2009

Representing the Refugee: Rhetoric, discourse and the public agenda

John M. Cartner
University of Notre Dame Australia

Follow this and additional works at: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING
The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.
Do not remove this notice.

Publication Details

This dissertation/thesis is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.
CHAPTER FOUR

*Reality in its entirety is not to be exhausted by what is immediately at hand, for an overwhelming part of this reality is contained in the form of a still latent, unuttered future Word*

Dostoevsky²¹⁷

One of the insights of the previous chapter is the intimate connection that exists between language and its context. Every utterance receives its vitality, life and potency from the situation of which it is borne. Whether it be the narrative of the Afghani refugee who, having had two brothers murdered in Afghanistan, speaks of being killed every day by Australia’s mandatory detention, or the words of the Iranian man asking the reader why, after having fled a regime that executed his nephew and black listed his family, he finds himself persecuted by the Australian authorities from whom he sought protection. Every utterance responds to the past and asks a question of the reader about the future.

As we have already seen, a crucial dimension of every utterance is its reception; the extent to which an utterance is heard, conceptualized and integrated into its recipient’s world view. Through the theoretical insights of Emmanuel Levinas, questions regarding the most effective means of negotiating refugees’ literatures will be explored in this chapter. I propose that utterances conveyed orally are more effective in conveying the full impact of detainees’ experiences as their transmission necessarily comes from what Levinas calls the ‘face’. This can be seen in an analysis of the form and content of refugees’ stories included in Heather Tyler’s *Asylum: Voices behind the Razor Wire*.

Heather Tyler’s text contains narratives that follow a similar pattern to those found in *From Nothing to Zero*. This is not surprising since those whose stories they tell share a similar history of persecution and suffering. This common history and shared context has demanded that the past be responded to and questions of the future be asked by refugees as well as the Australian community at large. This, however, is

largely where the similarities end. Stylistically the two texts are strikingly different. While *From Nothing to Zero* strives to preserve the integrity of the narratives at the level of content and style, allowing them to speak for themselves, albeit polyphonically, Tyler has chosen the path of heteroglossia, whereby a variety of voices are used to convey the story of selected refugees. In Bakhtinian terms, *From Nothing to Zero* adheres to a linear structure, as it focuses on the content of the reported speech and maintains a strict boundary between authorial reporting of speech and the speech reported, while *Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire* is pictorial in style because it infiltrates the reported speech with authorial retort and response to it. The extent and effect of these different approaches to narrative will be seen in this chapter.

According to Bakhtin, because language is historically constituted it is necessarily dialogic:

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.

The inherently dialogic nature of language of which Bakhtin speaks is clearly evident throughout the narratives contained in Tyler’s text. Each and every story brings together a variety of voices all competing and cooperating in order to convey the stories of Australian refugees. Heather Tyler’s voice is prominent in every chapter and it is her voice that directs the movement of each narrative; the voices of the refugees whose stories are told are similarly prominent and are reported directly and indirectly throughout each chapter. The voices of psychologists, professors, politicians and people from a variety of other professions are also included. Each of these voices acts like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle playing its part in constructing the final narrative. As such the various voices are interdependent, each relying on the other in order to articulate the narrative in its completeness. These utterances, therefore, far from being indifferent to one another, instead mutually reflect one another. These mutual reflections determine their character. Each utterance is filled

---


219 *ibid.*, p.76.
with echoes and reverberations of other utterances and thus must be regarded primarily as a response to preceding utterances. Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account.\textsuperscript{220} The first two pages of chapter one, “Behind the Iron Curtin”, exemplify this.

Opening the first chapter of \textit{Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire} is a quote from the then Inspector of Custodial Services in Western Australia, Professor Richard Harding, who, in commenting on the secrecy surrounding the inner workings of detention centres, stated that ‘it is appalling that public information about what is going on in detention centres has to come out by default’.\textsuperscript{221} Immediately below this, Tyler has placed a letter written by an unnamed refugee in detention addressed to an anonymous person known only as Edward:

\begin{quote}
Dear Edward,

A kind guard told me that people live long distances from each other in this country like this, and that almost every man has grown up with a gun. Do they use them on each other or is this only to kill the kangaroos? And he told me those who live out here are different from city people, that they are brave and kind, not afraid of the heat and the emptiness and they love the red sand, the gum trees, the blue hills. I want to see the long road out of here again. In my desert prison rubbish blows fat against the fences. Sand and dust live inside my ears and eyes. It is choking my soul where life used to be. Will some of those brave people come to visit us one day? Forgive me, but I am afraid of the emptiness and now I hate the colour red.\textsuperscript{222}
\end{quote}

Following the letter, Tyler relays the story of her own experience of being contacted by a refugee recently released from Curtin detention centre wanting to pass on a video smuggled out of Curtin that reportedly provided a shocking insight into life within detention.

The video eventually appeared on ABC’s Lateline—and it was a shocker. Hazaras, a persecuted minority in Afghanistan, who had been screened out of the asylum application process after one short interview and kept in isolation for months with no telephone, television or even a radio, were wailing and smashing their heads against the walls of their cells. Eventually one Hazara emerged, blood running in rivers down his face,\textsuperscript{220} \textit{ibid}., p.85.\textsuperscript{221} Heather Tyler, \textit{Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire}, Lothian Books, South Melbourne, 2003, p.1.\textsuperscript{222} \textit{ibid}
asking not for medical attention but why he had been held in isolation. ‘They need to check your wounds,’ one guard was heard to say. ‘But it is my heart that is breaking,’ the bleeding man answered…Lateline lined up the hard-hitters for presenter Tony Jones to interview: Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry spokesperson Dr Louise Newman, disaffected former chairman of the Multicultural Australia Council Neville Roach, and Professor Richard Harding, Inspector of Custodial Services in Western Australia.  

