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This essay intends to highlight how Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983) and *After China* (1992) waver between transparency and opacity. It explores some of the techniques employed – among which a blurring of categories and a questioning of narratorial reliability – in order to create what Roland Barthes calls a “text of bliss” – one which challenges the limits of language as a means of communication.

Transparency can be defined as a property linked to the quantity and quality of light transmitted by and through an object. The adjective derived from it can be taken in the sense of “easily seen through or understood, [...] not blurred, without distortion” (*OED* 3373). This prism can be applied to any literary work since the very aim of a text – and by extension of any communicative enterprise – is to convey a certain meaning. Brian Castro's works are a direct questioning of literary transparency, since they present more opacity than apparent, easy understanding, and lead the reader to question his or her relation to language. Brian Castro is a Hong Kong-born Australian writer of European and Chinese descent. His novels, mostly set in Australia and featuring at least one character of part-Chinese origin, play with the notion of transparency not only through the complexity of the identities presented but also through an elaborate use of literary techniques that tend to complicate the act of reading. Indeed Castro's books are characterized by a construction and content that create feelings of strangeness and estrangement, placing the reader in a paradoxical position both of understanding and puzzlement.

This essay intends to focus on his first novel, *Birds of Passage* and his fourth novel, *After China*. These two novels present similarities in their treatment of categorisation and are a good illustration of the variety of Castro's literary techniques. Among his early novels, they present his interrogations as a writer and reflect the creation of his specific style. In *Birds of Passage* the reader discovers two main characters, Lo Yun Shan and Seamus O'Young, whose stories are respectively set during the 1850s Australian gold-rushes and a century later. The narration alternates between the two characters' stories for the most part. We follow Shan through the difficulties and racism he encounters on the goldfields. Seamus, an orphan whose origins are most probably part-Chinese and who was adopted by an Australian family, finds a certain number of pages from Shan's journal and starts translating them from Chinese into English, progressively entwining his own quest for identity with that of Shan. *After China* presents a Chinese architect, You Bok Mun, who lives in exile in Australia. He meets a woman writer who is never named and is terminally ill. The narration alternates between the stories You tells the writer – a mingling of his own story and of traditional Chinese ones – and You's exchanges with the writer, creating a web of tales that questions the limits of fiction, memory and truth.

These two novels have received considerable attention, particularly concerning the major theme of racial and literary hybridity,¹ as well as the role of translation in *Birds of*

1. See Deves and Brun on the connection between racial hybridity and Castro's aesthetics.

Passage (Nikro 74-84) or the role of female characters in *After China* (Sorensen 778-83). Many critics have evoked the opacity they perceive in Castro's novels, linking it to the complexity of his writing. Yet the subject has not been tackled in any specific article, nor have those two novels been discussed in parallel, which is what I now intend to do. In order to understand how transparency is turned into opacity in Castro's novels I will focus on two specific techniques: a blurring of literary and racial categories, and the combination of the mechanisms of narrative construction and de-construction. In the end, these devices de-construct the reliability of categories, but more generally of language as a means of communication, and as I will attempt to explain, they turn these novels into what Roland Barthes characterises as "texts of bliss" in *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Something is immediately disturbing in Brian Castro's works. What could be a transparent, easy reading actually seems to be blurred, as if there were layers of veils obscuring the text. In order to create this impression of estrangement, the first technique Castro uses is to break the usual boundaries of literary categories, that is to say to blur the limits between different genres. Brian Castro has most recently used this technique in *Shanghai Dancing*. The novel resorts to different genres – autobiography, novel, biography, memoir, epic tale for example – which rendered its publication problematic since it was hard to label for publishing houses.² The two works under scrutiny here are more easily defined as novels, yet some passages differ from the structures usually encountered in novels. For instance in *After China*, an entire chapter (47-52) is devoted to the epistolary sub-genre with the correspondence between You and his wife, who had stayed in China while he went to Paris to teach. A letter is also used in *Birds of Passage* (99-100). The novel also gives way to potential playscripts with the use of direct speech and the typography that accompanies them (87-8, 124-6). The accumulation of other external materials conjures the idea that this novel is actually more of a notebook in which the narrator(s) collect(s) ideas, fragments of dialogues and personal notes. We can for instance note the use of passport entries (3, 58), a warning notice against Chinese miners (118), an extract from a racist song (83), a poem (74) that we can relate to Shan, although we cannot be sure of its source. Although those fragments are taken from "daily life" – in terms of their nature – they do not appear more transparent to the reader, who does not necessarily expect such a mingling of materials in a novel. This device makes it difficult at times for the reader to follow the narration, since it surprises his or her expectations and questions the roles of those fragments of information in creating a complete picture. The multiplicity of points of view and voices departs from linearity and echoes with the diversity of subjectivities that co-exist in real life, hence the difficulty to be sure of anything.

