Realism and Strangeness: C. J. Koch's "The Doubleman"

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FROM THE RUSSIAN Formalists to Roland Barthes and beyond, literary criticism has learnt to treat Realism as an historical and conceptual phenomenon over and above the dogmatic insistence on its unmediated relationship with the real world. An ironic consequence of this exposure of Realism's conventionality is the separation of Realism as an epistemological assumption from Realism as a self-conscious ethic. A modern writer may choose to adopt the techniques of Realism because of his or her commitment to a certain relationship between literature and social praxis, rather than out of naive faith in the ability of narrative to represent the world. Yet can this ethic survive its necessary combat with the relativism of modernity without recourse to an authoritarian assertion of its superior relation to "reality," and thus enter into exchange with modernist values and techniques? Or is Realism unable to break with its past, left to offer only a more and more dogmatic, even a more and more visceral, repudiation of modernity? The aim of this essay is to pursue a distinction made by Roman Jakobson, in one of the earliest reconsiderations of Realism, through a contemporary novel that not only lays claim to Realism as a literary technique, but recommends it as an ethic: C. J. Koch's *The Doubleman*. My intention here is not to provide a definitive answer to the questions outlined above so much as to clarify the terms of the debate as pursued by an Australian novelist of considerable reputation. The loud challenge to debate made by Koch's novel should not be ignored, if contemporary fiction is not to ease into a comfortable and innocuous consensus, wherein putatively postmodern

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techniques become commonplace, with only a superficial recall of the difficult and radical controversies that gave rise to them.

In his 1921 article "On Realism In Art," Jakobson traces the way the "real" renews its authority as a term of literary judgement. A new generation of realists foregrounds what had previously been considered "unnecessary details," breaking convention by violating inherited emphases and perspectives. The reader experiences this rupture of convention as immediacy, where the platitudes that had made his or her relationship with the world stale and habitual are erased, and access to the real seems direct. The implication of this argument is that our experience of the real is primarily an experience of strangeness, rather than authenticity or correspondence between a representation and what it purports to represent.

"Strangeness" itself can, of course, be seen as a corollary of the category "reality," with its implications of consensus about the distinction between the normal and the marginal. Perhaps from Diderot onwards, but certainly from Balzac and Dickens, Realism as a literary form has depended on evoking or more accurately defining the strange as the object of its fascination and the source of both its rationale and the terminology for its judgements. Whether it takes the form of the degenerate, the deformed, or the perverse—all terms that can only be made meaningful under the aegis of a strictly located normality—strangeness has always been the necessary assumption of Realism, its Siamese twin at which it looks with distaste but from which it cannot separate itself. The aim of this article is to show that the distinction between the strange and the real is not one defined by strict and objective rational categories. The experience of the "real" in bourgeois culture is inalienable from a strong sense of the pressing threat of the strange, a strange which both repels and tempts, challenges prejudices and confirms them. In the end, the encounter with these two apparently binary opposites becomes more or less a single experience, and the separation between them can only be loudly proclaimed by an appeal to authority—in literary terms, the authority of narrative truth—rather than by dispassionate demonstration.

In *The Doubleman*, an evil power is imputed to the otherworld of Faery, which Koch associates with a variety of ideas and ideologies from gnosticism to astrology and hedonism. The novel traces the experience of Richard Miller from his childhood fascination with this otherworld, through his ambivalent relationships with several of its more enthusiastic proponents, and ends with his effective cure, his eventual liberation from delusion in the novel's dying words. We assume that this cure signifies his achievement of the undeluded detachment which allows him to become the authoritative narrator who judges the other characters and his own past with such certainty. It is from an ostensible narrative present that Miller's criticism of his own past is spoken. His past is made coherent by retrospection, creating for the protagonist a double selfhood—a benighted and wandering character is transformed to a percipient and authoritative narrator.

Yet, there remains something uncertain about this contrast. The distinction between Faery and the narrative authority that stands opposite it is asserted rather than clearly demonstrated. In the end, an accidental death is contrived to damn conclusively the narcotic otherworld. This almost arbitrary conclusion is emblematic of the book's inability to articulate the distinction on which it seems to depend—the contrast between pagan delusion and the realism that underlies Miller's retrospection. The assumptions on which this distinction is based are never investigated—there is no recognition that narrative's claim to deal with truth by way of fiction might be problematic, and might even involve the same sort of manipulation and appeal to authority as the occult.