The above excerpts raise several questions: to what extent do they demonstrate within themselves heteroglossia? what is the relationship between these excerpts? how do the utterances respond to one another? what significance lies behind their inclusion? what do they contribute to the overall narrative? 

The first voice encountered in the opening chapter of Asylum: Voice behind the razor wire is that of Professor Harding. His position as Inspector of Custodial Services in Western Australia informs the reader of his area of expertise and the likely content of his utterances, while also adding weight to these utterances. The significance of the utterance selected by Tyler to open the first chapter lies in its placement, accent and content. By situating his utterance immediately below the chapter title, ‘Behind the Iron Curtin’ a sense of covertness is conveyed to the reader. This is of course reinforced by the content of the utterance which alludes to the existence of an ‘Iron Curtin’ preventing the Australian public from accessing information about the inner workings of mandatory detention. Its placement also provides the reader with an idea of what is to follow. The most powerful aspect of Professor Harding’s utterance, however, lies in its connotations. Words such as ‘appalling’ and ‘default’ suggest a feeling of disgust towards the events and/or utterances which prompted his own utterance. The significance of this goes beyond the expression of an individual’s feelings regarding a particular issue. Professor Harding’s context combines with the content and accent of his utterance to pose a highly political question to those who are orchestrating the cover up of which he is speaking. This knowledge no doubt played a large role in Professor Harding’s choice of terminology and his decision to articulate his criticism. These same factors undoubtedly influenced Tyler’s decision to open her first chapter with Professor Harding’s

---

223 ibid., p.3.
224 Tyler’s play on words is making clear parallels between the veil of secrecy over the Curtin Detention Centre and the Iron Curtain associated with the former Communist run Soviet Union.
225 ibid., p.1.
226 ibid
utterance. There is no doubt that Bakhtin places a great deal of importance upon the expressive element of the utterance, seeing it as highly significant in determining the compositional form of every utterance:

There can be no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance. The speaker’s evaluative attitude towards the subject of his speech (regardless of what his subject may be) also determines the choice of lexical, grammatical and compositional means of the utterance. The individual style of the utterance is determined primarily by its expressive aspect.  

It is worth reiterating the importance of context at this juncture, for in the absence of context, the dialogic element of the utterance is removed and the expressive element that provides much of the potency of the utterance is in most cases limited. This is exactly why those in authority rarely contextualize utterances that would threaten their interests. For this same reason their own discourses, which seek to marginalize the Other, are so often presented in black and white terms and are almost always void of the shades of grey that context inevitably supplies. Authoritative discourse ‘enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it’.  

Furthermore, since it is the emotive aspect of utterances which motivates others to respond, those seeking to operate covertly oppress all utterances that possess this expressive element. Herein lies another example of the modus operandus of the Orientalist.

The restrictions placed upon refugees’ communications have been well documented and the subsequent limitation upon face to face contact with those from the ‘outside world’ has necessitated the refugees’ reliance upon letters—though at detention centres such as Curtin this form of communication was also initially forbidden. The letter thus symbolizes the oppressed state of detainees. It enables detainees to express their needs, fears, concerns and anxieties through a relatively simple style more conducive to those whose familiarity with the English language is often limited. The letter also provides a forum more adaptable to the incorporation of the oral elements of refugees’ language. Additionally, letters are innately dialogic: one provides information about oneself and seeks information from the one to whom the

228 ibid., p.78.
letter is directed, thus they provide the ideal forum for refugees to attain responses to their utterances. The personable nature of the letter is also ideal for those reaching out to the world beyond the razor wire. For the detained refugees, the act of writing is as expressive as the content of their communication, for it conveys their reliance upon those who have initiated the dialogic exchange in which they are participating. Indeed for many detainees the letter signifies their final hope that beyond the oppressiveness of their lives within detention, people do exist who care for their plight. This is clearly demonstrated through the first of several letters incorporated by Tyler into her text: ‘In my desert prison rubbish blows flat against the fences. Sand and dust live in my ears and eyes. It is choking my soul where life used to be. Will some of those brave people come to visit us one day?’

Beyond the desperation and diminishing hope conveyed by this letter which is characteristic of many utterances emerging from detainees, the letter possesses other characteristics which highlight the complex social significance of both this utterance and others like it. Firstly, the question posed to the reader who in this case is Edward and any one else who has read Tyler’s text, demands a response. ‘The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, orientated toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction.’ In this case that future answered word could come from as many directions as there are recipients to the utterance. This dissertation could be considered one such response; the letter, returned by Edward to the author of this letter, another. The significance of this is that the future answer-word is not limited to a certain time or space but can emerge both immediately after the utterance is circulated and any number of times thereafter. Herein lies the potency of what Bakhtin calls ‘the word in living conversation’. It remains living for as long as someone exists to receive it.

This openness of the utterance to any number of responses is but one dimension of its dialogic nature, for, as is the case with the letter to Edward, utterances not only demand responses but also act as responses to previous utterances. In the case of the

---

232 *ibid*
aforementioned letter, it acts in part as a response to previous utterances; this is indicated in its opening sentences: ‘A kind guard told me that people live long distances from each other in country like this…And he told me that those who live out here are different from city people’.\footnote{233} Clearly the refugee who penned this letter had reflected on an earlier conversation which in turn formed an essential component of his/her own utterance. This interdependence of utterances not only demonstrates the dialogic nature of the letter but also highlights the process of reception within any dialogue:

In actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement.\footnote{234}

In each utterance the response plays a primary role, as through it understanding is signified. Indeed understanding becomes clear only through the response. These two processes are dialectically merged and mutually condition one another. One is synonymous with the other. It is through the response that one’s utterance is integrated into a new conceptual system. It is exactly this process which the speaker counts on.

