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Abstract
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Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

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*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal Myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS


If there was one fact about my father it was that though he hated finishing things, he loved beginnings. For a builder, this was disastrous. My childhood threads its way through a myriad of unfinished projects, of growths, of ideas being born but then slumbering into incompletion. It had to do, to some extent, with poverty. We were poor, so that we had to improvise. But it had more to do with impatience. My father loved to plan. I would wake early in the morning and he’d be sitting on the roof, an island of melting tar surrounding him, and he’d be staring into space. I’d speak to him and he’d reply as though we had been in a lengthy conversation and had just arrived mid-point.

‘Dad? What are you doing?’ I might say, and he’d shake his head.

‘Anyway’, he’d answer, ‘that’s where the door will be?’

‘What door?’

He would sigh impatiently, as though reproaching me for not paying attention. ‘The door. After I build the window display.’ And he’d stand and dust off his trousers, pick his way across the perpetually leaking roof, and come back inside. ‘Come on, we have to plan this.’

In the store we’d stand, hands on hips, and stare up at the sagging ceiling. Sometimes he’d take a screwdriver from the display case and poke it through the gyprock. A stream of water would pour through. ‘Get a bucket! Get a bucket!’ he’d shout, as though I should have anticipated the emergency.

‘Why didn’t you tell me what you were going to do?’ I’d snap and run to fetch a bucket from the window display. In our hardware store, nothing was new. Everything had been tried and tested by us first. Customers would look at a rust stain on a watering can, or finger a crooked crowbar, and my father would respond irritably, ‘Well, at the price I’m selling it to you, why are you complaining?’ It got to the stage that customers who knew us well sometimes asked us for the ‘rusty’ nails – the nails that Dad and I scavenged from building sites, and sold for half price.
The bucket in place, we'd watch the yellow stream of liquid pour forth from ceiling, and continue our half imagined conversation.

'You see, son, I can build right up to the footpath. That's a lot of extra space. I think we should build a window display out perpendicular from the shopfront, and then across, and then back to the store. Like a courtyard. Later we can throw a roof over it and knock down all the walls. Then, voila, the store is twice its size.'

'Voila' was not a word I enjoyed. It meant a lost weekend. Essentially we had to build quickly. We couldn't afford the construction permits, but Montreal, in those days, had peculiar laws. If the inspectors came by and you were in mid-construction, and if you didn't have a permit, they made you tear down what you'd built. But if a project was finished, they couldn't ask for your permit. So every Friday after five - which was when the inspectors signed off for the weekend - Dad and I would go into frenzied building. The objective was to bite off just what we could chew, chew like hell, and have the project wrapped up by Monday 8 am. So the small four foot square shack which my father had put up in an empty field, grew monstrously and inexorably. It developed limbs and tentacles which would snake out in all directions, but always according to some imaginary map my father charted in his head. A wall would shoot out, then veer left, then left again, and suddenly it was a square. 'It's a courtyard', my father explained to one frustrated inspector, when the man argued that the building was incomplete because it had no roof. It would have to come down.

'It's a what?'

'A courtyard. Very fashionable. We'll have plants out here.' A month later we threw a roof over the courtyard. The inspector ranted. 'This is not a courtyard. It has a roof!'

'It's a covered courtyard', my father explained, patiently scraping the rust and tar off some six inch nails.

'Where's your permit?' the inspector shouted into my father's calm imperturbability.

'For what?'

'For this. For building a cover on your courtyard!'

'What building? It's finished. '

'It's always finished with you. But it's always different!'

Slowly the building swelled outwardly, inwardly, upwards and down. A cellar emerged beneath the courtyard, and a balcony above. Eventually the balcony would become our home, since the store was a tad crowded for a family of three, and unreasonably noisy given the constant construction. But the building never stopped.

When I was eight I was sent to summer camp. On my return two months later I couldn't find the front door into the house. 'It's over here', my father added helpfully. 'Beside the courtyard.' I don't think any European could have lived next to as many courtyards as I did.
One year, when we ran out of timber, my father pulled out the second storey balcony. My mother, blissfully unaware that he’d done this, went out to hang the laundry up and stepped through the roof. ‘It’s a skylight’, my father explained to the inspector. ‘For the plants.’

The inspector quit, taking his frustrated bulk into a different line of work. He became a union agitator and loved to drop by on weekends. ‘Building a courtyard?’ he asked once.

‘A what?’ my father answered. ‘It’s a shed. Can’t you tell the difference between a shed and a courtyard?’

They laughed and disappeared inside for a lemonade while I knocked together another false roof.

The problem for me was wanting to finish something. Our greatest arguments were over the need to put handles on a set of newly built drawers, or installing a door on a room we’d just built.

‘It can wait’, my father would say.

‘But it’s a toilet.’

There was no winning with him. He had that distant look on his face – eyes turned towards the new beige carpet my mother had insisted he put down.

‘We are not recycling that green carpet’, she told him a week before.

‘But it’s perfectly good.’

‘It’s outdoor carpet from the balcony.’

‘What’s your point?’

‘It’s synthetic! From the Mini Putt you demolished for your cousin Claude.’

‘Who’s going to notice?’

‘I will!’

My mother had that look in her eye and my father shook his head resignedly. ‘There’s no winning with her’, he said.

That evening they went out and bought a new carpet which we installed the next day. It was an extraordinarily lavish purchase for my father to make, but when I pressed him his plan became clear. ‘It’s eleven feet across’, he whispered. ‘The room’s only eight and a half. That leaves one and a half by eighteen divided by two. That’s eight mini rugs I can sell for welcome mats.’

‘Dad’, I explained patiently. ‘No one uses beige pile carpet for welcome mats.’

