

Crossing *The Secret River*: From Victim to Perpetrator, or the Silent / Dark Side of the Australian Settlement

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Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) is a moving account of the disturbing colonial development of Australia. In historical terms, it dramatizes the transformation of the white settler's dream into the worst of all possible nightmares, and brings to the fore the darker side of Australia's past. This article will show how the novel defamiliarizes some of the most important myths of the Australian nation. It will also rely on the ideas put forward by some outstanding ethics and trauma theorists and postcolonial critics in order to analyse *The Secret River* as a further example of a recurrent phenomenon in contemporary Australian literature, namely, the attempt to spell out the trauma and anxieties of (un)belonging that haunt settler culture as a result of the belated and painful revelation of Aboriginal dispossession and genocide. This article will therefore show that Grenville's novel testifies to the desperate attempt on the part of some non-Indigenous Australians to offer an apology to the Aborigines so that the much longed-for national Reconciliation may some day be possible.

Keywords: Australian settlement; Australian national myths; Aboriginal genocide; victim vs. perpetrator; apology; reconciliation

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Cruzando *The Secret River*: de víctima a verdugo, o el lado silenciado / oscuro de la colonización australiana

The Secret River (2005), la novela de Kate Grenville, es un relato conmovedor de la inquietante colonización de Australia. En términos históricos, relata la transformación del sueño del colono blanco en la peor de todas las pesadillas posibles y saca a la luz el lado más oscuro del pasado australiano. Este artículo mostrará cómo la novela utiliza y cuestiona algunos de los mitos más importantes de la nación australiana y se basará en las ideas propuestas por algunos destacados críticos postcoloniales y teóricos de la crítica ética y el trauma para analizar *The Secret River* como otro ejemplo más de un fenómeno muy frecuente en la literatura australiana contemporánea: el intento de articular el trauma y la ansiedad de la no pertenencia que perturba a la cultura blanca, como resultado de la tardía y dolorosa revelación del genocidio aborígen. Por último, analizará el intento desesperado por parte de algunos australianos no-indígenas de ofrecer una disculpa a los australianos aborígenes para que la tan deseada reconciliación nacional sea posible algún día.

Palabras clave: colonización australiana; mitos de la nación australiana; genocidio aborígen; víctima vs. verdugo; disculpa; reconciliación

I. INTRODUCTION

The Secret River (2005) is a moving account of the disturbing colonial development of Australia.¹ In historical terms, it dramatizes the transformation of the white settler's dream into the worst of all possible nightmares and brings to the fore the darker side of Australia's past. As Eleanor Collins argues, "Atrocity, especially atrocity in your own country, does not make for a cosy read. Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is a discomfiting novel: compelling through long stretches, evocative, but also troubling" (2010, 167). Much of the discomfort and challenge that it raises, this critic goes on to argue, has to do with "a paralysis born of denial and guilt, in the general white Australian response to stories of colonial injustice and barbarity," an emotional conflict that has been clearly displayed in the so-called "History Wars" (167).² Not in vain does the title of the novel directly borrow from W.E.H. Stanner's announcement in a 1968 lecture that "there is a secret river of blood in Australian history:"³ by turning to fiction, Grenville manages to transform the act of recalling the repressed secrets of her ancestry into an act of recalling the repressed secrets of Australian national mythology.⁴ The novel stirred up vehement critical reactions on the part of a number of historians (Mark McKenna, Inga Clendinnen, Helen MacDonald, John Hirst, and Alan Atkinson automatically come to mind), who claimed that the writer was trespassing on a territory she knew very little about and was not entitled to set foot in. Their main complaint was that the book is not

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² As Marc Delrez summarizes (2010, 55 and 63), in the wake of the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner's pronouncement about the "Great Australian Silence" in the late 1960s, a number of historians set out to fill in this void at the heart of national self-representations by offering different, and at times even contradictory, viewpoints through which the Australian past could be seen and interpreted. This generated a polemical debate that came to be labelled as the "History Wars." A number of progressive historians, such as Charles Rowley, Henry Reynolds, Bain Attwood, Andrew Markus, Heather Goodall, Ann MacGrath and Tim Rowse, strove to write up the forgotten pages of Australian history by paying attention to the long-term violence inflicted on Indigenous Australians by the British settlement of Australia. A fierce counter-attack was, however, soon launched by more conservative historians, mainly led by Geoffrey Blainey, who went as far as to deny this genocide and coin the well-known expression "black armband view of history" to refer to those historians who had dared to endorse a historical narrative deeply concerned with the shameful dimension of the Australian national legacy. As is well known, these pro-settlement views gathered more and more strength after the election of the conservative Federal coalition government in 1996, with the then Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, openly supporting their views. This situation was significantly modified when Kevin Rudd, the then Labour Prime Minister, pronounced his "sorry speech" on 13 February 2008, in which he acknowledged the profound grief, suffering and loss inflicted on Australian Aborigines for such a long time.

³ For more information on these lectures (known as the Boyer Lectures), see W.E.H. Stanner's *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (2009, 172-224).

⁴ In *Searching for the Secret River*, the text where Grenville accounts for her inspiration and novel-writing process, she meditates on her own sense of collective guilt, resulting from her realization that her convict ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, had not harmlessly taken up land on the Hawkesbury river, but had rather forcibly taken the land from its Indigenous owners. This discovery prompted her to set about a research process that finally led to the writing of *The Secret River*, a novel partly based on her ancestor's life.

based on actual facts, but rather transposes anecdotal evidence in anachronistic ways in order to bend it to the author's purpose.

