Cannibalised Girlhood in Richard Flanagan's *Wanting*

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Abstract:
Half of Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008) centres on Victorian Tasmania. Flanagan retells the story of the Aboriginal girl Mathinna and her adoption by Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin and subsequent abandonment by the couple. In particular, Flanagan employs a combination of Greek mythology (Zeus and Leda) and cannibalism imagery to recount the relationship between the girl and her surrogate parents. We are therefore presented with a grotesque colonial girlhood, one that can be viewed as a metaphor and critique of British colonialism in Tasmania. The other half of *Wanting* focuses on Dickens's defence of Sir John Franklin against the accusation of survival cannibalism in the Arctic. In this part we are also shown Dickens's growing affection for the actress Ellen Ternan, who is described as "a girl" (Flanagan 2008: 99). Flanagan's strategy is to compare the story of Dickens and Ternan with the paedophilic relationship between Sir John and Mathinna. Sir John's and Dickens's yielding to their improper desires for girls mark them as the cannibal savages within the novel. Through this, Flanagan questions and undermines the masculinised imperialistic project, especially as the characters are meant to be read as representatives of Britain and the Empire.

Keywords: Australia, biofiction, cannibalism, Charles Dickens, Sir John Franklin, Mathinna, neo-Victorianism, postcolonialism, revisionist project, Ellen Ternan.

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In her article 'Australia's "Other" History Wars', Kate Mitchell remarks that "in recent decades, both novelists and historians have returned obsessively to the story of the European 'settlement' of Australia" (Mitchell 2010: 254). One such novel is Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008), which provides a sympathetic and provocative retelling of the colonial history of Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania).[1] Flanagan uses the theme of cannibalism insistently throughout the text, particularly in connection to the employment of Mathinna, an Aboriginal orphan girl, to comment on and critique the British Empire's treatment and exploitation of the land and its people. Flanagan's evocation of cannibalism to describe British imperialism in Australia is consonant with critics' general association of the practices of

imperialistic expansion and cannibalism. According to Peter Hulme in the introduction to *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, for example, "imperialism is itself a form of cannibalism" and "the association between cannibalism and Western imperialism is impossible to ignore" (Hulme 1998: 5, 7). Although much of Flanagan's novel focuses on Mathinna and her relationship with Sir John Franklin and his wife, another strand is devoted to Charles Dickens's life in London. While the Victorian author's connection to Australian Aboriginal history may at first seem tenuous, I argue that Flanagan's inclusion of Dickens helps strengthen and consolidate the text's core criticism of the "catastrophe of colonisation" (Flanagan 2008: 256). However, this portrayal of Dickens is ambivalent, an ambivalence that reveals Flanagan's own cannibalism of Dickens and points to the contemporary writer's simultaneous desires to appropriate and to destroy the Victorian influence within his work.

1. Mathinna

In *Wanting*, the extended metaphor for the cannibalistic relationship between the Empire and the colony rests primarily in the story of the seven-year-old Mathinna, the Aboriginal girl adopted by the Franklins. Flanagan's use of an orphan, who often represents "a vital strain" in novels (Auerbach 1975: 395), is an homage to the Victorian novel in general and to Dickens in particular. According to Laura Peters, "the Victorian culture perceived the orphan as a scapegoat – a promise and a threat, a poison and a cure" (Peters 2000: 2). A "stock character" (Letissier 2004: 77), the orphan "exercised a particular fascination for Dickens, who could hardly present a child without depriving it of one or both parents" (Tomalin 1990: 47). The orphan also fits Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben's analysis in *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma*, which suggests that "neo-Victorian novels prefer to particularise trauma by depicting specific victims, with the particular example standing for a whole class or people" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010b: 29). In *Wanting*, the orphaned Mathinna is a victim of colonialism and cannibalism, and she is used to represent Aborigines as a whole.[2] Similarly, the Franklins, whose Englishness is repeatedly emphasised throughout the text, come to represent the Empire.

In this light, Mathinna's adoption by the couple, which is a kind of social, educational, and religious "experiment" or "project" (Flanagan 2008: 69, 118, 128, 130, 136), is a metaphor for Britain's attempt to bring

'civilisation' to the Tasmanian colony.[3] The couple's adoption of the native girl reflects the colonialists' view that the Aborigines' capacity for civilisation might be improved through "education and paternal guidance" (Turnbull 2001: 6). Lady Jane espouses this philosophy and believes that she and her husband can provide Mathinna with the "most modern education" (Flanagan 2008: 121).[4] As in many of the Empire's colonial efforts, in which the British forced their interests and institutions upon local populations in the belief that doing so was a necessary condition for their improvement, Lady Franklin adopts the girl without her consent as a means of saving her from her perceived backwardness.

Through this representation of the child's forced adoption, Flanagan also evokes the history of the colonisers' removal and relocation of indigenous children, a highly traumatic experience for the children involved. Mathinna's encounter with her adoptive parents, then, sheds light on Aboriginal children's experience with the English colonisers. In its use of a relatively unknown historical figure as one of the main characters, *Wanting* is also in line with Victorian studies' shift of focus in the late 1960s and early 1970s from the "grand historical narratives of wars, prime ministers, governments and economic change" to "the fragmentary records of 'ordinary' individuals and their 'experience' of historical change" (Maidment 2005: 153), and thus must be considered a deliberate act of postcolonial revisionism on the part of Flanagan.