‘I’ll sell them two for one.’ A week later they were gone. The inspector had bought a boat and my father had convinced him they were waterproof.

‘For God’s sake, Dad. They weren’t even Berber. It was a deep pile carpet. He’ll kill himself.’

‘I’ll give him a discount on non-skid paint.’
My father’s notion of non-skid paint, it needs to be said, was to toss a couple of handfuls of sand into the liquid. When I scoffed he reminded me that he’d invented pre-mixed sand and cement, which was true.

‘You didn’t invent it’, I corrected pedantically, ‘you mixed them.’

‘Same thing. Was it available before? Well?’

‘No’, I said reluctantly.

‘Did that fellow from Bemix concrete come here and buy some? Did he ask me if I had a patent? Did they patent it the following year and become millionaires?’

‘Okay!’ I shouted. ‘That still doesn’t justify selling a pile rug to an amateur sailor.’

‘Speaking of carpets’, my father continued. ‘I have an idea.’ He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me outside. A customer was trying to come in the front door but my father blocked his path. ‘What do you want?’ he barked.

‘I want some grass seed’, the customer mumbled nervously.

‘It’s a bad time to plant’, he said and locked the door. I heard the customer mutter that it was spring but we were already ascending the makeshift steps which led upstairs. My stomach was churning. He had that look in his eye. My mother was away for the weekend, and the house was ours.

‘Where am I standing?’ my father asked when I entered the living room. His feet were planted on the new carpet – my mother’s day-old pride and joy.

‘On the new carpet, in the living room, behind your favourite chair’, I mumbled hastily.

It wasn’t the right answer and we both knew it.

‘Anyway’, he said, ‘as it stands now, I have to stay in the store all day long. And in winter, since the heating’s so expensive, it gets a bit cold. So where am I standing?’

My heart tried to stuff itself into my brain. ‘In your store?’ I squeaked.

‘Voila!’ he shouted triumphantly.

‘Dad, you don’t know what you’re saying.’

‘Yes I do. I said “voila!”’ He pointed at the new carpet.

‘This should be right over my office. If I cut a hole through here, I can lower a ladder into the store, and ...’

‘Voila’, I said. My brain was trying to stuff itself into my bowels. ‘Dad. You can’t cut through the new carpet ...’

‘Yes I can. I got a new delivery of power saws today, and a brand new drill ...’

‘No, no. I mean, you must not.’

‘She won’t notice.’

‘You want to cut a hole through her brand new carpet, in the living room, and you think she won’t notice.

‘I’ll make it a trap door. I can cut the carpet, glue it back down, put the door on a hinge ...’
'I'm not helping with this one.'
'My son', he cajoled, using his most wounded tones. 'My only boy.'
'Don't bug me. I'm not cutting a hole in ...'
'My arthritis ...'
'It'll be the least of your problems.'

* I suppose there was no way for him to know that the first hole would fall over a support beam and a tangle of wires which he could not shift. The second hole was much more discreet, and both could just about be covered up by the recliner. In truth, except for the deep clear cut through the brand new pile carpet, it was almost possible to pretend it wasn't there. Except for the electric bell my father installed just above the hole.

'When a customer comes in', he explained to my weeping mother, 'the bell will go off and I can go down. Don't you see, I can spend more time up here with you.'

My mother swallowed her sobs and stared at him with her clear brown eyes. I'd never heard her speak through clenched teeth before - until then I must admit the phrase was merely a metaphor to me - and the experience was not pleasant to observe. I believe she said something lame to the effect of 'Is that supposed to be a consolation', but something in her voice suggested there was a more pointed comment to follow. Luckily the bell rang and my father disappeared through the hole in the floor and he quite wisely didn't return again until dinner time.

It took a while to get used to the bell. At first, during mealtime, we would involuntarily shoot our food across the table whenever it went off unexpectedly. My father had hot-wired it with the same sort of urgency that he put up illegal walls, and not without purpose. The bell, he seemed to know, had to go up before my mother came home, or it never would.

'She's like the inspector', my father explained to me as the sparks flew from the small generator he was trying to bury beneath the carpet.

'Does it show?' he asked.

It looked like a bright green goitre. I assumed his question was rhetorical, and when he set fire to the carpet, it pretty much was.

'I'll put it in the store', he reassured.

* What was most extraordinary about the process of metamorphosis was that it never seemed alien to us. We quickly accommodated the changes, came to know them, and were surprised when other people found them odd. To us there was nothing unusual about a thief accidentally poking his head up through the trap door thinking it led to the roof, while we sat around watching The Brady Bunch. There was nothing odd about having relatives emerge from a myriad of entrances, so that Uncle Robert entered
via the roof, Auntie Maggie popped up through the floor, and cousin Denise dropped in through the fire escape. It was like living in a Vaudeville set.

What I never expected was that this impermanence would affect my recollections. That when both my parents would be gone, and when I needed most to remember, there would be no boundaries to cling to, no doors to open because I couldn’t find them, no solid frameworks of any kind – just façades. I know from life that this is true for everyone – and yet I can’t help but feel this impermanence is peculiar to me.

My last sight of my father was as he struggled down the hole in the living room floor, his hands hooked into arthritic claws, disappearing as though into a submarine. I flew back from Australia some years later, but too late. He was lying in a coma – neither here nor there. And I begrudged him this consistency for unfinished business. I resented that he hadn’t waited for me to say goodbye. That even in death he couldn’t finish things – that he left mid-phrase. But oddly, when I finally felt strong enough to visit the dilapidated store from which they had moved after I had gone away, everything made sense. Somehow, it hadn’t changed a bit.