Kate Grenville's novels question the processes whereby the myths of nation are constructed and that have systematically put to the test Australian clichés and values, in narratives that tend to explore the point of view of those who, like women, have often been regarded as marginal and unqualified for national belonging. However, it is only in *The Secret River* that Grenville delves into the "secret," as it were, of settler colonial violence and brings it into the open, thereby disclosing what might be labelled as the Australian foundational trauma.⁵ As Julie McGonegal puts it, this novel has at its narrative centre "a secret concerning the unspeakable horrors committed against Aboriginal people that is protected by the settler-protagonist, and both insist on not only the impossibility but also the *necessity* of (re)presenting that secret" (2009, 73; emphasis added). This novel can be seen as a further example of a recurrent phenomenon in contemporary Australian literature, namely, the attempt to delve into what critics such as Gooder and Jacobs (2000) have come to label as the dilemma of "the apology in postcolonizing Australia," the term "apology" being understood both as an apology for the actions of white settlers and as an apology, however indirect and insufficient, to Indigenous Australians. In other words, Grenville's novel could be said to endeavour to spell out the trauma and anxieties of (un)belonging that haunt settler culture, with the aim of promoting Aboriginal, and by extension national healing, and paving the way for the so-called Australian Reconciliation process.⁶ As is well known, these anxieties were reinforced and gathered unprecedented strength with the growing realization that modern Australian culture, together with the foundation of the nation itself, had come about at the expense of previously unacknowledged acts of Aboriginal dispossession and genocide. The publication of the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997, for example, greatly contributed to this belated and painful revelation which galvanized what is now known as the "Sorry Movement" and inevitably precipitated in descendants of settlers,⁷ Kate Grenville included, a traumatic

⁵ As Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte speculate in their editors' introduction to *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009), the rhetoric of the secret, which shares certain theoretical concerns with haunting, such as trauma and memory, prevails in contemporary academic discourse on settler literatures and cultures. Similarly, critics such as Wendy Brown (2001) and Fiona Probyn-Rapsley (2007), to mention but two well-known examples, have relied on the notions of hauntology and spectres of the past as developed by Derrida (1994) in order to analyse the guilt, shame and complicity continuum in contemporary life.

⁶ In 1991, the Commonwealth parliament voted unanimously to establish the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and a formal Reconciliation process that might contribute to building relationships for change between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Also in the 1990s, the Australian High Court decided two landmark cases: *Mabo vs. Queensland* (1988 and 1992) and *Wik Peoples vs. Queensland* (1996), which overturned the concept of *terra nullius* which claimed that land was legally available for colonization because Aborigines had no legal rights to it.

⁷ The revelations of the *Bringing Them Home* testimonies about the practice of removal of Aboriginal children, which started in the nineteenth century but continued until the 1970s in some rural areas, led thousands of ordinary Australians to sign "Sorry Books," and to participate in nationwide marches and demonstrations on National Sorry Day (a designated day of commemoration begun in 1998 and continued every year since), as a gesture of personal apology in a context where the Federal Government was at the time adamantly refusing to offer an official apology.

sense of the loss of a properly constituted national selfhood. Their former sense of belonging and being-in-the-nation began to crumble, and the previously unquestioned authority of colonial possession suddenly seemed to become irretrievably de-legitimized. This feeling of anxiety is what Hodge and Mishra labelled as “the dark side of the dream” of Australian national identity, the “occluded but central and problematic place of Aboriginal Australians in the foundation of the contemporary Australian state and in the construction of national identity” (1991, 24).

As Sue Kossew sees it (2007, 8), two different narratives collide in bringing to the surface this occluded space: on the one hand, the Aboriginal oral stories of ruthless attacks on the part of settlers and, on the other, the European historical accounts, whose main aim is not to understand or to interpret, but rather to justify and legitimate the white presence and occupation of the land. What Grenville strives to accomplish in her novel is a kind of impossible task. She tries her hand at offering a double apology: examining her own convict ancestor’s implication in acts of Aboriginal genocide and dispossession, while also acknowledging the strength, courage, and determination that made settlement possible. A reconciliation most difficult to achieve, given the precarious nature of balancing such antagonistic feelings as blame and admiration. Whereas, from today’s perspective, the white settlers’ story can be seen as one of opportunities and egalitarianism, since convicts who worked hard could eventually become free landowners, it is also a story of violence that has left perennial traumatic marks on the psyche of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

It is my contention that Grenville’s novel allows for different and contradictory readings. Much of this debate was instigated by a polemical exchange between Kate Grenville and Melissa Lucashenko, an Indigenous scholar, about the meanings and implications of “taking up” land (see Gall 2008), which disclosed how irreconcilable Indigenous and non-Indigenous positions are and how scarce the possibilities for reconciliation appear to be. Critics such as Gall (2008), Probyn-Rapsley (2007) and Radstone (2013) have claimed that the empathy and understanding that the novel often shows towards its protagonist indirectly endorse Aboriginal genocide and dispossession. In keeping with this, critics such as Rowse (2003) and Blomley (2010) have stated that the “counterfactual” past that the novel describes prevents it from fully understanding and representing Aboriginal perspectives, and have in turn concluded that land ownership should be regarded as a precondition, rather than an outcome, of dispossession. Although I fully subscribe to these views, I also claim that Grenville’s novel contributes to acknowledging some of the atrocities committed against the Aborigines and to demanding that an apology on the part of non-Indigenous Australians be made.