Castro further blurs the picture by inserting historical landmarks, thereby questioning the part of fiction and reality in the two novels. In *After China*, for instance, there are references to the T'ang and Ming Dynasties (96). In *Birds of Passage*, the historical background stages the Lambing Flat Riot of June 1861 (133),³ and the shipwreck Shan survived on "the second day of February 1857" (63) corresponds to the histori-

2. It created what Brian Castro calls "the annoying effect of innovation" (Castro "Danser Shanghai").

3. The Lambing Flat Riots were a series of anti-Chinese demonstrations. They occurred on the goldfields in the Burrangong region (N.S.W.). They were called after the events that took place on 30 June 1861, when a mob drove the Chinese off the Lambing Flat and destroyed their belongings.

cal shipwreck of the Phaeton.⁴ Other references point to socio-historical realities such as the racist ideology against Chinese migrants underlying the Australian gold rushes: "They say that we dirty the water. Thus we are dirty. [...] We are accused of spreading diseases. [...] Diseases are seen as evil; thus we are evil" (110). Yet, Castro's interest does not lie in the fidelity to the events related or in reflecting the spirit of an age. These references function as a tool to create a setting for the characters to evolve in, and therefore turn into an unsettling device. The status of stories is questioned as those fictional events are connected to historical ones. Simultaneously the reliability of history is also put under scrutiny through the underlining of its nature as a discourse. Castro therefore prevents the readers from being caught up in the fictionality of the novel and continually leads them to interrogate the genre of the texts, the limits of labels and categories, and our role in creating them.

Creating categories is an old human endeavour, as can be seen in the attempts at categorising people according to many different criteria. Castro questions this very process and the transparency of racial categorisation by inviting the reader to encounter characters in search for a definition of their identity, but who do not fit into any pre-existing category. In *Birds of Passage*, the main characters are linked by their search for identity – an identity complicated by external factors as well as by their own reflections on identity in general. Seamus is an orphan who was adopted by an Australian family of Irish descent – hence his name – although he looks part-Chinese. This physical appearance weighs on his self-perception and the way others see him. He therefore has difficulty defining who he is, as can be seen in this extract from the very beginning of the novel:

Seamus O'Young. It's not my real name. I'm not Irish. I am in fact an ABC; that is, an Australian-born Chinese. [...] It was a classification which straddled two cultures. Yes. ABC. I am a refugee, an exile. My heart and my head are in the wrong places. There was no country from which I came, and there is none to which I can return. (8)

In this passage, we can feel the power of categories as well as the need to belong to a definite group, but the impossibility of such an ideal because of Seamus's double cultural lineage. Much critical work has been concerned with the feeling of displacement migrants experience and the need and difficulty – if not the impossibility at times – of belonging.⁵ Simultaneously unable to go back home and to adapt to their place of arrival, they tend to create an idealized concept of their former home – what Salman Rushdie labels "imaginary homelands"⁶ – which no longer corresponds to reality. Throughout the novel, Seamus therefore tries to reconcile his present and his past by investigating Shan's life, which is also a life of cultural estrangement and a quest for answers. These semi-opaque identities can be found in *After China*, as You the architect experiences exile having left China under difficult circumstances to migrate to Australia. He feels

4. *The Phaeton* was sailing from Hong Kong and was shipwrecked at Port Robe on February, 1st 1857, carrying 260 Chinese passengers who landed safely the next morning. For further information concerning the shipwrecks at Port Robe, see <<http://www.council.robe.sa.gov.au/page.aspx?u=530>>

5. See for instance Tseen Khoo & Kam Louie or Chambers.

6. A phrase Rushdie uses in relation to his own experience of exile from India: "It may be that writers in my position, exile or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (10).

alienated and is seen by others as “a curiosity from the ancient past” (68), as if there were a veil upon his identity, creating a sense of mystery and foreignness that keeps him apart from the others.