If autobiographical discourse is a mythologising practice that explores, rehearses and confronts the collective anxieties and beliefs of the culture then personal story will always be a metonym for deep and complex narratives about the contradictions and forces that shape the culture as a whole. And, since autobiography is predominantly concerned with origins and genesis, these metonymic stories about the discovery of self in the mirror world of the past can be seen as windows into the historical process whereby the entire culture understands, invents and constructs itself.

Within the Australian context, the motif of the traumatised exile searching for a lost and unattainable home in the golden valleys of an idealised childhood is an essentially European and romantic discourse in which the pain of exclusion is counterbalanced by the Edenic possibilities of transcendency and homecoming. This search for an unattainable national space in the myth of a prelapsarian childhood may provide comforting anodynes for the trauma of exile but it also produces orthodox narratives which depoliticise the individual by transmuting the interested actions of everyday life into the disinterested powerlessness of essential childhood. However, since autobiography is also revelatory and confessional in nature and often positions the protagonist as a victim in stories about difference, powerlessness and injustice, the form has radical, subversive and oppositional possibilities. The secret stories of convicts, homosexuals, migrants, Aborigines, artists and women represent an unauthorised and covert history which, by exposing the dominant cultural forces that suppress and silence minorities, open up the secret country of the untold past. By telling stories that deal with society’s fringedwellers, autobiography can radically change perspectives, transform social practices and undermine mainstream ideologies.

This dialectic between historical process and poetic space, between autobiography as sociography and autobiography as personal quest is perfectly illustrated in the highly self-reflexive work of Dorothy Hewett. Her thinly disguised autobiographical narratives – ‘I’ve been criticised for writing a sort of endless autobiography’ – are concerned with what appear to be the unresolvable tensions between the poetic ‘I’ and the historical ‘other’. In Wild Card, the conflict between her political and
artistic self, between the historian and the poet, is central to an understanding of the way the wider culture speaks through her highly personalised narratives. *Wild Card* is both a domestic and political secret history in which the writer 'invents a pseudonym, a character, and follows that character through a series of events that appear to make up a life', a life suspended between two opposing pulls - political and poetic - each represented by different persona and different modes of narration. If the sociographer and political activist is expressed through the 'realism' of the referential historian then the anarchic romantic is expressed through the poetry of the preludes in which the golden valley of the Dream Girl's Garden becomes a metaphor for the lost world of childhood possibility. *Wild Card* is a sociography about a middle-class woman whose development from country girl to city activist and romantic poet reflects the movement of a whole society as it copes with the traumas and contradictions of historical isolation, economic depression and war. The fact that the storyteller is a woman, a poet and an ex-communist reinforces the very isolation and dislocation that the sociography reveals. It is also a story about a society emerging from the myth of a bucolic paradise to embrace its fate as an extension of urban European history. When Dorothy Hewett decides to escape Perth and travel across the continent to Sydney, she is descending into an Orwellian Purgatory - 'my very own Wigan Pier' - in which the fall from the grace of childhood gardens is expressed through the desert of city life, 'a landscape of horror' (p. 166). It is a landscape which not only reveals the collapse of mythic Australia as natural garden but also opens up the secret countries of Australian covert history, presenting us with a sociography of activism in post-war Australia, in which the female outsider battles against all odds (domestic, social and cultural) to establish feminist and Marxist alternatives in a predominantly conservative and unresponsive culture (p. 84).

On the other hand, although the book, as sociography, highlights the struggle of the marginalised and oppressed, it is far from being a political tract. Indeed, the main focus of *Wild Card* is not so much political and consciously historical as personal and romantic. It is the story of a poet whose central concern is the gap between the pain and disappointment of experience and the purity of the prelapsarian self. Her constant reference to the idealised childhood of Wickepin is, in effect, a yearning for the lost and transcendent possibilities of youth. The aged and experienced Alice cannot find a way back into timeless Wonderland - 'it's sad to grow up' (p. 237) - except through the union of memory and imagination in art. Even Hewett's political life - her energetic Marxist faith - has to be seen in terms of a romantic utopianism which seems to inform every aspect of her story, whether it concerns love, family, poetry or politics. Hers is the story of the battling and alienated self, of the child/artist as outsider, misfit and self-creator.
This conflict between the poet and the historian belongs to a set of dualities and oppositions which is central to an understanding of the way Hewett interprets her life. Doppelganger images of division structure a narrative in which the protagonist is seen as constantly at war with herself. The 'I' is divorced from the 'other', the watcher from the doer, the ascetic from the hedonist, 'the responsible Communist' from the 'wild girl' (p. 119), and the poet from the activist. 'The girl who moves and talks and rages and loves,' is in direct conflict with 'the cold detached consciousness of the writer' (p. 90): the subjective actor and the objective vivisector, to borrow Patrick White's image, seem constantly at odds. Reconciliation seems to lie in the act of autobiography itself, in the conscious search for a past in which the divided can be made whole.

The preponderance of garden, glass and mirror motifs in Hewett's work is a clear indication of her fascination with ideal spaces and her tragic sense of being locked out of those spaces. Her identification with Lewis Carroll's Alice and her adventures in the mirror world of timeless wonderlands is central to an understanding of all her work, in general, but to *Alice in Wormland*, in particular, where Alice is a kind of Eve in an Edenic garden threatened by experience and the world:

Done Alice said All over your wife domestic Eve will warm your bed swallow your guilt & big with it your life forfeit perfection let your garden grow one winter's day you'll find behind the door that white blurred mirror on the other side reflecting all the Eden we possessed the gift of self single distinct & whole & your worn face.

