefacts, his trips back to Portugal, and even his brief meeting with a youthful Fernando Pessoa, all mirror what we know of Pessanha’s life. But his painting over of the Chinese works of art which he so painstakingly collects reflects the theme of appropriation, copying and forgery, which featured in the first fugue. Nor is appropriation limited to art. Conceição bequeaths to his son the surname of his third concubine, Peregrine, who had in turn appropriated it from her former French lover, De Rivière, producing in its garbled passage from French to Chinese, Portuguese and English, Jason’s imitation of the original: Redvers. Moreover, the Pessanha model is further elasticated into the realm of fiction through Conceição’s brief romance with an itinerant Australian art collector, Julia Grace, in transit in Macau while on passage from Australia to France with her lesbian lover, Anna Angström. The fruit of this liaison, we discover, will be Fabiana’s mother, making Fabiana a distant cousin of Jason Redvers, and mirroring to some extent the blood ties between Jaime Pomeroy and Fatiminha in Castro’s second novel.

The third fugue, ‘Sarraute’s Surgery’, returns us to present-day Australia, somewhere on the Queensland coast, to where Judith Sarraute, a general practitioner, who had appeared in the first fugue, has re-located after being involved in the scandal of a botched sex-change operation in Sydney. She had been Redvers’s and Gottlieb’s doctor. In her own way, she is as cosmopolitan as Redvers. Born in France, the daughter of a Jewish mother who had died during the German occupation, she had inherited her father’s extensive collection of toxins and anti-toxins, which had formed the basis of his expertise. Just as Redvers is the grandson of a fictionalized Pessanha, so Judith is potentially the fictional daughter of a fictionalized Nathalie Sarraute (1900-99). Unlike Judith’s mother, however, Nathalie Sarraute survived the war, becoming an accepted forerunner of existentialism, friend of Sartre who admired her work, and part of the post-war movement

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that reacted against social realism in fiction, concerning itself with the inner motivations of human behaviour that would feed into what became the *nouveau roman*. Nathalie Sarraute had prided herself on writing a fiction that was not easy, but required the reader's attention and participation, much as Castro does in his own work, and in his own predilection for inter-textual references and coincidences.

In this fugue, we encounter another of Castro's favourite themes, previously explored in novels such as *After China and Drift* (1994): the cost to mankind in his quest to tame the wilderness and tamper with nature. The main secondary character in the narrative at this point is the wealthy entrepreneur, Carter Cordillion, who is establishing a tourist resort in the area. After attempting to buy Judith's house to complete his monopoly of the surrounding land, he has helped her with some real estate investments, including partnership in a restaurant, which will ultimately become the site of her own major project, an art museum. When there is a plague of deadly jellyfish, the fish that had ensured the economic sustainability of the area are killed, and increasing numbers of bathers are brought into the surgery, requiring Judith's skills and knowledge of anti-toxins. It requires an oil tanker to run aground on a reef and release its own viscous poison to bring the jellyfish plague to an end, but by that time, it is too late. Much as Judith's pathologist report on Redvers had confirmed his approaching mortality, Judith has to convey similar news to Carter, who commits suicide, bequeathing to her his share in the restaurant, thus enabling her to proceed with her museum project, which will house some of the collections amassed by Julia Grace and Redvers, including works by Camilo Conceição.

The fugues are held together by a plethora of intertextual references from Michel de Montaigne, about whom Redvers is attempting to write a book, to Baudelaire, Camilo Conceição's poetic model in his early Paris sojourn, to Sarraute. Even the twin sisters, Blixen and Blimunde, the result of a dalliance between Gottlieb and Fabiana, contain literary allusions – Blixen, the nomadic, free thinking Danish author of *Out of Africa*, Blimunde, the lover and spiritual twin of Baltasar in José Saramago's most iconic novel, *Baltasar and Blimunda*³. But the most audacious appropriation of cultural antecedents is Walter Gottlieb, whose name derives from hybrid influences, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a student of Sebastian Bach, and a composer

for the harpsichord, the author of the Goldberg Variations appropriated but also acknowledged by his master in the composition now known as the Bach Fugues. The use of these inter-textual references merely underlines some of the major themes of Castro's novel, which are re-elaborations of concerns expressed in his previous work: literature is a self-referential activity, which derives from and is in dialogue with the literature that has preceded it. Central to this, of course, is the concept that all art is imitation, and therefore forgery, which is why Judith's museum is going to be a museum of forgery, in recognition of this idea.