2. DEFAMILIARIZING SOME OF THE MYTHS OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATION

According to Eleanor Collins (2010, 168-70), the novel draws on three Australian myths, playing one off against the other two: the myth of the good convict, of the good pioneer,

and stories of first contact. First, the narrative of the victim and “almost” innocent convict, William Thornhill, begins in late eighteenth-century London, where he is born into extreme poverty, cold, and hunger. The family is too large and too far down the English class system to be able to get along by strictly honest means, and Will, decent at heart but mainly concerned with staying alive, learns skilful theft as a means of survival: “The dainty parson could shrill all he liked about sin, but there could be no sin in thieving if it meant a full belly” (16). When he marries Sal, the daughter of a local waterman, he seems to have the chance for a new and better life, but with the unexpected deaths of his parents-in-law his rise in fortune is short-lived. He is left indebted and unable to support his wife and their child. In his desperate search for a little extra money, he takes many risks, eventually ending up before an Old Bailey judge, accused of stealing a boatload of timber. Initially condemned to death, he is saved from the hangman’s rope by Sal, whose clever activities on his behalf result in the more lenient sentence of transportation to New South Wales. According to this myth, England is a land of social and legal injustice that produces, paradoxically, a better and fairer Australia by sending there all those subjects whose principal crime was sheer destitution.

Once Will and Sal reach Australia, the myth of the good convict gradually becomes the second national myth: that of the pioneer. Will Thornhill works hard as a boatman between Sydney and the Hawkesbury river, the frontier of settlement. He earns his pardon, and his longing for a piece of land he can call his own leads him to join other emancipist settlers along the lower reaches of the Hawkesbury. There he sets about carving a “civilized” place for himself and his growing family: he builds a hut, plants crops, even takes on two convicts as hired hands. This section of the novel partly reminds us of the Robinson Crusoe story, since it is the tale of one self-made man’s courage and determination. Will is able to cope with an unfamiliar environment in order to provide his family with sustenance and better prospects. However, what Will fails to realize is that he is not the owner of the land he calls Thornhill’s Point. The territory he regards as “the emptiest place in the world, too wild for any man to have made it his home” (101) is, in fact, inhabited by the Darug people, who are unpredictable and frightening. They carry spears, know nothing about boundaries and, therefore, threaten the settlers’ lives and property.

It is at this point that the third national myth, that which distorts and smears the other two, takes over, that is, the recurrent story of first contact, described by Mary Louise Pratt as the moment when “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations,” with the result that “subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other” (1992, 6-7). The first contact moment is, therefore, liminal. As is well known, liminality (from the Latin *limen*, “a threshold”) has often been defined as a psychological or metaphysical subjective, conscious state of being on the threshold of, or between, different existential planes. The liminal is therefore described as a period of transition, as a threshold state of ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, and it is only after going through this process that one may enter into

new forms of identity and relationship. At the moment of first contact, then, anything is possible, since the situation allows for multiple possibilities.

Stories about the first encounters between Europeans and Aborigines are omnipresent in works by Australian authors, Thea Astley (*A Kindness Cup*, 1974; *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, 1996), Thomas Keneally (*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, 1972) and David Malouf (*Remembering Babylon*, 1993) being three well-known examples, although the list could be never-ending. As argued by Benedict Anderson (1991), one of the main functions of national myths is that of unifying, defining, and binding the nation. Likewise, the classical / realist novel also concludes with unity: all the gaps, mistakes and miscommunications making up the plot are resolved at its end. Unlike other novels by Grenville, *The Secret River* is quite a realist and straightforward narrative, which makes the reader hope for a happy ending. Contact between other emancipist settlers and the natives or “blacks,” as they are often called in the novel, ranges from Blackwood’s harmonious relationship with them (he even has an Aboriginal wife and child), made possible thanks to his clever policy of give-and-take—“*Ain’t nothing in this world just for the taking*, he said. . . . *A man got to pay a fair price for taking*, he says. *Matter of give a little, take a little*” (104; emphasis in original)—to Smasher Sullivan’s cruel mistreatment of Aborigines,⁸ which often leads him to commit abominable acts of mutilation, rape, and murder. The protagonist will have to make his own decisions. As Sal wisely says, “*Got to work it out for ourselves, looks like*” (210).

Will’s first reaction towards the blacks is one of fear and aversion. He regards them as wild, unclean, unchaste and irrationally aggressive, that is, they stand for the inferior and dangerous Other that must be kept under control or eliminated altogether so that civilization is possible. Following the same line of thought, the blacks might also partly encapsulate Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, since, as this critic explains in her groundbreaking book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), the abject is what threatens the integrity of the subject, who thus depends on her / his capacity to extrude the forces that threaten to dissolve the ego and that constantly confront it with the terror of annihilation. The improper, unclean, disorderly elements which generate abjection (urine, faeces, pus, vomit, blood) must be forced out of the subject’s clean and proper self if it wants to survive. Similarly, the blacks must be kept at bay, even erased, as a prerequisite for the creation and preservation of an orderly and civilized white society / nation. Like the rest of the settlers, Will initially considers the blacks to be “lower in the order of things even than they were” (92). He considers them childish and wild creatures who have no sense of property, who do not work the land: “there were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them” (93); “like children, they did not plant today so that they could eat tomorrow. It was why they were called savages” (141). They do not seem to be ashamed of being naked, unlike him, who “would have rushed to cover her [wife] up” had his wife ever stood before him in such a state of undress (194). They carry spears all the time, and are accused of committing

