

THE LUMINARIES: A D—NED FINE TALE, BUT OF WHAT?

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Abstract

The Luminaries (2013), Eleanor Catton's novel of nineteenth-century New Zealand, has won wide international acclaim, including the Man Booker Prize. Yet many readers find the work exasperating to read—a “nightmare,” to use a term Catton herself suggests. In large measure, this response emerges from Catton's use of heavy structuring devices, particularly astrology and mathematics, that pertain to the time period of her fiction. These frameworks tend to make totalizing claims, often through causal or linear progression, and to support modernist and realistic protocols of reading. As this essay demonstrates, Catton undercuts those claims, and frustrates such readings, by emphasizing multiple paths of comprehension and multiple voices of narration. *The Luminaries* embraces its multiple structural mechanisms, but is not dominated by any of them.

Keywords: New Zealand; Historical Fiction; Australasia/Southern Hemisphere Theory; Commodity Circulation; Postmodern Structure

The characteristics that make *The Luminaries* (2013) such a good book are the same things that frustrate or annoy many readers. Certainly, the accolades came quickly. *The Luminaries*, Eleanor Catton's second novel, brought her the Man Booker Prize at age twenty-eight. It won the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction in Canada, where she was born, and it brought her wide acclaim in New Zealand, where she lives, including an honorary doctorate from Victoria University of Wellington. As Nicholas Birns says, *The Luminaries* “carried all before it, making news in a way that no book from the antipodes had since Peter Carey's early days” (221). Catton is frequently matched with Carey, a writer of similarly difficult, antipodean metafiction—but also seventeen years older than Catton when he first won the Booker Prize. Critical recognition and public acclaim, however, do not settle the matter of what makes *The Luminaries* good, but rather highlight the fragile and tenuous success of its historical narration: its establishment of, and apparent reliance

upon, nineteenth-century structures of understanding that almost succeed at totalizing vision, but fall just short of certainty. That is, *The Luminaries* succeeds through its manipulation of paradox, its calculated and incremental failure. The novel is framed by a heavy armature of astrology that suggests visible intrusion and thorough predetermination, but actually encloses free-floating demonstrations of randomness and confusion that the structure cannot resolve. Moreover, several systems of meaning—symbolism, allegory, irony, scientific method, legal process—contend for the power to identify and control both the characters' perception and the readers' apprehension. Numerous codes of language, not only authorial references to nineteenth-century literary convention but also shifting awareness among the characters of their own diction, similarly complicate internal and external desires for critical certainty—as do untranslated passages in Maori and Cantonese. Any of these structures, modes, and voices might produce a solid, tight novel, and in *The*

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Luminaries each of them loudly claims precedence, totality, and duration, and each comes teasingly close to comprehensive explanation before it ultimately fails. As a result, all of these elements overlap, with none gaining domination and many speaking at the same time, thus revealing their contentious and inefficient mutual dependence. What is good about *The Luminaries*, then, comes from its steady management of ongoing conflict: it highlights irreducible uncertainty within systems that loudly proclaim their totality.

In her acceptance speech for the Man Booker Prize, Catton called *The Luminaries* “a publisher’s nightmare.” She referred to matters of production, as we will see, but many reviewers quickly pounced on that phrase, so that the difficulty of categorizing the book quickly became a measure of readers’ frustration. The *New York Times* reviewer Janet Maslin, for example, found that “by and large, it’s a critic’s nightmare. Consider the reviewing efforts of those seeking to explain, recommend and applaud this book: raving abounds, but so do clutches at thin air.” Catton’s style, she says, is “verbosely Victorian,” full of “endless reiteration and precious little amplification”; the dualities of theme, as she calls them, are left unresolved. For Maslin, the cardinal sin of *The Luminaries* seems to be that it is not *Wolf Hall*, the Booker awardee for 2009: Hilary Mantel’s magnificent novel is just as long, just as dense as Catton’s, but is notably more linear in its plotting and more direct in its characterization of Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, Anne Boleyn, and other familiar figures.¹ The complexities of *Wolf Hall* can be followed in expected ways, with clear resolutions (and we already know the plot, after all). Usefully, then, Maslin’s nightmarish encounter with *The Luminaries* suggests a greater appreciation to be found in a less hurried, less conventional reading, one that in fact can accommodate its nightmare—not by waking up and straightening it out, but by directing its uncanny recognitions toward a better appreciation of the grand conversations that underlie the book in all its difficulty.