The constant danger of narrative and the occult becoming indistinguishable presses on the reader in the text. *The Doubleman* embraces a patterning of omen, fascination, and dream that harnesses the mystery and energy of what Koch calls Faery while apparently trying to repudiate it. Realism's dependence on the strange for its charisma is played out here in narrative's dependence on the occult. That which is ostensibly to be condemned is embraced. That which the text seems to be dividing off from the

world because it is dangerous proves to be necessary to the text's very existence, even an analogue of its substance.

In Koch's world of Faery, separateness and difference take on an almost archetypal menacing power. This is first made clear in the characterization of Clive Broderick, the swarthy Man in the Lane (13), whom the adolescent Miller first meets on the way to school. "He was no ordinary man going to work at all," Miller recalls; "he was not like other people" (13). Later, when the two characters meet outside Sandy Lovejoy's shop, Broderick is described in exactly the same terms: "I still found [his eyes] different from other eyes" (53). This obscurity does not lead to curiosity, but to fear, and the imputation to Broderick of otherworldly power. "The man made me uneasy to a degree for which there seemed no explanation" (13); "it was very important to contradict him" (14). Koch teases us with such statements, unwilling to supply us with more than implied meanings. Miller's experience of Broderick is limited to "enigmatic flashes, telling me little, yet intriguing me more and more" (62).

This undefined power is related to esoteric knowledge. Broderick's knowledge takes many forms—from a mastery of all aspects of guitar-playing to obscure but certain business skill, from his confident denunciation of the Catholic Church to his encyclopaedic acquaintance with different spiritual traditions. His office "seems more suggestive of esoteric knowledge than any lecturer's study" (123). Broderick's function as a character is clear—to effect at least a notional connection between esoteric knowledge and a menacing obscure power. He provides the experiments of his younger protégés with a connection to the world history of dangerous superstition without which they could appear merely odd. It is through him that Faery is established as a real force to be reckoned with, possessed of as long and important a tradition as the Christianity to which it stands opposite.

It is Darcy Burr who inherits the link between knowledge and danger that started with Broderick. The two men even look alike (274-75). In the book's closing scene, Miller mistakes one for the other (351). From the outset, Darcy is presented as evil and manipulative. "His face shows a pitiless coldness" (109). Miller is not surprised to learn that he has been involved with the Church

of Scientology, and imprisoned (227). He offers Miller a share in his power over the others: "We can make it happen, you and me," he says. "The others'll be our instruments" (248). Like Broderick's before him, Burr's power takes on an abstract dimension: "it was a form of power, and on that scale . . . it ceased to be vulgar and became a sort of mystery" (288).

Miller too has been tempted by the connection between separateness, knowledge, and power. Koch traces his disposition to illusion back to his childhood, when, in convalescing from polio, he was obsessed with a private toy theatre. This toy theatre allows him to develop his fantasies, and indulge his dreams of manipulation. It is combined with his amateur researches into Faery into "a rite of worship" (30). It is clear from the start that this taste for illusion is dangerous. His grandfather soon regrets that he has bought the toy (24). The young Miller knew that this regret was not misplaced (29), and that his yearning to go to Elf-land was "sickly, foolish" (31). Later, his involvement with ABS as a radio and television producer is seen as a version of the same dangerous theatre of illusion. The mass media are presented as other, modern versions of Faery; its actors work in "fantasy" (144). Several times he even says he is "working in my toy theatre again" (260). The world of Faery theatre illusion in childhood and media illusion in adulthood are defined in the same terms, contriving for Miller's career and character at least a symbolic consistency. His knowledge of Faery, on which he discourses eloquently to both Burr and the reader, is part of the same apparent entrapment, by which he is reluctantly caught up in the larger struggle which is the abstract background to the novel's narrative.