The sense of a lost world of innocence in which the 'gift of self ... single distinct & whole' is what lies behind Alice's Wonderland door and Looking-glass world. Ironically, the mirror of the lost self is a motif that simultaneously denies the very thing it celebrates: inclusion in the unattainable world of childhood perfection. Although Nim is Hewett's attempt to reconcile the profane and the sacred, the sensual and the pure, it is the sense of expulsion from paradise that dominates the poems. Hewett's Alice has fallen into the world and cannot get back: she is in Wormland and she is going to die: 'I'm experiencing old age very hard'.

The 'Dream Girl's Garden', the Wickepin Eden, 'perfect circular' is blighted by 'the spotted snake' with 'hooded world-sick eyes' and Alice is 'driven howling from the garden', as time and the world take their toll.

In *Bons Bons and Roses for Dolly*, the protagonist is the 'dream of youth/That seems/Ephemeral, unreal ...', she is 'the fairytale Alice ... the dolly-bird in green' who inhabits the 'crystal palace' of cinematic dreams where mirror transformations are magic and childlike. In a fantasy that
underpins many of Hewett's autobiographical figures, the middle-aged and dowdy Dolly Garden walks through the projecting mirror of art to emerge as eternally young and beautiful. The crystal palace is a kind of never-never land in which Alice/Dorothy never has to face the horror of growing old until the mirror smashes and the reality of time undermines the dream.

DOLLY: (to music) The Crystal Palace, it all fell down, we all grew old ... we all grew old. They promised me the world, and I ended up with a lousy, empty, out-of-date picture show.10

*Wild Card* attempts to reverse this process by turning the past into a longed for but inaccessible dream of childhood possibility. The author is Alice who, on cold winter days when mutability threatens the dream, attempts to rebuild the ideal space of childhood.11 ‘The small clean enclosed space of filtered light’ is the unattainable ideal that lies at the end of the search for the lost childhood. Although her size and age prevent her from entering the golden space, with the aid of the narcotic of memory, she plans to enter, inhabit and explore her own fragile construction, her own biography. The attempt to reverse time fails and she is left feeling excluded, ‘a giant amongst the Lilliputians’, an outsider, a lady of Shalott, condemned to a life of yearning whilst being locked out of worlds she will never be able to inhabit. However, in spite of the losses, guilt and pain, ‘the little sour apples’ that ‘still grow in my heart’s orchard’ continue to come up ‘out of the dead country’ (p. 267). It is the pain of exclusion and failure that prompts Alice to continue to build her fragile houses of cards as she searches for an integration and inclusion in the ‘enclosed space of filtered light’ that reflects ‘all the Eden we possessed’.12

The prelude to part 1, in which the adult Hewett rebuilds the first house of the heart, is a richly realised collage of images and fragments which recaptures the fixed and immutable space of ‘permanent childhood’ where memory and imagination combine to produce ‘the poetry of the past’.13

The first house sits in the hollow of the heart, it will never go away. It is the first house of childhood become myth, inhabited by characters larger than life whose murmured conversations tug at the mind. (p. 3)

This is the timeless garden of the imagination where the orchard ‘heavy with peach and apricot, nectarine and mandarin, quince and pear’ (p. 7) celebrates the richness and fullness of life, and where the running child, if she runs fast enough, will find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow (p. 8).

However, no sooner has she concluded her celebration of paradise than she introduces the cold reality of chronology and ‘realistic’ narration. The same events are reworked into a narrative voice that abandons Alice and
The Dream Girl's Garden

poetry and speaks with a harsher more objective tone, as the 'skinny ten-year old' (p. 11) begins to face the world. In this narrative world the comforting anodyne of the coherent childhood self is counterbalanced by a more historical perspective in which the developing self is seen in terms of the cultural forces that shape the roles that constitute the life: 'Daughter, sister, lover, wife, mother, grandmother, domestic treasure, I will be suborned into all these roles' (p. 11).

It is always important to bear in mind that this story, like most autobiographies, charts the development of self, the experiencing and integrated 'I', through the fictive conventions of the reflective cohesion of the narrating 'I'. As a result, the tension between the romantic notion of the self as absolute and the historical notion of the self as culturally determined permeates the telling. If the historical mode produces the sociography - social history when told through people - then it is the romantic mode which guarantees the integrated 'I' of the child/artist. Although Hewett sees herself as fragmented into roles determined by the past and by her upbringing, her identity as a writer is an absolute that draws the pieces together. The 'I' in this narrative is made coherent by a destiny that seems to predate history: the 'I' is a character that only has definition and existence in so much as she is a creation of her own autobiographical act. In other words, being a writer is like being a child: it provides you with an absolute wholeness and unchanging identity beyond the fragmenting and alienating flux of history:

I have my vocation. It is outside sex, and yet my sex is part of it. It is already fixed, brutal, implacable, complete. There is nothing I can do about it, except to get better at it. It shakes me, seductive as love. Words fall out, I am possessed by them. (p. 11)

Although this act of self-creation seems to transcend everything, it drives a narrative that, even in its most ahistorical moments, reveals the culture's deepest concerns - the question of genesis and historical identity. Although the story is a personal account of an individual life - with the writer as hero - it is also a narrative which, by contextualising the individual and textualising her into fiction, produces myth that refracts the culture through the mirror of self. The character of the misfit, the outsider/artist - 'Everything seems to mark me off as different' (p. 44) - in a distant land which is both remote and exotic, both isolating and rich in potential is a figure that rehearses dreams close to the centre of the Australian myth of exile in paradise. It is a double image which hints at romantic possibilities only to expose the blight beneath. Emerging from 'a seemingly gentle, unpolluted, isolated world of space, white beaches and long golden summers', the exiled child turns into a radical romantic who, as she scratches 'the thin skin off the top of this utopia', finds 'corruption beneath ... and a vicious world that blocks everything' (p. 88-9).