Maslin’s discomfort with modal shift and irresolution in *The Luminaries* points to a larger characteristic of Catton’s work and a greater contrast with *Wolf Hall*. Working with narrow deadlines,

reviewers need to categorize their subjects quickly, and may fall back upon a generalization that historical fiction is most authentic when it reproduces conventions of historiography: thus, many discussions of *The Luminaries* echo Kirsty Gunn’s conclusion in the *Guardian* that the work is “a massive shaggy dog story; a great empty bag; an enormous, wicked, gleeful cheat.” The New Zealand writer C. K. Stead complains in the *Financial Times* “that it doesn’t allow me to forget, even for a moment, that *this is fiction*—the novel as game.” High levels of manipulation and prominent narrative intrusion are nothing unfamiliar in the contemporary novel—Stead also compares Catton to Carey, disdaining both—but the reader’s exasperation may be increased by Catton’s use of nineteenth-century narrative styles and vocabularies that are generally associated with fictional realism. Stead, a champion of modernism, finds this anachronism not only retrograde but politically revanchist: “The history of fiction in the 20th century was a struggle, never entirely successful, to escape this kind of writing. . . . It is, you might say, Virginia Woolf’s nightmare of how many steps back a woman might take the form if given her head and a room of her own.”²

In effect, however, *The Luminaries* employs realistic styles that originally projected transparency, and offers narrative intrusions that formerly suggested common values held by reader and author alike (using the euphemistic “d—ned” for example), in order to produce the opposite effects: these strategies in fact distance the reader from the characters’ consciousness and suggest continually that much is hidden. Certainly, a game is afoot, but we do not know what game it is. In fact, there may be several games afoot, since Catton’s nineteenth-century voice has many registers; particularly in dialogue and internalized description, characters’ vocabularies and thought-patterns shift suddenly and widely, and some of these seem so stilted, so theatrical or sermonic, that the reader, feeling put-upon already, may forget that such phrasing once facilitated the attempts of real people to express themselves in honest and revealing ways. Thus Catton seems to invite the reviewers’ consternation, anticipating Gunn’s worry that, however brilliantly presented, “nothing in this enormous book, with its exotic and varied cast of characters whose lives all affect

each other and whose fates are intricately entwined, amounts to anything like the moral and emotional weight one would expect of it.” Catton seems fully conscious that her stylistic complexity may obscure the “moral and emotional weight” of her narrative—which is considerable, as we will see. Taking that risk, however, is a calculated tactic, part of a design to undermine assumptions of certainty and totality, the comforting resolutions that “one would expect.”

While allegations of the reader’s or critic’s nightmare measure Catton’s relationship with her audience, the actual phrase from her Man Booker acceptance speech identifies the structural riskiness of the novel’s production, its very existence as an artifact. “From the beginning, a publisher’s nightmare,” Catton says of *The Luminaries*, a phrase that points to complex technical matters, rather than to the reader’s discomfort: “the shape and form of the book,” she says, “made certain kinds of editorial suggestions not only mathematically impossible, but even more egregious, astrologically impossible.” She refers here to meta-structures of mathematics and astrology which are so precisely applied and foregrounded to the extent that the physical text of *The Luminaries*, the book we hold in hand, demands continual attention. Mathematically, the twelve chapter divisions function as an exponential regression: each chapter is half the length of the one before, so that the source of Stead’s unavoidable awareness, then, “that *this is fiction*” can be charted in a virtually Cartesian sense.

To work this gambit in an 830-page novel, the range of numbers must be huge. Catton’s first chapter is 360 pages long, which is outrageous, and the final chapter is two, which is equally outrageous. We might not remain mindful, early on, that there are divisions at all, since the first chapter is longer than many entire novels; by the end, we may be pressured by the opposite, as the mechanisms of chapter division intrude upon content. Separately from the reader’s perceived nightmare, this mathematical pattern induces Catton’s production nightmare: a book that cannot be edited by shifting material from one chapter to another, by dropping a paragraph or adding a page, deleting a line or anything else that would alter the typeset page count. At the least,

the strategy highlights *The Luminaries* as a physical book and not an electronic file: as with Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) and Tom Phillips’s *A Humument* (1987), *The Luminaries* shows great concern for *mise-en-page*, spread, and layout in producing the experience of an object in hand. More than that, it marks the turn that Stead locates accurately (but decries), a shift from modernist pretenses of transparency and narrative detachment, toward postmodernist engagement with a world where multiple narratives are always under construction and obvious interventions demand continuing critical interpretation. As N. Katherine Hayles says of these self-consciously physical artifacts, their “focusing on materiality allows us to see the dynamic interactivity through which a literary work mobilizes its physical embodiment in conjunction with its verbal signifiers to construct meanings in ways that implicitly construct the user/reader as well” (130-31). We watch ourselves turn the pages while our bookmark bravely soldiers on.

