

'AN INTELLIGENT CONVERSATION OF A STRUCTURED KIND' WITH ANTONI JACH

JEAN-FRANÇOIS VERNAY

Born in Melbourne in 1956 of Polish and Australian descent, Antoni Jach has authored three published novels: *The Weekly Card Game* (1994), *The Layers of the City* (1999), and the recently published *Napoleon's Double* (2007). His first and fourth novels, *Dina Club* (1989), which was shortlisted for the Vogel Prize, and *Travelling Companions* (2001), are as yet unpublished. His half-completed sixth novel is set in Rome. He also has published a book of poetry, *An Erratic History* (1988) and has written two plays recently: *Miss Furr and Miss Skeene, plays I & II*. He is an advisory editor for Ivor Indyk's *HEAT* literary journal. His latest art project is the completion of a cycle of oil paintings for an exhibition. Jach currently lives in Melbourne with his wife, Australian novelist Sallie Muirden, and their daughter, Hayley, and son, Oliver. It was on a sunny spring afternoon that Antoni Jach had chosen to be interviewed in the courtyard of Jimmy Watson's, his favourite wine-bar, located in Lygon Street, Carlton.

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Jean-François Vernay: I believe *The Weekly Card Game* is a real tour de force. Trying to entertain using the subject of boredom is a risky challenge few writers would dare take up in an increasingly market-oriented publishing industry. The comic effect is mainly achieved through a terse but very stylish prose sprinkled with deadpan humour, the action being revealed through the eyes of a self-effacing focalizer. What is more, *Napoleon's Double* has been defined by Judith Armstrong as 'a fictional chronicle—a series of "historical" events recounted chronologically, artlessly and without any

concern for climax, denouement, or even characterization.' Do you hold anything against the conventional action-packed novel dominated by an outstanding central character?

Antoni Jach: It's a good question. I'm not interested in writing a conventional novel, nor am I interested in writing a conventional Australian realist novel. I see myself as a late modernist novelist. I like modernist and 21st-century late modernist novels. I'm interested in fiction that is reflective, meditative, and philosophical. I like novels that are technically challenging. I like novels that reveal the novel-making art in the exposition of the novel itself—in the same sense that if we look at abstract expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock, then his paintings are simultaneously paintings and a revelation of what a painting is. One of my concerns in *Napoleon's Double* is the issue of the difficulty of representation. How does one as a novelist represent adequately? I think this was a fundamental issue for the early modernist writers from the 1910s and the 1920s and is still a fundamental issue for 21st-century late-modernist writers. I look to a great writer like W.G. Sebald, who is also concerned with the problematics of trying to represent adequately. One of the major issues in his work is the need to represent via words and images, but how can one adequately represent anything at all? So the desire to represent scenes of life with words is there but the means are limited. I feel exactly the same with my own novels. I have the desire to capture a type of reality about what happened to those fictional conscripts who went with Napoleon to Egypt and ended up on Baudin's expedition to New Holland, while being fully aware of the difficulty of trying to translate that 'reality' into a novel.

JFV: Is it a coincidence that this debut novel, with its prominent themes of change and changelessness, was published at the time of the re-emergence of the Republican debate in Australia? Do you feel—to take up your metaphor in the concluding chapter—that Australia is some grand-scale chess game with 'no republican spirit' and 'an exaggerated respect for royalty'?

AJ: I think in a way it was coincidental that *The Weekly Card Game* was published about the same time. It was a novel I had wanted to write for about 5 years; but on the other hand, you do, as a novelist, pick up the Zeitgeist and so I was conscious of those issues. I've always been conscious of the notion of Australia representing itself symbolically to the world as a young country. The Australian national anthem says, 'for we are young and free.' The positive side of that 'youthfulness' is the optimism, the enthusiasm, and the childlikeness, but the negative side is a childishness, an unwillingness to be mature in lots of ways. So I think it's a double-edged sword, and in *Napoleon's Double* there are comments on some aspects of the Australian psyche, which I put into the mouth of one of my characters in part two. One of my characters says the following: 'The inhabitants of Rose-Hill and Sydney-Town applaud sporting prowess and the ability to make money. They admire three qualities above all others: rat-cunning, brute force and a dogged determination.'

JFV: Going back to *The Weekly Card Game*, could you explain your frequent use of italics in the narrative?

AJ: Yes, it has to do with emphasis and it's a bit like poetry. I write a type of poetic prose. I've written poetry for a long time and I love the tonal quality in language and I really see the novel as another way of writing poetry. Mallarmé says that prose does not exist. He says, 'there is the alphabet and then there is verse, which may be more or less tight, more or less diffuse.' I think there is a lot to be said for that. We need to be reminded of that. I've also been a playwright for a long time and in plays you use italics to tell the actors how to speak. And there's another reason for italics. I wanted to suggest a heightened emotion, almost on the verge of hysteria in a way—the emphasis on italics brings the whole to a higher pitch. So in the novel we're sort of moving into a more stylised area, and this relates to my two recent plays *Miss Furr and Miss Skeene, plays I & II*, which are very mannered and neo-baroque—a term which I think could be used to describe all of my writing and painting: extravagant, over-the-top, polyphonic, emotional, rhetorical, lyrical, grandiose, playfully ludic, and contradictory. Italics, in *The Weekly Card Game*, work well from my

point of view in heightening and stylising. But then again, the novelist encodes and you never know how the reader is going to decode!