It is the metonymic dimension of the personal story which gives the
autobiography its strong sociographical slant. The tribal stories of the clan, 'the inherited traumas' that constitute family history belong to an order of myth that enacts the values and anxieties of the wider culture through the particular story of the Hewetts. The early part of the autobiography is full of the murmurs of 'adult voices endlessly recounting the web of stories that crisscrossed the generations' (p. 27). The anecdotes about convicts, pioneers, farmers, swaggies and secessionists, the references to the depression, to the war and to growing up on a sheep and wheat farm in Western Australia combine to produce a view of Australian social history which is mediated through the myths of family folklore and then validated through the intimacy of personal story.

In spite of the sociographical detail, however, it is the essential romance of these stories that draws the reader into the world of the developing child, into the fables that shape the writer. For example, Hewett's account of her grandfather's wild ride into the bar of the Wickepin pub - a romanticised story she has inherited from her mother - is told with a delight that not only celebrates the power of myth to poeticise and immemorialise the past, but which also reveals the writer's own particular preference for a narrative that freezes time into perfect moments of space:

This was her dream father, a kind of 'man from Snowy River', thundering up the turkey red carpet, throwing his hat in the ring, the red horse rearing, glamourised and frozen for ever in that one magnificent gesture. (p. 24)

A similar romanticisation of the past can be seen in the way Hewett characterises her mother as the mythic source of her own divided self. The evil stepmother punishes her daughter for inheriting the non-cautionary romanticism that has plagued her own life. She wreaks revenge on the innocent and beautiful fairy princess by poisoning her with guilt. In this wonderland fable, the magical potion of transformation is a poisonous drug designed to destroy the very innocence that keeps both wonderland and the pristine self intact:

She is standing by the dressing-table, her shadow huge on the white walls. The carved heads of the griffins are grinning at me from the doors ... She is holding a tiny bottle in her hand, full of some brownish liquid. I think of Alice In Wonderland and the white rabbit. Her eyes ablaze. (p. 31)

And so myth and history are united in the trope of the blighted wonderland in which the innocent child is cast out of the timeless garden. The farm may very well be 'the centre of our existence, our Garden of Eden' but the 'black snakes' of guilt and sensuality that 'wait and slide' (p. 32) in the undergrowth suggest a dark and guilty lust for life that is both attractive and threatening. This contradiction between the need for experience and the yearning for Eden is resolved into poetry when the dreamer turns her past into static space, into the pure myth of
I have given my heart once and for all and I know that I will never have another real home in the world again ... I'll make legends out of this place ... the Golden Valley of my childhood with Nim, the boy with the owl on his shoulder and the falcon on his wrist, buried at the foot of the orchard ... I'll write poems and plays and stories full of ghosts. (pp. 48-9)

As the narrating self searches for coherence in the firsts of sexual and intellectual experience, it is the trauma born of exclusion from the Golden Valley of childhood which dominates the discourse. The search for wholeness, and for the other half that will make the 'I' complete manifests itself in the utopian idealism and impulsive romanticism which characterises all her actions whether they are political, personal or artistic.

On a personal level, her grandfather is 'my other self, the gay, blond, tender, blustery companion of my childhood' (p. 121). Her first lover is a 'secret lover, my other self', (p. 92) the ideal companion for the non-cautionary romantic. On a political level, a similar search for wholeness can be found in Hewett's uncompromising commitment to Marxism: 'I will proletarianise myself. I will be a heroine of the Marxist revolution' (p. 160). The Pilbara strike, the visit to Russia, the political campaigns, the personal involvements, the self-sacrifices all point to a need to resolve the duality in her nature:

the mainspring of my political belief was a Utopian faith rather than any philosophical, scientific Marxism. I actually believed that Communist had saved my life ... Marxism for me was a conversion, an act of personal salvation. (p. 174)

Once again, the energetic pursuit of the 'other' in the mirror world of ideal reflections seems to exacerbate the division between the two selves. The figure of the responsible Communist attempting to bury the ego in the language of social realism is constantly at war with the the figure of the 'rebellious girl with the hooped earrings and the black velvet beret, who wouldn't be seen dead with her hair in a victory roll?' (p. 123). The conflict between the two selves seems to represent a direct threat to the wholeness that the romantic poet requires for her art. Living the outer life too strenuously leads to fragmentation of the self and the destruction of the poet:

In burying her (the wild girl), have I fragmented my personality so drastically that I have killed the poet in me, traded the gift of tongues for the dream of a Marxist Utopia? (p. 123)

This pursuit of the self and belief in the inner life is strongly connected with the desire to be a child again, to be free of the responsibility that ties her to the outer world of action. But the escape from responsibility brings with it the sort of pain that is closely associated with the motif of expulsion. Her decision to leave Lloyd Davies, Clancy and Perth for Les
Flood and Sydney is an experience that is once again expressed in terms of the pain of exile and separation. As she leaves Perth, the clock chimes, the rain falls and her timeless childhood comes flooding back in a rush of images that suggest a yearning for an irrecoverable ideal violated by time and experience. A child calls, a grandmother dies and the ‘wind in the unripened wheat flows in a green sea to the foot of Rock Hill’ (p. 145).

And so Alice, driven by the ‘maggot of love’, tumbles out of wonderland into the Orwellian nightmare of her Sydney years. The journey from childhood, from the poetic self to the cold reality of adulthood and objective responsibility is a journey from Arcady to hell, from the blessed country to the ugly city. This mythic journey belongs to the sort of narrative paradigms Richard Coe outlines in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Australian. The myth begins with ‘a passionate, an overmastering love for the “magic” and mystery, for ... the tangible “timelessness” and “agelessness” of the Australian bush’. According to Coe, this blessed beginning is followed by ‘an uneasy, half-nauseated contempt for Australian “civilisation” ... with its ugliness, conformism, petty-mindedness and philistinism’. The urban hell which is Hewett’s Sydney is the house of cards that seems to lie furthest from the golden spaces of her childhood.

