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The Palimpsest of the Said and the Unsaid: Peter Carey's Search for the Past

Abstract: The article explores strategies of elliptical writing in *The Chemistry of Tears* (2012) by Peter Carey, a novel concerned with the presentation of the processes of concealing and revealing the troublesome past and its connections with the present. It argues that, systematically oscillating between the secret and the revealed, the novel tries to negotiate its way through the palimpsest of the past to re-construct the versions so far unrepresented or suppressed. The narrative introduces and then slowly fills in narrative gaps, omissions and allusions, becoming a dramatisation of the elliptical strategies of prose. The first level of the operation of elliptical strategies concerns personal stories of characters; the next is represented by larger history and its ramifications for the present; while the last includes historiography and literary tradition. In the centre of the numerous layers of the text and its parallel plots, bringing together and intersecting the characters and themes of the novel, stands the central image of the automaton connected with the processes of revelation and restoration. It encapsulates the novel's elliptical strategies by filling in various textual gaps and yet, in the postmodernist gesture characteristic of Peter Carey's novels, simultaneously hinting at the profound impossibility of any such operation.

Keywords: ellipsis, metonymy, allusion, meta-history, Peter Carey

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Palimpsest wypowiedzianego i niewypowiedzianego: Petera Carey'a poszukiwanie przeszłości

Streszczenie: Artykuł bada eliptyczne strategie pisania zastosowane w *Chemii łez* (2012) Petera Carey'a – powieści, która koncentruje się na problemach ukrywania i ujawniania problematycznej przeszłości i jej związków ze współczesnością. Dowodzi on, iż oscylując między tym, co ukryte i co ujawnione, powieść próbuje przedrzeć się poprzez palimpsest przeszłości i zrekonstruować jej dotychczas niereprezentowane lub przemilczane wersje. Powieść wprowadza, a następnie wypełnia szereg luk, niedopowiedzeń i aluzji, fabularyzując tym samym eliptyczne strategie, którymi się zajmuje. Pierwszy poziom eliptycznych zabiegów to dzieje bohaterów; drugi – to szerzej rozumiana przeszłość i jej konsekwencje dla współczesności; ostatni to problematyka historiografii i gry z literacką tradycją. W centrum tych licznych warstw tekstowych i równoległych wątków stoi kluczowa figura automatu, który niczym zwornik łączy bohaterów powieści i jej główne problemy, wiążąc ze sobą tematy ujawniania i przywracania. Automat zbiera w sobie eliptyczne strategie powieści poprzez wypełnienie narracyjnych luk, jednocześnie wskazując, w postmodernistycznym geście charakterystycznym dla pisarstwa Petera Carey'a, na zasadniczą i nieusuwalną niemożliwość takich operacji.

Słowa kluczowe: elipsa, metonimia, aluzja, meta-historia, Peter Carey

1. Ellipsis: the art of hole-making

In the theory of prose, the rhetorical figure of ellipsis is most frequently defined in relation to the plot duration and plot gaps. Tzvetan Todorov, for instance, describes it as "an omission [in the plot] of the whole period of action time" (Todorov 1984: 48; my translation) and classifies it as one of the plot-making devices used to turn a story into a discourse. Similarly, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan conceptualises ellipsis as a method of accelerating the plot; she observes that "acceleration is produced by devoting a short segment of the text to a long period of the story […] the maximum speed is ellipsis (omission) where zero textual space corresponds to some story duration" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 53). Ellipsis, then, may be described roughly as an omission for the sake of brevity, as an elimination of content not necessarily essential to the story. Such omission, however, may also function in a way unconnected with the duration and the speed of the story. It may, for example, in an allusive way paradoxically draw attention to the material eliminated for other than temporal reasons. This is the case, for instance, of erotic content whose details, for the sake of propriety, tend to be eliminated, with only some hints left as to their presence. In such situations, gaps and silences, as David Lodge observes, "are a conscious artistic strategy, to imply

rather than state meaning" (Lodge 1992: 190). Thus, ellipsis conceptualised as a conscious elimination may be either smooth and unnoticed, creating no problems for the reader and hence no curiosity, or to the contrary – it may be marked and pronounced so as to draw attention to the fact of withdrawing information. It may concern the plot, character or the theme and may serve as a neutral way of condensing the story or, contrarily, as a method of intensifying its meanings.