In the case of the letter to Edward, the detained refugee has heard and understood the guard’s utterance and then applied this understanding to the new utterance which he/she has created. According to Bakhtin, this process conforms exactly to the expectations of the speaker. In the absence of the guard’s complete conversation with the detainee, we can only hypothesise about the intended purpose or speech-will of his utterance. We can, however, with far more certainty assume that he expressed his utterance with the expectation of attaining a response. We know also that at least part of the guard’s words lived on in the detainee’s utterance as it has in turn been received by Tyler and those who have read her text. This is but one example of the living force of language and it highlights the potency of the spoken word in its ability to initiate reflection and propagate further utterances. It is for this reason that Said can say that the greatest pressure one can exert upon the authoritative utterance is

narrative as it acts to introduce diachrony into the system. What seemed stable—such as reductive, binary based representations of refugees—is suddenly destabilized: ‘Narrative, in short, introduces an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness to the unitary web of vision.’ 235

The third piece of direct discourse, the third voice to be heard from the opening chapter of Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire, comes from the author Heather Tyler. In comparison to the utterances of Professor Harding and the anonymous detainee Tyler’s discourse is the most extensive. It is, however, also the discourse most saturated with heteroglossia. Tyler’s voice is first heard on the second page of the opening chapter, which—as mentioned previously—begins with the story of her experience of being contacted by a recently released refugee seeking to pass on a video of coverage within the Curtin detention centre. 236

It is immediately obvious to the reader that Tyler’s story is dialogic. Like the detainee’s letter to Edward, the origins of Tyler’s utterance arise from a previous conversation. The significance of this conversation to the author is conveyed through its placement at the beginning of her narrative. It is likely that this initial contact was formative in the conception of Tyler’s interest in the plight of refugees and/or in the writing of Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire. It is certainly significant that the text strives to achieve exactly that which the detainee central to Tyler’s opening narrative was seeking of her through his initial contact, namely to make the plight of detained refugees known. Eight of the thirteen chapters within the text, which deal exclusively with the conveyance of refugees’ stories, are dedicated exclusively to this end.

It is worth noting that Tyler’s opening story incorporated fifteen other voices. Each of these represented different sectors of the Australian community and their respective utterances conveyed contrasting attitudes towards the plight of detained refugees, thus demonstrating some of the ‘thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an

utterance’. Through the clash of these utterances the battle between the centrifugal and centripetal forces of language is manifested. Consider the following as an example of this interplay:

ABC TV reporter Margot O’Neill spoke with former Curtin detainee Fashid Kheirollahpoor, who was in Curtin at the time of the riot. Fashid said the men resorted to hunger strikes and extreme measures because they had no money and no way to help themselves. ‘The only thing they had to sell was their own blood.’ O’Neill, aghast, had to ask him to repeat it. At the end of the Lateline report, O’Neill said: ‘This was just one incident, on one day, in just one detention centre.’ The Department of Immigration brushed the tape aside, blaming the disturbance on 50 people ‘who had no legal basis for being in Australia’.

The above dialogic exchange involves the voices of three stakeholders in the issue: journalist Margot O’Neill, the detainee Fashid Kheirollahpoor and The Department of Immigration. O’Neill’s position as investigative journalist requires some level of professional distance from the subject. That the content and accent of her utterance reveals a level of empathy with Fashid and other detainees suggests the shocking contents of the tape viewed by O’Neill. This is supported not only by the emotive utterance of Fashid but also by the bland response of the Department of Immigration who, rather than addressing the concerns arising from the video, chose instead to lay blame for the riot on 50 detainees and attack them as illegals. The fact that most have since had their status as refugees recognised and are now living in the community reveals the desperation of the Department of Immigration to hide the true nature of detention from the Australian public. Hence the appropriateness of the title of Tyler’s opening chapter: ‘Behind the iron Curtin’.

Finally, it is important to note that the above dialogic exchange demonstrates another aspect of heteroglossia noted by Bakhtin, namely the stratification of language: ‘At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word (according to formal linguistic markers, especially phonetic), but also…into languages that are socio-ideological: languages

---

239 *ibid.*, p.1.
of social groups, “professional” and “generic” languages...”\textsuperscript{240} In the case of the above dialogic exchange we have two professional voices and one generic voice contesting the circumstances surrounding the subject of their utterances. It is fortunate for Fashid that his utterance is supported by Margot’s ‘professional’ utterance. Fortunate, not because Fashid’s utterance lacks credibility in and of itself—indeed since it expresses the account of an eye witness it is all the more credible—but fortunate, because, as Foucault points out, one of the principles of exclusion placed upon discourse is that of the speaking subject. ‘There is a rarefaction, this time, of the speaking subject; none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so.’\textsuperscript{241} In the case of the Department of Immigration’s utterance, the credibility of Fashid was attacked on the false premise that he had no legal standing in the Australian community. In essence the implication of DIMA’s statement is that as he is not ‘one of us’ his words should not be trusted. It was not an accusation that could be attached to O’Neill.

Chapter two of \textit{Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire}, entitled ‘Please, let me go home’ is dedicated to the story of Dr Abdul Rahim. According to Tyler he arrived in Australia without a passport on November 14 1999 after having fled the Taliban. Dr Rahim had solid grounds for being concerned. Tyler relates the fact that his wife, a teacher, ‘knew that while the Taliban remained, she would not be able to teach in a school again. The couple had seven children: their four daughters would have to terminate their education at the age of eight, and their three sons faced being schooled in religious dogma.’\textsuperscript{242} Under the intensely anti-intellectual and anti-western regime the future of Dr Rahim and his family was undoubtedly bleak.