Although, Hewett’s activist years in the ‘city of the poor and dispossessed’ (p. 171) reinforce her need to withdraw from politics into poetry, they provide a telling insight into the unofficial and secret history of Australia’s political left. Her experiences at the Alexandria mill where she campaigns for equal pay and gets sacked for being eight months pregnant is just one example of the way her particular story reflects the lives of many. The party meetings, the rivalries, the debates, the expulsions, the world events, the Petrov affair, the referendum, her own disenchantment with the movement are all part of a radical, covert history in which feminist and socialist perspectives undermine the dominant ideologies.

Nevertheless each strand of the narration, whether personal or political seems to take us back to the central motif of the estranged and alienated self searching for harmony, integration and wholeness. Indeed, Wild Card can be seen as a confessional discourse in which the alienated ‘I’ seeks coherence by attempting to exorcise those ghosts that prevent the guilty Alice from finding a way back into the garden. Unfortunately exorcism merely seems to result in a deeper sense of alienation. The death of Clancy, for instance, is bathed in an imagery which suggests that the loss is as much to do with her own loss of innocence as it is to do with the actual death of her son. Her dream of the child drowning is, of course, a metaphor for the boy’s death, but it is also a chilling reminder of her deep sense of alienation from the centres of her own mythic childhood:

From this angle the pool looks innocent and clear. Only when I come closer I can
see something lying on the bottom – a shadow? Puzzled, I lean over the surface and see the drowned child, the white face turned upwards, the floating sandy hair, the open eyes reflecting the sky. I am weeping uncontrollably, groping for the dead child in the limpid pool. (p. 183)

It is this loss of the essential self that eventually prompts a return to the ‘first house in the hollow of the heart’, to the mythic centres that might compensate for the failures. Going back to the bush is, of course, the final stage in the ‘paradis-perdu’ myth whereby the ‘vanished past’ of childhood can be reconstructed into a ‘Paradise which is at one and the same time real and inaccessible’.  

Although the heart leaps to see ‘the house lying in the hollow amongst almond and fig trees’ (p. 236), the exact moment of fulfilment in the golden childhood is undercut by the harsh realities of history and change. Not only has the garden disappeared but instead of the longed for reunion with the mirror landscape of the past, the dominant image is one of desolation and flatness in which her own children, the inheritors of this blessed land, ‘stand, small and desolate, on the verandah, staring out across the empty flats’ (p. 236). Indeed, the homecoming alerts the narrator to the way in which dream and nostalgia masks the cultural and historical forces that shape the self. Behind the facade of the ‘Golden Valley of (her) childhood’ lie the mechanisms that shape destinies, the stories that write the culture and which in turn write the self:

The Golden Valley of my childhood has gone for ever. I am reliving my mother’s life on the farm, finding out the difference between illusion and reality. A child’s vision has changed into a grownup woman’s nightmare. Standing by the kitchen window, staring out across the creek bed, I even experience the identical loneliness my mother must have felt, the sense of hopeless entrapment. (p. 237)

Although this recognition of the impossibility of returning to the idealised spaces of childhood prompts a realisation of the power of time, change and history in determining the shape of a single life, the failure of the return does not destroy the dream. If anything, the impossibility intensifies the sense of longing for the inner spaces. This is reinforced by the narrator’s gradual abandonment of the political life for the imaginative life of the artist. Shortly after her return to Wickepin, ‘the miracle happens’ and the narrator is able to write again after ‘ten silent years’ (p. 246). She has found her way back again ‘to the country of the imagination’ (p. 247), a country whose inspiration lies in the poetry of her mythic childhood. The clash between the outer and inner lives, between the prose and the passion, between history and poetry is resolved in favour of poetry. As she travels back to Perth, ‘tired, defeated, sadder, older, wiser perhaps’, (p. 264) the exile’s dream of renewal is grounded in a desire to rediscover “the clean well-lighted place” in the middle of the world’ (p. 265).

Hewett’s song of exile ends with an epilogue in which the aged Alice
returns for the final time to the site of her childhood. Having tasted the ‘sour apples that still grow in my heart’s orchard’ and experienced the desolation of the ‘dead country’ the poet confronts the reality of her exile and is empowered to speak: ‘Here I will eat their salt and speak my truth’ (p. 267). When she discovers that the landscape of her mythic childhood is denuded and desolate she is repeating the rituals of a tribe whose genesis myth is grounded in the dialectic between the garden and the desert, homecoming and exile.

Although the ‘tarnished glass’ of memory shows us ‘what social history can look like when told through people’16 the closure of the story seems to reinforce Gaston Bachelard’s maxim: ‘we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost’.17 As Hewett turns away from the site of a golden childhood blighted by history, the poetry that was lost is now ‘secure in the hollow of the heart’ (p. 273). She doesn’t need to return to the Dream Girl’s Garden in Golden Valley because the poetic space has become her art, has become story. The ghosts that keep ‘walking in our sleep’ (p. 273) are the narratives that make up the art of self that informs all of Dorothy Hewett’s work, an art of self that celebrates, exposes and reinvents the social and cultural practices that constitute the rituals of the tribe.