In *Wanting*, Mathinna's body is often fetishised. In fact, the impetus behind the novel can be found in her naked feet:

> Flanagan first came across her in a Hobart Museum where he was shown an unusual watercolour portrait of the girl wearing a red dress. The curator then pulled up the frame to reveal that the picture had been cropped, explaining that Mathinna's bare feet embarrassed her adoptive parents, who were the island's governor and his socially ambitious wife. Mathinna's refusal to wear shoes betrayed her savage provenance, so they cut her off at the ankles. (Holt 2009)

The phrase "cut her off at the ankles" is chilling. Flanagan explains that "I thought there was this large story of love and its denial in those feet that had been framed out of the picture. I knew what the book was at that moment, I

knew exactly what the emotion was" (qtd. in Holt 2009). While the girl's adoptive parents regarded her naked feet as repulsive and wished to hide them in the painting, the contemporary author finds them creatively inspiring and, in *Wanting*, refers to Mathinna's feet regularly, even obsessively.[5] The repeated appearance of Mathinna's feet inevitably draws the readers' attention and to a certain extent makes them feel complicit in and guilty about engaging in the colonial gaze. Simultaneously, the cropped feet provide a metaphor for the historically marginalised, who are often deliberately 'cropped' from official narratives; Mathinna, of whose life we only know the "barest" details (Flanagan 2008: 255), is such a subject. Thus, her feet can be viewed as a metonym for the silenced subject as a whole.

In *Wanting*, Flanagan appropriates not only Mathinna's feet but her entire body. Both Lady Jane and Sir John desire the girl's body, a desire that is expressed in terms of cannibalism. Before the adoption, the childless Lady Jane's longing to have children is triggered by the sight of Mathinna with a large white kangaroo skin over her shoulder, dancing (see Flanagan 2008: 50). One aspect of Mathinna that particularly appeals to Lady Jane is the child's body, which strikes her almost as if it was "think[ing]" (Flanagan 2008: 53), and she remarks, "you almost wish to hold the little wild beast and pet her" (Flanagan 2008: 51). Lady Jane's racism is obvious here, since she sees the black girl as a wild animal having the propensity to be domesticated, yet she is also driven by a motherly instinct to care for and protect the girl. This ambiguity highlights a certain cognitive dissonance that the coloniser is not entirely able to maintain: while she may see Mathinna as less than human, on some fundamental and instinctual level she still reacts to the girl's humanity.

However, Flanagan makes clear that, despite Lady Jane's maternal instincts, there is something cannibalistic about her relationship with Mathinna. This element is particularly evident in a dining scene in which Lady Jane proposes to the Protector, George Augustus Robinson,[6] that she and her husband adopt the Aboriginal girl. The cosy interior of the dinner party is contrasted with what is happening outside. While Lady Jane is speaking, beyond the walls a "seemingly infinite population of half-starved curs was yelping" (Flanagan 2008: 69), echoing her own animalistic hunger and yearning. The Protector is uncomfortable with Lady Jane's suggestion, not having expected her request: "As a further course of roast black cygnets was served, Lady Jane announced she wished to adopt a native child, as

though it were the final item to be ordered off a long menu" (Flanagan 2008: 69).[7] The association of Mathinna with food is not subtle here. She is discussed over the dinner table, and Lady Jane is presented as a kind of cannibalistic connoisseur choosing a prospective daughter. The inanimate pronoun "it" suggests that, to the English adults, Mathinna is genderless and not quite human. "[A] further course of roast black cygnet" adds more significance to the scene, the word "black" describing both the food and the Aboriginal girl. Black swans are native to Australia, and Flanagan links the child with the fauna of her country. This association can also be seen in Mathinna's kangaroo-skin garb, an image that the author returns to in the dinner scene, where Lady Jane stresses that she specifically wants the child she had earlier "watched dancing in the white kangaroo skin" (Flanagan 2008: 70). Flanagan may be suggesting that the whiteness of the animal skin contributes to Lady Jane's attraction to the girl. The use of the animal skin again suggests that Lady Jane does not view Mathinna as fully human.

While Lady Jane's consumption of the young Aborigine is described in the dinner scene, Sir John's cannibalism of the girl is configured as rape. Although the relationship between rape and cannibalism may not be immediately evident, both involve violent incorporation or communion. According to Maggie Kilgour, "[l]ike eating, intercourse makes two bodies one" (Kilgour 1990: 7). In this sense, cannibalism, an extreme form of eating, can be seen as comparable to rape, a violent form of intercourse. Flanagan presents the rape of Mathinna with strong allusions to the Greco-Roman myth of Leda and the Swan, in which the god transforms into the bird to rape Leda.[8] When Lady Jane is told that Mathinna has been given the Christian name Leda, she jokingly makes reference to the ancient story: "You must protect her from swans" (Flanagan 2008: 51).[9] Marina Warner believes that "[i]n myth and fairy tale, the metaphor of devouring often stands in for sex" (Warner 1994: 259); the converse, that sex may stand in for devouring, could also be said to be true in *Wanting*. Given that Mathinna is associated with black cygnets in the dinner scene already described, the story of Zeus and Leda is particularly suggestive.

The earlier allusion to Leda and the Swan foreshadows what happens later, when Sir John rapes Mathinna-Leda. Apart from the implications of her name, the rape is also prefigured in other ways. For example, at one point Sir John is shown to have sexual appetites for Mathinna: he would prepare "buttered toast and toasted cheese" for the girl

and "watch her greedy little mouth intently as the yellow fat oiled her hungry lips" (Flanagan 2008: 139).[10] The sensual connection between Mathinna's consumption of "buttered toast and toasted cheese" and Sir John's lust for her "hungry lips" oiled by "yellow fat" is evocative and troubling – not only because Mathinna is only ten years old at this point of the narrative, but also because it shows Sir John's deliberate manipulation of the girl. He feeds her knowing that he will be aroused by the effect of watching her eat, perhaps because it evokes a fantasy of oral sex. Although Mathinna is the one eating, the situation is also charged with cannibalistic overtones, especially in the image of "yellow fat", which presents the girl almost as a roast bird with glistening skin.

