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“Shakespeare was wrong”: Counter-discursive intertextuality in Gail Jones’s *Sorry*

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In what is presented as a moment of truth in Gail Jones’s novel *Sorry*, the narrator’s brief statement that “Shakespeare was wrong” appears to call into question the English dramatist’s literary and epistemological supremacy. Starting from this unsettling premise, this article seeks to define Jones’s counter-discursive use of Shakespearean intertextuality. While it has, for decades, proved a risky task for both historians and novelists to write about the delicate issue of silence in Australia without risking the appropriation of an Aboriginal voice, the article examines how Jones exploits defamiliarizing techniques in order to undermine the dominant European discourse (as encoded in the Shakespearean text) without assuming an Aboriginal perspective. Her aim is to facilitate the emergence of an incipient, tentatively defined counter-discourse sufficiently attuned to the specific realities of Australia. The article argues that by adopting an Australian cultural perspective designed to decentre Shakespeare, Jones hopes to reconcile history and writing, and also the divided aspects of White Australia’s twofold identity at a time of profound national changes.

Keywords: Gail Jones; *Sorry*; Shakespeare; intertextuality; counter-discourse; Australia; Aborigines

“Shakespeare was wrong” (Jones 2008a, 182). This arresting claim made by Perdita, the autodiegetic retrospective narrator in Gail Jones’s novel *Sorry* (first published in 2007), deserves consideration. Perdita, a young girl of settler lineage brought up in the Australian bush and educated by her Shakespeare-obsessed mother Stella Grant, unsurprisingly develops an early interest in and fondness for Shakespeare and his work:

The Shakespearean lessons were those Perdita loved best because they were stories. When her mother recited she was at a loss, completely bamboozled by the half-English, half-ornament quality of the verse, the overwrought pomposity of it all, the lavish sentiments. (Jones 2008a, 36)

However, through the teachings of her Aboriginal friends (the community of research of her father, the English anthropologist Nicholas Keene), Perdita starts to question her mother’s unflagging assertion that a volume of Shakespeare contains “everything one need[s] to know about life” (36) and that it answers all the big questions. Thus, although Perdita’s growing scepticism about the English playwright, which eventually leads her to the realization that “Shakespeare was wrong”, seems at first to smack of iconoclasm, her questioning of Shakespeare’s authority arouses the reader’s suspicion of official or received forms of discourse early on in the novel:

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Small questions, Perdita thought. There were *small* questions here. Or perhaps – the idea subversively filled her head – there were *different* big questions. When she tried to discuss this with her mother, she was met by staunch refutation. [...] Beyond dispute, it was, wholly beyond dispute. [...] Shakespeare had identified, [Stella] asserted again, all the “big” questions. (38; original emphases)

Moreover, Perdita’s realization that, just as there are alternative questions, there may also be alternative realities – such as “the unremarked, simple and non-noble feelings, the taste of warm water dribbling from a canvas bag, the silky air of early evening shining with nickel-glow, the floaty feeling induced by hearing Aboriginal songs by firelight” as well as “the rhythm of the clap sticks, repeating, and the words, the Language, drifting and braiding, drifting and braiding and dissolving into the darkness, like wind, like forgetting” (38) – matches her growing sense of the bipolarity of Australia’s history.

Like most White Australians, Perdita is torn between her parents’ British ancestry, on the one hand, and her Australian-cultivated mind on the other, and she eventually realizes that European cultural codes do not fully apply in the Australian context. *Sorry* can therefore be said to epitomize both Perdita’s growing awareness of the psychological and “cross-cultural” impasse in which she is stuck, and her quest to find her voice – both literally and figuratively. She will develop a partial amnesia that prevents her from realizing that she is guilty of stabbing her own father to death, and a psychogenic stutter that makes her gradually speechless, eventually leading her to question her own existence and identity. On an allegorical level, this sense of inappropriateness was shared by many contemporary White Australians after the publication in 1997 of the *Bringing Them Home* report. This document, containing numerous Aboriginal testimonies and harrowing revelations about the country’s official policy of abduction of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, had been commissioned by the Keating government in 1995, but was made public under the Howard government. In requesting that a national apology be offered to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders for the forcible removal from their families and homes of thousands of “half-caste” children, now known as the Stolen Generations, it challenged the existing national history of Australia. However, the apology was withheld by Prime Minister John Howard for as long as he was in office. During the Convention of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, in May 1997, he even denied the findings of the inquiry, calling into question the existence of Stolen Generations, and claiming that “Australians of this generation should not be required to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control” (Howard 1997). This is the context in which eminent Australian historian Henry Reynolds (2000) published his personal journal, significantly entitled *Why Weren’t We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History*, in which he criticizes the “Great Australian Silence” seen to inform the distorted and idealized versions of the past he and generations of Australians had to grow up with.