As Catton describes the progress of her composition, the early desire “to write an adventure mystery of some kind” coincided with a self-challenge to describe a specific setting:

I wanted to know whether I was up to the challenge of writing a story firmly located in time and space. The west coast gold rush of the middle 1860s presented itself quite naturally: the west coast is a part of New Zealand I know fairly well, and a gold rush seemed a fine theatre in which to play out an adventure story. (“How She Wrote”)

These two determinants appear as writerly challenges to herself to produce a certain type of story in a particular kind of location—an adventure in a specific setting. With this commitment in mind, the next steps seem straightforward: “I started reading, beginning with gold-rush history, which led me to the nature of wealth, which led me to confidence tricks and scams, which led me to fortune telling, which led me to the stars.” Longest to shortest, each of the twelve chapters focuses on a single day, ranging over a year, although the sections are not presented in chronological order:

the earliest date, 27 April 1865, appears in the heading of Part IV, beginning on page 625. The title page of each chapter displays an astrological chart, locating dominant influences on that date, adjusted for the location of the gold rush town of Hokitika, a real place on the west coast of the South Island of New Zealand. Each zodiac division is additionally labeled with the name of a character; for example, the opening page of Part I, dated 27 January 1866, shows the Sun and Venus in Capricorn, the Moon in Taurus, and Mercury, Mars, and Saturn in Sagittarius. These coordinates are respectively ascribed to the characters Gascoigne, Frost, and Balfour, and constitute our introduction to them. The charts that head the eleven chapters to follow describe similar influences in different houses, presumably coordinating traits of other characters named in those segments.

Catton's explanation of her writing process nicely emphasizes the steady hard work of the professional writer, and alludes to some of the serendipitous leaps that can occur when the basis of research is so solid:

I found a programme online that could track the movement of the planets through the constellations of the zodiac. I typed in the co-ordinates of the Hokitika gold fields, dialled the clock back to 1864, when gold was first discovered in the region, and began to watch the skies revolve. Over the next four years (of gold-fields time), I tracked the movements of the seven bodies visible to the naked eye over Hokitika's skies, wondering how I could turn the archetypes of the zodiac into human characters and a sequence of horoscopes into a story. ("How She Wrote")

At the same time, Catton quietly evades the question of content implied by the structure: as readers in the twenty-first century, are we expected to take astrology seriously?³ That is to say, the mathematical and astrological frameworks may be brilliant, but do they have value beyond Catton's gymnastic performance on them? Certainly, this is a towering risk for an author to take. Stead, for one, is annoyed enough to dismiss Catton's effort in a single acid line: "there is also an astrological structure that I have allowed myself to pass

over." Even if we suspend such judgments, noting and appreciating Catton's narrative structures, we may say "so far, so good," but even so we have to ask "so far, so what?"

Overdetermined, totalizing structures can offer impressive mechanisms for interpretation and classroom presentation, because they allow us to locate consistent meaning in a particular passage and to coordinate its contexts and references. In exchange, these frameworks demand hard concessions: we must agree to view them as static and unchanging, and accept that they can deliver on their claims to provide sufficient meaning. This submission makes general interpretation easier, and a busy newspaper reviewer such as Janet Maslen would like those claims to work. Maslen's clear preference is that each of the twelve characters assigned to a zodiac figure should remain "stereotypical to an astrological sign." Indeed, Catton pays strict attention to the system, so that, as Julian Novitz says, "each of the major characters is aligned with an astronomical concept, either the signs of the Zodiac (Stellar) or one of the seven heavenly bodies known to the ancients (Planetary); all are set in symmetry with the Earth (Terra Firma)." A character chart at the front of the volume clarifies these relationships. However, Catton had already anticipated and resisted conventional assignment of characteristics by the time she began "wondering how I could turn the archetypes of the zodiac into human characters." The astrological locations suggest that we ought to be able to predict the characters' behavior, thus reinforcing the conventional reader's expectation of consistent development and resolution—even while the localized narrative highlights the converse, the problematic nature of anticipation.

Interpretive systems approach totality by reducing the number of variables they consider, and by suppressing or discrediting the possibilities of uncertainty within their asserted patterns; totalizing, then, is generally self-proclaimed within the system itself, revealing perhaps a wish for comprehensive order rather than a proof of its existence. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for instance, may be the most heavily overdetermined narration we have, but, in the fourth canto of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice describes how tenuous the claims of structural totality

can be. As Dante's advocate in heaven, she apprehends the actual cosmic plan and explains that what Dante observes—that is, the universally admired structure of his massive poem—has been reduced to the limitations of human understanding. *Così parlar*, she says, it is necessary to speak this way:

Such signs are suited to your mind, since from the senses only can it apprehend what then becomes fit for the intellect. And this is why the Bible condescends to human powers, assigning feet and hands to God, but meaning something else instead.