Together, Miller and Burr are separate from the social norm, possessed of a knowledge and power that allow them to manipulate others:

> We laughed like conspirators, as though there were an underlying point to the presentation, never put into words by either of us, which went beyond mere entertainment, and would catch people unawares, subtly undermining their simple enjoyment of a folk group, and drawing them into that Otherworld they thought had no power anymore, its messages carried by the weird electric whine of the guitars. (260)

Such self-indulgent play with esoteric knowledge, when combined with a willingness to manipulate, ends in dangerous exposure of innocents to the otherworld. In an unabashed generality, Koch announces how naive enjoyment can be undermined by cynical manipulators, exposing the unprepared to an archaic, putatively satanic, power. Faery is indeed dangerous—the novel connects it with the media, Nazis and Communists (237), Scientology and crime (227), gnosticism (127), the occult (112), hedonism and the love of Nature (310), drug use (262), and interest in foreign cultures (275).

What stands against Faery? In several important episodes in the book, an alternative spirituality linked to Catholicism is proposed. This first happens when the adolescent Miller meets a charismatic Italian monk who warns him against the delights of sensuality (47-48). He is described in these terms:

> Every one of us received his smile, like a gift to take away for the rest of the day; I was to take it away for the rest of my life. (45)

This image of spiritual purity conveyed by a beatific smile is repeated in one of the book's final episodes, when the disoriented Miller enters a Catholic church in Darlinghurst. His distaste for an elderly communicant is overcome when he sees him returning from the altar-rail (339). In an interview with Michael Hulse, Koch has described this scene as one in which Miller recognizes "psychic health" in the Mass. In these two episodes, a clear preference emerges for the simple rites of Catholicism, which are seen to offer some protection from "wicked spirits who wander through the world to the ruin of souls" (339). Yet this alternative is never fully argued. Separate episodes do not quite cohere to become a thoroughly articulated Catholic position.

The alternative Koch proposes most consistently and emphatically to the blindness of Faery is not *within* the narrative. It is the narrative itself and its persona, the simultaneously credulous and skeptical Miller. There is something paradoxical about the denigration of illusion in television, radio, and popular music within the confines of a work of fiction. There is no serious attempt to argue a way out of this paradox, by, for example, recourse to documentation as authority for the period the novel covers, or a

model of culture that separates fictions into deluded low and perceptive high forms. The problem is not acknowledged. The most striking manifestation of this paradox is the similarity between the detachment, knowledge, and power provided by Faery, and that provided for Miller when he becomes the narrator.

The detachment Miller enjoys as narrator locates him in a present separate from the novel's main action. The novel's closing words signal the transformation in his life that allows him this detachment. The occult name Eurybia loses its power over him:

> The cold name shone briefly from the bottom of memory: a forgotten toy; something from my boyhood at Trent Street, with no more glamour.
>
> And I knew now that it was all gone—like Harrigan Street and Broderick, and the district of Second-hand. (352)

The breaking of this spell gives the book its end. Within the plot's projected naturalistic time, it frees the narrator so that he can dispassionately scrutinize and assess the lives of those around him. Koch reminds us several times that Miller is recalling the story from a very different present. Of the nightmares that close contact with Darcy Burr had inspired in him, he writes: "little of their content comes back *now*. . . . Even *now*, I puzzle over the strength of conviction I developed that these weren't normal dreams" (317; emphasis added). This implication that Miller is writing from a particular present time, in which he is no longer subject to the pull of the otherworld, sets him apart from the other characters in the novel.

Given that the detachment of those enthralled by Faery leads to esoteric knowledge and power over others, it is important to note that Miller as narrator combines a similar sort of knowledge with a similar sort of power. This knowledge takes the form of an almost encyclopaedic general knowledge; his power over other characters is demonstrated in his judgement of them. Miller's amazing general knowledge is not part of his characterization as much as emblematic of his authority as a narrator. The reader is casually informed that the *buleria* is "the most virile of flamenco forms" (103). There are almost textbook accounts of the history of Tasmania and Estonia, the sensual life of Sydney, and the

history of Faery archetypes. A description of Sydney harbour even announces that it covers exactly twenty-one square miles (185). Susan McKernan has remarked that Koch evinces a tourist's outlook. This may seem a glib way to describe this kind of writing, but it is important to notice how literally Koch understands the idea of narratorial omniscience.