In *Sorry*, the importance of the issue of silence is uppermost, since, ironically perhaps, the novel’s incipit invites the reader to hearken to this story “that can only be told in a whisper”:

A whisper: sssshh. The thinnest vehicle of breath.

This is a story that can only be told in a whisper.

There is a hush to difficult forms of knowing, an abashment, a sorrow, an inclination towards silence. *My* throat is misshapen with all it *now* carries. *My* heart is a sour, indolent

fruit. *I think the muzzle of time has made me thus, has deformed my mouth, my voice, my wanting to say.* (Jones 2008a, 3; my emphases)

In these opening lines, the reader is directly introduced to the first-person narrative of Perdita, a character who is carrying the burden of some unspeakable event and is at this stage suffering from a partial loss of speech. Inasmuch as this narrator appears to be carrying in the present a burden correlated to her symptomatic misshapen throat, the novel bears the unmistakable stamp of trauma narratives. In addition, reflexivity is denoted through the statement that “this is a story that can only be told in a whisper”. Not only does this make the whole book into an enactment of stutter, it also functions as a kind of warning for the reader, that the hushed tone of the story may enable the emergence of some deeper, underlying truth. Indeed, the more one proceeds into the story of the sisterly friendship between Perdita and Mary, the 16-year-old Aboriginal housemaid, the more one becomes aware of all that has remained unsaid – crucially, the episode in which Nicholas is found stabbed to death, his trousers “unbuttoned, slid to his ankles”, and Mary, who has clearly been raped, confesses to the crime, is arrested and taken to a girl’s delinquent home (92). This is why, in Alev Adil’s words, Jones has chosen “to speak of silence, not of the silenced. [The book] is careful not to ventriloquize Aboriginal histories. The elegiac and occluded nature of [its] narrative is an ethical as much as aesthetic choice” (quoted in Herrero 2011, 287). In an article tackling the issue of writing and justice in the Australian context, Jones vindicates this form of obliquity, confessing that *Sorry* has “a political-allegorical aspect – as one would expect, claiming such a title”, yet that “it is not centrally concerned with representing the Stolen Generations. As a white Australian, it would be presumptuous to do so and it would risk appropriation of others’ painful experience” (2008b, 84). She further contends that non-Indigenous writers who wish “to engage with ‘stolen’ matters must write from another perspective and perhaps use forms of indirection that will signal a refusal to ‘claim’ the experience of others” (79).

In *Sorry*, Jones contrives to handle the delicate and highly controversial issue of voice and vocal appropriation encountered when dealing with Aboriginal (hi)stories through her appeal to trauma fiction and her use of different perspectives and “forms of indirection” such as allegory and intertextuality, which help her avoid the appropriation of Indigenous material, testimonial style and voice. As Dolores Herrero (2011) puts it, Jones’s novel

discloses the author’s uneasiness with official historical discourses and continuous narratives through her concern with the complexities of traumatic time, one that is characterized by ellipses and stasis, but also [...] by returns and sudden progressions. [...] Jones creates the sense of trauma as a reading strategy. (284)

Indeed, by introducing into her novel the concept of traumatic time, which Jones defines as “a time that is broken, and that is recursive” (2008c) and which mirrors on the level of form and structure the effects that trauma exerts on its victims, she recreates a narrative model that echoes an Australian discourse predating the *Bringing Them Home* report – that is, a discourse which is tinged with amnesia, fragmented memories, and silence. My main contention in this article, therefore, is that Jones’s discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, including inter-discursive Shakespearean references, in order to expose its underlying assumptions, before dismantling these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of both the novel’s culturally hybrid protagonist and its readers. It is by first establishing an inter-discursive

link with Shakespeare that Jones subsequently and most successfully manages to distance herself from the dominant discourse and to assert her own counter-discourse.