Beatrice asserts that there is a cosmic reality, but kindly suggests that its manifestation in the sublunary realm can only be a series of constructed images. In the modern world, where faith is only one mode of understanding, such a system—should it exist at all—would involve such complexity that its many factors would appear on earth as infinite variables, and a sequence of events within it would seem so very close to randomness that the guiding hand would remain invisible. Beatrice does well here to remind us that heavy structuring works better if we accept it as a reader's nightmare, a hermeneutic crisis of cosmic proportions: the great figures do not function as containment vessels, holding all meaning, but rather as sculptural armatures, supporting the observer more than the material. Dante's allegory, in this sense, apprehends structure, but does not mistake structure for truth itself; *The Luminaries*, likewise, does not propose a central enclosure, some nineteenth-century crystal palace railway station where trains of thought predictably arrive and depart. Instead, Catton suggests an Eiffel Tower, a framework for elevated observation, whose obvious hollowness is one of its strongest features.

By merely invoking totalized structures in the twenty-first century, Catton tempts us to respond conventionally, to see the work as a satire that allows us to find more coherence than the characters can, as it emphasizes their myopia and misunderstanding. We sense that we have in hand a controlled, redacted work of authorship, whose closure implies an orderly larger world. The narrator's first-person plural likewise suggests

that we participate in that order, but the fellowship is misleading: we are, in fact, rarely better off than the characters who notably stumble and grope through *The Luminaries*. Peter Carey's historical settings in *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *Jack Maggs* (1998) do much the same, raising expectations of nineteenth-century formal completion and then stopping just short: thus, the structures' claims, that they provide solid footings for interpretation, turn into their precise opposites, points of instability and uncertainty. However, while systems of astrology and mathematics are denied the very totality they are set up to assert, they are not completely discredited; when reduced to functionality, they become actually useful.

Taken on its own, the decreasing algorithm of chapter lengths may seem like a narrative parlor trick, but in conjunction with other tropes it reminds us powerfully that pace and duration affect the flow and coherence of information. Likewise, the framework of astrology turns out not to determine events that are inevitable, but instead describes behavioral tendencies that are irreducible: birth in the house of Aries may or may not specify a personality dominated by ego and physical activity, or birth in Taurus induce materialism, or in Aquarius, friendship, but the system works as well as others to remind us that such traits are always around, parts of a volatile psychological mix that we simplify at our peril. Better yet, when freed from the expectation of totality, partial or tentative systems may offer useful terms for collating and evaluating information. Incompletion can be a virtue in itself, opening vistas of other patterns, so that meaning can emerge through accumulation and exchange, rather than by imposition: at any point in *The Luminaries*, three or four such systems of meaning may be at work, lowering the certainty of any particular path of interpretation but conversing usefully with others (Scheckter 237).

Catton sets in motion the interplay of claimed certainty and functional uncertainty by locating the story at Hokitika, on the west coast of the South Island of New Zealand. We may think we know where that is. The location, to be sure, has coordinates of longitude and latitude, its time and tides are recorded in known

scales, and its harbor, as Catton shows, connects the colony (in several stages) with Australia, China, and England. Thus, Hokitika, with the Blue Ensign aloft on its civic flagpole, is situated on a familiar globe of continuous information.⁴ Catton invites this global positioning by echoing the universal advice to young writers, to write what they know, as she reminds us that “the west coast is a part of New Zealand I know fairly well.” At the same time, however, she enforces distance: for the vast majority of Catton’s readers, the west coast of the South Island is remote and difficult to visit, a topography of the imagination like Peter Jackson’s New Zealand setting of Tolkien’s Middle Earth. Accomplished readers know how to draw it outward, to coordinate Catton’s Hokitika with more familiar extrapolations of landscape, but the astrological system also draws powerfully inward, toward specific acts of location that demand close attention.

The sensitivity of astrological charts is dependent upon exact location, and the computer application Catton used in citing archetypal traits of personality also required her to enter the exact global coordinates for Hokitika, latitude 43° South and longitude 171° East.⁵ The more literally these figures are followed, however, the more they undermine their claims to direct representation: “of course, the entire scheme is built around the Northern Hemisphere sky and seasons; by setting the novel in New Zealand, Catton critiques and redeploys these norms. The stars are not the same everywhere” (Birns 233). Further, the characters’ horoscopes are determined both by where they were born and by where they find themselves. The assignment of traits within charts cast for Hokitika always acknowledges multiple points of origin. All of the characters are displaced from their birthplaces, and many acknowledge an antipodean estrangement, so that their charts must reflect multiple polarities. In addition, the Chinese and Maori characters, who are well developed beyond stereotype, would have their own horoscopes, determined within systems of celestial observation far removed from the European. Thus, Hokitika functions less as a set of coordinates knowable within fixed global or astral systems, and more as a dynamic nexus of everything that has arrived

from a wide variety of origins—like the Tabard Inn for Chaucer or the *Pequod* for Melville.