Though exiled and isolated, the two protagonists are not the only characters whose identities are far from being clear. In *Birds of Passage*, almost every secondary character has foreign origins. Some of them have a foreign name, like the Spanish worker Carlos, or Fatima whose real name is Fatiminha, although her mother was Portuguese (68). It is Seamus who tries to define her by saying that she is Australian because of her accent, which she does not deny. Other characters are said to speak with a foreign accent, like the Irishman who offers to lead Shan and the other Chinese men to Ballarat and robs them of £50 (78), or the alleged German gold-digger who attacks Shan and his companions, accusing them of stealing the Australian gold. The German accent seems to be associated with material success, a connection which is particularly present in the character of Mr Gold, Seamus’ first boss. This character presents a further level of caricature since his real name turns out to be Abraham Feingold, therefore underlining the stereotype connecting Jews with money. Here is the first conversation between Mr Gold and Seamus:

“My name is Seamus O’Young. I’ve come about the job.”

“Oh, yes. Va ist you say your name?”

“Seamus O’Young.”

“Such a funny name for a Chinese.”

“I’m Australian.”

“Really. Hum. You haf some Chinese blood. I can see that. Your fater ist Chinese? Your mutter?”

“I don’t know. I’m Australian.”

“That ist unfortunate... but ve try you out chust the same.” (23-4)

This extract shows how misleading physical appearance is when categorizing people, since Mr Gold employs Seamus because he looks Chinese and is expected to work hard if one believes stereotypes, although he does not, and will in fact quit his job after a few days. On the contrary, Mr Gold, in keeping with his name and position, is supposed to embody both the material success of Australians and the anti-semitic stereotype associating Jewish people with wealth. His is a position of power, which is not limited to employing and firing people, but extends to judging and categorizing them. Since Mr Gold is actually of foreign origins, his legitimacy in categorizing others as non-Australian is undermined. Moreover, the definition of what it means to be Australian⁷ seems even more vague, particularly since Seamus, who looks part-Chinese though he is Australian, speaks better English and could pass as an Australian more easily than his employer, whose accent betrays his origins.

Therefore, using blurred identities that belie the stereotypes we associate with origins questions the very act of characterizing. As Fatima underlines when she asks Seamus if she can paint him, “the process or references of which the subject is part” (69)

7. Concerning the definition of a nationality, Bhabha underlines that “[i]f the problematic ‘closure’ of textuality questions the ‘totalization’ of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life” (3). Therefore, the very definition of the term “national” contains a “conceptual indeterminacy, [a] wavering between vocabularies” (2) which is questioned through the opening of meanings contained in language. These two novels reflect that “[t]he ‘locality’ of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it” (4).

is made opaque when the subject is positioned in-between categories. As she points out to Seamus: "what would the painting of you be saying about time, or about race, or memory?" (69). Such a painting – and in Castro's case such a novel – shows that characterization appears more complex than it seems and cannot be limited to races or origins. An underlying opacity affects it, preventing the reader from reaching clear-cut definitions and explanations, therefore dismantling another level of categories. This questioning also affects the reader in a more personal way, since his or her very position as creator or subject of stigmatization is put under scrutiny, while the power of language as well as its limits are highlighted.

The disruption of definitions goes hand in hand with another technique of obfuscation: the association of the antagonistic notions of a meticulous construction and de-construction – in the sense of undermining the process of construction – of this very same narrative structure. In order to reach this effect, Castro employs repetitions and parallels which lead the reader to question the reliability of the narrators. In *Birds of Passage* reiterations seem to be intended as signposts for the reader. From one narrative to the other, there are many echoes in the descriptions of places. For instance after the section relating Shan's experience of the storm when he is on the boat to Australia, Seamus describes a room in Edna's house as being "like a cabin of a storm-tossed ship" (43), or even words or phrases (for example "smoke" (102), "bunched" (126-7), "Then it happened one summer's day" (147) paralleled with "It happened suddenly one evening" (149), "the sound of petals dropping" and "A hundred petals about to fall at once" (32)). Recurring phrases tie together both stories, building a bridge between the two spaces and periods of time. All of this creates a feeling of familiarity and connects the two stories together, tightening the bond between the two men as the story goes on.