⁸ Hereafter, whenever italics appear in quotes from the novel, they must be understood as emphasis in the original.

so many crimes that the settlers had “a handy expression that covered all the things the blacks did, and suggested others: *outrages and depredations*” (95). Communication is not possible between these emancipist settlers and the Aborigines: Will and Whisker Harry, a member of the Darug people, exchange words in their respective tongues, but only to finally realize that “words between them [were] like a wall” (197). As if this chasm were not deep enough, Will fills the need to make differences clear: “A line had to be drawn with the blacks” (193). The abject / Other must be kept at bay so that the white man’s safety, orderly life and desired identity are preserved.

However, with the passing of time, Will is able to look at the Aborigines in a different way. He eventually realizes that their difference sometimes implies a certain degree of superiority. They can see the whites all the time, whereas, as Blackwood tells him, “*only time we see them is when they want us to*” (102). They can reproduce English words “as clear as could be” (213), whereas Will is not capable of reproducing theirs: “Thornhill caught the first sound but the rest evaporated into the air like steam out of a kettle. . . . It was as if a word that had no meaning could not be heard” (214). They leave their marks and messages on rocks, thus making it clear that, contrary to what the whites think, the land is not an empty space (154), and their dances (corroborees) are dramas, tales that “could reveal their secrets, but only to a person who knew how to read them” (244). They show Will that making fire with only two sticks is not, as he had thought, a “bit of tomfoolery” (212), but something they do on a regular basis, and dare him to match their skill (213). Their scars are very different from those of the convicts: if those of the latter meant pain and humiliation, theirs “were carefully drawn,” like “a language of skin” (91). In addition, they never feel naked as the whites often do, but are rather “clothed in their skins” (194). Their teeth are “the most astonishing white” (200), “their hands [are] ever so fluid it seemed that they had extra joints in their fingers” (222), they know how to turn up and disappear all of a sudden, without making any noise, and they can “[look] through him as if he were made of air” (199). Furthermore, they find the whites funny because, although they “sweated away under the broiling sun, chopping and digging, . . . [they] still had nothing to eat,” while they themselves “strolled into the forest and came back with dinner hanging from their belts” (202). So strong is Will’s admiration for their way of living, that he once goes as far as to compare them with the English gentry, with the only difference being that they are rather more egalitarian, thus temporarily allowing class considerations to take precedent over race distinctions: “They spent a little time each day on their business, but the rest was their own to enjoy. The difference was that in their universe there was no call for another class of folk who stood waiting up to their thighs in river-water for them to finish their chat so they could be taken to their play or their ladyfriend” (230).

The minor transactions that Will and Sal eventually make with them (a bag of flour in exchange for some kangaroo meat; a bonnet in exchange for some wooden dishes) leads Will to reach the conclusion that “some version of normal society” can be established between the two communities (230). He even has the farsightedness to conclude that their blood is “the same colour as [his] own” (280), and that differences based on skin

colour are nothing but a cultural construction, since “their skins were not black, no more than his own was white. They were simply skins, with the same pores and hairs, the same shading of colour as his own” (214). Even Sal, when walking into their camp for the first time, realizes that, contrary to what she had at first thought, they are not savages, since they are also able to build their own homes and turn an empty space into a domestic place (287). Everything is a matter of perspective, Will concludes when acknowledging that the forest takes on a different aspect depending on whether you contemplate it from the outside, when “the eye was confused by so many details,” or from inside a hut when, “framed by doorway or window-hole, the forest became something that could be looked at part by part and named” (161). It is the unfamiliar that shocks and frightens Will but, as soon as he gets used to it, all of a sudden difference loses its frightening dimension to be assimilated to sameness. Kangaroos look so wrong and disproportionate only because he does not know them: “A kangaroo was a freak of nature. But Thornhill was discovering that if a man looked at a kangaroo for long enough, it was the idea of a sheep that became peculiar” (224).

In this way, Will begins to realise that the barrier between self and Other is insurmountable as one wants to make it. After all, as was stated before, the Other is nothing but a construction to help us to conform and preserve our identity, to feel safe and in control, in short, the projection of all of those attributes and qualities that we refuse to recognize in our own civilized selves, and which must therefore be thrust away so that we can preserve our own integrity as subjects. The Other consequently becomes the scapegoat who is made to bear the blame for our own sins and faults. This, famously argued in postcolonial studies by Edward Said (1978), is also the conclusion that Dominick LaCapra reached when he dealt with Holocaust trauma, and which might be extrapolated to the Australian case. According to LaCapra (2001, 165), Nazi ideology was primarily based on “sacrificialism and scapegoating.” In particular, he asserts that “scapegoating” is related to an almost ritual and phobic horror over contamination by “the Other.” The way in which this fear is confronted (expulsion, extermination) is of secondary importance; the really important thing is to eradicate it altogether. Just as the Nazis felt the compulsive need to preserve what they regarded as their pristine race by getting rid of the Jews (and other victim groups like communists, gypsies and homosexuals), the white Australian settlement inexorably implied the demonization and subsequent annihilation of the country’s Aboriginal population. However, as was argued earlier and as Grenville’s novel also seems to show, those evil attributes and qualities that we systematically project onto the Other are also part of ourselves, the dark side that we would rather ignore, but that suddenly erupts, doing away with all the defences that we build to keep it hidden. Smasher, another emancipist settler living in the area, is very quick to accuse the blacks of being “nothing but thieves” (169), thus conveniently forgetting, as Blackwood makes him see, that most convicts were transported to Australia on account of just such a crime. As far as Will is concerned, no sooner does he enjoy a better social position than he starts to show towards his subaltern the same arrogant attitude that he so much abhorred in the