In both cases, the use of ellipsis produces the demand for the activity of the reader who has to imaginatively "fill in" the gaps with his or her interpretation of what was omitted by the author. Rimmon-Kenan concludes that "the gap […] always enhances interest and curiosity, prolongs the reading process, and contributes to the reader's dynamic participation in making the text signify" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 129). Similarly, in his elaboration of the reader-response theory Wolfgang Iser observes that

> no tale can be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty of establishing connections – for filling in gaps left by the text itself. (Iser 1971: 285)

The reading process involves the reader in the act of making a coherent whole out of the sometimes fragmented narrative and thus reveals the intertextual nature of all literature which always refers its readers back to earlier stories or to earlier knowledge. It activates the gap-filling mechanisms which in an act of imaginative reconstruction complete the Ingardenian "spots of indeterminacy" (Ingarden 1979: 249) and create images and senses only signalled by the narrative. The use of ellipsis, then, is far from a neutral or inconsequential mechanical procedure – rather, it is one of the ways in which the readers, to paraphrase Umberto Eco's formulation, produce texts by reading them (cf. Eco 1979).

Therefore, due to its ambiguous nature of hiding and disclosing, the rhetorical figure of ellipsis turns out a useful instrument in the practice of prose writing: it may accelerate the plot, engage the reader or allude to the unpronounceable content. In brief, it may function as a powerful tool to both conceal the undesired or censored notions and simultaneously to reveal, via exposing the gap between what is said and what is left unsaid, the issues which are difficult – for various reasons – to express. The hints left in the narrative function as signals of the omission and draw the attention of the readers precisely to that which has been omitted, activating their curiosity and sense-making processes. The paradoxical revelatory potential of ellipsis – which speaks through silence – proves particularly useful when trying to communicate not merely erotic details but also such "unspeakable" themes as e.g. trauma, uncomfortable past or intimate personal experience. Thus, the use of textual ellipsis connects the level of discourse (i.e. the omission of narrative content) with the logico-semantic level of the text, making the textual gaps "speak" and reveal the themes often too painful or problematic to be rendered openly. It may then have an ethical potential of addressing the notions connected e.g. with suffering, hurt or injustice. Following Dominic LaCapra, one may suggest that such use of ellipsis may create an opportunity for the story to become a redemptive narrative and assist the characters and / or the reader in the process of confronting and working through trauma (cf. LaCapra 2001) or crisis. In so doing, via the never complete omission, ellipsis opens the gates to the deeper levels of the story, palimpsestically

covered with new layers, yet inviting to be revealed and reconstructed – and this reconstruction may have both a revelatory and healing potential. Ellipsis, therefore, cannot be treated merely as silence or elimination: it is the absence that speaks, leaves traces, drops hints, conceals yet reveals. Hence, it is an interactive strategy that invites interpretation and completion of the missing content. As such it is a staple method of communication used in literature, particularly often in Modernist writing where in such classic examples as the fiction by Virginia Woolf it is used to hint at past traumas or in the works by Samuel Beckett it signals the impossibility of communication. However, Postmodernist fiction, too, just as the fiction of all times, makes frequent use of this rhetorical strategy of communication.