Perdita's sudden realization that "Shakespeare was wrong" thus emerges as an important moment of truth in the narrative, one that corresponds to the protagonist's liberation from her long-standing entrapment in traumatic time. This is made clear in a passage in which, wondering about the curious way children come to understanding, the adult Perdita remembers how, after thinking about the opening stanza of sonnet 60,¹ "the repetition of which [she] loved", "all of a sudden, [she had] realised Shakespeare was wrong", because "there was no forward incessancy, like waves meeting waves, but recursion, fold, things revisiting out of time" (Jones 2008a, 182). She goes on to claim that her "sense too was of the implicating dragnet of the past, the accumulated experiences to which [she] was somehow compelled to return, the *again* and *again*, one might say, of moments drastically mistaken" (182; original emphases). Thus Perdita – and here I agree with Robert Dixon (2008, 125) – views time as folded, as in Michel Serres's metaphor of the handkerchief crumpled in the pocket, which, as Lynda Nead (2000) suggests, evokes "a 'topological' concept of time, in which previously distant points 'become close, or even superimposed' " (8). This coincides with Jones's conception of temporality and of history as a multilayered patch of memories, all folded one upon the other, superimposed yet mutually permeable. Using the image of "the photograph of someone one loves, as a child" in her earlier novel *Dreams of Speaking*, Jones had already described folded time as follows: "The present is given adorable density; in the face of the beloved rests an earlier face" (2007, 37). Unlike Shakespeare, she sees time as neither linear nor cyclical, but as intertwined; and *Sorry* can be said to incarnate, formally and thematically, not only this notion of folded time, but also the possible unfolding of experience, a process by which past events, which up until this moment have suffused the present with their repressed presence, can eventually surface and bring to light a previously silenced yet haunting chapter in the history of Australia. This resonates in the context of Jones's political allegory, as the narrative structure of *Sorry*, with its suggestive, forward-looking, and apology-oriented ending, encodes the political situation of White Australia under the Howard government, at a time when many people began to feel drawn towards Reconciliation. As Janet Wilson puts it, "in using the framework of the Reconciliation process and its address of historical injustice in the settler colony [*Sorry*] speak[s] directly to the hiatus caused by the Federal Government's refusal to apologise" (forthcoming). Thus, no matter how flawed Perdita's narrative may seem while she remains trapped in her stutter and her partial recollection of events, the Shakespearean intertext constitutes an important blind spot in the novel, suggesting the need to deconstruct the European master narrative with which it is associated.

Interestingly, reconciliation is also central to Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, a play that haunts Jones's *Sorry* with its notions of recognition, redemption and revisited time. A brief examination of these concerns as they are tackled in Shakespeare's romance will provide a useful subtext against which Jones's singular position can subsequently be sketched. Jean E. Howard (2008) calls *The Winter's Tale* a "resonant narrative of loss and redemption" (2883), and significantly she indexes the play under Shakespeare's tragicomedies in view of how it "moves from sorrow to joy" (2884) without quite obliterating the former. There is indeed a 16-year-leap forward in the narrative, involving a dramatic and stylistic schism which explains why *The Winter's Tale* is usually said to be "structured like a diptych, with a tragic first half succeeded by a comedy of regeneration" (Shell 2010, 206). Importantly, however, "that joy is

bittersweet”, for the reconstitution of Leontes’s family is “only partial and imperfect” (206): Leontes’s son, Mamillius, commits suicide and Hermione, Leontes’s petrified wife, “returns as a woman past childbearing”, her body bearing “the mark of time” (Shakespeare 2008b, 2884). Thus, in spite of its rather joyful tonality (old sorrows are healed and new romances on their way), the ending of *The Winter’s Tale* “cannot make an old man young or erase all the consequences of rash deeds” (Howard 2008, 2884).