NOTES

3. Dorothy Hewett, Wild Card (Ringwood: Penguin, 1990), p. 150. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
6. Dorothy Hewett in Bons Bons and Roses for Dorothy.
7. Alice in Wormland, p. 10.
11. Alice in Wormland, p. 100.
15. Richard Coe, p. 137.
MICHAEL MEEHAN

On The Swamp

For João Guimaraes Rosa

Our dad was an ordinary bloke who didn’t ever talk a lot, even before he went out on the swamp. After he went, I tried to talk about it to some of his old mates at the shanty, but they mostly just shuffled about and looked at the floor and didn’t say much either, though I almost think they were a bit proud of what our dad had done. I even wondered if some of them might have liked to go off, one by one, and do the same. For the moment, they just seemed to like the idea that one of them at least had done it, and they weren’t going to let him down and head the whole thing back to a world where there had to be reasons for what people did.

We enjoyed the part where he was building the boat – none of us had ever even seen a boat before, except in pictures – and we all imagined that we would be using it to net redfin, or to get up closer to the ducks, which always flew off ahead of us and out of range as we waded through the waters of the swamp. The boat was the only bit of fun any of us had had for quite a time, with the long dry spell and the stock gone and the whole earth raised up and singing around our ears. Dad stripped the corrugated iron for the sides of the boat from an old tank that had rusted out, and he picked up some thin sheet metal from a shop over at Nyarrin, and some tar for fixing the pieces together and caulking all the leaks. The boat only took a day or so to put together, with the help of a neighbour’s welder and a lot of fetching and passing by us kids, who scrambled around and got in the way and ended up coated in tar, which we tried to scrape off when we took the boat down to test it for leaks in what was left of the dam. The boat was long and shallow, with a frame of wooden planks to protect the bottom, and we soon found out just how easy it was to tip over. We knew, though, that in a dry season you could just about walk right across the swamp, as long as you minded out for cruising tigersnakes and the odd deep hole, and that we didn’t have to worry about getting drowned.

Our mother didn’t come out to watch the building of the boat. She kept to the house that day, and when any of us ran up to tell her about it, she would just turn away or change the subject, and we thought that perhaps she was just worried that someone might get drowned. Our mother can get pretty cranky, and there were times when even the weather seemed to be somehow our fault and when just about
everything any of us did turned out to be the kind of thing that just had
to come on top of everything else. When the boat was first mentioned,
she had begun to scold, but had then gone silent and sulked about in the
darkness of the house, with the two of them, Dad and our mother, gone
cold and dark and unspeaking across the table, and our questions
gradually fading from our lips, right down to the littlest who harped
about the boat for a bit longer than the rest of us, and then seemed to
pick up the mood around the table and went silent too.

It started as a great day for us when the time came to take the boat
down to the swamp, as we all thought we would be going out in it with
him. When the time came, though, and our dad took up his sugar bag
with some sandwiches and other things in it, he mumbled that I was the
only one who was going to come out with him to the edge of the swamp,
and that the others should stay home with our mother. There was a bit of
a row over this and some talk of ears getting boxed, with the little ones
whimpering and our mother refusing to get into the argument, though
she did talk about people with yet more ‘tom-fool ideas’, and demanded
to know why there were no better things to do. And as we got set to go,
with Old Kitchener harnessed and the boat loaded on the wagon, she
came out onto the verandah and watched us leave, except that she didn’t
seem to be looking at us, but at some point way ahead, some point far
out there in the distance. I might not have noticed it at the time, if I
hadn’t expected her to make some sort of fuss about Dad and I taking
half the day off to wander up to the swamp, and so I watched her,
turning my head around again and again as we lumbered away from the
house, expecting the squall to break; but instead she just stood there,
ignoring us, and ignoring the little one who was still tugging at her skirt
and whimpering about the boat, just biting her underlip and peering out,
in that glazed sort of way, over the dead stubble and out into the scrub.

We arrived at the swamp and we unloaded the boat together, sliding it
out across the soft mud and into the water, so that it bobbed and finally
floated free.

Then I said to him, ‘Can I get in?’

He just looked at me in a funny sort of way, for such a long time that I
began to fidget about and wish that he would just get on with doing
something in the way that he usually did. Then he told me, in a strained
sort of voice that I hadn’t heard before, to get on back home with the
others, and to ‘keep a bit of an eye on things’. Our dad wasn’t someone
you tried to talk out of something once he’d made up his mind about it,
so I did as I was told and took hold of Old Kitchener’s reins and walked
back along the track a little, as though I was heading for home; but as
soon as I was out of sight I crept back through the scrub to see what he
was doing. I saw him clamber into the boat, which rocked and wobbled
and then steadied itself in the slimy waters at the edge of the swamp,
and then, as he thrust into the soft mud with his paddle, the boat slid
quietly through the rim of rotting leaves and fallen bark and pale green
And we never got him to come back again. Late that afternoon we all went down to the swamp to see how the boat was doing, and for a long time all we could see were the usual dead-white gums and peeling grey sheets of bark and strutting waterbirds and nothing more than that. Eventually, my little brother spotted him, floating around between the gums, sitting upright on the wooden slat that ran across the rear, his face dark and hidden under his hat, the boat drifting slowly from tree to tree, aided along by the occasional thrusts he gave with his paddle. And we waited until it was almost dark, expecting him to come back at any moment, but he just pushed around, out there towards the middle of the swamp, from tree to stump to tree, never coming closer to the shore, and never approaching the other side. Occasionally he would be lost to view behind a bank of timber or a cluster of fallen trunks, and then one of us would spot him again, drifting along a little further out. And after a time we sat down in the mud by the edge of the waters and slapped away the insects and fooled around with sticks and climbed the trees and threw rocks at the jays and waited and began, as it grew darker and the shadows crept out across the water, to think about what it might be like if he never came back.