This article explores the strategies of elliptical writing in *The Chemistry of Tears* (2012), one of the novels by Peter Carey concerned with the presentation of the processes of concealing and revealing the troublesome past of its characters and with the uncovering of the connections between past and present. In Carey's fiction the representation of the past is one of the most frequently recurring themes and it tends to be variously conceptualized: as the Australian difficult history (*True History of the Kelly Gang, A Long Way from Home*), as literary tradition (*Oscar and Lucinda, Jack Maggs*), or as personal story (*My Life as a Fake*). *The Chemistry of Tears* belongs to the latter category, although it connects the personal story and the personal past of its characters to the larger European and world history, showing the parallels between the personal and the global. In what follows I will argue that, systematically oscillating between the past and the present, the secret and the revealed, the social and the personal, Carey's novel tries to negotiate its way through the palimpsest of the past to re-construct the versions so far unrepresented and unsaid. This oscillation is connected with the introducing and then slowly filling in narrative gaps created by the text. The narrative fabric of *The Chemistry of Tears* contains numerous gaps, omissions and allusions and as such, it may be seen as an excellent dramatisation of the elliptical strategies of prose. The first immediately available level of the operation of elliptical strategies concerns personal stories of the characters which contain unsaid secrets, clandestine relationships and poignant experiences. The next level is represented by larger history which likewise is revealed as a narrative text with numerous elliptical gaps. In the novel, the past seems to be the area of operation of concepts and ideas that, seemingly neutral and "transparent" at the time, hence not needing explanation, have their far-reaching ramifications for the present and the future, which can only be noticed and interpreted later. In an elliptical gesture, the novel conceals these connections at the start, only to reveal them at the ending of the story. Finally, there is the level of historiography with its reflection on history writing, and literary tradition with its allusions to other works of fiction. Each of these aspects is constructed with the help of elliptical strategies and all of them intertwine in the rich textual fabric of the novel. In the centre of the numerous layers of the text and its parallel plots stands the figure of the automaton, the central image connected with the process of revelation and restoration: of an object, of the past, and of peace. I will argue that the automaton encapsulates the novel's elliptical strategies by filling in various textual gaps with this object, which in a spectacular way shows the impossibility of any such operation. The automaton, ultimately, becomes a sign of the gap that cannot be filled and that can only be contemplated in a work of artistic genius: the artistic object itself, which metonymically represents everything that can never be restored completely, and the novel which dramatises and thematises the processes of elimination and restoration.

2. Plot and characters: parallels and tangents

The Chemistry of Tears is a historical novel with two parallel plots running at two time levels: the past situated in the Victorian period (this plot starts in 1854), and the contemporary one, located in the 21st century, in the year 2010. The plots are narrated interchangeably, with the novel oscillating between the past and present and the plots reflecting each other as being concerned with similar problems of loss, failure and grief. They converge, too, at the point when the contemporary character of Catherine, a horologist and conservator at the fictional Swinburne museum in London is asked – as a form of therapy after the loss of her lover – to conserve and reassemble an automaton, which in the past plot is commissioned by the Victorian character, Henry Brandling, who wants to have it made for his sick son, Percy. The parallel plots, then, to some extent constitute a variation on the same theme of absence, loss and vacancy; both characters, as Rūta Šlapkauskaitė observes, are "fellow emotional orphans" (2017: 110), having lost, or almost lost, their beloveds. For both of them, too, their loss has to remain secret and unexpressed for social reasons: Catherine had a long-lasting affair with a married man and a curator at her museum which had to remain hidden; Henry suffers because of the loss of his daughter and the illness of his son but also because of his estrangement from his wife who emotionally rejected him and chased him away from their home. Both protagonists are also constructed as emotionally withdrawn figures lacking any deeper contact with other characters; both, then, are doomed to secrecy and loneliness. Within their social milieu, their very personal and intimate loss may be only hinted to other characters, with little possibility for them to show it openly or examine it in detail; they tend to conceal rather than reveal it.

Yet, this omission is to some extent remedied by the hints and traces that construct the narrative: Henry's chapters are the entries of his diary which he keeps during his journey to Germany to commission the toy-automaton for his son; they are, in turn, read by Catherine, who, a century and a half later, conserves this very object. It is the reader, then, who is let into conspiracy with Catherine about her love affair, and it is Catherine, in turn, who has a chance to read about Henry's very private loss. The ellipsis, then, or the withdrawal of information, which is eliminated at the level of the plot for the sake of the remaining characters, is simultaneously filled in for the reader who may easily fill the gaps and understand the main protagonists' pain. One may notice, then, that the elliptical strategies employed in the text vary as to their degree: they seem vaster in the case of the characters who sometimes have little chance to see and understand some events of the plot, while the textual gaps are easier to fill for the reader who has the privilege to observe various characters at various time levels. In both cases, however, the ellipsis is best dramatised by the figure of the automaton ordered by Henry and restored by Catherine: a substitute for a lost human object of love, a life-like "counterfeit of life" (Carey 2012: 15), uncanny in its resemblance to and difference from a living organism. Catherine observes that