Upon arriving in Australia Dr Rahim asked for asylum. Instead ‘he was driven 45 minutes west to the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre...He was put into the ugly Stage One compound, where detainees considered to be a potential security risk

\textsuperscript{242} \textit{ibid.}, p.35.
are secured. Dr Rahim expressed shock at the conditions of the compound which he described as worse than an Afghan jail: ‘Hygiene was poor he said. The bedding was soiled, the toilets grimy. The fetid dormitories became sweat boxes in the humidity of the Australian summer. “The conditions were shocking”, he remembered. “I didn’t expect conditions like this in a civilized country.” After eighteen months of life at Villawood and limited contact with his family depression set in on Dr Rahim. During this period his application for asylum was rejected as was his appeal to the Refugee Review Tribunal. ‘He said he was told bluntly by the Tribunal his story of persecution was not credible. “They told me, ‘I don’t believe your story and you are not a truthful witness’” he recalled with barely disguised anger.’ One of the reasons given as evidence of Dr Rahim’s lack of credibility was that he used different words to tell his story on different occasions:

If you changed your words about the story in any way, they would use that as an excuse to reject. How can any person tell the same story twice using exactly the same words, especially if they are already under great stress from arriving in a strange country and suffering from the trauma of fleeing their country and what happened to them in their homeland?

At this point Tyler again takes up Dr Rahim’s story, describing the impact of the rejection of his asylum application:

With these rejections for asylum, Australia was officially saying it did not believe Dr Rahim was who he said he was. He was denied all credibility and the monotony of detention took its toll. Deprived of any semblance of normal life, without even the simplest task to fulfill that would maintain his self esteem, Dr Rahim’s depression deepened. He couldn’t eat, he couldn’t sleep and a feeling of intense isolation made him withdraw from conversation with other detainees...Helplessness overwhelmed him. Returning to Afghanistan was not an option. It was too dangerous. And while he was stuck behind the razor wire his wife and children were dependant on others to survive. He felt as though he had abandoned them, and he in turn felt abandoned.

Further blows arrived with the news that in their efforts to flee persecution in their tribal lands, a member of his family—his nine year old son—had lost his life in a

243 *ibid.*, p.38.
244 *ibid*
245 *ibid.*, p.39.
246 *ibid*
247 *ibid*
248 *ibid.*, p.40.
flooded river. ‘Thousands of kilometers away from his family, he was only able to comfort and grieve with occasional phone calls.’ In November, two months after al-Qaeda’s attack on the World Trade Centre, the Taliban fell and, despite the fact that pockets of al-Qaeda and the Taliban still remained ensconced in Afghanistan, Dr Rahim wrote a letter to Mr. Ruddock asking for repatriation:

On 22 November 2001, he applied to the Department of Immigration to be repatriated. There was no reply from Canberra. At the beginning of February 2002 he wrote to Mr. Ruddock saying he had ‘made an unforgivable decision to escape the tyranny of the Taliban’ and had suffered greatly as a consequence. His family had lost everything. He urged Mr. Ruddock to speed up his request for repatriation because his country needed qualified people to reconstruct the health system.

In a note to Tyler prior to his eventual repatriation Dr Rahim wrote:

I have been in struggle since November 2001 to go back to Afghanistan. No one was ready to respond to me in a reasonable way. I wrote again to Ruddock to consider this application seriously, but still there was no reply. Eventually with the help of compassionate Australians I won the fight of going back. I am happy for two reasons. One is that I am joining my frustrated family and the other is that I am leaving the country in which punishment of innocent people is lawful. I am very thankful to my friends who have given me courage and helped in terrible times.

At the level of content, Dr Rahim’s story is reminiscent of many of the stories told by Afghan refugees, which makes DIMA’s rejection of his application all the more incredible. Like so many other cases the human cost of Dr Rahim’s detention extends beyond his immediate sufferings. In light of these events, it is surprising that the accent of Dr Rahim’s utterances is not characterised by greater anger.

At this point a consideration of Tyler’s role in the construction of Dr Rahim’s story is appropriate. Stylistically, Tyler follows the pictorial form of narrative which focuses upon the individualized qualities and style of the reported speech and, as previously mentioned, ‘finds ways of infiltrating the reported speech with authorial retort and response to it, or, alternatively, the reported speech may begin to infiltrate the authorial context.’ This interplay between the authorial utterances of Tyler and

249 ibid., p.43.
250 ibid
251 ibid., p.44.
252 ibid
the utterances of those whose stories are being told is prominent throughout the text. In the case of Dr Rahim’s story it is evident throughout the chapter. Consider the following:

World Health Organisation statistics estimate that 40 per cent of the Afghan population suffer from mental stress accumulated after so much conflict. One day Dr Rahim and I talked about this accumulation of trauma, as drizzle enveloped the visitor’s compound of Villawood. He was frowning and oblivious to the beads of water seeping onto his threadbare shirt as he said: Nobody is normal in Afghanistan. How on earth can they create such figures when every person has suffered? Nobody has remained untouched by the past 23 years. Children are born into conflict and die because of it. A large majority of people suffer from severe depression and anxiety neurosis. Children play on the streets from dawn to dusk with no one watching them because their parents are too concerned with their own problems. They are unable to nurture their children.253

The interdependence of Tyler and Dr Rahim’s utterances is obvious: Dr Rahim’s utterance, which at the level of content and accent, expresses frustration and anger, is a direct response to the preceding utterance from Tyler. Of course Tyler’s utterance is also dependant on the utterances of the World Health Organisation, which informs the content of her narrative. It is also worth mentioning that the content of Tyler’s utterance was very likely determined by the context of her respondent. In quoting statistics taken from the World Health Organisation it is likely that Tyler, aware of Dr Rahim’s own qualifications and experience, was seeking his professional response. This demonstrates the indelible link between the two speakers in the formation of the word: ‘Orientation of the word towards the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, word is a two sided act …As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. (Bakhtin’s emphasis) Each and every word expresses the “one” in relation to the “other.”’254 Just as Tyler’s utterance is determined by her knowledge of Dr Rahim’s context as a doctor, Afghan citizen and refugee, so too does the reverse apply. It is likely that the content and accent of Dr Rahim’s response was in part determined by the relationship that he had established with Tyler. It is

unlikely that Dr Rahim would have responded in exactly the same manner if Tyler’s utterance had been delivered from a member of the World Health Organisation.