English gentry when he was a poor waterman in London. He strolls like a gentleman while refusing to give Dan, one of his convict servants, a break (180). Such is his delight to have this power, almost of life or death, over Dan, that he makes him call him Mr Thornhill, despite having been one of his childhood friends in London: "His own pleasure in it, as he had bullied Dan on the wharf, had come as a surprise to Thornhill: he had not known that he had it in him to be a tyrant. A man never knew what kind of stuff he was made of, until the situation arose to bring it out of him" (177).

Will, like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, at times also falls prey to even baser instincts. He is scared to discover the beast within himself as, on one of his visits to Smasher, he is confronted with the Aboriginal woman that Smasher has enslaved to satisfy his sexual appetites and, much to his alarm, a lascivious impulse takes hold of him: "For a terrible vivid instant, a scene lit by lightning, Thornhill imagined himself taking the woman. Could feel her skin under his fingers, her long legs straining against him. It was no more than a single hot instant, the animal in him. . . . Thornhill was seized with a desperation to get away from this airless place. If he did not he would stifle to death there and then" (252).

The memory of this woman will haunt him for ever. Not only did he feel like raping her for a second, but later he was unable to do anything to help her out of the abominable situation. His passivity turns him into a collaborator: "Now the evil of it was part of him" (253). Last but not least, Will transforms into a mad man and is about to strike Sal, his dear wife, when she demands that they should leave Thornhill's Point: "He saw that she did not recognize him. Some violent man was pulling at her, shouting at her, the stranger within the heart of her husband" (291). The whites can be savages, and not only towards their enemies, but also towards their own kin. George Twist, for example, was "famous for the fact that one of his hogs had killed his youngest infant, and rumour on the river had it that he refused a burial on the grounds that the hog might as well finish what he had started" (257).

Unfortunately, Will's greed and obsessive need to possess the land will prevent him from foreseeing the imminent tragedy and from opening himself up to the Aboriginal Other so that some peaceful coexistence between both groups might somehow become possible. He copes with the unwelcome intermittent irruptions of the Aborigines, but his tolerance comes to an end when they burn his corn patch and destroy his crop. As interracial tension escalates into murderous violence, a dilemma takes hold of him, and all he can feel is panic: "He had stepped on a great wheel that was spinning him away somewhere he had never planned to go. . . . But he did not want to look at what it might mean, or where it might lead" (234).

Much to his regret, Will must make a most difficult choice. New South Wales had become "a machine in which some men would be crushed up and spat out, and others would rise to heights they would not have dreamed of before" (182). Either he becomes a loser or a winner. In other words, complying with his wife's ultimatum, he must leave the land of his dreams never to return, or align himself with the other emancipist settlers

and take part in their attack on the Aboriginal camp to defend his own interests. To put it differently, in order to preserve what he wants he must become a killer. However strong his love for Sal may be, his love for the land, “a hunger in himself he had never known before” (108), is even stronger, since it finally leads him to join the other settlers and commit violent acts, thus breaking the promise he made to his wife that he would never do “such a thing:” “*I would never*,” he said. . . . “*Not never ever*” (159). The settlers’ attack is, in fact, so brutal and merciless that readers presumably find it increasingly difficult to side with Will’s aspirations. The Aboriginal presence undercuts the legitimacy of the pioneer story. The pioneer dream can only come true if the Darug people are expelled from the land and ultimately annihilated. But the price paid is far too high: the victim has turned into a perpetrator. As Eleanor Collins puts it, “One of the discomforts of *The Secret River* is the pressure of weighing the Thornhills’ considerable suffering in an unjust English class system against the Darug people’s unimaginable suffering in an unjust colonial racial system. . . there is a sense in the novel’s structure that one system of harshness and lack has led directly to the other” (169).

3. THE TRAUMATIC VICTIM / PERPETRATOR PARADIGM

Stories of first contact are all about division, misunderstanding, violence, fear, in a word, trauma. Similarly, the final pages of *The Secret River* conjure up feelings of separation, impotence, guilt and failure. Will Thornhill is not, apparently, aware of the meaning and implications of the slaughter. Yet, deep down in his heart he knows that, unlike Long Jack, the one and only Aboriginal survivor of the massacre, he does not have “a place that was part of his flesh and spirit” (329); in a word, he does not belong to this place. To make matters worse, he cannot understand why, after having finally succeeded in life—he owns more land, two vessels, a villa surrounded by an English garden and a wall—“it did not feel like triumph” (334). Similarly, his collaboration in the massacre has made a permanent breach in his relationship with Sal:

Thornhill noticed, but said nothing. It was part of the new thing that had taken up residence with them on the night he had come back from the First Branch: a space of silence between husband and wife. It made a little shadow, the thing not spoken of. . . . But whatever Sal knew, or guessed, was with them and could not be shifted. He had not thought that words unsaid could come between two people like a body of water. (324)