It should be stressed that while in Shakespeare’s play Mamillius’s death and Hermione’s death-like inertia provoke in Leontes an urge for repentance that will eventually lead to his rehabilitation and the quasi-restoration of an earlier situation, in *Sorry*, by contrast, although Perdita feels duly repentant, time and Mary’s death (from appendicitis) have forestalled her sense of recognition and therefore the possibility of a true reconciliation and reparation. Thus, in spite of the two girls’ sisterly friendship, there is no closure of any kind, mainly because Perdita’s apology comes *too late* – “*I should have said sorry to my sister, Mary. Sorry, my sister, oh my sister, sorry*” (Jones 2008a, 211; original italics). It is thus my contention that, in portraying Perdita’s *total* failure to apologize in time, as opposed to Leontes’s *nearly* complete reconciliation, Jones is alluding to the official apology in Australia (still pending as it was at the time of the novel’s publication) and simultaneously offers a picture of the alternatives awaiting the Australian government and population: either the apology will be offered soon, and could then lead to reconciliation (as in *The Winter’s Tale*), or the failure to apologize in time will inhibit any efforts at curbing the line of history (an anxiety very perceptible in *Sorry*).

Simultaneously, Jones warns against the insufficiency of reconciliation in itself. Not content to harp on the bittersweet ending of *The Winter’s Tale*, she seems to suggest that what matters most is that reparations should be made. This she illustrates through Stella’s behaviour when Perdita and her speech therapist Doctor Oblov seek to persuade her to vouch for her own guilt and Mary’s innocence:

Stella announced simply: “What’s done cannot be undone.” [...] It was like a door slammed shut. [...] Stella was refusing to speak when a few words might release Mary from prison [...] and offering no explanation. (Jones 2008a, 201–202)

To a certain extent, Stella’s refusal to speak resembles Prime Minister John Howard’s rejection of the *Bringing Them Home* report, as well as his refusal to apologize. I would even venture to suggest that, in comparing Stella to “a mad monarch, awesomely stubborn” (202), Jones establishes a triangular link between Stella, John Howard and Shakespeare’s Leontes, who also comes across as a harbinger of tragedy in view of his long-standing inability to question his own premises. Jones thus questions the legitimacy of all three and through this focus on Leontes² she decentres Shakespeare himself from an Australian cultural perspective. This is in line with her use in *Sorry* of Shakespearean intertextuality as a script open to deconstruction. Importantly, the displacement of Shakespeare’s “pre-text” (and of everything else that goes with it) also occurs through a splitting of Perdita – into the young protagonist and the adult narrator. Jones enhances her counter-discursive strategy through this dichotomy. As narrator, the adult Perdita calls on traditional discursive strategies to mirror on the level of form the official Australian discourse (that is to say, a flawed and shaded discourse, tinged with silence and trauma envy). However, when narrating from the more indirect viewpoint of her younger self, Perdita challenges the limitations of her own discourse as an adult, thus introducing self-reflexivity into her narrative. In other words, the adult Perdita serves intermittently as a vehicle for Jones in her development of a

counter-discursive strategy, embodied by the young Perdita and signalled by the latter's claim that "Shakespeare was wrong" (Jones 2008a, 182). By contrast, the adult Perdita pursues something like victim surrogacy: even from the beginning of the novel, the first-person narrator establishes herself as a victim of trauma, thus claiming the reader's attention while relegating Mary's traumatic experience to a position of secondary importance. Given the "political-allegorical aspect" (Jones 2008b, 84) of *Sorry* and considering the meaning of *Perdita*, which is the Latin denomination for "lost one", the female protagonist of Jones's novel can then be said to allegorize White Australia's contemporary identity loss and crisis. The text appears to be inviting such a reading in one of its more metatextual moments: "*Perdita*, I understood then, was the lost one found, the lucky child. I was pleased with my name, and did not think, those days, to read a wider allegory" (Jones 2008a, 27; original emphasis). Perdita is thus endowed with an allegorical significance, aptly encoded in her name: to a contemporary reader; her loss of selfhood comes across as an embodiment of White Australia's struggle with nationhood and identity, while her loss of speech alludes to the Great Australian Silence as it existed at a time when part of the historical truth about the relationship between settlers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was repressed.