Yet, this apparent transparency is in fact blurred by the very process that constitutes it. Indeed, the repetitive use of this technique tends to create a feeling of strangeness, as it foregrounds the artificiality of the narrations. As Xavier Pons underlines, repetitions distort reality:

The novel is in fact based on series of coincidences, of echoes from the past that are awakened by the present, of recurring incidents and characters [...] The two basic narratives are like mirrors held up to a single reality which is reflected, and occasionally distorted in them. [...] These recurrences are in a sense irrational and anomalous. (470-3)

Shan himself notices the oddity of so many echoes when he says: "But such coincidences were impossible. His mind was exhausted, his imagination stretched by the strange twists and turns of his journey" (130). This self-reflexive passage catches the attention of the reader and the stability originally created by the repetitions erodes, leaving a feeling of strangeness which prevents any willing suspension of disbelief.⁸ These artificial devices therefore arouse a feeling of doubt on the part of the reader, which is reinforced by the use of secondary characters. Indeed, most of them appear in both narratives with the same names and common characteristics – for instance Clancy of the goldfields, actually called Fitzpatrick, seems to be connected to Bill Grove, "also known as Fitzpatrick, or 'Clancy'" (15); likewise Fatima Feingold (Seamus' wife) seems to run along parallel lines with Fatima the prostitute in Shan's story, and hints at Abra-

8. Coleridge coined this phrase in his *Biographia Literaria*, defining the "willing suspension of disbelief" as a device that enables the reader to reach "poetic faith" during the process of reading (5).

ham Feingold too. This tends to arouse the suspicion of the reader who starts questioning the reliability of what is related.

The reliability of the narration is further questioned through the examination of the narrators themselves. Indeed, the shift of narrators in *Birds of Passage* and of narrative times in *After China* represent a desire to blur the boundaries between voices and times, creating a feeling of misunderstanding and even, at times, of disorientation, as the reader can no longer ascertain who is talking, which makes it difficult to trust the narrator. In *Birds of Passage*, the reliability of mingled narrative voices is further questioned since, as the reading goes on, Shan's first-person account of his own experiences turns into a third-person heterodiegetic narration, before we finally find out that it is being translated by Seamus. Translation implies a mediation through Seamus' own perception and understanding of Chinese, as well as his own fantasies. He appropriates Shan's story, and adds more and more fiction to it, while he puts his own life aside – he starts living a monastic life locked up in his room (87-8, 126) – in order to concentrate on Shan's records. As Shan is erased little by little, the narration gives way to two dialogues recorded by an extradiegetic narrator in which doctors try to understand what is wrong with him (87-8, 124-6). No answer is given to the reader, and further doubts are raised concerning Seamus's reliability since the reader now starts questioning his mental health. The narrators – or narrator – cannot therefore be trusted, and the reader is left adrift in the narration, unable to get a clear view of the story and its narrator.

In *After China*, the reliability – and even the sanity – of the narrator is questioned as another veil of opacity is thrown over the existence of the character of the writer. Indeed, the writer You meets is never given a name in the story, but simply called “she” or “the writer.” Their exchanges mainly consist of dialogues and stories that You tells her. Still, this character is often addressed as if she were not a real person. She can be interpreted in many ways. She could be a figment of his imagination, a fantasy he creates in order to have some company during his exile. The writer could also be a metaphor, the personification of a work in progress You might be writing. The writer would therefore not be a real character, but some sort of disembodiment of a part of You, re-embodyed in an unreal companion – a fellow writer – he created for himself during the process of writing his own book. This can be seen in the content of the different conversations they have together, which corresponds to what You would need in order to write his book: a part of personal history – i.e., the passages when You tells her his own memories –, a fragment of personal fiction – when You invents or re-arranges his past to fit the story he wants to tell her – and a fragment of collective fiction – when You uses ancient Chinese legends and tales to create his stories. This idea also gains credibility with the ending of the book, since her death corresponds to the birth of the book itself. Moreover, the writer's funeral is described as a literary event – as if You, after having completed the book, finally offered it to his readership for the first time: “He didn't know of her fame until her funeral. A couple of hundred of people chatting about her achievements. It became something of a literary conference” (142). The character of the writer is thus more complex than it initially seemed and offers many other interpretations, all pointing to the fact that the narrator cannot be entirely trusted since even the reality of one of the main characters cannot be taken for granted. This omnipresent unreliability unsettles the enunciative structure. The transparency of the narrative is blurred, and the techniques employed in order to construct a sense of order turn against themselves.