How could this happen? How could he, a good man, he wonders, “do what only the worst of men would do?” (300). The view that perpetrators of crimes against humanity are utterly different from average folk derives from the human desire to believe that this is a just and orderly world, composed mainly of persons who would harm others only in self-defence. However, the consideration of historical traumatic events such as the Shoah makes it clear that, contrary to what most people would like to believe, and as Grenville’s

novel clearly shows, the most ordinary human beings are capable of the most inhuman acts. Genocide is often committed by “ordinary men” who,⁹ like Thornhill, are caught up in a particular set of circumstances. As Holocaust literature has widely demonstrated, the monstrosity of the majority of barbaric actions seems all the more monstrous because of the ordinariness of the perpetrators. More often than not, perpetrators lack the demonic dimension we would all like them to have. As Hannah Arendt exclaimed after attending the Eichmann trial as a reporter for *The New Yorker* and realizing that this Nazi victimizer lacked all the evil qualities that the prosecution had attributed to him, the shocking truth about human nature is “the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” (1984, 287; emphasis in original).

Moreover, perpetrators do not often operate as isolated individuals, but as members of groups, which provide a shared view of the world and rewards for conformity, both of which facilitate the shedding of inhibitions and the annihilation of *excendance*, the key concept in Levinasian ethics as put forward in *De l'Évasion* (1935), which designates the drive to escape a view of the self as closed to the Other in order to define it in opposition to, rather than in relationship with, the Other. There is nothing like colonialism and blind jingoism, and by extension fascism, to illustrate a celebration of isolation and self-complacency gained at the expense of doing away with all kinds of empathic bonds and annulling *excendance*. Furthermore, most perpetrators seem able to distance themselves from the acts they committed and go on with their lives. Very often, as Anna Freud (1937) and other later prestigious psychologists, such as Lapanche and Pontalis (1967), Cramer (1991) and Michael Khan (2002) have put forward, perpetrators manage to overcome remorse through psychological defense mechanisms that deny, falsify, or distort reality. Whereas primary defense mechanisms (repression, denial) prevent unacceptable ideas or impulses from entering the conscience, secondary defense mechanisms (identification, projection, sublimation, rationalization) work to change or subvert reality, thus preventing the individual from feeling anxiety and guilt.

Especially important for the analysis of Grenville's novel are the mechanisms of denial and repression (white settlers relieve anxiety by ignoring a threat in external reality—Aboriginal presence—and in their own internal reality—greed and violence), and of projection, whereby, as was previously explained when dealing with Kristeva's notion of the abject, all of those qualities, feelings and wishes that settlers refuse to recognize or simply reject in themselves are expelled from their selves and relocated in the figure of the Aboriginal Other. Another closely linked defense mechanism worth considering is that which Robert Jay Lifton, in his polemical study *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing*

⁹ This expression automatically brings to mind Christopher R. Browning's well-known study of the Holocaust perpetrators, titled *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992). For more information on the polemical figure of the perpetrator, see Herbert Kelman's “Violence without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers” (1973); Ervin Staub's *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (1989); and George C. Browder's “Perpetrator Character and Motivation: An Emerging Consensus?” (2003).

and *the Psychology of Genocide* (1986), labelled as “psychological doubling,”¹⁰ whereby the individual has two selves (that of the perpetrator and that of a normal decent human being) that are part of the same overall self, although each of them obviously functions as though it were a separate autonomous self.

Perpetrators can also attempt to find excuses for their actions. More powerful, however, are techniques of neutralization that combine denial, repression, and projection defense mechanisms in a whole set of excuses and justifications. This is Will’s case. He tries to deny responsibility, to exonerate himself from murder, he longs “for it to be yesterday, . . . a time in which this thing did not have to be dealt with” (293). He finds it difficult to confess to his killing of Whisker Harry: “The gun went off” (307), we read. However, it was he who pulled the trigger. Echoing Smasher’s attitude, he also tries to deny the humanity of the victims. The blacks are only lazy savages, by no means entitled to occupy the land: “*They ain’t never done a hand’s turn . . . They got no rights to any of this place. No more than a sparrow. . . Them blacks ain’t going to stand in my way!*” (290). Furthermore, the blacks have done terrible things: they speared Sagitty, another emancipist settler, to death, they burnt his corn patch. Last but not least, Will appeals to higher loyalties, namely, his obligation to look after his family, “He held all their destinies in his hands” (120), and his love for Sal to justify his actions: “How could he choose, between his wife and his place? Making things so that she would stay was worth any price” (299). He tries to repress his sense of guilt, to convince himself that he is a good man. He offers clothes and food to Long Jack, one of the few Aborigines who still remain alive, who rejects them altogether, much to his amazement.