The possibility then arises that, as an aspect of her allegorical import, Perdita comes to signify trauma envy³ as well as victim surrogacy. Indeed, her memory loss allows her to play a trauma victim's part. All things considered, the different readings her role elicits remain quite ambivalent throughout the narrative, as she can be seen as both a child victim on the plot level and a surrogate victim (standing in for Mary and, through her, for the Aborigines) on the allegorical level. In depicting herself from the beginning as a child who, in spite of standing up to her parents, suffers from dereliction of parental duty, the adult Perdita – she is both the first- and third-person narrator⁴ – arouses a feeling of empathy in the reader right from the start. This feeling is then gradually fuelled by the episodic hardships that Perdita undergoes: the first time she becomes aware of the fact that Mary is being raped by Nicholas, "she [doesn't] want to know. She turn[s] her face to the wall and shut[s] her eyes tight" and wonders

what witness was this, that Perdita could not bear to contemplate? What palpitation of the heart, what sense of panicked strangulation, was she suppressing behind her tightly closed eyes? Perdita was frightened. The night was dark. With her eyes closed there was an extra darkness she could sink her witnessing into. (Jones 2008a, 61)

Significantly, although this passage is concerned with Mary's rape by Nicholas, the narrator's focus is clearly directed towards the young Perdita's fears. Consequently, the reader's sympathy is possibly more stirred by the young girl's witnessing of the rape of her "sister" than by the fact of the rape itself. Similarly, when Nicholas hits Stella, "sending her flying backwards so that she toppled a stack of books", and strikes Mary, who does not fall but stands "before him in staunch, smarting accusation, so that he [becomes] self-conscious, or perhaps even ashamed", Perdita "[feels] once again the sting of her cowardice, the way she [has] become a mute witness, a child whose limits [define] her" (79). Again, the focus is on Perdita's torments, and she will keep this status of surrogate victim up to the moment of her final statement about her failure to apologize in time.

In playing at victim surrogacy, the adult Perdita retrospectively aims at what Marc Delrez (2010) has called "an experiential equivalence with the victims" (57). Following Erikson's (1995) claim that "traumatic conditions [...] give victims the feeling that they have been set apart and made special" (186), it may be claimed that Perdita also

envies Mary for having been made special, as if she had been designated by an external, god-like, but also traumatic force. In her retrospective narration, Perdita thus responds to this by drawing the reader's attention to her own traumatic experience and muteness, caused by her father's death but mostly by Mary's ensuing removal. Interestingly, the reader is given some insight into Perdita's thoughts and feelings following these traumatic experiences. In this way the adult Perdita *subtly* shifts the status of victim from Mary to her childhood self: as we have seen, it is made difficult for the reader not to sympathize with the white girl, who has suffered the loss of her sister Mary. Perdita's role in the story is all the more ambiguous since she does indeed rescue Mary from Nicholas's grip, but fails to rescue her from prison and eventually from death: when the two policemen arrive at the crime scene on the night when Nicholas has been murdered, she is hushed by Mary who urges her not to "tell them" (Jones 2008a, 3), and indeed Perdita "says virtually nothing, and seems to have trouble forming words in her mouth" (92). Although it can be argued that Perdita keeps silent out of a wish to obey Mary's orders, she nevertheless claims, when she has recovered the memory of having stabbed her father to death, that she "knew what [she] was doing" (204). It can therefore be claimed that through her muteness and by not speaking up for Mary, Perdita, as narrator, monopolizes the reader's attention by implicitly referring to her own victimization as a child and by surreptitiously silencing Mary. In focusing far more on the white character's trauma, and eclipsing the Aborigine's traumatic experience, the adult Perdita's childhood narrative then seeks to create an equalization of the white and Aboriginal characters' traumatic experiences. Thus Jones, who elsewhere criticizes the trauma model as a "transferential gesture of victim surrogacy" symptomatic of postcolonizing settler cultures (Jones 2004, 162), may well wish to show how easily one gets carried away by the sufferings of a young traumatized girl, meanwhile forgetting the Aboriginal girl. In other words, instead of acting as a moralizing authority reminding readers at regular intervals that the Aborigine's story and trauma are being silenced, Jones plays with the book's twofold perspective in order to mimic the settler Australians' contemporary claim that they are the traumatized ones with the consequential neglect of the Aborigines' predicament.