Therefore, everything that seems constructed, from plot to narration, is in the end de-constructed, twisted and rendered opaque by Castro. This oscillation between construction / de-construction finds its embodiment in the hotel You is building in *After China*, which functions as a metaphor. Indeed, You's hotel was designed in order to incorporate constant change and even to self-destruct (Brennan 72), bearing what You calls "a negative potential" (107) as it collapses into the sea at the end of the novel. We can compare this to the structure of the novel itself: on the one hand, it is a very dense, tightly-knit narrative structure, and on the other hand, this very structure is constantly questioned, broken and de-constructed. A further level is added to the oscillation between construction and de-construction in *After China* by framing the text between two paratextual quotations as if to remind the reader of this central preoccupation. The epigraph, taken from Primo Levi's essay "A Bottle of Sunshine," defines mankind in terms of its architectural propensities: "... man is a builder of receptacles; a species that does not build any is not human by definition" (Levi 30). And the novel ends with an afterword taken from Joedicke's *Architecture since 1945* defining what "metabolist architecture" is. This particular type of architecture – which resembles the structure of the book itself – reclaims the need for mankind to accept on-going processes of change and destruction: "Metabolism consisted in the integration of constant change into a system of design [...] which teaches eternal change in all things [...]. The Metabolists constructed their theory on the Ise Shrine which is demolished and rebuilt every twenty years" (145). It is mainly concerned with flexibility and the fact that structures must be expandable in order to emulate the organic growth found in nature. Consequently, the novel is not a fixed entity with a definite meaning but a malleable, evolving, ever-changing material reflecting life itself.

The key to reading Castro's book is therefore given to the reader, yet only at the very end of the novel, which strengthens the devices used by the narrator(s) in order to create this surrounding opacity. Readers must thus expect both construction and de-construction, transparency and layers of opacity, to coexist in a reciprocal, antagonistic way within the same structure.

The creation of a veiling and unveiling of things can also be felt through the use of language. Foreign words are deliberately used, which may create a feeling of estrangement. The words are nevertheless always accompanied by an explanation or translation and therefore never completely alienate the reader from the text. Most of the time, they are either inserted into the text and translated afterwards, or associated with their equivalent in English and do not really imperil the transparency of understanding. The very beginning of *Birds of Passage* illustrates this point, since the first sentence contains the name of the main character in Chinese, followed by its signification in English: "My name is Lo Yun Shan. I take my name from Tai Mo Shan, which is the Big Mist Mountain" (1). This opening immerses the reader into the foreign landscape set up, while leaving some familiar landmarks. However, the most interesting borrowings from foreign languages are achieved through plays with sonorities and meanings. Indeed, at times the narrators employ a foreign word which sounds like an English word and by associating the two of them, a further level of meaning is deployed, thus widening the ranges of possible meanings. This technique is present in *After China*, as can be seen when You plays with the French term "dragner" and the English one "to drag out." He says: "I liked dragging things out. The French have a nice word for it: draguer. To be on the prowl. To tell sto-

ries. To seduce” (10). By putting these two terms side by side the narrator relates two very different notions and hence adds a further meaning to the first word. “To drag out” is what You is indeed doing by telling stories to the writer, trying to prolong her life. At the same time, he is also trying to seduce her, flirting with her, thanks to his words.

Drawing the reader’s attention to these words and their nuances also raises questions about what the author is actually doing. Indeed since we, readers, are told a story, we could also feel that the author is flirting with us, which can be related to the argument Barthes develops in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Using the French verb *draguer*, Barthes states that the author has to play with his reader, that is quite literally cruise him, in order to create a “site of bliss” (4). The critic subsequently defines two different kinds of texts:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts [...] unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (*Pleasure* 14)

Castro’s texts could therefore be described as “texts of bliss,” as they toy with language and destabilize fixed meanings. Castro’s novels create effects of “defamiliarization,” a process in art which, Chklovsky explains, consists in making the form of the object more obscure in order to raise the difficulty and time of perception. This results in the creation of a feeling of strangeness – *ostranenie* – which enables the audience to free their perception from automatisms (Chklovski 75-99). This idea is confirmed in one of Castro’s essays playfully entitled “Just Flirting”: “Flirtation then, is for unsettling positions, for re-invention. It is not for commitment or possession. It is providing a constant desire by frustrating ‘knowability’ and the safe harbours of unquestioned loyalty” (37). “Flirting” with the text gives the reader the awareness of the different degrees of transparency and opacity layering the reading experience.