There is a similar sense of deliberateness in Sir John's preparation for the fancy dress ball during which the rape of Mathinna occurs. In his arrangements for the party, Sir John is at least on some level preparing to re-enact Zeus's rape of Leda. He orders a black swan costume for the ball and then models it for his wife (see Flanagan 2008: 146). Sir John's choice of costume is probably motivated by his fondness for "the black swan dance" (Flanagan 2008: 132-133) that Mathinna performs earlier in the narrative. Lady Jane objects to the outfit on the grounds that it looks ridiculous, although one also wonders whether she worries that something is amiss in her husband's enthusiasm for this dress. Before she eventually convinces him to wear only a black swan mask, Sir John feebly attempts to defend his attire, linking the costume with Napoleon, who had "a bedhead made for Josephine out of a Van Diemonian black swan" (Flanagan 2008: 145). This association with the French emperor hints at Sir John's sense of grandiose self-importance, an attitude also highlighted in his costume's connection to Zeus. By dressing up as a swan, Sir John is arrogantly and consciously imitating the myth and the ancient god's own transformation. Indeed, Flanagan is at pains to make it clear that Sir John knows the mythological associations of the costume, going so far as to have one of the characters at the ball ask him, "Are we […] Zeus himself?" (Flanagan 2008: 149).[11]

The themes of colonial arrogance and of Englishmen as animals are extended in the fancy dress ball itself, which is themed "bestiary" (Flanagan 2008: 145) and held on an Antarctic expedition ship, suggestively named *Erebus* for the Greek personification of darkness. Flanagan uses this setting to portray and heighten the estrangement that Mathinna experiences among the foreigners "in their strange fanciful animal costumes – platypuses,

griffins, centaurs, unicorns and wombats" (Flanagan 2008: 147). Here we see the continued blending of animals and people, as well as the not very subtle suggestion that it is the colonisers who are the beasts.

At the ball, Mathinna dances with Sir John and falls into her wild and free dance, the dance of a black cygnet, shocking the other guests. Afterwards, Franklin gives in to his desire and rapes Mathinna:

> Above her loomed the face of a giant black swan. She knew her life was over.
>
> '*Rowra* [Devil],' Mathinna whispered.
>
> […]
>
> 'What?' said Sir John.
>
> The child said not a word more.
>
> Far away, the ball continued, the band played on.
>
> He was all things and all things were him. Looking down on Mathinna, her diminutive body, her exposed black ankles, her dirty little feet, the suggestive valley of her red dress between her thin legs, Sir John felt thrilled.
>
> And after, was thrilled no more. (Flanagan 2008: 152; original emphasis)

Flanagan does not depict the rape of Mathinna outright. Instead, he forces the readers to imagine the event's details, thus making them complicit in the problematic desires the narrative implies and arouses. The scene also begs for comparison with W. B. Yeats's poem 'Leda and the Swan' (1923). Interestingly, while in the poem the word "body" closely precedes "white", in *Wanting* "body" is followed by "black". Also, Flanagan's description of Franklin's postcoital dejection, "And after, was thrilled no more", is reminiscent of the Swan's abjection in Yeats's poem: "the indifferent beak could let her drop" (l. 15). The poem suggests that Leda might acquire Zeus's "knowledge" (l. 14), but it is unlikely that the sexual encounter will have any positive consequence for Mathinna-Leda. Nor does it establish Sir John as a god. In having Sir John dress up as an Australian bird, Flanagan portrays him as 'going native' and becoming assimilated to the very people he dismisses as savages. The rape scene also provides a doubly paedophilic crime: not only do we see Sir John force himself upon Mathinna, we also see an adult swan taking a cygnet. Considering the food associations made

earlier between black cygnets and Mathinna, the rape additionally takes on cannibalistic overtones.

The rape scene is central to Flanagan's revisionist aims within the novel, especially as a metaphor for British colonialism. As the representative of her native people, Mathinna's sexual violation and incorporation, particularly at such a young age, reveals Flanagan's view of the relationship between the colonialists and the colonised. Characterising colonialism as rape is a common trope in history and literary criticism, especially when Europe appears as the masculine rapist and the colonies as the feminised raped. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, for example, point out that "a dominant metaphor of colonialism was that of rape" (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 4), and in *Colonialism-Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba comments that "a wide spectrum of representations encode the rape and plunder of colonised countries by figuring the latter as naked women and placing colonisers as masters/rapists" (Loomba 1998: 79). Flanagan uses a similar technique in *Wanting*, where the theme of rape exists on both literal and metaphorical levels.[12]

Although it is Mathinna's body that both Lady Jane and Sir John desire and cannibalise, this body also provides them with an excuse not to bring the girl back to Britain. Sir John explains that "experience showed savages' bodies were constitutionally incapable of surviving a robust climate" (Flanagan 2008: 182). But the real reason the Franklins abandon Mathinna is that their "experiment" has not provided a satisfactory result. Lady Jane realises that her attempt was "the most ignominious failure" (Flanagan 2008: 195). For all the Franklins' supposed good intentions, once they decide that their efforts have proved ineffectual, the project is discarded and the Aboriginal girl is left to her own devices. Mathinna is first sent to St John's Orphanage and later becomes an alcoholic prostitute, a career that ensures that she will go on being sexually violated and manipulated: "She continued trading her body" because "it was what she had learnt and finally come to understand as her only possibility for survival" (Flanagan 2008: 227). The book dwells on the details of Mathinna's final days and her death by drowning in a puddle.