Stella's use of Shakespeare is wrong, then, not only in that the English playwright's view of time and redemption proves inapplicable in the case of Australia, but also because his understanding of experience does not translate easily to the antipodes. A case in point is the passage in which Stella desperately tries to find consolation by reciting Shakespeare's sonnets after having "performed her wifely duty" (Jones 2008a, 16) to her husband on her first night in Broome. Interestingly, it is only when writing to her sister Margaret that she will find "relief, after all, in silent words. In her *own* words" (16–17; original emphasis). This particular passage from the novel's beginning hints at the inability of Shakespeare's words to soothe Stella once she is in Australia.⁵ Indeed, it seems that consolation fails to materialize, while Australian realities intrude, as on Christmas Day 1940, when Stella performs Act Five of *Othello* and Nicholas lets out "a deep, derisive laugh" (79). Outraged by his reaction, she tears off the newspaper cuttings showing pictures of the war raging in Europe, which the war-obsessed Nicholas had pinned on the walls of the shack. In reaction to this, Nicholas hits Stella, "sending her flying backwards so that she topple[s] a stack of books" (79). When Mary protests, she is struck, too, "but [does] not fall" (79).

There is undoubtedly a parallel of some kind between this scene and Act Five of *Othello*. However, unlike the Moor of Venice, who is filled with remorse after his murderous deed, Nicholas offers no apology, nor does he say anything after venting his

wrath on Stella and Mary (79). Once more, Shakespeare fails to fit the Australian scene, much to Stella's mental and epistemological discomfort. The accumulation of such disillusionments, I believe, might even contribute to her folly. Consider, by way of illustration, the scene in which Stella falls into a trance, reciting Shakespeare's *King Lear* in "black-magical speech" (86), while a cyclone rages outside. When the storm is over, Stella scrabbles on all fours in the mud, "acting out Lear tormented, believing herself infirm, weak and despised" (87), and searches for her cards, 42 of which she will eventually retrieve. Stella's appeal to Shakespeare in this moment of distress once again seems unhelpful. Significantly, Perdita even believes "that her mother might boost or encourage the storm by her fanatical invocation" (85).

More efficient is the intervention of Kurnti, a former Aboriginal stockman on the nearby station, who shelters Stella and Perdita under a double mattress held up like a roof until the cyclone has passed. This episode suggests that, in the Antipodes, the roles are reversed: it is the Aboriginal stockman who protects Perdita and her mother from the "black-magical speech" (86) of Britain's most renowned playwright. Thus, it seems that both Stella's retellings of Shakespeare's works and her "redescription of life in Shakespearean terms" (113), that is, her "addled vision of the world" in which "so much was [...] misremembered, so that the planet reshaped into new tectonic variations, changed the size and outline of countries on shaky hand-drawn maps, filled up with fabricated peoples and customs" (35–36), end up disappointing the Australian-born Perdita and eventually drive Stella to depression and folly.

What is more, Perdita learns at school that "Shakespeare was not as important as her mother had tediously proclaimed" and discovers "by accident [...] that she [can] recite complete verses of Shakespeare fluently, without entering the word-fray and deformation of her stutter" (Jones 2008a, 141). Thus, quite ironically, it is Shakespeare who rescues Perdita from complete muteness. By the same token and as part of her ambivalence concerning Shakespeare, Jones presents Doctor Oblov's proposed speech therapy as both profoundly ironic, since he invokes Shakespeare when trying to help her recover her own voice, and yet is accidentally effective all the same. It is when "open[ing] Doctor Oblov's copy of [Shakespeare's] *Collected Works at random*" and "*chanc[ing] upon the tragedy of Macbeth*" – from which Stella had chanted as Nicholas lay dying – that Perdita's eye, "*as if fated*", catches "on something wholly familiar" and she not only sees before her, "as if cinematically arranged, the complete, recovered scene of her father's death" but also hears, "to her amazement, her own verbal recovery" (191–192, 195; my emphases).

Thus, Jones develops in *Sorry* a counter-discursive use of intertextuality by adding an extra layer to the two traditional textual levels: in addition to the plot level, where Shakespeare is used as an indirect vehicle to give Perdita her voice back, and the narrative level, where the narrator Perdita gives voice to her younger self, meanwhile silencing Mary, Jones introduces a metafictional level, where Perdita (after her muteness) is given a self-reflexive voice by the author. In my view, the following words encapsulate a metafictional comment by Jones:

Perdita realised that the speechless, the accursed, gradually vanish. She noticed with a kind of fear how frequently she was overlooked, how she was becoming dim and disregarded in the estimations of others. Less than a character in a book. Less than a fiction. (Jones 2008a, 146)