It has been said that there is no such thing as an original thought, the premise being that everything one thinks and says is in some way affected by the utterances received from others. One internalizes the meaning and expressive elements of previous dialogical exchanges and incorporates this new knowledge into what Bakhtin calls inner speech. From this inner speech our future utterances emerge. With this in mind, it can be reasonably asserted that from the time Tyler made contact with Dr Rahim her inner speech was altered and this can be seen to be manifested through her narrative. This is of course true not only of her encounter with Dr Rahim but of all her dialogic exchanges. Bakhtin explains the process in the following terms:

This active inner-speech reception operates in two directions: first, the received utterance is framed within a context of factual commentary (coinciding in part with what is called the apperceptive background of the words), the visual signs of expression and so on; second, a reply (Gegenrede) is prepared. Both the preparation of the reply (internal retort) and the factual commentary are organically fused in the unity of active reception, and these can be isolated only in abstract terms.255

In the case of the first manifestation of inner speech, examples are to be found throughout Tyler’s narrative. The following excerpt incorporates an acknowledged quote from Dr Rahim as well as information that has presumably come from this same source which is presented through Tyler’s paraphrased utterance: ‘Kabul’s soccer stadium had been transformed into a grotesque forum where executions and amputations of limbs were carried out in front of a crowd of spectators. Dr Rahim said Afghans were forced to “watch and learn that dissension brought pain and death”’.256 A similar pattern is repeated in the next excerpt although on this occasion all of the reported speech is fully incorporated into Tyler’s own language: ‘Dr Rahim said diagnostic procedures became a battle of wits and the effectiveness of available drugs a flexible question. The majority of Afghans were deprived of even the most basic health care. He estimated that about half of Afghanistan’s 330 districts were without accessible health centres, although the World Health Organisation listed only

255 ibid
256 Heather Tyler, Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire, Lothian Books, South Melbourne, 2003, p.34.
50.’ These are two of many such examples of Tyler incorporating knowledge attained through previous utterances into her inner speech and then articulating this knowledge through factual commentary of events formerly the subject of her previous dialogic exchanges. What then of the gegenrede? Where is Tyler’s response to the utterances of Dr Rahim to be found? It could be argued that the entire chapter dedicated to Dr Rahim’s story is Tyler’s response. One could extrapolate further and suggest the entire text embodies her response. What is certain is that Bakhtin is correct when asserting the project of separating the authorial commentary from the response is an exercise in abstraction.

In chapter two of *Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire*, Tyler tells the story of Majeed an Iraqi Shi’a Muslim tortured by government officials working for the Intelligence Security Force. Majeed’s story is one of torture, cover ups and forced deceit and ironically, the same techniques used by Majeed to survive his persecution in Iraq saw his application for asylum rejected by Australian authorities. Tyler begins chapter two, ‘Everything but the truth’ with a quote taken from Stanley Cohen’s *States of Denial*: ‘The culture of state terror is neither secret nor openly acknowledged. Information circulates—neighbours witness disappearances or kidnappings, torture victims return to families, newspaper readers know exactly what was censored—but is simultaneously denied.’\(^{257}\) The shocking element of Cohen’s utterance is that every element of its content can be applied to the experience of Majeed:

For each round of torture, Majeed was naked, forced to disrobe in his communal cell and walk the short distance from its fetid confines to a dark room embellished with the instruments of torment. Without his clothes, powerlessness was absolute even before the first calculated blow. No matter what information he had to hide, raw pain and mortal fear was inescapable. The perpetrators were free to do what they wanted. The torture ended when Majeed was considered to be of no further use. While the acts of suffering stopped, they became indelible, etched in physical scars and recycled in nightmares at night. By day a state of denial helped him construct something of a life. Suppression wasn’t difficult for Majeed. In Iraq, truth was dangerous and, for its persecuted citizens, deviation was as natural as breathing.\(^{258}\)

\(^{257}\) *ibid.*, p.48.
\(^{258}\) *ibid*
The grim opening to Majeed’s story foreshadows the harrowing details to follow and also provides the reader with an insight into the problems persecuted refugees face when confronted with the sight of razor wire, ACM guards or even riot police, not to mention immigration officials who demand their stories match, word for word, every time they are asked to recount them.

“I was always tortured naked,” Majeed said of the place where he was brutalized. “They would hang me up by my legs, and then they would take a 7UP bottle and shove it up my anus. They did this many times. We had to joke about this place where they did this to all of us, because it was the only way to stay sane. We are Middle Eastern men—we had to be brave. We called it the Bottle Room. In there they made me eat a lot of watermelon and then blocked the end of my penis. This hurt a lot, you know, it was agony. They beat us until we went unconscious. I used to pray to become unconscious quickly. We were bleeding everywhere—from our eyes, noses, ears—and when we were taken back to the cell, the other detainees cleaned the blood off and helped put our clothes back on.”