But all these efforts are in vain. No matter how often he repeats to himself that Thornhill’s Place is *his* place, “the wind in the leaves up on the ridge was saying something else entirely” (139). Moreover, he knows that his “possession” is ephemeral for, if he ever left the place, “it would not take long for Thornhill’s Point to melt back into the forest” (295). No matter how many fences he puts up or how many English flowers he grows in his garden, “the everlasting forest [cannot] be got rid of, only pushed back” (250). He must face up to “the moment of cold nothing” (326), to “the shocked silence hanging over everything” (309), to “the blankness [that] might tell the story to anyone who had eyes to see” (325). His life will not go on as it did before, because he is no longer innocent: “fear could slip unnoticed into anger, as if they were one and the same” (285); but he is responsible for what he did: “he [chose] it, of his own free will” (301). He has achieved success, has become “something of a king” (314), thus keeping the boast made to his sister years earlier that “*William Thornhills will fill up the whole world*” (11). However, he has lost one of his sons who, disgusted by the massacre his father took part in, decides to leave the

¹⁰ As Lifton explained in an interview years later (in Kreisler 1999, 4), these doctors were not originally killers, but ordinary men who were socialized to evil. While in Auschwitz, they had an Auschwitz self which was responsible for making the selections and running the killing process, as well as for the vulgar life (sex, alcohol, etc.) that they led there. However, when they went home to their families, for weekends or on leave, they would behave like normal loving fathers and husbands, thus incarnating a non-Auschwitz, and rather more decent and humane, self.

family home to go and live with Blackwood. Furthermore, Will feels the compulsive need to look through his telescope every single day, looking for “them,” the blacks. He wants to believe they are still there, in the forest, of which they are part: “He could not say why he had to go on sitting there. Only knew that the one thing that brought him a measure of peace was to peer through the telescope” (334). Yet, in spite of all his efforts to deny the facts, his traumatic memories and deeply felt sense of guilt inexorably and relentlessly come to the fore. Each time he looks “it was a new emptiness” (334).

4. ON THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF APOLOGY AND THE TRAUMA THAT HINDERS RECONCILIATION

The dynamics of scapegoating, the transformation of the Other into an object of abjection, are to be found everywhere and are intimately connected with trauma. The British colonization and settlement of Australia is a case in point. As stated earlier, the victimization of others is always related, in Levinasian terms, to a mode of being concomitant with the ravaging destruction of the Other to assure the self, or, in terms of trauma theory, to the annihilation of the empathic bond that lies at the core of trauma. Will Thornhill strove to define and preserve his humanity by depriving the Aborigines of theirs and, by so doing, became inhuman himself. Violence obliterates the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressors. In spite of the fact that Will has apparently succeeded, he is aware that he has lost much of his humanity on the way, and cannot therefore help having a “bad conscience,” an expression that could be understood in both the common and the rather more specific Levinasian way. If we agree with Levinas that “the human is the return to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness, to *mauvaise conscience*, to its capacity to fear injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it” (1989, 85), then it is obvious that Will ends up experiencing this *mauvaise conscience*, this mode of being that realizes that the self exists only because of the Other; should the Other cease to exist, so too will it cease to exist. Will knows that, in his attempt to colonize the Other, he adamantly refused to acknowledge the Aborigines’ right to exist and be different in order to justify his actions and muster some good conscience (*bonne conscience* in Levinasian terms) about his dealings with them.

The Secret River could thus be said to corroborate one of Benedict Anderson’s main contentions (1991) and offer a credible account of how easily national discourses can cross the boundaries of reality to enforce their own “imagined” past, and of how an individual of good instincts can cross the ultimate human boundary to become involved in acts of the utmost barbarity and atrocity. To put it another way, this novel could be read as an apology (Kossev 2007, 9), that is, as a convenient instrument “to provide an arena for managing guilt, apology, and reconciliation” (Weaver-Hightower 2010, 132). It could therefore be argued that Grenville’s novel also contributes to disclosing the other / dark side of the Enlightenment project. The barbarism of the Australian settlement does not preclude the notion of “civilization.” On the contrary, the white settlers often relied on

rational means (“The White Man’s Burden,” to use Rudyard Kipling’s well-known poem, to rule other “inferior” peoples for those peoples’ own benefit) in order to implement sheer irrationality, such as treating the Aborigines with the same brutality that they themselves condemned and suffered at the hands of the British authorities. Moreover, Enlightenment entails a violent and totalitarian system in which full control is a must. Everything that is different or resistant to the order must be eliminated; the Other must be reduced to the same, whenever it is not altogether annihilated. The Aborigines almost died out as a consequence of this ideology, but the white humanist idea of man partly died with them as well. The present neurotic condition of the Australian (literary) panorama is the result of this death. The past in reality, though, will never die, the traumatic past will always continue to haunt the present. However, *The Secret River* could also be seen in a rather more ambivalent light. As critics like Weaver-Hightower have stated (2010, 134), although Grenville’s novel can be interpreted as clearly testifying to the settler’s feelings of guilt, it could also be read as evidence of the denial that undercuts the attempt to offer an apology. In keeping with Weaver-Hightower’s arguments (138-40), it could be said that not only does the very setting of the novel encourage denial, but the storyline also insists on depicting the settler as the ultimate victim, mainly by confronting the figure of the preponderant well-meaning and unintentional “good colonizer” with that of the marginal competing and aggressive “bad colonizer.” Setting the novel in the past subtly contributes to depicting the conflict of settlement as an event that took place only in the past, thus displacing guilt onto the modern day settlers’ ancestors and playing down contemporary racial struggles and feelings of shame. Similarly, by focussing on the agony of Will Thornhill as a colonial victim of the brutal and unfair British legal system, the plight of the Aborigines is conveniently diluted and minimized. To quote Weaver-Hightower:

By portraying their non-Indigenous protagonists as downtrodden but resilient settlers, as victims and not perpetrators of colonization, often with the non-settler English as the ‘real’ colonizers, [these novels] identify with the victim position and project colonial aggression. That is, these novels spend a great deal of time depicting non-Indigenous Australians as colonial victims of the British compared to the brief nod to non-Indigenous Australians as themselves colonizers of Indigenous Australians. (139)