The reader is therefore left with a feeling of estrangement or lack of familiarity which leads him or her to participate actively in the elaboration of a meaning that is simultaneously contained and hidden in these “writerly texts.” Words do not mean anything just by themselves but carry another level of understanding which draws us closer to what Barthes calls “signifiante” (*Pleasure* 82) – defined as the meaning which is sensually produced (*Pleasure* 61). Indeed, it is not only – or not any more – a signification that Brian Castro’s readers are looking for, but a “signifiante”. By the term “sensually,” Barthes does not only mean sensuality, but also and more importantly the use of our senses.

Castro’s use of language is therefore far from being what the critic Richard Bradford labels “ordinary language” or “non-poetic language” (Bradford 3)¹⁰ but it allows what Bradford calls “a double pattern” (45). Indeed, this language contains a poetical dimension in addition to its common denotative use, and “creates unusual relationships between words” which encourages the reader to become aware “almost simultaneously of the object and the medium that makes the object available” (30). The self-referenti-

9. “Writerly texts” question the stability of “readerly texts” that present a familiar, conventional style and content. Writerly texts offer a multiplicity of meanings, hence destabilize the reader’s expectations and lead him or her to interpret the text according to Nietzsche’s use of the term, that is to say to encounter its plurality and not try to find a single interpretation to it (Barthes, *Pleasure* 4).

10. According to Bradford, “non-poetic language” is concerned with the efficiency of the exchange of information, whereas “poetic language” is further concerned with the processes and materiality of language.

ality of the poetical text thus creates a feeling of defamiliarization from common language. This effect is reached by “creating an interplay between words and phrases that no longer pays adherence to the general rules of clarity and coherence” (4-5). In order to bring forth a sensory experience for the reader, Castro adds lyricism to common descriptions. In *Birds of Passage* the lyrical qualities of words are put forward in numerous passages, which often brim over with alliterations. From the very beginning, Chinese rain is described with an abundance of alliterations that create a highly evocative atmosphere, as if moisture could actually be felt through the pages:

I sat snug in my rocking sedan chair and listened to the squelching steps of the coolies, the box emitting a not unpleasant perfumed mustiness in contrast to the humid air outside, the harsh wetness glistening on the long poles and bare, heaving torsos, redolent of sweat. (2)

In *After China*, alliterations are further reinforced by repetitive and accumulative devices which create a perceptible movement and rhythm on the page. For instance when You remembers his father's life, the reader whirls along with him down the thirty-six lines of a paragraph finishing – or rather left unfinished – with three dots, punctuated by seven “you wouldn't think so” (64-5). In this way, the time of the reminiscence becomes even more powerful and haunting, since the reader follows the waltz of his father's glory and decay until his final fall.

Other passages offer a visual experience to the reader through the moments in which the narrator pauses to muse, describing scenes as if they were paintings, their details almost real, their meanings evasive, yet appealing to the senses of the reader:

Nightwork is writing. Nightwork is pure joy, when the brush sweeps into the ideogram and the character discovers that its being is as fragile as tissue and as perfect and eternal as a vein of jade. Look how the ink finds its flight, its departure from meaning in the whiskers of the Dragon and the flames of the Phoenix. (97)

This excerpt from *After China* underlines the image created through comparison. The sensuality of the movement of the brush leads to a “departure from meaning,” which is also what the reader experiences since this passage seems to transcend mere description. The sensorial quality of language therefore adds a further level of meaning thanks to this emotional and sensory experience. While this adds depth to the transmitted message, it also tends to complicate the reading by opening up the possibilities of understanding through a multiplicity of interpretations.

Brian Castro's use of language is far from being transparent and sometimes borders on opacity. The techniques he employs, the veils he uses in order to blur boundaries and conventional understanding place us in the presence of “texts of bliss” which ask the reader to participate in the creation of meaning, however personal and unstable it may be. By inviting the reader to construct his or her own meaning, Brian Castro manages to challenge limitations and categories in general. He also – and more importantly – foregrounds the endless possibilities of language and its power to create new realities. As Castro underlines in his essay “Making Oneself Foreign,” a complete transparency cannot – perhaps fortunately – be reached: “Art is actually what resists full comprehension” (8).

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