> anyone who has ever observed a successful automaton, seen its uncanny lifelike movement, confronted its mechanical eyes, any human animal remembers that particular fear, that confusion about what is alive and what cannot be born. Descartes said that animals were automata. I have always been certain that it was the threat of torture that stopped him saying the same

held true for human beings. Neither I nor Matthew had time for souls. That we were intricate chemical machines never diminished our sense of wonder … our evanescent joy before the dying of the light. (ibid.: 19)

The automaton, so similar and yet different to the human, becomes an emblem of both loss and life, an imperfect substitution that inevitably reminds the characters of the irrevocable nature of their loss. Yet, its commission and restoration, the process of its creation and recreation turns out a healing therapy – at least for the character of Catherine. The huge gap in her life, the ultimate ellipsis which is the death of her beloved, is somewhat mitigated by the restoring therapy and the communion with other protagonists she meets and works with in the process of restoring the automaton whose completion closes the novel and emblematically suggests the completion of mourning. In the case of Henry, his ellipsis, or the gap created by loss, is never filled: his plot ends with the ready automaton being shipped from Germany to England; whether his son was still alive, whether he could see and enjoy it – the reader never learns.

The automaton which constitutes the heart of the novel's plot and meaning functions as an emblem of ellipsis also in reference to other characters. Most of the main protagonists involved with it seem to miss something or have some clear deficits: Catherine and Henry miss their beloveds, Henry's son, Percy, is a sickly child deprived of any joy of childhood, Karl, the angel-child and Herr Sumper's apprentice, is lame, and Amanda, Catherine's assistant at the restoration, seems emotionally unstable. All of these characters are misfits, warped and misshapen by life and fate, lacking an essential grounding in mundane reality, and yet strangely beautiful in their fragility and humanity. The automaton brings them together and reflects their fragile beauty, their life mechanics and their organic machinery. It shows the immanent quality of their lives and, generally, of any life: never complete, always elliptic.

3. History: accidents waiting to happen

Apart from the foregrounding of the gaps and omissions involved in the plot and character construction, the automaton also brings in the issues of larger history – and other examples of ellipsis. The historical background adds yet another layer to the palimpsest of the text, anchoring it in a precise historical milieu, yet it does so using the elliptical strategy characteristic of this novel. Thus, the construction of the larger spatio-temporal setting connected with the historical period the story is located in may be analysed as yet another example of elliptical practices.

The automaton commissioned in the novel by Henry Brandling is to be a replica of the historical Jacques Vaucanson's mechanical duck – the automaton invented by the French inventor in the 18th century to imitate the living animal that moved, ate and excreted to the enthusiasm of the audience, yet whose aim went beyond mere entertainment: via imitation, it was to be a study of what was mechanical in organic life (cf. Fryer and Marshall 1979: 257 and on). Vaucanson was also the inventor of the prototype of Jacquard's knitting machine and other industrial contraptions. Interestingly, within the plot of the novel

Vaucanson's duck, which the protagonist orders to be made and which he wants to offer as a precious gift to his sickly son, is dismissed by the craftsman commissioned to produce it as a primitive toy unworthy of the latter's genius and deemed simplistic and unimaginative. In the end, what Henry Brandling receives instead is an infinitely more complex and more beautiful automaton in the shape of a swan, created in the German Schwarzwald village of Furtwangen, located near Karlsruhe, by Herr Sumper and his child-assistant, Karl. The fictional character of Sumper used to be an assistant to Albert Cruickshank, an English genial constructor and engineer whose *idée fixe* was to construct a computing engine – a machine that would eliminate human error, and whose dream was to create an engine so complex as to transgress the limits of narrow human possibilities.

Although entirely fictional, all these plot and character details are highly allusive: while Vaucanson was indeed a historical figure, the character of Cruickshank borrows his name from a 19th-century caricaturist and is a thinly veiled representation of Charles Babbage, the inventor of the difference engine, a prototype of today's computers. Likewise, the insistence on Karlsruhe as a place of action is far from accidental. The image of the city plan of Karlsruhe, included in the novel, draws attention to its peculiar urbanistic design which resembles a wheel. Together with the name of the young assistant, Karl, they all allude to the historical figure of Karl Benz, the inventor of the internal combustion engine and modern transportation. Finally, the fictitious Swinburne museum bears some resemblance to the Victoria and Albert museum with its collection of clocks and automata. Even the swan has its historical model: an automaton of a silver swan which moves in a glass imitation of water and consumes fish belongs to the collection of the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle, County Durham, in Northern England, and was constructed by Jean-Joseph Merlin in 1772.