This knowledge is also exhibited in the narrator's irrepressible determination to pronounce universal truths, usually in the form of aphorisms:

> The artist, the amateur of the arts and the convalescent all pass through the same door. Those, that is, who have been truly broken—but who have afterwards been able to mend. (24)
>
> [M]ystery is the property of very simple and self-contained people, and is often an illusion. (40)
>
> All enthrallment is an arrested past: the prolonged, perverse childhood from which some souls never escape. (63)

Throughout the narrative, the narrator is possessed of unrivalled knowledge about both trivial details and universal truths.

The most important manifestation of this knowledge is the insight Miller has into the lives of other characters. He orders their lives, putting them "inside the frame" (270), overseeing them in the same way that he and Burr were able to use their knowledge to manipulate the Rymers. The judgement Miller pronounces on the characters often takes a form as simple as the aphorisms mentioned above. He says of Darcy Burr that he "was only half-educated, and therefore an easy mark for odd ideas" (117); or of Katrin Vilde that "she was a mixture in equal parts of sensuality and old-style propriety, a mixture more common then than it is now" (196). He dismisses characters by reducing them to a simple formula; he says of Rita Carey: "I suspected she was the sort of person who found it difficult to keep her life tidy. Reality was difficult" (252-53).

The most significant example of this sort of anthropology is the treatment of Deirdre Dillon, who is understood almost completely in terms of cliché. Deirdre is "Dadda's girl" (94). The narrator becomes moralistic when she is raped, blaming her:

> She has no understanding of why this penalty has come to her: even now, she doesn't see that her mirror-games have gone too far. It isn't

her fault, it's Burr's fault; Patrick's fault. She'll run away crying, to tell Dadda. (325)

This sort of judgement cannot merely be explained away as part of Miller's characterization or even the arrogance of an unreliable narrator. Miller as narrator displays the same kind of detachment, knowledge, and authority exercised by Broderick, Burr, and himself while empowered by the spirit of the otherworldly. Narrative is a kind of white magic for Koch, contesting the illusions and thraldom of Faery with the authority of its truth. No alternative system of belief ever appears in the novel in the same detail or on the same scale as Faery. Catholicism and Andres Vilde's pronouncements on history may be notionally connected with Miller's clear-sighted realism. But the only thing of sufficient scope and coherence to deal with the otherworld is the retrospective judgement of a detached narrator. This is why Koch so meticulously foregrounds the conditions under which the narrative has been made possible. Here we do not merely find him surrendering to convention. In the dispassionate and omniscient narrator, we are invited to detect the machinery of truth. So confident are we supposed to be in the authority of narrative that Miller's opinions need not be incorporated into a general or coherent argument.

Koch tries to compensate for this lack of argument by persistent assertion. In this way, the judgemental narrator is emblematic of Koch's aesthetic, which prefers pronouncement to elaboration, assertion to discussion, and aphorism to discourse. Sometimes the distinction between Faery and its opposite is argued by the mere insertion of an adjective or recall of a platitude. Things are associated with the irrational or otherworldly by the force of a single word, often when the association is not readily apparent. Brady plays the guitar as if looking at "a vision" (60). The guitar is a "magical" instrument (64). Burr brings "the irrational through the door with him" (213). Marijuana is described merely as "dangerous" (217). Darcy's ambition to be famous is described as "mystical" (301). Koch enforces the identity between the illusion of Faery and the fantasy world of the mass media by analogy alone. He describes mass enthusiasm

for the media as a child's search for "fairy food" (145). Those who work in the media are "mechanics of dreams" (229). Given the historical emphasis Koch places on the meaning of Faery, these analogies function as more than mere imaginative decoration. The analogy, unsubstantiated and undeveloped, claims the status of truth. This slippage from analogy to statement is more than mere ineptitude, however. By adding an adjective or image, Koch is trying to convince us that Broderick's Faery and Miller's Realism are really very different. This seems to acknowledge almost tacitly that the two world-views are constantly in danger of collapsing into one another.