According to Tyler, under the duress of torture Majeed told his interrogators everything they wanted to know, ‘although he made up details about his mother, father and five brothers in order to protect them. “I didn’t care what I told them, I just blurted anything out. I wanted to survive and I didn’t understand why they wanted to do these things to me. I was not politically important to them”’. Eventually Majeed was released, ‘he was taken to a highway and thrown out onto the road…Bruised, malnourished and suffering from a broken rib, he wandered in a daze for some hours before he was able to hitch a ride back to Basra.’ Tyler then asks Majeed, “Didn’t anyone ask you what had happened to you?” to which Majeed responded, “I didn’t need to say. People know what is done to many individuals in Iraq and they don’t ask questions. They are afraid to know. I was alive and that was all that mattered.”

It was for this same reason that Majeed never revealed the details of his torture to his family. In Saddam Hussein’s Iraq information was dangerous. Majeed had experienced this first hand and would not place his family at risk by revealing the

259 ibid., p.53.
260 ibid
261 ibid., p.54.
262 ibid
extent of his suffering. In a country such as Australia, which does not subject its citizens to torture, the idea that Majeed could keep the information about his own sufferings to himself seems beyond belief. Yet Tyler has incorporated sources into her narrative which testify to the credibility of Majeed’s assertions. In an email to Tyler, Thomas Cromwell, a journalist with twenty years experience in the Middle East, wrote:

> Your contact is right about hiding the truth. I soon learned in Egypt that many there would say what they thought would be best to say rather than the truth so as to avoid what they perceived as dangers, or just negative reactions. This comes from living in a police state, and all the Middle East countries are police states, regardless of the nominal structure of the regime: monarchy or republic. The fear is that if authorities know too much about an individual’s life, they might use that information to destroy him and/or his family or livelihood.

Majeed’s silence regarding his torture was not, however, solely due to his fear for his family and distrust of authorities: ‘I don’t remember much about the day I was released. I had spent three months trying to forget everything. This torture was very extreme, it hurts the mind as much as the body’. Such a response is understandable considering Majeed’s circumstances. Unfortunately DIMA had no such understanding as Majeed’s application for asylum was rejected. Even more incredible is that DIMA officials failed to recognise these strategies as indicative of someone who had been persecuted.

Having had his application and appeal rejected, Majeed wrote two letters to Mr. Ruddock appealing for intervention on humanitarian grounds—these too were turned down. Additionally, the experience of detention was exacerbating Majeed’s trauma:

> He felt afraid in crowds and found the incessant throngs in detention difficult to deal with. Anything with the sound of metal—such as door bolts sliding or jangling keys, sounds familiar to all detainees—made him jump, and the opening of doors was enough to make him sweat. He could not forget how the door to the cell in his mountain prison grated open when his torturers came to get him for another round in the Bottle Room.

263 *ibid*
264 *ibid.*, p.55.
265 *ibid.*, p.57.
266 *ibid.*, p.60.
Worse was to come for Majeed and the other detainees when on the 11 May 2001 a riot broke out:

It was sparked by ACM’s manhandling of Iranian detainee Morteza and his father, but tension between detainees and complaints over the quality of the food also contributed. Detainees hurled whatever they could find, overturned tables in the dining room, broke windows and battled with officials wearing full riot gear. ‘The next morning at 5a.m., officers in riot gear came to our rooms in the single men’s block, bashing on the walls and doors yelling “Wake up!” We had to kneel with our hands behind our heads, and then they put boots into our backs to make us fall to the floor. We were not allowed to turn our heads left or right. They used batons to poke at our buttocks if we moved. If any of us wanted to go to the toilet we were not allowed to stand upright, but had to bend over with our arms twisted behind us. We were given exactly one minute in the toilet and we were not allowed to close the door. We stayed on the floor from 5a.m. to 11a.m. The police were arresting people over the riot.267

Prior to the riots, Majeed had busied himself by helping other detainees by acting as a negotiator in their dealings with the Department of Immigration and ACM. ‘Detainees said he was kind, unfailingly compassionate and had a keen sense of humour.’268 After the riots, however, Majeed fell into a state of deep depression which was exacerbated by the loneliness of detention: ‘No one got visitors. The social isolation was the cruelest thing of all. You forget social etiquette, which is important in my culture, you forget how to talk with people. I didn’t know any more how to sit around a table and have a cup of coffee with many people talking at once about a variety of subjects.’269

Majeed spent three years in Australia’s detention centres, after which we are not told of his fate. It is a case marked by tragedy and an understandable unwillingness to tell Australian authorities about his torture in Iraq. His silence not only reflected his own context but also the failings of Australia’s immigration system:

I just told immigration lies about why I wanted asylum and the lies got bigger and bigger and it got out of my control. When you come from a country where the truth puts you in peril, you automatically hide it. You say everything but the truth. I didn’t know the mentality of Australian authorities, I wasn’t at all sure I could trust anybody. I wasn’t alone in this. We grew up not being able to trust the governing system. We knew

267 ibid., p.62.
268 ibid., p.61.
269 ibid., p.62.
nothing about Australia, only that it was supposed to be a safe place to come to. Many of us are afraid the things we tell to (the Department of Immigration) might be filtered back to Iraq. The system of detention makes you mistrust people even further, because you are not treated as human. You are treated with the utmost suspicion and adult responsibility is taken away from you. So you are suspicious in return...I want to forget this evil, to deny what happened to me. I told you, but I cannot face telling it over and over again. It brings back the past and creates too much pain. I have nightmares every night still. It never leaves me. I feel like my life is already over and I am in this big hole that I can never climb out of.

As the title of chapter two suggests, Majeed’s experience is one of survival through deceit. Raised in Iraq, Majeed knew only one way to deal with authorities, namely to tell them what they wanted to hear, or, if it was a matter of protecting one’s family, tell them lies and hope they didn’t find out. He, like all Iraqi citizens, was at war with his government. Majeed’s fate is now unknown.