Birns’s reference to Northern skies offers a key to the function of systems throughout *The Luminaries*. As Raewyn Connell describes their spread to the Southern Hemisphere, European social orders and theories of social order were propounded throughout the imperial world as signal embodiments and defining principles of modern civilization: “models constructed on that lie, such as ... modernisation theory and neoclassical economics, were then exported to the rest of the world with all the authority of the most advanced knowledge, and all the weight of First World wealth and power” (x). Fundamental to this globalization of Euro-specific understanding is the local acceptance of “a metropolitan vision of what society was and how we should talk about it. ‘Australian society’ was simply presumed to be *the same kind of thing*, for which the same conceptual categories were unproblematically appropriate” (82: emphasis in original). Obviously, the success of colonizing power on all scales from global to local depends upon the imposition of standard and standardizing terms, together with the denial or suppression of potentially competing vocabularies; local acceptance is predicated upon a perception that other models are less rewarding, both socially and personally. In this way, conceptual frameworks and practical methodologies—say, for Hokitika, laws of economics and rules of banking—benefit from mutual reinforcement. The flaw in this hegemony, as Connell sees it, emerges from the very success of its spread: far from their Northern origins, where perhaps they make better sense, systems imported to Southern lands are asked to do too much. Using the same “metropolitan methods and topics” both to report back to the imperial center and “to address a local audience about local versions of social problems” (81) introduces dissonance and uncertainty in all directions. Gaps appear, and in those gaps particular, site-responsive explanations emerge. These alternatives appear in local forms that more readily accept those destabilizing elements and find in them both material and expression—a type of narration that “recuperates the vitality of the novel as a genre by recovering, *through the processes of remediation*

themselves, subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration that remains the hallmark of the print novel” (Hayles 112: emphasis in original). Thus, *The Luminaries* both instantiates and demolishes principles of organization that would dominate the narration, if only they could.

From the beginning, Catton’s setting demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining standardization in all registers. On the global scale, Hokitika has an established position in coastal and long-distance shipping routes, a location that supports values of regulation and ascertainment. On the local level, however, every ship approaching or leaving Hokitika must cross a dangerous bar at the mouth of its harbor, so that uncertainty and high risk must be acknowledged as constant factors of movement. Thus, the arrival of Walter Moody, our first viewpoint character, shows how the trait of Reason, assigned to his Planetary nature by Catton’s prefatory chart, may be easily unseated:

He had known the voyage to West Canterbury would be fatal at worst, an endless rolling trough of white water and spume that ended on the shattered graveyard of the Hokitika bar, but he had not been prepared for the particular horrors of the journey, of which he was still incapable of speaking, even to himself. (4)

We do not yet know the “particular horrors” of Moody’s voyage, but the general ones offered by local topography are sufficient to direct our attention to influences of chance and unreason. The interplay of small and large scales fluctuates widely in that opening scene, when Moody, newly arrived and still shaking, enters a tavern on a dark and stormy night. Such an establishment can be found anywhere; Robert Louis Stevenson’s pirates, Thomas Hardy’s farmers, and Joseph Conrad’s self-exiles would all be at home there. In this immediate place, however, Moody appears to intrude on a strange *tableau vivant*, where twelve gathered characters pretend to act naturally despite their obvious anxiety. In something resembling orderly form, the narrator introduces each of them in terms of their zodiac traits, but each portrait also comments on the character’s particular self-doubt: thus, from

the start, uncertainty pressurizes our confidence in narrative stability and internal coherence. Local efforts at consistent sense-making appear to be wishful or performative, rather than to reflect larger patterns of order. At the end of the very long first chapter, chaos intrudes mightily, when the ship on which Moody has arrived slips its mooring within the comparative safety of the harbor. A servant assigned to keep watch outside the tavern dashes in, breathless:

“It’s the *Godspeed*,” the boy managed.
All of a sudden the room was very still.
“The *Godspeed*?” Mannering barked, his eyes bulging. “What about it? Talk, you idiot!”
“The nav lights on the spit,” the boy said. “They went out—in the wind, and—the tide—”
“What *happened*?”
“*Godspeed*’s run aground,” the boy said.
“Foundered on the bar—she rolled, not ten minutes ago.” He drew a raggedy breath.
“Her mainmast cracked—and then she rolled again—and then the surf came through the hatches and pulled her down. She’s a goner, sir. She’s a goner. She’s wrecked.” (360)

So far, the characters have revealed their positions in the tableau, their backgrounds and relationships, and their talk has initiated numerous lines of plot and subplot. Catton has suggested that the 500 pages to follow might be quite complicated, but might also develop in the familiar and gratifying manner of her nineteenth-century sources. This will not happen. So much of this exposition intersects with the *Godspeed* that the comforts of assumed direction and development—the safe channels marked by navigation lights—“all of a sudden” go dark.