In the end, we see that despite Lady Jane's confession that "I loved her" (Flanagan 2008: 198), the girl (and by extension the indigenous people that she represents) is damaged by the civilising 'experiment'. From one perspective, Lady Jane is at least motivated by a desire, albeit misguided, to

help Mathinna's lot. However, Flanagan, more than just revealing the colonial project as an often mistaken attempt to bring civilisation to Australia, presents it as much starker and more cynically self-interested. As one colonial character in the book says, "We didn't come here for society and civilisation. We came here for […] money" (Flanagan 2008: 148). Through his different explorations of the often cannibalistic relationship between the British colonisers and the Tasmanian colonised subjects, Flanagan investigates the violent and inhumane early history of his homeland. In this task, the author appropriates the historical Mathinna – one of those typical characters in neo-Victorian fiction "who have never had a proper voice, story, or discursive existence in literature" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010b: 31); she is presented as a symbol of the Aboriginal people who were overwhelmed by their colonisers.

Flanagan uses Mathinna as his representative figure for Tasmanian Aboriginals. His form of revisionism does not aim to 'correct' the wrongs of history but to extend our understanding of the past beyond received notions of the British Empire. His portrayal of Mathinna is designed to supplement the inadequate historical record of "the ex-centric, the marginalised, the peripheral" (Hutcheon 1996: 482). That Flanagan does not make Mathinna the first-person narrator and instead mediates her subjectivity through the omniscient third person might seem an unfortunate choice for an author attempting to give voice to a marginalised figure.[13] One could also argue that Flanagan is in some sense continuing the exploitation of Aboriginals through his use of Mathinna. However, his omission of the colonised's voice may not be so unjustified in the context of the novel itself. Lady Jane employs tutors to teach Mathinna writing and reading, but the girl's interest soon wanes and she eventually avoids her lessons altogether (see Flanagan 2008: 130). Although Flanagan does present Mathinna's own writing in the book (see Flanagan 2008: 121), Western notions of literacy prove inadequate for the girl's self-expression. She prefers dancing, a form of art and communication that is indigenous to her cultural heritage. This rejection of writing in favour of an Aboriginal art form can be read as a repudiation of Western technology and literacy. Flanagan also manifests a certain cruel honesty towards Mathinna, as he does not give her an easy and successful life but rather represents her as repeatedly humiliated. This pessimistic and realistic approach can be interpreted as an act of remembering amidst a "culture of forgetting" (Wallhead 2003: 14). In *Wanting*, Flanagan presents

a revised colonial history, one that shows a possible version of how things were, not as they should have been. The novel reminds us not to forget historically silenced individuals but also makes it clear that fiction can offer no remedies for past injustice and violence.

2. Ellen Ternan

"But what of Dickens?", the omniscient narrator in *Wanting* asks at the beginning of Chapter 6, almost as if readers needed to be reminded that the novel is *also* about "the most popular writer of the day" (Flanagan 2008: 71). The connection between Dickens and the characters in the Australian sections of the book may not be immediately obvious; one reviewer even describes the relationship between the Victorian author and the other characters as "shadowy" (Boyd 2009: n.p.). Flanagan himself admits that the link between Mathinna and Dickens is "odd", but he also firmly asserts that this association is "undeniable" (Flanagan 2008: 256). Indeed, upon closer reading, the connection between the two strands of the novel, as well as how they serve Flanagan's postcolonial critique, can be identified. In what follows, I will discuss how the author presents Dickens, too, in cannibalistic terms, especially through his relationship with the novel's second 'girl', Ternan, and how this fits his wider view of British colonialism. In Flanagan's appropriation of Dickens, the ultimate nineteenth-century literary celebrity, we also see the twin motivations for the neo-Victorian incorporation of the Victorian. First, it speaks to the contemporary author's goal of revising history and thus reveals his desire to express a separate self-identity; and second, Flanagan's portrayal of Dickens as a cannibal is a self-reflexive comment on his own desire for communion with the Victorian author. Significantly, girls serve in both plot strands as the locus for Flanagan's discussion of cannibalism and consumption.

Mathinna and Dickens do not meet in the book; their stories are connected by the Franklins. After Sir John and Lady Jane's departure from Tasmania, Sir John embarks on his fatal Arctic expedition to locate the fabled Northwest Passage. When he and his crew fail to return to England, Lady Jane, who refuses to believe that he has died, organises and supports a number of expeditions to search for her husband. She also wages a propaganda war to preserve Sir John's image, especially after John Rae publishes a report suggesting that the explorer and his crew resorted to cannibalism for survival.[14] Lady Jane meets Dickens, hoping to enlist him in

her campaign, and after hearing her story, the Victorian author, indignant, agrees to help. He dismisses the accusation of cannibalism, rejecting it as a lie told by the "Esquimau": "we have a race of thieving, murdering cannibals [the Esquimau] asserting that England's finest were transformed into thieving, murdering cannibals" (Flanagan 2008: 31). Dickens's strong faith in the moral superiority of Englishmen leads him to the conclusion that they could never descend into savagery. Yet Flanagan suggests that Dickens's involvement in the project stems not entirely from a sense of moral righteousness but also from his own deep interest in the subject of cannibalism. For example, after meeting Lady Jane, Dickens says to Wilkie Collins about his decision to join her campaign, "I am rather strong on voyages and cannibalism" (Flanagan 2008: 38).[15]

Dickens mounts his defence of Sir John in several ways. He writes 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers' in 1854 and publishes it in the *Household Words* to attack Rae's report. He also becomes involved in Wilkie Collins's play *The Frozen Deep* (1856), which is set in the Arctic. Through the story of Richard Wardour, in part modelled on Franklin, *The Frozen Deep* shows "Englishmen meeting their ends nobly rather than as savages" (Flanagan 2008: 78). In *Wanting*, the fictional Dickens comments on the play,

> "A savage, my dear Wilkie, be he Esquimau or an Otaheitian, is someone who succumbs to his passions. An Englishman understands his passions in order to master them and turn them to powerful effect." (Flanagan 2008: 83-84)

Dickens's deep personal commitment to Sir John's cause is evident when he decides to perform the role of Wardour and increasingly identifies with the character. His identification with Wardour is a reflection of the author's growing connection to the real Sir John. After writing the article 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers', Dickens's association with the explorer is filtered through his personal life, and he links the voyage with his own frozen relationship, musing, "for twenty years, had not his marriage been a Northwest Passage, mythical, unknowable, undiscoverable, an iced-up channel to love, always before him and yet through which no passageway was possible?" (Flanagan 2008: 35). Dickens equates what he assumes to have been Sir John's stoic resistance to cannibalism in the face of hunger to his own triumphs over his desire for an extramarital affair.