What then becomes of Majeed’s story? In light of his uncertain whereabouts, does not an ethical imperative to tell his story exist? Indeed, given at least 386 asylum seekers have lost their lives in either trying to reach Australia, while in detention or after having their applications rejected\textsuperscript{271} is there not a moral responsibility upon those with this knowledge to tell and retell their stories, not to mention the stories of those who have suffered and survived the traumatic effects of Australia’s mandatory detention system? Given that the suffering experienced by asylum seekers and detainees was and is a result of a system and policies founded upon a matrix of reductive procedures which have actively worked to erase the face of the Other, the need to return truth to the situation is urgent.

In the face of the horrific impact of Nazi Germany Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas stated that ‘Truth is inseparable from its historical expression and without its expression, thought thinks nothing.’\textsuperscript{272} Such sentiments, historically grounded as they are, form yet another premise upon which accusations of fallaciousness can be attached to much of the rhetoric of the Howard government as it pertained to those seeking asylum in Australia. In the light of the stories examined in this dissertation

\textsuperscript{270} ibid., p.64.
\textsuperscript{272} Emmanuel Levinas, Humanism of the Other, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2006, p. 18.
and the thousands of others told elsewhere or those yet to be uttered, reductive terms such as ‘illegals’ fail to tread water. As Levinas says, ‘signification needs all the density of the story’\(^\text{273}\) and without it attempts to signify the Other\(^\text{274}\) are meaningless. Indeed, according to Levinas’ philosophy, the uncontextualised act of signifying says more about the signifier than their object. In other words, the Howard government’s attempts to signify the asylum seekers revealed far more about itself than the reality of those seeking asylum. History has demonstrated that the questionable ethics behind such signifying practices has never stood as an obstacle to those wishing to marginalize the Other: ‘Needs, admirably direct and impatient in their aims, give themselves multiple possibilities of signification solely to be able to choose the unique path to satisfaction. Man confers a unique sense to being by working it, not by celebrating it’.\(^\text{275}\) Arguably, the Howard government felt the need to marginalize asylum seekers in order to maintain its hold on power. It is widely acknowledged that the Labor party’s hopes of winning government in 2001 went down with the hopes of those aboard the Tampa when they were signified as a public enemy.

Levinas’ words stand as a warning to all of those who would represent the Other, even those wishing to provide avenues to the Other for self representation. This is especially the case for those, such as Tyler and indeed the author of this dissertation, adopting the pictorial approach to narrative of which Bakhtin speaks. For whenever a third party is involved in the representational project of the Other, the danger of colonizing the Other all over again re-presents itself. This said, such dangers can be minimized by ensuring that access to the Other being represented is maximized which is something those wanting to marginalize the Other rarely bother about. What this warning does highlight is the importance of the personal encounter with the Other. It is a theme Levinas takes up in his work.

In his text, *Humanism of the Other* Levinas places the spoken word at the heart of relationship and seems to imply that this word, far more than an expression of one’s

---

\(^{273}\) *ibid.*, p.20.

\(^{274}\) Levinas often uses the capitalized ‘Other’ to signify the divine ‘Other’ in his writing while the lower case ‘other’ signifies the human. However, as there are inconsistencies in this regard Levinas’ work, I have elected to continue to use the capitalized ‘Other’ in line with the usage employed by Said and other theorists cited within this dissertation.

\(^{275}\) *ibid.*, p.21.
being, is an ontological signifier of the Other to whom one speaks. Furthermore the spoken word is especially significant when encountered through face to face contact, for it is at this level that the Other conveys him/herself as being most completely:

The Desire for Others that we feel in the most common social experience is fundamental movement, pure transport, absolute orientation, sense. All analysis of language in contemporary philosophy, emphasizes, and rightfully so, its hermeneutic structure and the cultural effort of the embodied being who expresses himself. Hasn’t the third dimension been forgotten? The direction towards the Other who is not only collaborator and neighbor of our cultural work of expression or client of our artistic production, but interlocutor: the one to whom expression expresses, for whom celebration celebrates, he who is both term of an orientation and first signification. In other words, before it is a celebration of being, expression is a relation to the one to whom I express the expression and whose presence is already required so that my cultural gesture of expression can be produced. The Other who faces me is not included in the totality of being that is expressed. He arises behind all collection of being, as the one to whom I express what I express. I find myself facing the Other. He is neither a cultural signification nor a simple given. He is primordially sense, because he lends it to expression itself, because only through him can a phenomenon such as signification introduce itself, of itself, into being.  

The personal encounter possesses great power, for through it we discover a person’s being as everything that has constituted them to that point in time. It is little wonder that the Australian government went to such extraordinary lengths to prevent such encounters. The rarity of such face to face contact facilitated perfectly an environment in which the public could be easily persuaded that asylum seekers posed a serious threat to Australia’s national security. According to JanMohamed, such prohibitions reflect Manichean ideology and functioning.

According to Levinas, ‘The manifestation of face is the first discourse. Speaking is first and foremost this way of coming from behind one’s form. An opening in the opening.’ He goes on to assert that it is through such encounters that the individual finds him/herself infinitely responsible:

276 *ibid.*, p.30.
278 *ibid.*, p.31.
The challenge to self is precisely reception of the absolutely other. The epiphany of the absolutely other is face where the Other hails me and signifies to me by its nakedness, by its destitution, an order. Its presence is this summons to respond. The Ego does not only become conscious of this necessity to respond as if it were a demand or a particular duty it must decide upon. The Ego is through and through, in its very position, responsibility or diacony, as in chapter 53 of Isaiah. To be Me/Ego thenceforth signifies being unable to escape from responsibility, as if the whole edifice of creation stood on my shoulders.279

It is this encounter with face which gives the narratives analysed through this dissertation their potency. In the act of meeting Australia’s detainees and refugees, Julian Burnside and Heather Tyler encountered embodied stories before a word was spoken. In these encounters, given the stories that have emerged from them and the conditions in which they occurred, one suspects the words of Isaiah, taken from the Bible, ring eerily true:

> He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
> Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
> He was despised and rejected by others;  
> A man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
> And as one from whom others hide their faces  
> He was despised and of him we held no account. 280

This country consciously chose to hide its face from those seeking its assistance; we refused the invitation to personal encounter with the face of the refugee Other, and thus absolved ourselves from the infinite responsibility to respond.281 Or so we thought.