The same problem arises with the book's ending. There is an attempt here to make an emphatic statement about the dangers of Faery through the accidental death of Deirdre Dillon. The statement that the rocks on which she fell "had always been waiting" (351) seems to claim, not only that there was a certain inevitability about her death, but that this inevitability has been clearly and subtly demonstrated by her characterization throughout. We find, however, that Dierdre's characterization has merely been one undramatized assertion after another. When she and Miller first meet in Tasmania, she is described as a two-faced personality, "an indulged, precocious child . . . and a mature, cultivated woman" (81). When he meets her again towards the book's end, he finds her "an infant forever" (284), indulging her whims in dangerous games. This sort of characterization proceeds by labelling rather than by demonstration. Deirdre's death is the definitive episode that coincides with Miller's final freedom from the entrapment of Faery, the freedom that allows him to become the novel's narrator. Yet, as the culmination, not of demonstrated necessity, but of dogmatic enthusiasm, this death is a mere assertion of danger superadded to the plot as a symbolic repetition of statements already insisted upon, rather than the result of their patient development into an argument.

By asserting rather than arguing the difference between Realism and the otherworldly, whether that assertion takes the form of an extra adjective or an arbitrarily added violent episode, the novel chooses to rest on authority alone. Because that authority is

the authority of Realist narrative, the genre whose conventions are most easily mistaken for unconditioned perception, a consensus of common sense readership is evoked: we do not need to have things spelt out for us, because we can fall back on fundamental agreement about, for example, what is deluded and what is real perception, or what is normal and what is abnormal. Assertion is relied upon because we as readers are not being informed about danger as much as being reminded of it. This pre-knowledge is what places us in the community of Realism. Narrative authority stands as the sign of this putatively obvious community, and assertion is its weapon. Its confidence seems to imply that consensus is so close that the text itself is actually in the process of freeing us from the strange in such a way that we will soon be able to experience the real alone.

Yet, in *The Doubleman*, the real depends upon the strange for its power and distinctiveness, and can never deliver what it seems to promise, a spiritual world where the strange will fall away, leaving us with the real, sanitary and glorious. This is made most explicit when we see how the novel relies on the mysterious and alluring for its effect. Koch repeatedly emphasizes the ominous, beginning with portentous descriptions of Tasmania. St Augustine's steeple is "a watch-tower over a camp of fear" (11); "it seemed to me that the fusty odour of fear, the stench of the prison-ships was still in Hobart" (34). Miller constantly evokes an undefined threat. A lane hums "with unnatural warning" (16). His holiday at Greystones is "the dangerous time, when the extraordinary might happen" (91). Talking to Darcy Burr, he feels "an actual sense of threat" (127). While walking on his balcony in Elizabeth Bay, he feels "a sense of secret events gathering; a feeling of being watched" (151). When he first sees Burr and Brady at the Grain Loft, he has "no premonition at all . . . of what might happen" (217).

Not only does the narrative depend on this portentousness for much of its effect; it also harnesses the sense of scandal that surrounds dubious or controversial behaviour. A séance is described in graphic detail, and the character of Denise is contrived to add to it a sort of cheapened sexuality (112-16). Denise is always described in a nightgown:

> Skinny as a boy except for the hinted swellings of her breasts, she hitched with her free hand at the strap of her nightdress . . . And there was something abnormal about her, I decided. (113)

Later, when she has been abandoned by Darcy and Brian's flight to Melbourne, Miller meets her:

> She continued to smile at me, and arched herself provocatively, her small, sad paps showing through the nightdress like bruises. (135)

This association between the occult and pubescent sexuality is not related to the narrative at all. It is contrived to add a morbid erotic fascination to the already morally ambiguous.

There is a similar mysticism of landscape. Tasmania is described in terms of "fields of unknown force . . . a power and mystery that could plainly be sensed; that could almost be heard humming, like electricity" (138). This is more than just Miller's fascination with the mysticism of landscape, something he has been warned against (47-48). The treatment of Tasmania is part of a fascination with the menacing and mysterious, whose charisma remains relatively undiminished in the novel's imaginative design and effect.