In an elliptical gesture typical of the novel, the narrative removes all these details leaving only the most essential allusions and enveloping them in a fictitious story. Yet, the hints dropped allow their identification and interpretation despite the gaps. Interestingly, however, in the process of finding and deciphering their historical antecedents, the characters and objects undergo also the process of reinterpretation. The duck and the swan, which for most of the fictitious parts of the novel are presented as emblems of beauty, creativity and imagination, in the light of historical allusions may be interpreted, too, as metonymies of the mechanisation brought by the industrial revolution, of the substitution of the organic with the mechanical and of the foreshadowing of automation and artificial intelligence. This reading is reinforced by the importance attributed to the event introduced in the contemporary plot: the 2010 oil-spill in the Gulf of Mexico (the so-called "BP oil-spill") which brought pollution and death to a large part of oceanic organic life. The automaton connecting the two plots and the characters connects also the mechanisation introduced by the industrial revolution with its delayed effects experienced a hundred and fifty years later. As Rūta Šlapkauskaitė writes, the duck (and hence the swan, too) becomes "a conceptual link between our blind dependence on the modern-day oil industry and our myopia as regards environmental pollution" (Šlapkauskaitė 2017: 111). Apart from being a beautiful object, an emblem of imagination and creativity, the automaton functions then also as a sort of a Trojan horse as its delayed effects turn out disastrous. In the final sections of the novel Catherine tries to decipher the inscription laid in silver on the underside of the swan's beak; it reads "Illud aspices non vides" which is translated in the novel as "You cannot see what

you can see" (Carey 2012: 253). Apart from hinting, for the protagonists, at the mystery of life – the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the mystical book written by Albert Cruickshank – this inscription may hint, for the readers, at the connections which become apparent only with time and experience: at the long-term results produced by the seemingly innocent mechanisation and oil consumption. In a Heideggerian phrase quoted by Rūta Šlapkauskaitė, "technology is a mode of revealing" (cf. Šlapkauskaitė 2017: 112): the automaton and the names and details associated with it, alluded to and triggered by it, reveal not merely the characters' personal secrets but also larger connections. Mechanisation and oil consumption, with their disastrous consequences clearly indicated in the contemporary plot of the novel, hark back at the dystopian or even post-apocalyptic tradition inspired by the monstrous and oppressive consequences of the industrial revolution present in literary tradition from William Blake to Richard Jeffries to J. G. Ballard, to mention the most obvious examples. The disastrous side-effects of technological progress are perhaps an obvious aspect that should be always taken into account. As Paul Virilio famously states, "all technologies are accidents waiting to happen" (Virilio 2012: 14) and inventing technology means simultaneously inventing its unintended and unfortunate outcomes. Yet the blindness towards the consequences of one's actions is probably just as common. Drawing attention to the belated yet unmistaken results of technological development and mechanisation, Carey's novel inscribes itself in both the tradition of dystopian warning and in the belief that technology – including the accidents inevitably connected with it – reveals the larger patterns that govern reality.

At the same time, the novel makes connection between the past and the present and shows it as a process of causes and effects, of actions and their consequences which, though separated in time, can nevertheless be connected and analysed. As presented in the novel, the past is linked to the present sedimentally; it underlies the present both at the personal level and at the more general, global one. The elliptic use of detail, the allusiveness of the characters and their "inventions" reveal the large-scale and dangerous ramifications of progress and technological development.

4. Literary tradition: transformation of a duckling

The story of a duck which in the end turns out to be a mesmerizing swan is, in turn, clearly reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen's story of an ugly duckling. Yet again, the novel elliptically eliminates the reference yet leaves behind the allusions which allow to interpret the absence of Andersen's story and to communicate with the reader despite and through it. The ellipsis and allusions draw attention to the dialogue the novel establishes not only with the historical past but also with the literary tradition.