In November of 2008, SBS televised ‘A Well Founded Fear’282 which documented the travels of Phil Glendenning, the Director of the Edmund Rice Centre, who journeyed to Afghanistan, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Canada in order to discover the whereabouts of those asylum seekers rejected by Australia. In his own words, Glendenning outlines the purpose of his travels and the program by asserting that the only way to do justice to those asylum seekers rejected by Australia is to say to them ‘we want to know your face and we want to know your name’.283 During the

279 ibid., p.33.  
282 A Well Founded Fear, television program, SBS Corporation, Australia, 19 November 2008, Directed and produced by Anne Delaney.  
283 ibid
following 50 minutes Glendenning introduces his viewers to several of those asylum seekers, who after being told by DIMIA that the fear which drove them to seek asylum in Australia was not well founded, were subsequently sent back to the countries from which they fled. Due to the visual medium used, Glendenning is able to share his face to face encounters with his viewers, and in so doing he shares stories which are contextualized by embodiment.

One of the most powerful of these embodied narratives is conveyed through Glendenning’s encounter with Rajabi Abdul Azim. (pictured below)

Figure 4: Rajabi Abdul Azim

Azim is introduced as a Hazara, a member of the most persecuted minority in Afghanistan. Membership of this group immediately made Azim a target for the Taliban. Adding to his woes was the fact that Azim also gave up his Islamic faith and married outside of his ethnic group. To a fundamental group such as the Taliban such actions warranted the most severe of punishments. In their pursuit of Azim, the Taliban captured and interrogated his father who refused to give up the whereabouts of his son, an act which cost him his life. According to Azim, after being bashed to

---

284 Cases of asylum seekers being sent to Syria by DIMIA on false passports (provided by DIMIA) are also documented in the program. This is despite the fact that these refugees were not from Syria.
such an extent that ‘his entire body was blackened with bruises’\textsuperscript{285} he was dumped at his home and died two days later as a result of his horrific injuries. Azim immediately sent his family into hiding and fled to Australia to seek protection from the authorities. After a period of mandatory detention, The Australian government rejected Azim’s pleas for asylum, claiming that because the Taliban was no longer in power, there was no longer any danger to his life. Azim was offered $2000 to return to Afghanistan and told if he chose to stay he faced indefinite detention as his claim would never be accepted. In the face of such an ultimatum Azim returned to Afghanistan. One night, after returning to his homeland, Azim heard a massive explosion outside his home. His two daughter’s Yalda and Rowna (pictured below) were hit by shrapnel which flew into the house and both lost their lives.

![Figure 5: Azim’s three children](image)

As a detainee on Nauru, Azim was allocated and identified by the number, nr03-0054-02. In contrast, Glendenning’s encounter with Azim revealed a loving father and husband who had needlessly lost two daughters after already losing his own father. In the encounter with Azim, Glendenning found himself ‘infinitely responsible’:\textsuperscript{286} ‘It’s about human beings, it’s about their hearts, it’s about their kids, it’s about their marriages. We couldn’t summon up enough love to do the right

\textsuperscript{285} A Well Founded Fear, television program, SBS Corporation, Australia, 19 November 2008, Directed and produced by Anne Delaney.

\textsuperscript{286} Emmanuel Levinas, Humanism of the Other, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2006, p.33.
thing." The sense of responsibility Glendenning, as not only an Australian citizen but a fellow human being, felt in the face of the Other, was a response the Howard government went to great expense to ‘protect’ the Australian public from. No pathos can be evoked by the number, nr03-0054-02. Yet when confronted with the face of Rajabi Abdul Azim, a face that in an instant conveys years of suffering, grief and loss, one is indeed ‘unable to escape responsibility’. The encounter with the face makes present the interdependency and responsibility that comes with being a member of the human family. In the words of Levinas, ‘signification, the intelligible, is being showing itself in its nonhistorical simplicity, its absolutely irreducible unqualifiable nakedness, existing “before” history and “before” culture.’

Herein lies the potency and importance of narrative. Narrative, as stated previously, defies the permanence of vision brought about by the sort of reductive procedures of exclusion spoken about by Foucault and utilized against Australian asylum seekers. Narrative by its very nature is embodied. It emerges from people of history and simultaneously conveys their humanity which is beyond this same history. It speaks contextually, to the present and into the future. Its potency lies in its demand of a response. In the face of narrative, one is compelled to engage with its complexity, one enters into the shades of grey that characterise every human life. The Manichean allegory, which upholds the arguments of those seeking to marginalize the Other, collapses like a house of cards. The work of narrative is not complete at the conclusion of its first utterance, but lives and finds itself rewritten in each of its recipients. Whether it be through the dialogic theories of Bakhtin or Levinas’ philosophical approach, we are reminded that narrative is a constantly evolving and interdependent phenomenon. Its evolution occurs within the liminal space at the fringes of each discursive act; the space between the utterance’s origin, the utterance itself, and its destination. Furthermore, since every utterance emerges from a socio-historical context, each is politically charged, reflecting its source and destination and manifesting its speech will through its accent. This desire, innate to all narrative, gives it its potency and, as history testifies, makes it the primary object of censorship from those whose power it most threatens.

287 A Well Founded Fear, television program, SBS Corporation, Australia, 19 November 2008, Directed and produced by Anne Delaney.
289 ibid., p.38.