Yet the fortitude of both author and explorer, and thus by extension the character of the Empire generally, is undermined when it is revealed that Dickens himself had once made "that error of passion" when he was younger and longing for his early unrequited love: "Had he not yearned to bite into Maria Beadnell's thighs as keenly as the Esquimaux had wanted to feast on old Sir John's gentlemanly drumsticks?" (Flanagan 2008: 47). In light of this disclosure, in which Dickens is presented in cannibalistic terms, the Victorian author's adamant repudiation of the accusations of Franklin's barbarism seems less motivated by a strong belief in English nobility than by a profound emotional reaction to the charge itself. If Dickens once had sexually cannibalistic thoughts towards Beadnell, he must also believe that it might be possible that Sir John had resorted to man-eating. Moreover, Flanagan does not present Dickens's and Sir John's transgressions as individual lapses, but as representative of the moral limitations of the Empire as a whole. By adding Dickens's transgressions with a young woman to the cannibalistic nature of colonialism in the relationship between the Franklins and Mathinna, Flanagan extends and consolidates his critique.

Dickens's sexual yearning to "bite into Maria Beadnell's thighs" is clearly intended to be read as cannibalistic. To emphasise the point, Flanagan also portrays Dickens's attraction to another girl-woman, the young actress Ellen Ternan, whom he meets through the staging of *The Frozen Deep*. Ternan becomes the subject of the author's intense interest, causing him to break his marital vows and give into his own desires, the fate he fears most. There is a sense of serious transgression in Dickens's relationship with Ternan. Indeed, Flanagan's strategy in *Wanting* is to compare the story of Dickens and Ternan with the paedophilic relationship between Sir John and Mathinna. Several places show a link between the Aboriginal child and the young British woman. For example, Ternan is described as "the girl", "little more than a child", and "childish" (Flanagan 2008: 99, 156), terms that are reminiscent of Mathinna. Ternan's role as performer is linked to her childhood in comments such as "Ellen […] had also been on stage since she was three" (Flanagan 2008: 89). And there is an echo to the young Aborigine, who often wears a red dress (see Flanagan 2008: 130, 132, 146), in a scene in which Ternan draws Dickens's attention to her pomegranate mantilla, saying, "it is the traditional colour for brides in India" (Flanagan 2008: 165). Still, Flanagan's attempt to parallel Mathinna's and Ternan's narratives seems stretched and unconvincing at

first sight. Ternan is much younger than Dickens (he is forty-five and she is eighteen when they meet), but she is certainly more of a woman than a girl. Relatively speaking, her life in England is also much more privileged than Mathinna's in Tasmania. However, through the comparison of the two females, Flanagan emphasises their shared vulnerability in the face of older and more powerful men. By linking her to Mathinna and to childhood, he portrays Ternan as a defenceless girl, despite her actual age, thereby reminding us of the exploitative and imbalanced aspects of the relationship between Dickens and the actress. Because girlhood is equated in *Wanting* to powerlessness, Ternan must function symbolically as a 'girl' where Dickens is concerned.

If Ternan is like Mathinna, then Dickens is like Sir John. Dickens's cannibalistic desire for the actress, echoing Sir John's for the Aboriginal girl, is evocatively portrayed in the following eating scene:

> [S]he placed a cherry she had been rolling in her fingers into her mouth, sucked the flesh for a moment as if it were a sweet, and then delicately rolled the still pulpy pit to her lips' edge, took it between thumb and forefinger and dropped it in a bowl.
>
> Dickens stared at that spent stone with its wet threads of red flesh. He envied its good fortune. With a sudden movement, as unexpected to him as it was to her, he scooped the pip up and swallowed it. (Flanagan 2008: 208)

In this sexually charged scene, Dickens does not eat Ternan *per se*, but only the cherry pip that has moments earlier been inside her mouth. The cannibalistic overtones are nevertheless suggestive. The "wet threads of red flesh" of the fruit (cherries themselves already carry sexual connotations), probably still warm from the young woman's mouth, are suggestive of Ellen's own moist and rosy flesh. Dickens's gluttonous consumption of the pip, driven by sudden passion, is a clear symbol of his ravenous desire to consume her, much as Mathinna's eating of the buttered toast inflames Sir John. The scene also recalls what Dickens says to Collins earlier in the novel: "We all have appetites and desires. But only the savage agrees to sate them" (Flanagan 2008: 79). In this scene, Dickens gives into his desires; such is his sexual excitement that he consumes even the spent stone, an item

not normally considered food. In this act, Dickens is closer to the 'savage' than he would like to admit.