Forgery, therefore, is a central motif in this novel, since it clearly relates to Castro's continuing concern with trying to define (or in fact un-define) identity. We have already seen that, for Castro, identity lies in plurality, and is linked to fiction and the art of storytelling. The problem in *The Bath Fugues* is that narratives are purloined: Redvers's tale of his grandfather is appropriated by Gottlieb and transformed into his own novel. Identity, then, is further de-stabilized by making it prone to theft, whether in Redvers's renderings of Francis Bacon paintings, or Gottlieb's biographical fiction of Camilo Conceição. All creativity begins life as imitation: a work is executed over other, older works, leaving these like palimpsests, artistic layers under the new work. In painting over the old Chinese paintings he collected, Camilo was, in his own way, unwittingly the forger that his grandson, Jason Redvers, would openly become. However, Camilo, like his real-life model, Camilo Pessanha, was primarily a poet who collected Chinese art, but who translated classical Chinese poetry. Perhaps Castro, through his character Gottlieb, is suggesting a link between translation, imitation, and forgery. It is significant that Gottlieb's first name is Walter, and that the epigraph to his novella is a quote from one of the most celebrated literary and translation theorists of the twentieth century: Walter Benjamin. A central plank to Benjamin's theory is that the act of translation should not only bring out the hidden meaning of the original text but also transform in some measure the translating language. Translation, therefore, is not merely an act of copying one language into another. For Benjamin, it is not surface imitation, but an act of hybridity, and above all, a creative process. In painting over older works, Camilo Conceição therefore injected into them his own imagination, 'forging' his own route into the artistic

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subconscious, much as the real Pessanha did with his poetic translations from Chinese. As Redvers himself puts it: “This painting-over, this restoring or *forging* a new road, experiencing the past and experimenting with the future, was what my grandfather did to unearth his poetic inspiration” (Castro, 2009:113).

Castro’s heavily baroque notion of cyclical time is underpinned by symbolic motifs that recur in each of the fugues. The first is an image that is quintessential to the idea of forward movement and propulsion, and also cyclicity. Redvers invests in a 1928 Swift Safety bicycle, on which he moves around. Conceição traverses Macau on a tricycle, while Sarraute takes long bike rides. The bicycle combines the contrasting ideas of movement and flight, and stasis, in so far as the rider sits in the same place, and repeats the same circular movements. In this sense, it is the landscape which moves past rather than the rider, the latter’s flight being no more than a tortured illusion. Thus, the bike ride is a means for the mind to wander, the physical expression of the fugue in the psychological sense.

The same movement forward is symbolized by liquid flow. Redvers’s name plays on the contrasting suggestion of the words ‘reverse’ and ‘river’, from which, as we have seen, it is derived. Water washes away stasis, whether it is Jason Redvers’s kidney stones, or the unblocking of the channels which feed the waterholes on Fabiana’s property. Flowing water suggests the cleansing of corruptive matter, and by extension, the re-birth of imagination, creativity, and new life. It also suggests the progress of time, or at least, the opening of a new cycle of time and the temporary victory over stasis. As Redvers commits his act of self-destruction by releasing the subterranean channels that have silted up, he turns his death into an act of creativity and renewal: “... and when the bung bursts open, there will be an almighty gush of water and time, uncontrollable, a diabolical pumping and shuddering circulation, for water is true imagination, memory dammed up over time, seeping from dense sources, and the earth is impressionable, receptive of such leakage” (Castro, 2009: 150/1).

Finally, movement and liquidity, counteract the stagnation of pressure to assimilate into an acceptance of identity as a fixed category, whether at a personal or national level. Even Cordillion’s involvement with Samantha, his transsexual lover, reflects this pressure, for he wishes her to undertake gender reassignment

that would set her on a path to an artificially induced single identity, which she resists, but which Cordillion sees as a ‘return’ to normality. The theme is a further extrapolation of the relationship between Pomeroy and Stella Wang in Castro’s earlier novel, and once again illustrates the author’s underlying interest in states of in-betweenness, in identity as a never-ending process rather than a fixed state to be arrived at. In Cordillion’s relationship with Samantha, the author seems to invite us to challenge accepted notions of normality. Indeed, beyond these concerns, there is a sense in which the supreme form of freedom is to have no identity at all. The third fugue contains an enigmatic narrator who is invisible and unknown to all but Judith Sarraute. The ‘grifter’, as he is called, encompasses both the idea of drifting (eternal movement and rootlessness), and graft, with its attendant notion of insertion and parasitism, the stock-in-trade of the forger and the thief. The ‘grifter’ is a ghost, whose travels and daily living are funded by petty theft. We are unsure whether he is the ghost of a Redvers at last set free, or merely a stream of collective consciousness encapsulating the characters of Redvers, Conceição, and all of life’s drifters and existential escapers. Whatever the case, he is a shadow who has disappeared “behind a mask, beneath the surface of things” (Castro, 2009: 354). The ‘grifter’ survives the plague and the apocalyptic ending, to witness nature’s reclaiming of its realm from civilization after the oil slick, the renewal of life and the return of the ocean in its pristine, untamed beauty. A new cycle begins, and perhaps another set of fugues. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Brian Castro, *The Bath Fugues*, Artarmon NSW, Giramondo, 2009.
- 2 For a monographic study of Castro’s novels, see Bernadette Brennan, *Brian Castro’s Fiction: The Seductive Play of Language*, Amherst NY, Cambria Press, 2008. See also, David Brookshaw, ‘Hybridity and the Pleasures of Disinheritance’, Macau, *Revista de Cultura*, 8, 2003, p.131-139, and ‘The Power of the Story in Postcolonial Fiction: The Novels of Brian Castro and Mia Couto’, Macau, *Revista de Cultura*, 13, 2005, p.143-149.
- 3 *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1987) is the English translation (by Giovanni Pontiero) of Saramago’s first internationally successful novel, *Memorial do Convento* (1982).