Hokitika’s reason for being is gold, which is why the characters are willing to take such risks to get there. Birns calls it “an improvised town, a community generated at short notice and with little advance planning. It is a kind of dress rehearsal, or a performance with a great deal of spontaneity” (225-26). An ugly scar on the edge of wilderness, it resembles every other mining, lumber, or cattle town that grew too quickly, including an early settlement described by Daphne Marlatt in *Ana Historic* (1988):

legible, easily read: the rawness of new wood, the brashness of cleared land, of hastily built houses, outhouses, leantos. And beyond them, the endless green of woods, a green so green it outgreened itself, hill after hill. When she turned she could see the mountains behind her hanging close, close and yet aloof. Beautiful, she thought, or perilous. But not pretty. (15-16).

Hokitika is easily read in its infancy, but like Marlatt's Vancouver, Canada, it also exists in visions of its potential future—an Empire town of more substantial establishment, yet representative, too. Already, the Reserve Bank branch and miners' hotels have opened, prostitutes and a newspaper have appeared, a prison is under construction, and the Chinese have been excluded. So far, it fits our expectations of nineteenth-century order. Yet the focal purpose of Hokitika, the convergence of the categories and specific location of the astrological framework, is blurred by the nature of the gold discovered there. In the many functions and circulations that attempt to situate its value, gold itself produces an alternate structure to the fixed determinations offered by astrology and algorithms.

One extended plot arc of *The Luminaries* concerns a fortune in gold worth £4000. Conservatively, that amount would send the possessor back to England, Europe, or China with a decent establishment, but none of the characters even mentions that possibility. Despite the lure of greater status, they decline reentry into the global economy whose margins they have sought: they reject, that is, re-placement in the more rigid social structures of Home, in favor of the unhoused rawness and thrill of the new place. On the gold frontier, the power of that £4000, and all the other gold found and unfound, instigates strange behavior, including tax evasion and theft many times over, blackmail, drug addiction, gunplay, and declarations of love. The metal itself is melted and re-poured numerous times, which deprives it of concrete presence—makes it inadmissible as legal evidence, for example, in an important turn of plot. As a fungible commodity, it is without distinction; once gold enters the global circulation of capital, the “placeless universal market” (Connell 208), it loses any sign of an origin in Hokitika or Ballarat or Dawson City.

New Zealand, Victoria, or Alaska—any gold is like all gold, with its value determined by arbitrary and abstract consensus, and without linkage to other scales of social or moral value. If astrology suggests the enactment of prior determinations, gold, by taking the shape of whatever molds it, permits ongoing personal and communal development in a plastic, unfixed environment. The circulation of gold moves in exactly the opposite direction from astrology; leaving Hokitika, the characters would lose whatever individuality they had acquired there through risk and effort. In the Southern setting of *The Luminaries*, further, going Home might not seem so necessary, or attractive. Local identities do indicate social and moral values, and so are desirably linked to gold by a different sense of its value, its immediate purchasing power, or ability to transmute into other objects and actions. Thus, the suggestion by Chris Bohjalian, the *Washington Post* reviewer, that “the key to following the story is to try to follow the money,” is correct, as it always is. However, the recognition that several scales of signification, global to local, may operate at any particular time, and that on local levels each character sees the money in a different way, fractures the notion of “the story” into multiple directions of action and pathways of desire. Some characters want security, some want release, some want information; on the ground in Hokitika, their money variously buys bread, clothing, building materials, time with prostitutes, political favors, and judicial verdicts. Multiple systems of analysis and evaluation sometimes reinforce common values, but more often jam one another and produce a strange uncertainty that directly refutes claims of totality. The result is a visceral feeling that the characters are in the grip of massive and competing forces not only outside their control but beyond their comprehension—and ours as well. Whatever advantage we readers might claim by knowing about the larger structures of narration eventually turns to disquiet, because the values of ironic detachment are no more reliable than anything the characters believe.

If the simultaneous operation of multiple systems in *The Luminaries* discredits attempts at totalization, temporal structures prove to be destabilizing as well.