In connecting fruit with sex, the passage has a number of literary predecessors. For example, one is reminded of the strawberry Alec holds for Tess in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) – "she parted her lips and took it in" (Hardy 2005: ch. 5) – and of Christina Rossetti's sensually tantalising poem 'Goblin Market' (1862), in which the orchard fruits (including cherries) are described as "the fruit forbidden" (l. 479) by Laura, who succumbs to temptations and "suck[s the goblins'] fruit globes fair or red – / Sweeter than honey from the rock / […] she suck[s] until her lips [are] sore" (l. 128-129, l. 136). The similarities between Flanagan's work and Rossetti's are particularly striking, as words from the poem – "sucked", "red", "sweet", and "lips" – are repeated in the passage from *Wanting*. Of course, the root of all these scenes is the biblical forbidden fruit from Eden. After the woman has tried the first taste, the man follows suit, giving into his own untapped and base passions: first Eve, then Adam; first Ternan, then Dickens.

Dickens's abandonment of civilised behaviour continues later in the novel. On stage, when performing with Ternan in *The Frozen Deep*, he is physically close to her flesh, and he feasts on the arousing stimulation and rhythm of her body: "His cheek pressed against her uncorseted belly. He could feel its softness pulsing in and out. […] He was smelling her, hot, musty, moist" (Flanagan 2008: 241). Dickens, devouring Ternan sensually as if she is edible, must realise on some level the hypocrisy of giving into his own passions while portraying Wardour. In some sense, although the stakes are much smaller, Dickens has become the cannibal Franklin and becomes aware of his transgression: "Dickens knew he loved her. […] And he, a man who had spent a life believing that giving in to desire was the mark of a savage, realised he could no longer deny wanting" (Flanagan 2008: 241). It is as though in the frozen land of his marriage, Dickens, hungry, emotionally deprived, has found sustenance in the form of the 'girl' Ellen Ternan. While he abhors those who succumb to base instincts and calls them "savage[s]", Dickens is consumed by his own. By this logic, he turns himself into a kind of cannibal.

Within the novel, the staging of *The Frozen Deep* is presented in deliberately ironic terms. Dickens uses the play to stress Sir John's moral fortitude, but it is also through this vehicle that the author meets Ternan and

acts on his own sexual desires. This contradiction not only renders unpersuasive his defence of the explorer's reputation, it also exposes the hypocrisy of the notions of British superiority and civilisation. Throughout *Wanting*, a distinction is drawn between "civilisation" and "savagery", the latter a term that, according to Kristen Guest, is "traditionally associated with cannibalism" (Guest 2001: 4). There is an insistent differentiation between the racialist British characters on the one hand and the "Van Diemonian Aborigines" and "Esquimaux" on the other. Flanagan deconstructs this binary, primarily through the use of Dickens, who believes, that "[w]e all have appetites and desires. But only the savage agrees to sate them" (Flanagan 2008: 79). Within the logic of the novel, then, the difference between savagery and civilisation relies on one's ability to resist the temptation to yield to passions and desires. Dickens asks at one point, "wasn't that control precisely what marked the English out as different from savages?" (Flanagan 2008: 43). Sir John's and Dickens's descent into base desires, a similar story told twice and thus strengthening the thematic link, marks them as the cannibals in the novel and challenges the binary of "civilisation" and "savagery". Their narratives also undermine the English imperialist project, especially as the characters are meant to be read as representatives of Britain and the Empire – Sir John is "a great Englishman in the stoutest English company", and Dickens is "the most famous Englishman of the age" (Flanagan 2008: 25, 162).[16] British imperialism often rested on the assumption that the Other was uncivilised and therefore needed to be colonised; yet, by portraying Dickens and Franklin as sexual cannibals, Flanagan emphasises the kinship between "civilisation" and "savagery" and suggests provocatively that the English are the savages, not the "Esquimaux" or the colonised Aborigines.

3. Cannibalised Girlhood/Cannibalising Authorhood

While we have some evidence about Dickens's relationship with the actress Ellen Ternan,[17] there is no indication that Sir John raped Mathinna, or even felt any sexual desire for the girl. Flanagan is clear about his novel being a work of fiction, not history (see Flanagan 2008: 255). On the relationship between Franklin and Mathinna, he writes that "what Sir John's feelings were towards Mathinna […] appear to be knowledge now irrecoverable" (Flanagan 2008: 256). Flanagan's language here is intentionally ambiguous. Despite admitting that the sexual relationship is

not based on any available facts, the author is not quite willing to dismiss it as a possibility. He suggests that the "knowledge" of their relationship is "irrecoverable" and thus leaves the door open for any interpretations that he wishes to put forward. Such ambiguity permits his portrayal of Sir John as a paedophilic cannibal – if the "knowledge" is lost, it is possible that in fact Sir John *was* a sexual predator. As Franklin is a stand-in for the British Empire, this unsupported accusation also reinforces Flanagan's argument about the cannibalistic nature of colonialism. These manipulations are well within the prerogatives of the novelist, but certainly raise ethical issues.

In presenting Franklin and Dickens as cannibals, then, Flanagan himself is cannibalising them. More troublingly, he can also be seen as cannibalising Mathinna in his representation of the young girl's emotionally and sexually exploited childhood. These passages are often shocking and demonstrate the author's readiness to sensationalise history at the expense of both the historical Sir John and Mathinna if doing so serves his aim of revising the colonial discourse. In her analysis of Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan', Elizabeth Butler Cullingford points out that the poem "demonstrates what happens when a writer cares [primarily] about using explicit sexual situations as a strategy" and raises concerns about women being used as "both the subjects of and subject to the power of his [a writer's] imagination" (qtd. in Warner 2002: 113).

Even Flanagan's choice of mythic structure in *Wanting* is problematic. He filters Mathinna's experiences through the story of Leda and the Swan, which is derived from the Western tradition. This European representation is forced upon the girl – Mathinna is given, rather than choosing, the Christian name Leda – and it comes at the expense of her own native myths. The Aborigine is thus being incorporated into European mythology; her traditional identity is undermined and her alterity neutralised. Of course, part of the colonial project was to impose Western culture and religion on native populations as a means to contain and estrange them from their own heritage. Flanagan perpetuates this cultural colonialism by superimposing European beliefs and narratives onto his Aboriginal character. The violence of this act, especially alongside Flanagan's insistent association of Mathinna with animals (cygnet, kangaroo), is that the *real* child is diminished and as a result becomes a slippery and elusive cipher.