Although *The Secret River* never denies that even well-meaning settlers were guilty of land appropriation, it nonetheless offers a very ambivalent picture of non-Indigenous Australians’ collective guilt. It is true that Grenville’s novel clearly confesses to this guilt at times, but it is also undeniable that it often tries to minimize and hide it by highlighting the figure of the white settler as victim and distinguishing between the many “good” and the very few “bad” settlers. As a result, some readers will choose to read the novel as an apology, others will prefer to focus on the excuses that dilute the settler guilt, and yet others will inevitably consider both positions. That said, what remains clear is that novels like this contribute to bringing to the fore the traumatic wounds that lie behind the dark side of the

Australian colonial past, silenced for so many decades. The British settlement of Australia is therefore subject to an ongoing process of revision and discussion, and the myths of the Australian nation can no longer conceal, let alone erase, Australia's foundational trauma.

In the face of this, is it possible to hold out any hope for a harmonious future? Unfortunately, to quote Collins' words again, "Neither novel nor nation can find unity in this encounter" (170), and yet, the secret gaps and muffled histories that make up the forgotten colonial archive must be opened and disclosed to allow for reconciliation to begin. Remembrance does not guarantee reconciliation but, as McGonegal concludes, "the impossible task of remembering is a very preliminary step in a reconciliation process that must be conceived as an open-ended, perpetually ongoing, and always unfinished conversation" (2009, 78). Novels like *The Secret River* confront the non-Indigenous reader with the need to become aware of, and thus confront, what Terry Goldie defines as the spectre of indigenization, a neologism conveying "the impossible necessity of becoming Indigenous" (1989, 13), either by erasing and replacing the Indigenes (fear) or by incorporating and acquiring them (temptation). Furthermore, non-Indigenous fiction that dares to represent the unrepresentable awareness of colonial genocide has the power to open up new worlds where harmonious coexistence is honestly sought. Literary texts can, and must, tackle traumatic experiences, if not to help us fully overcome them, at least to make it possible for us to try and articulate them in some kind of healing narrative. After all, as Judith Butler claims, it is only literature that can encapsulate the "kind of saying that takes place on the border of the unsayable," a saying that puts our perspectives and identities to the test, thus making it possible for us to "think about worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible" (1997, 41).

However, important as these texts and their potential to spell out an apology may be, they must also be accompanied by some kind of social change such that non-Indigenous Australians are not tempted to put all the blame on their ancestors, thus exonerating themselves from responsibility for contemporary injustices. To be able to say "sorry" is the first, but by no means the last, step. Moreover, as critics such as Eva Mackey have denounced, the apology should never be used as a white strategy to re-gain / assure their innocence. The understanding of the apology as a "speech act," she argues, can run the risk of granting apologizers direct forgiveness, while no reparation whatsoever has been offered to the victims. In her own words,

How could it be possible that a few words of regret and apology (no matter how earnest, remorseful, or passionate) are expected to erase or begin to address 200 years of colonial violence? How is it that the apologizers emerge, after the ritual, washed clean and innocent, congratulating themselves on their action? How do whites get so much for so little? Is this as good as it gets in a supposedly post-colonial nation? (1999, 35)

Mackey also highlights that the term "reconciliation" is rather inappropriate, since it implies the recovery of some previous form of national harmony, and the rehabilitation

of criminals who were cast out as a result of their offence. Yet, it is clear that national harmony never actually existed in Australia, and the perpetrators of those violent policies against the Indigenous Australians were never actually excluded or held in disregard in the country, with the result that, Tavuchi argues (1991, 31), the “crucial concern” of this form of national apology is “the reclamation and revalidation” of rights and obligations “enjoyed prior to the discreditable transgression.” To make matters even worse, Mackey goes on to argue (36), since the Reconciliation was first put forward as a “nation building process,” the fact that it is only victims that can forgive inexorably puts them in a very difficult position. As soon as an apology is offered, they seem to have the moral duty / burden to forgive and accept the terms they have been given, whether they like them or not, for the sake of the country’s unity and prosperity. As Marguerite La Caze makes clear (2006, 1-9), the relationship between apology and forgiveness is rather asymmetrical: whereas the apology can be a perfect duty and a public act (which does not necessarily turn it into an admission of individual guilt), and is based on respect and acknowledgement of the victim, forgiveness is based on love and is a personal and imperfect duty, that is, victims are not ethically obliged to forgive. Yet, however difficult reaching this national harmony may be, and in spite of their different perspectives, most social critics agree that reconciliation should be understood as a necessary process to pave the way for a better future in Australia. To quote La Caze by way of conclusion: “Although forgiveness cannot be expected it is possible to work towards reconciliation, if reconciliation is properly understood as a willingness to work together without a presumption of having overcome the past, rather than as necessarily involving forgiveness” (2006, 1).

As the workings and conclusions reached by the polemic South African TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) disclosed, an apology is always necessary, being a *sine qua non* gesture towards reconciliation, which must nonetheless enforce other measures of a rather more practical nature. Forgiveness may or may not be given by the victim, but only a previous admission of guilt by the perpetrator can open the door for this to happen. The merit of novels like *The Secret River* lies in their attempt to make non-Indigenous readers aware of the need to offer an apology to the Indigenous Australians so that a better and fairer future might some day be possible in the nation.

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