In Andersen's version, "The Ugly Duckling" is a tale of otherness, misfitting and rejection which in the end turns out optimistic: the ugly and troubled protagonist outgrows all the obstacles and fits in perfectly as a dazzlingly beautiful being (Andersen 2014: 165–170). In Carey's version this transformation is more ambiguous: while the duck seems to

be an innocent toy, and the swan – a creation of genius, their later significance turns out less alluring. Both of them are on the one hand treated in the novel as signs of creativity and imagination, yet also, due to their metonymic interpretation as emblems of mechanisation, they may stand for its unpredicted and damaging results. The change in interpretation, then, in contrast to Andersen's tale of improvement, leads from innocence to experience, from naïve optimism to much darker helplessness. The concluding chapter of the novel shows the prophecy of the future allegedly made by Henry Brandling, although the authenticity of this fragment is uncertain and – again, elliptically – one never learns if it is reliable. Henry seems to foresee the future oil-spill and climate change which he describes in apocalyptic terms:

> And the filth shall spew forth from the depths, like black bile, like gall, and the ocean shall be as a mother giving wormwood from her breasts. The truth will be like a razor no tongue dare touch. A multitude of idiots shall flee back and forth on rivers of tar, an awful honking like generations of geese … The cruel famines, the draughts – all will be enigma and injustice. And any who sees the truth will be called mad. (Carey 2012: 270)

Unlike in Andersen's tale, which shows the change of the rejected duckling into the desired swan and interprets it positively, as a progression from awkwardness and alienation to adjustment and success, *The Chemistry of Tears* shows the change in the interpretation and significance of the objects of desire. Both the duck and the swan, mechanical products of human genius perceived in the past plot as innocent and beautiful, in the present one are revealed as products of the way of thinking which led to the exploitation of nature and the damage brought by mechanisation and industrialisation. The novel dramatises, then, the change not so much of one object or creature into another but rather the change of the perception of their value and the shift in the understanding of the larger processes they exemplify. It shows the achievement so enthusiastically greeted in the past as much more complex and ambiguous, leading also to disaster rather than just to unproblematic development. Alluding to the literary classic, elliptically omitted from the text and only left as a trace, Carey's story takes an issue with the naïve optimism of the idea of progress and shows how the past indeed informs the present and the future, although possibly in a much darker way than one would wish.

At the same time, the operation of elliptical strategies in this particular case is connected with intertextuality: the novel evokes a well-known text, introduces some of its elements, yet it does so in a discrete and allusive way, leaving the process of finding the connections and interpreting them to the reader. In the process, as Heidi Hansson observes, both texts rewrite and reinterpret each other (Hansson 1998: 31) and produce a new and sometimes even subversive meaning. In the case of *The Chemistry of Tears* Andersen's text serves as a mark of the lost innocence and the much darker – though also much more alluring – consequences of progress.

5. Uncovering the past: geological excavations

Finally, the use of ellipsis is also emblematic for yet another layer of the novel, namely its meta-historical interest. Similar to several other of Carey's novels (*Oscar and Lucinda*, *Jack Maggs* or *True History of the Kelly Gang*), *The Chemistry of Tears*, too, foregrounds the process of uncovering and recovering the past from its written documents and from the traces it left not only in material objects (i.e. the automaton) but also in writing. The past, the novel implies, is definitely gone: eliminated, omitted, and concealed; it can only be revealed through the process of deciphering its traces. In its plot construction, characterisation and setting, the novel dramatises the process of both the erasure of the past with its inevitable elimination of everything, and of its, at least partial, recovering through restoration and conservation.