It could also be argued that the act of using colonialism for his own ends, particularly as a writer of European descent, makes Flanagan

complicit in colonial cannibalism. In his use of real historical figures, we see Flanagan's own cannibalisation of the Victorian past and a clear example of the process of neo-Victorian identity-formation through incorporation. He uses and reworks people such as Dickens and Franklin to create his own version of the past, one that could not have existed within Victorian notions of history. Flanagan, of course, might claim that even if he has tampered with the nineteenth-century celebrities' biographies, his version of past events is in some ways more 'truthful' than theirs in its presentation of the realities of British colonialism.

Yet although Flanagan exploits Dickens and Franklin to advance his arguments about colonialism, he also reveals his apprehension about his sometimes sensational manipulation of these real people, especially in relation to the theme of cannibalism. He self-reflexively comments on his own incorporation of Dickens by presenting the author as still another victim of cannibalism. In *Wanting*, Dickens perceives his one-time flame and her relatives as feeding on his body; he laments that "Maria Beadnell and her vile family had treated him as little better than a corpse to play with, to feast upon" (Flanagan 2008: 43). Flanagan also draws the reader's attention to Dickens's belief that he has been victimised by the women in his life through rhetorical questions such as "Had not women failed him all his life? His mother. Maria Beadnell. His wife." (Flanagan 2008: 79). We also see Dickens feeling consumed in the passages that describe the financial burden of taking care of his family: "He liked seeing his daughters look as splendid as she did in the bonnet, but the cost! The cost! His children had no idea about money – they were as spendthrift as his own father had been" (Flanagan 2008: 95).

In his apprehension, we also identify Flanagan's desire to commune with Dickens. At one point, the narrator of *Wanting* says,

> For those who had followed the greatest mystery of the age [Franklin's disappearance in the Arctic], the prospect of the most popular writer of the day putting forth his view on the sensation of the rumours of cannibalism was irresistible. (Flanagan 2008: 71)

Here, it is as if the narrator is speaking directly for Flanagan, who is admitting that he himself could not resist the sensational link between

Dickens and Franklin. Indeed, in *Wanting*, Flanagan repeatedly emphasises Dickens's literary achievements and iconic fame: "he remained the most popular writer in the land" (Flanagan 2008: 21). Such moments highlight Dickens's importance as a symbol of Empire in the colonial narrative, but they also betray the contemporary writer's admiration for his literary ancestor. Even though Flanagan's use of Dickens is intended to solidify the core criticism of Australian colonialism, Dickens is by no means an obvious choice of character through which to explore Aboriginal history. Thus on some level Flanagan's selection of the Victorian author as a subject reveals his acknowledgement of Dickens as a literary influence and a predecessor whom he wishes to emulate. This desire for communion with Dickens may rest partly on his connection to the literary history of Australia,[18] but seems primarily driven by his stature within the canon of English literature more generally, not only as "the most popular writer" (Flanagan 2008: 21, 71) of his own day, but one of the most famous of all time. Even the book's title can be interpreted as encoding a Freudian allusion to Flanagan's own *wanting* to be associated with the Victorian author, whose name is guaranteed to move books. In sating this desire, Flanagan has become a kind of literary savage.

Flanagan's work demonstrates two conflicting characteristics of neo-Victorian fiction's relationship with the past, a desire for communion and a need to fashion a new self-identity. He uses Dickens within *Wanting*, but he must also contain and transcend him. This point is amply demonstrated in the contemporary author's aggressive portrayal of his Victorian predecessor as cannibalistic. Not only is this representation itself a cannibalistic act, it is also the severest possible criticism of the Victorian author and can thus be viewed as Flanagan's attempt to undermine and destroy his literary influence. Flanagan also uses this characterisation to advance his goal of providing a revision of Australian colonial history that fills gaps of historical knowledge. In this act, which also cannibalises the biographies of the Franklins and of Mathinna, Flanagan creates an identity separate from the Victorian past. Yet he also reveals his own apprehension at incorporating Dickens and the other historical personae. In particular, he portrays Dickens as the ultimate victim of cannibalism and reminds the reader of the Victorian author's greatness. The process of revealing his ambivalent desire to commune with Dickens involves what becomes

marginalised as mere collateral damage: the girlhoods of Mathinna and, to a smaller extent, Ellen Ternan are cannibalised.

Notes

1. Flanagan has previously explored the life of convicts in his novel *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), which portrays the English convict and artist William Buelow Gould in Tasmania. Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000), like *Wanting*, focuses on the indigenous people of the island.
2. A number of neo-Victorian novels commodify Victorian girlhood to explore colonial trauma. For example, both Robert Edric's *The Book of the Heathen* (2000) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006) employ this trope. The former relates the story of a white man accused of the murder and cannibalism of a black girl, while the latter narrates the traumatic childhood of thirteen-year-old Matilda on the blockaded and war-torn island of Bougainville in the early 1990s.
3. The idea of Australia as a place for colonial 'experiments' is discussed by Denis Judd, who writes that "the Australian colonies were to receive hundreds of thousands of free immigrants, and to be the subject of daring, if not always successful, experiments in social engineering" (Judd 1996: 30).
4. One is reminded of 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835), in which Thomas Babington Macaulay argues that English education is the only thing that can lift Indians out of superstition.
5. "She was barefoot in a filthy pinafore and a red woollen stocking hat" (Flanagan 2008: 10); "Mathinna looked down at her naked feet, and so too for a moment did the Protector" (Flanagan 2008: 15); "She [Lady Jane] remembered the softness of those dark eyes; the sight that once had angered her and now moved her so, of those bare feet. […] I am so alone, she thought. Those bare, black feet" (Flanagan 2008: 28); "He [a sawyer called Garney Walch] noticed her bare feet poking out from the rug's ragged bottom and, reaching down, he tweaked her big toe" (Flanagan 2008: 112); "For though the Aboriginal child was dressed in a dark grey serge dress of a type that attracts the word sensible, poking out from beneath its hem were two large, splayed and very brown feet" (Flanagan 2008: 116); "it was the sudden, unexpected flashing gleam of teeth that disarmed him [Sir John]. Gleam of teeth, swirl of red, puddle of eye, dance of feet" (132); "her dirty little feet" (Flanagan 2008: 152), and more.