Prolepsis, beloved of modernism, is nearly useless here, since the underlying circumstances of any particular effect are so numerous and contingent that an effort to attribute causality ends up looking like another literary card trick. The resolution of plot issues, especially involving mysteries such as the whereabouts of that £4000, seems boringly literal. Catton, in fact, gives up the chase in several key places: some leads go cold, some causes of death are never determined. More to the point, the desire of some characters to envision a sense-making linear chronology proves self-defeating, because cause-and-effect requires a reductionist loyalty to a particular version of the past. Characters who heavily draw identity from family history, for example, succumb to a special nightmare, because ancestral pride does not necessarily produce social value on the gold frontier. One of those is Walter Moody, whose journey to New Zealand is motivated by his father's abandonment of his mother, a disgrace to his sense of gentility that he feels must be redressed—and never is. The actual result is that Moody is so disturbed by his late-blooming recognition of social hypocrisy that that he misconstrues many of the relationships around him in Hokitika. Likewise, Sook Yongsheng's attempt to avenge his father's dishonor turns self-destructive, because only white people are allowed to speak about such things in Hokitika, and it is harder to listen to a troublesome Chinaman, or recognize his legal rights, than it is simply to shoot him. The reclusive Crosbie Wells tells the most heartbreaking story in *The Luminaries* in a series of fourteen letters written to his half-brother, the prominent regional politician Alasdair Lauderback. Quoted in full, italicized as if they are real inserted documents, the letters describe the pathetic life of a castaway Victorian child, illegitimate and unwanted. Lauderback goes so far as to preserve the letters, but Wells's words match nothing of value in his *quid pro quo* world. The letters offer no blackmail threat or demand for patronage, only a plea for recognition and the hope that Lauderback will buy him the cheapest passage back to England.

Sir six months have passed since I first wrote & I fear by your silence that I have offended you.

I cannot recall my phrasing but I do recall that in my last address I styled myself your brother & perhaps that caused you grief. [...] I assure you that as a whoreson I am not unaccustomed to the beggar's life but to beg a man a second time is shame indeed. Nonetheless I write in desperation. You are a man of means the cost of a third-class ticket is all I ask & thenceforth you needn't hear of me again. (471)

Walter Moody discovers the letters in a wrongly delivered trunk, and we read them over his shoulder, but Moody does nothing with them. By the time Lauderback finally visits the isolated cabin of Crosbie Wells, he discovers him already dead; Birns says Lauderback's regret then "provides, if not the actuality or the sentimentality of reconciliation, at least a conceptual affirmation of such" (231), but the gesture is late and there is, in fact, nothing to be done. No one can be helped or harmed by the information the letters reveal, and they have no effect whatever. The poor man's pain only deepens our sense of the past, and highlights the personal histories that the characters have brought to Hokitika—astrological in predisposition, perhaps, but influenced even more by their social and economic situations in the present.

Those who wear their histories more lightly, it would seem, are better off. The antipodean isolation of Hokitika offers the opportunity for the new arrivals in *The Luminaries* to construct new identities. Even more, they may set aside the Northern preference for categories based on birthplace and affiliation, with "its tendency to reify such mobile distinctions into hard-edged groups—the bands, hordes, clans, moieties, totemic descent groups and so forth" (Connell 200).⁶ Erasure and new opportunity have limits, to be sure, as full detachment from a nasty past reduces the present to another nightmare, a world of unanticipated, free-floating menace. The sweet prostitute, Anna Wetherill, and her goofy lover, Emery Staines, are rendered nearly defenseless by their inability to comprehend intent; these two have difficulty even with basic registers of suspicion and self-preservation. They rely upon the openness of the settlement to make their identities, but their vaudeville-quality fecklessness emphasizes that some level of self-awareness, and some extension of context beyond immediate experience, would be

more beneficial. On the same hand, the more successful characters are able to remake themselves that way, using the past lightly, and allowing them to negotiate social and moral orientations that neither debilitate them through memory nor leave them defenseless. This group includes survivors of historical trauma: the newspaperman Benjamin Löwenthal, whose family in Germany was murdered for being Jewish, and the stone-carver Te Rau Tauwhare, who has suffered the loss of Maori sovereignty, culture, and land (and was Crosbie Wells's only true friend). Their survival of broad, cultural violence produces and supports exacting, precise awareness of the present. In a conversation between the Maori and the Chinese miner Sook Yongsheng, for instance, new identities that permit articulation—that bring together such a pair in any event—speak directly through a recognized basis of dislocation, not in spite of it:

(Tauwhare spoke slowly, and with much gesticulation; he was evidently well used to communicating with his hands and his expressions, and paused after every clause to make sure he was accurately understood. Ah Sook found that he could understand his meaning very clearly, though English was neither man's native tongue. He whispered the names to himself: Arahura Valley, Te Rau Tauwhare, Crosbie Wells.) (265)

To what end, though, should the remaking of the self be directed? Can new identity lead to systematic understanding? Can it overcome loss? Can it prevent nightmares?