Catherine's obsession with the automaton and with Henry Brandling grows out of her reading of his diary; gradually immersed in his world, she navigates through it due to the process of reading the documents of the past. It is his writing that persuades her to make an effort and unveil both the object to be conserved and its history. She relates:

> I held, in my naked hands, eleven notebooks. Each one I examined was densely inscribed in a distinctive style. Every line began and ended at the very brink, and in between was hand-writing as regular as a factory's sawtooth roof. There was not a whisker's width of margin. … [I]t was definitely this peculiar style of handwriting that engaged my tender sympathy, for I decided that the writer had been mad … and I pitied him before I read a word. (Carey 2012: 21–22)

It is the reading of the authentic document of the past which both unveils the long-gone secrets and sets the protagonists on a search for them. Yet, Henry's diary is not the only document studied in the novel: he himself, together with Herr Sumper, studies the 18th-century design of Vaucanson's duck and also the city plan of Karlsruhe. The documents, archives and objects become a point of connection not only between characters (Catherine and Henry, Henry and his son) but also between the past and present. The novel dramatises the process of reconstructing the past through the practice of reading its traces and thus catching its glimpses, and then constructing a narrative about them. As Lucy Daniel concludes in her review of the novel, Carey's "are not just books with historical settings, but also about history, not just refitting real documents to new stories, but about that process. They lend themselves to meta-readings but conceal themselves within page-turning adventures" (Daniel). Using the figure of ellipsis for the process of the erasure of the past, the novel simultaneously shows, in a meta-historical gesture, the process of recovering the past and constructing one of its versions.

This comes perhaps as no surprise as both historical and meta-historical novels seem to be a preferred novelistic convention of the author. His historical works include both such neo-Victorian classics as *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Jack Maggs*, and less famous *Parrot and Olivier in America* and *The Chemistry of Tears*. In all of them, both the past and its study – history – function as a much more profound element than a mere background to the events; in a broader sense, they are treated as themes and problems. True to the Postmodernist conviction that the narratives about the past are fundamentally imaginative constructions

rather than faithful accounts of the past "as it really was", all of Carey's historical novels present it as an area of recovering and discovering, involving as much interpretation and creative imagination as documentation and description. Such approach necessarily involves the acceptance of or even preference for ellipsis as a method of signalling the inevitably fractured, incomplete and always provisional knowledge of the past.

5. Conclusions: palimpsests of stories

In Carey's novel ellipsis turns out to be a strategy inviting the reader to read deeper than the surface story only and to interpret both the novel and the past as a complex web of connections and correspondences. It operates via a system of gaps, allusions and metonymies which create a space for interpretation and revelation. The use of ellipsis may be compared to the cutting of a hole in a palimpsest: it shows the glimpse of the past and connects it to the present. With the help of such "holes" *The Chemistry of Tears* manages to bridge the gap between the past and the present and to point to the long-lasting consequences of the processes once started in the past, whose ramifications reach the present and the future.

The elliptical strategies employed in the novel and discussed above may have several functions. On the one hand, they allow the novel to create suspense, introduce secrets to the characters' plots or connect seemingly distant protagonists and events, thus serving as plot-making devices. On the other hand, elliptical strategies of various kinds which draw attention to the fact of omission and elimination help show the existence and persistence of the past, even that which is obscured or forgotten. Hinting at the aspects omitted, they also initiate the process of the uncovering and reconstruction of the past, even if the results they bring are only partial, incomplete or unsatisfactory. Finally, in so doing, they also involve the readers in the process of text construction and interpretation, activating reading curiosity and the process of gap filling.

The use and function of ellipsis in Carey's text, however, apart from its obvious text-making functions, may be seen as not quite traditional. In contrast to Modernist ellipsis, which often tended to "speak" through silence, impeded language or obstacles in communication and thus was used to communicate subjectivity, inner life or mental and emotional solitude, elliptical strategies used in Carey's novel primarily concern plot and character construction and involve plot gaps, withdrawal of information and allusions which are to be interpreted by the reader. His use of ellipsis, then, is closer to that found in generic fiction, where it usually functions as a suspense-creating mechanism, than to the psychologically oriented Modernist "fiction of silence". However, this time in contrast to popular fiction, in *The Chemistry of Tears* elliptical methods are employed not only to create narrative tension but primarily, via concealing, to paradoxically reveal several more complicated aspects or palimpsestic "layers" of the story, bringing the novel close to the Postmodernist poetics of using popular fiction mechanisms for serious reflection. The plot and character-focused ellipsis reveals, then, deeper layers of the story and more complicated themes. Far from being an ornament, it seems both an effective and artistically accomplished way to communicate notions which otherwise may appear unpleasant, unwanted or unavailable.

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