6. In his role as Protector, Robinson is responsible for civilising the local Aborigines.
7. This scene is reminiscent of a meal in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) in which the Fat Boy conflates food and his romantic interest, Mary. See Stone 1994: 78.
8. The Leda myth also appears in the Dickens narrative in the form of a painting in the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition (see Flanagan 2008: 165-167), emphasising the connection between the two strands of the novel.
9. Mathinna's renaming as Leda provides an echo of her father Towterer, who is given the name "King Romeo". According to Chris Healy, "King" was one of a number of titles given to Aboriginal chiefs to make them sound "familiar" to the West (Healy 2001: 25). As we can see in the case of Mathinna, it is a process tinged with condescension and cruelty. Bestowing a name with classical and literary connections upon the girl, especially one with such brutal associations, is a dehumanising means of depriving her of her individuality and native identity.
10. Perhaps a coincidence, Dickens was known to have a penchant for toasted cheese; his son Charley wrote about his father's fondness for the dish (see Tomalin 2011: 408).
11. Zeus is also mentioned in relation to the Greek temple that Lady Jane builds in the colony: "Once, perhaps, she thought, Zeus did sport here, transforming into whatever animal he needed to be – a bull, a goat, a swan – in order to take yet another mortal or goddess unawares. At that moment a kangaroo came bounding across the temple" (Flanagan 2008: 132). Again the rape of Mathinna is ominously prefigured. The marsupial recalls the skin Mathinna dons earlier in the narrative and suggests that in this new pastoral landscape she will be Zeus's next victim.
12. Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) also features a raped Aboriginal female. One of the first-person narrators of the novel, Peevay (named by the Europeans "Cromwell"), is the son of an Aboriginal mother who has been raped by a white convict.
13. Compare, for example, to Kneale's *English Passengers*, which employs an indigenous narrator.
14. For more about Rae's report on Franklin's Arctic expedition, see McGoogan 2002.
15. The sentence initially appeared in a letter that Dickens wrote to W. H. Wills in 1854.

16. Similar sentiments can be found in Jeff Rackham's *Rag & Bone Shop* (2001), which contains the line "[Dickens] became England" (Rackham 2001: 4), and in Claire Tomalin's biography of Dickens, which comments, "He was, and he continued to be, a national treasure, an institution, a part of what makes England England; and he continues to be read all over the world" (Tomalin 2011: 400). The connection between Flanagan's expedition and the British Empire is made explicit in Tomalin's remark that *The Frozen Deep* was "helped perhaps by its theme of absent suffering men and anxiously awaiting women, which found an echo in so many Victorian households in the heyday of the Empire and the year of the Indian mutiny. Voyages like those of Darwin with the *Beagle* and Sir John Franklin to the Arctic naturally aroused tremendous interest and excitement" (Tomalin 1990: 97-98).
17. On the relationship between Dickens and Ternan, see Tomalin 1990.
18. Of all the colonies that Dickens wrote about or was interested in, Australia, a white settler colony, is the most visible. Australia was the place in which Dickens's works were the best received outside Britain and America (Thieme 2001: 103). Dickens's connection with the country can also be seen in his patronage of Urania Cottage, an enterprise that helped 'fallen' women to move to the colony. Dickens also uses Australia in his novels, albeit ambivalently. In *David Copperfield* (1849-50), he sends characters such as the Micawbers, Mr Peggotty, and Emily to start better lives in the colony, lives that would have been impossible if they had stayed in Britain. In this sense, Australia is like "a New World Arcadia" (Thieme 2001: 103). However, Dickens also portrays the country negatively. In *Great Expectations* (1860-61), the convict Magwitch is deported to New South Wales, reflecting the use of the colony as a site of banishment and punishment during the nineteenth century. These twin characterisations have provoked a variety of reactions from Australian writers. John Thieme believes that some authors, such as Henry Lawson, saw Dickens as "a father figure" (Thieme 2001: 103). John O. Jordan goes so far as to suggest that Dickens is the "single English writer" who embodies "cultural authority and originary enunciative power" with respect to Australia (Jordan 2003: 46). However, because of its unflattering portrayal of the Antipodes, Dickens's *Great Expectations* has inspired a number of postcolonial reworkings, including Michael Noonan's *Magwitch* (1982), Elizabeth Jolley's *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983), Tim Burstall's film of Australian nationhood *Great Expectations: The Untold Story* (1988) and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1998). Carey's novel, written out of a sense of "colonial insecurity" (Hanitijo 2012: 50), has especially received critical

attention for its postcolonial themes. According to Simon Joyce, *Jack Maggs* is a response to "Edward Said's insistence that we rethink *Great Expectations* from an Australian perspective, seeing Victorian Britain and its colony as interdependent spaces" (Joyce 2007: 166). The book also interrogates the novel's role in the imperial project, as "Carey challenges Dickens's novel's participation in Britain's ideology of overseas expansion and penal colonisation of Australia" (Sadoff 2010: 164).

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