Systems of material arrangement, temporal progression, and social exchange in *The Luminaries* reveal uncertainty too quickly to be usefully sustained. Uncertainty itself, however, once it is admitted as an influential factor in all forms of understanding, may help organize information. Speaking of the sharpest incident of violence in the book, his cold-blooded shooting of Ah Sook, the blustering constable George Shepard links the killing to the death of his brother, and too quickly draws a line under both events: "What's done is done." His listener, the minister Cowell Devlin, responds with surprising power that the past is not closed at all:

"Some things are never done," said the chaplain. "We do not forget those whom we have loved. We cannot forget them."

Shepard glanced at him. "You speak as though from experience."

Devlin did not answer at once. After a pause he said, "If I have learned one thing from experience, it is this: never underestimate how extraordinarily difficult it is to understand a situation from another person's point of view" (622).

If we take this seriously, if we see Devlin less as a Gemini with Venus in his house than as a complex figure who plumbs the depths of self-doubt and social anxiety in order to produce an ethical present, we may find that information, like gold, is a fungible commodity. Information in *The Luminaries* means little until it is brought into present effect, and veracity in an absolute sense is often less functional than consensual values that are negotiated and then performed as if true. Catton's first novel, *The Rehearsal* (2008), likewise revolves around issues of social and artistic performance—of fraught adolescence, of friendship, of sexuality that is never as assured as it would like. Settings of high school counseling, private music lessons, and drama school exercises are described in passages that first appear to be exposition and dialogue but emerge as scenes characterized by subjectivity and role playing; characters' fantasies intersect with real actions, and both modes of performance have powerful effects upon self-conception. As one drama teacher says, however cynically,

"'real' is a useless word. 'Real' describes nothing onstage. The stage only cares if something *looks* real. If it *looks* real, then whether it is real or not is immaterial. It doesn't matter." (129)

In that sense, the frontier settlement of Hokitika functions like a stage setting—isolated, flimsy, heterotopic—and the characters' performances within unstable structures matter more than their confirmation inside lasting systems.

The focus on ethical performance answers the opening question: this is what makes *The Luminaries*

such a good book. Late in the novel, long after satire has given way to empathy, backstories of coincidence and desire are performed in tragic mode. As we have seen, we learn the truth about important plot elements too late for it to matter, and for the most part we can only watch events already unfolded, consequences already determined. The twelfth section, the last and shortest, is also the quietest and most intimate of stagings; chronologically, it refers to a very early moment, with Anna and Emery in bed, in love, the only two people in Hokitika who actually listen to each other. Their dialogue is unattributed: love has brought them that extraordinarily difficult understanding of another person. One says, “I feel—more than myself,” and the other says, “I feel—as though a new chamber of my heart has opened” (830). In the cold logic of linear time, these two have no idea how roughly the world will treat them in only a few hours. But here, in the sprung chronology of *The Luminaries*, in the smallest compass of performance, Catton offers the great generosity of redemption: the present moment. Surely, this is what Beatrice meant by giving feet and hands to God, as the characters search for words to tell one another of the vastness of being and the depth of love.

Notes

1. Novitz’s review-essay similarly compares *Wolf Hall* and *The Luminaries*, in more detail.
2. Birns (231-32) discusses Stead’s modernist insistence in some detail.
3. Countervailing the anachronistic nineteenth-century diction, the computer-assisted design confirms *The Luminaries* as a twenty-first century artifact. The mathematical pattern of chapter length could be determined with pencil and paper—beginning at the end, shortest chapter, and merely doubling the page-count forward—but fitting the text into the determined space requires layout programming during composition, well in advance of the publisher’s typesetting phase. The astrological generator Catton describes is a more complex application; it not only performs functions that would be depressingly time-consuming if performed by hand, but it also can be easily calibrated for the exact dates and global positions of the story.
4. The Blue Ensign of the Royal Navy flew over imperial outposts at the time of the fiction; when colonial

insignia were placed in the blue field over the next few years, the results were known as “defaced ensigns.” Eventually, some of these became national flags—and matters of ongoing controversy. In Australia, alternatives to the defaced ensign are frequently proposed and debated, while New Zealand, in a 2015-2016 referendum, voted to reject other designs and retain the existing flag.

5. More precisely, 42.7167° S latitude and 170.9667° E longitude. The numbers to four decimal places were found with the simplest Google search. Again, a determination made very easily with twenty-first century resources emphasizes the distinctions between current access to information and the means available at the time of Catton’s fiction.
6. Connell’s passage here specifically addresses the complaint by Nancy Williams that tactics of hard categorization have been mistakenly and forcibly applied to anthropological studies of indigenous Australians, and, as Connell says, “have been the stock-in-trade of Australian ethnography for a hundred years” (200). Such practices, however, developed as the disciplinary codification of European social divisions that were already centuries old—a set of preferences, of course, that influences the very notions of specialization and disciplinarity from the outset.

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Recebido em: 22/02/2016

Aceito em: 30/03/2016