The novel thus relies for its interest on the scandal and mystery it is claiming to repudiate. The fascination with the otherworldly, in all its forms, and the need for the truth constantly evoke one another. Yet the structure that expresses them, the fierce combat between the occult's intent to deceive and the narrative's determination to enlighten, cannot keep them apart. They are constantly in danger of becoming indistinguishable. One step behind this problem lies the generic problem, that the real and the strange not only depend upon one another for their distinctiveness, but are in fact part of one and the same act of perception. It is impossible for the real to be imagined without the strange. This explains why the strange must be evoked as a threat. The strange is constantly threatening to consume the real, to corrupt the normal and make it perverse. It is only by the simple assertion of an unquestioning authority that these two categories can be kept apart. Herein lies the fascination with *The Doubleman*—the contest between these two imagined opposites is played out, and finally a victor is proclaimed almost arbitrarily, by

the recall of a consensus that is more or less a prejudice. The two can only be kept apart by force.

Koch has written in his essay on the state of the novel ("Who Wants the Novel?") a statement remarkably reminiscent of Lukacs:

> When the rocks of reality and consistent personality are lost altogether, then why should we care, and why should we believe? (10)

Does this mean that character and reality are given facts, from which belief can be derived as logically necessary—we cannot do other than believe because reality and consistent personality are indisputable? Or is Koch saying belief is absolutely necessary, even primal; therefore, because belief depends on reality and consistent personality, we must commit ourselves to them too in order not to destabilize belief? Of course, Koch is saying both of these things, and neither of them. The logic of this statement is purely performative—it is a rhetorical question, supposedly containing such force within it that conviction will be immediate. Belief, personality, and reality all depend upon one another. But they are in no way grounded, except in the momentary force of the performative—a performative that disguises an imperative in the language of consensus. Koch is unable to supply any logical reason other than a plea to our undefined better nature. We *should* believe. We *should* recognize the difference between Realism and Faery. Consensus is understood, not as the result of a patiently developed argument which convinces us to share certain values, but as the recall of what an authoritative voice tells us we have believed all along and were only pretending not to believe.

In the end, this sort of Realism is fundamentally about authority. In his article, "L'effet du réel," Roland Barthes has argued that, in writers like Flaubert, nineteenth-century Realism chose to break out of the logic of pure social representation. This was done by incorporating into the narrative images and usages that were not simply reducible to a description of a specific element of a consistently represented real world. This almost random inclusion of what Barthes calls, following Jakobson, "unnecessary details" aimed to show that Realism was a system of repre-

sentation that went beyond the mere repetition of pre-digested social meanings to represent the unassimilated real itself. In this way, Realism signified its direct access to the real, or, to put it more incisively, Realism signified itself. Realism proclaimed its own authority by presenting itself as smashing authority and giving the reader direct access to the real. Veronica Brady writes in her review of *The Doubleman* that Koch's targets are the masters and manipulators of the imagination. Yet this awareness of manipulators never becomes self-reflexive, choosing to ignore as unnecessary the main preoccupation of postmodern fiction, the self-consciousness that, from Beckett to Eco, from Robbe-Grillet to Janette Turner Hospital, has chosen to base its uncertainty about ideological authority in general on skepticism about its own claim to authority.

One of the primary tasks of Realism, therefore, is to proclaim itself. This seems to be the aim of *The Doubleman*—preferred and rejected ideologies are only kept apart by the assertion of narrative authority, to which all the rest of the novel's interests are secondary. Surprisingly, therefore, it is the novel's formal and aesthetic, rather than its moral and social, values that house, and determine, its political commitments. This explains why widely disparate forms of social behaviour—from drug use to interest in Aboriginal culture—can be equated so easily, and why the apparent alternative to them, Catholic moral realism, is only really distinguished from them by assertion. Questions of social behaviour fade in the face of the insistence on the assertion of an authority that proclaims itself free of the blindness and self-indulgence of contemporary spiritual life. Yet, although it appeals to our imagined better nature, and what we should admit we really do know, and although it disguises itself by repeated judgements about ideas and values it does not really care to know anything about, this authority is really only interested in itself. Its claim to repudiate specific deluded patterns of belief is secondary to the assertion of authority. Its politics are based in discourse, aiming to question the diversity of discussion and experiment it characterizes as modern life, by celebrating the habit of authority which that diversity interrogates.

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