Where words fail and memory falters, existence is threatened, unless fiction fills the gaps. More generally, Jones seems to advocate the importance of creation and

creativity, as confirmed by her thematization of sign language, which is described in *Sorry* as “a form of poetry” (199), “a language rich with hidden density, such as the body itself carries, and soulful as each distinctive, utterly distinctive, signer” (205), as an alternative to ordinary (mimed) speech:

So she had been barely expressive when her stutter had maimed her and driven her to silence, and now she felt almost mystically extra-expressive. With Billy and Pearl she discovered another dimension of communication. There were meanings that could exist only in sign, connotation for which only the inventive body and a gestural repertoire sufficed. She loved the three of them together, watching each other’s faces and hands, as though the body itself was a kind of book. (199)

So it seems that, in sign language with its “new meanings” (206), Perdita might well find an alternative to her mangled speech on the one hand, and to her mother’s unsuitable Shakespearean lingo on the other. This privileging of sign language can be seen as a response to the silence that surrounds Mary’s fate, as well as a confirmation of the novel’s awareness that some things cannot be talked about or represented through traditional language. Thus a new, shared language between the victim (embodied by Mary) and the guilty (embodied by Perdita) needs to be established in order for forgiveness to occur.

In this sense, Jones eventually displaces the Shakespearean intertext that is made so prominent in the novel. The paradox is that the centrality given to Shakespeare as a point of cultural reference, ironic though it may be, nevertheless depends upon, and perhaps encourages, the cultured reader’s continuing esteem for the English playwright and for the authority that is associated with him. The resulting ambivalence, one that may well be shared by the text of *Sorry*, accords with the author’s privileging of alienating techniques – subtle manipulations, hardly perceptible ironies, and a suggestive approach to metafiction – which serve to undermine the dominant discourse and facilitate the emergence of an incipient, tentatively defined counter-discourse attuned to the specific realities of Australia. As we have seen, this occurs in a context in which any smooth rhetoric of reconciliation can only seem glib, and where cultural arrogance and self-importance finally beg to be punctured.

Shakespeare, then, may not have been wrong in the absolute sense, but the point is that he somehow became so, or in any case he began to seem insufficient as a model of understanding, *once brought to Australia*. In retrospect, the child Perdita can only seem wonderfully inspired in her precocious perception of this fact, though the novel also suggests that, even then, she still had – indeed, like many White Australians today – to find a voice in which to express the resulting sentiment with the required freedom and creativity. The suggestion that, in the process, a passage through the tortuous contiguities linking the national past to its interconnected present will have to be negotiated can perhaps be received by thinking and reading individuals as less a curse than a rich opportunity for ethical self-invention.

Notes

1. “Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end; / Each changing place with that which goes before, / In sequent toil all forwards do contend” (Shakespeare 2008a, 1966).
2. Similarly, Nicholas is associated with Leontes, in keeping with the negative view of the Shakespearean character sustained in the novel: “His profile had a sharp, *Sicilian* quality. *Leontes*. And the light glinting off his eyeglasses, Perdita thought, made him look sightless, brutal” (Jones 2008a, 34; emphases in original).

3. John Mowitz (2000) was the first to remark that “trauma has come to be invested with such authority and legitimacy that it elicits a concomitant desire to have suffered it, or if not the unspeakable event itself, then the testimonial agency it is understood to produce” (283).
4. The first- and third-person narratives succeed one another, typographically separated by an asterisk, yet within some sections both narratives are merged. For instance, (a) when the first-person narrator claims that “this is a story that can only be told in a whisper” this suggests that she is the narrator (first- and third-person); (b) chapter 2 starts with “I believe that” (14) followed by details of Nicholas’s and Stella’s lives that only a third-person narrator could possibly know; (c) chapter 3 begins with “It was the wet season when Stella heaved *me* out” (24; my emphasis) and ends with “*Perdita* grew chubby, contented and well” (26; my emphasis); (d) at the end of the penultimate chapter, the third-person narrator suddenly turns into the first-person narrator: “And only then [...] did she begin to know, did she begin to open and grieve. [...] *should have said sorry to my sister, Mary*” (211; original italics).
5. For more on this matter, see Herrero (2011), 291.

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