JFV: *The Weekly Card Game*, with its strong focus on suburban *tedium vitae*, can also be read as a satirical sociological study of the Australian way of life. Why have you chosen an essentially European pastime to highlight the foibles and anxieties of Australian suburbanites? Do you imply that there are some benefits to be claimed in seeing Australia in the European mirror? Couldn't a cricket or footy game have served your purpose?

AJ: Well, I don't see card playing as being specifically European. People used to play a lot of cards in Australia and one of my aunties, Sister Raymonde, who is a Catholic nun, played cards in the 1960s and 1970s in the convent where she lived and a lot of country folks used to play cards every night. I can remember a time before TV when there was radio, and people played cards to pass the time. The novel *The Weekly Card Game* was based on one of my own rituals, a weekly tennis game, but I didn't want to use tennis because that's the reality. I wanted to twist reality so I transformed that event into a weekly card game. But that weekly tennis game now has been going on for about 21 years and of course there was a lot I could use for the weekly card game from the reality of the weekly tennis game. In terms of the European connection, my father was Polish and my mother was Australian but of Irish descent—her mother was a Clancy—but my name sounds foreign, so I've been identified by others as foreign, as an outsider, which has been crucial in the formation of my sense of self. We are created, as Lacan says, by the desire of the Other. So, I've had this sense of living in two worlds although I was born in Australia, which is really important in terms of the cultural codes that you inherit, but I don't identify totally with Australia. I have always been aware of my half-European ancestry—other people remind me of it on an almost daily basis—and all my writing and now my recent paintings are connected with this notion of the link between Europe and Australia and trying to reconcile and understand this link. You have a background in psychoanalysis, so I can say to you because you'll understand, that there's rich psychoanalytic territory to be explored here in terms of the relationship with that part of yourself

that you identify with and that part that you don't identify with. Jacques Lacan asks the question: why do we keep going back to one grandfather and identify with his stories but ignore the other grandfather and the stories of the other side of the family? What are we doing? What is the psychic benefit in doing this? These questions about identity and storytelling—the creation of the narrative of one's own life, the notion of self-dramatisation—interest me greatly.

JFV: And I hope they will also be of interest to critics and academics alike. On another level, *The Weekly Card Game*—published as you were verging on 40—can also be perceived as a midlife-crisis novel. Is the 'possibility of change' enough in itself to fulfill people in desperate need to pull themselves out of their deep-seated and mind-numbing routine?

AJ: That's a complex question. Yes, it can be seen as a midlife-crisis novel, but then *The Weekly Card Game* can be seen as many different sorts of novels—I'll leave that up to the critics. I see myself as belonging in the school of Anton Chekhov and Samuel Beckett. I'm interested in ennui and I'm interested in repetition, greatly, and all my work is about repetition to a lesser or greater degree. The first play in the *Miss Furr and Miss Skeene* cycle grows out of Gertrude Stein's writing. Both plays are full of repetitions and a luscious sound poetry of tonal waves. The first play pushes repetition—and the audience—to endurable limits. The first play is 2 hours and 20 minutes in its running time and some people just had to leave at half time—it was too much! I am fascinated by Søren Kierkegaard on repetition, and Peter Handke has written a novel called *Repetition*. Gilles Deleuze has also written on repetition. When you are bored you open up a meditative and reflective space, your time is not taken up with action, there's room to reflect on one's life. Kierkegaard has said, 'We live life forwards but we understand it backwards,' and that's a very important axiom for me and for all of my writing.

JFV: It also seems that all the activities taken up in the novel are as much a form of entertainment as they are some kind of *divertissement pascalien*. The Pascalian notion of distraction from death is clearly spelt out in the

last pages of your most recent novel. I quote: 'We have to push away all thoughts of death in order to keep on living. The thought of death is what eats away the spirit of life like the leech the surgeon uses to bleed the patient dry' (ND 277). Is the purpose of life to elude death?

AJ: Yes, I could not have said it better myself: the purpose of life is to elude death. That appeals to me as a maxim. Blaise Pascal is very important for my recent novel, *Napoleon's Double*. It is written in the spirit of Pascal's axiom: 'We need diversions from our misery.' That notion is contained in *The Weekly Card Game*, too—we *do* need to find reasons to keep on living. I think we need to find, continually, new reasons to live as well. So, that ties back to the midlife-crisis notion. If we feel depressed or we feel that life is not going anywhere, we have to reinvent ourselves endlessly—so, I agree, in a Chekhovian fashion or in a Beckettian fashion, with the sentiment that we do have to elude death. Spinoza talks about the obligation of the organism to stay alive. He says, 'Everything endeavours to persist in its own being'—an axiom I like a lot. Also, we do have to try and forget certain things—the extreme horrors of the world for instance—to keep on living each day, and we keep on needing to renew ourselves each day to keep on living as well. There's also another important aspect to 'eluding' and that is that reading novels is a way of eluding death, too. If you really get into a novel, you completely forget about time—time doesn't matter to you anymore. Eight hours can go by and you don't know where those eight hours went. So novel reading itself can be a diversion, an enlightenment, an entertainment, an elusion as well as an illusion of life. Novel reading can be a distraction from all

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