Things back at home were very strange, but only for a time. Our mother was always one for keeping up appearances and for a while we all acted as through everything was the same as before. We went to school as usual, and even to church, with our mother giving out various excuses about Dad, and people, after the second or third week, eventually not asking questions, which was when we knew that they had begun to know. And when we went out to the swamp sometimes in the evenings to see if we could spot our dad, sometimes we would find others there, with gigs and kids and picnic hampers and people with field glasses and even once a telescope sinking up to their ankles in the slime at the edge of the shrinking water, competing with each other in the game of trying to spot our dad. And every now and then they would catch sight of him far out in the swamp, passing between two trees, sitting bolt upright in the boat, his only movement the occasional thrust of the paddle; and never would he even as much as glance across to the shore where we stood. And when the watchers saw us, they would generally stop laughing and pointing, and steal away, leaving our family to its shame.

After a while, word got around that our dad never set foot on land by day or by night, and that he had sworn some sort of promise to live out the rest of his life in that boat, and never again to set foot on the ground that had let him down. People at church started looking at us with sad faces and passing little bundles of things over to my mother who somehow managed to receive them like a debt she was owed rather than just charity, and we could tell from the ways in which even the kids suddenly stopped teasing us at school that the stories were getting
wilder. Some thought that he had decided to wait out on the swamp for the rains, and that he would stay there, with the swampwaters shrinking all around him, until the rain came, and then he would drift back to shore and simply take up farming again where he left off. Others thought that my mother had driven him to it, and soon people all over the district were using her as a kind of curse that husbands laid upon their scolding wives. Most people felt, though, that it was just one of those summer breakdowns of a kind that was best left to mend itself, out there upon the peace of the waters, and that when he became too hungry, or when the weather turned cold, or when the swamp finally dried up, he would drift back home again.

Truth is, no-one quite knew how he lived out there. There were thousands of yabbies in the swamp, and maybe he had some rabbit traps with him, which he crept into shore at nights to set: I never saw any in the boat, when he pushed it out, and our mother said there were none missing from the house. Maybe he had it all organised – fishing lines, traps, perhaps even a rifle – long before he even built the boat. Once or twice, as the months drew on, I went out to the swamp with sugar and salt and fishhooks and things like that, and I waded out into the water and shouted and whistled and made sure he knew that I was there; but when I came back later the ants were in the sugar and everything else was untouched. And one evening when I was out at the swamp and the light was beginning to fade and I was watching the red of the sky catch the gums, I could see our dad, slipping out from behind a nearby tree. The boat was turned towards me, and he was just sitting there watching me from under the deep shade of his hat, watching me, as I imagined, as he had that last day when he had looked at me in that funny way and I had turned away, to the scrub.

For a moment I thought that he was paddling towards me and I waited and then whistled and hollered and jumped up and down and waved my shirt on a long stick; but then as he began to come closer and the dark figure began to take on the shades of a shirt, a waistcoat, as the shadow under the hat began to show a jaw, a mouth, a neck and wisps of long hair and whiskers, I became nervous and stopped shouting and waving and started to move back through the mud and the waste: I moved more quickly as he came towards me and I backed against a submerged log and fell and came up gasping and scrambling and making for dry land, and then I saw him turn and slip off back out to the cover of the gums.

The months passed, and our mother managed to keep things going on the farm, in so far as there was anything that could be done. We kept on going to school as we had before, though as word got around the local area that our dad wouldn’t come in off the swamp, even more people – even, we were told, some people from up town who had heard about the man on the swamp – starting bringing their picnics over on Sundays and sitting around the edge of the swamp with umbrellas and deck chairs,
and watching him out there, dark and silent beneath his hat, still sitting up straight in the boat and drifting silently through the shining spaces on the swamp. In time they got used to the sight of his wife and his children peering out through the screen of gums, and no one left in embarrassment anymore, or smothered their cries and laughter. His neighbours of old would call to him and one day some bloke from over near Manangatang even came over with his army three-o-three and fired a few shots out across the water, but after the boom had rung out and come back to us through the trees, things went on just as they had before.

It was when the Debt Adjuster came around that our mother finally decided she’d had enough, and just bundled all of us into the Debt Adjuster’s car and directed him out to the swamp, though without telling him how long our dad had now been out there, gliding backwards and forwards across the water. The Adjuster didn’t ask too many questions, as what could be more reasonable than for a bloke on his uppers with so many mouths to feed to be out chasing yabbies or duck or redfin? And so he took us out, cheerfully enough, to the swamp, which was already much smaller than it had been when we first pushed the boat in, and we drove his car through the trees and along the mudpans and deep into what had once been covered with water. Yet even then it was some time before we were able to spot our dad, drifting around behind some stumps towards the far side of the swamp. Then we shouted, and tooted the Debt Adjuster’s horn, and he even fired a couple of shots from a real revolver he produced from out of a suitcase – a big six-shooter, it was, with a spinning chamber and all – but our dad just drifted about out there as though there was no-one in the world but himself.

For a time the Debt Adjuster was amused and paddled about with the rest of us, shouting and tooting and showing off his revolver. Then, as it got hotter and our dad ignored all the noise we made, he started to get angry and began to throw a few questions at the little ones who let out too much of the truth for my mother to be able to step in with her stories about yabbies and redfin; and soon the Debt Adjuster and I had half our clothes off and were wading out after him, across the drying slime, clambering onto banks which looked like safe islands of dry land but turned out to be just huge drifts of rotting vegetation and black mud. And as we waded deeper into the swamp in pursuit of our dad, the Debt Adjuster became wetter and redder and crankier and ended up carrying most of his sodden clothing on his head. And I occasionally slipped out of my depth and started sinking into the soft mud on the bottom, and the Debt Adjuster had to rescue me more than once and got a spike in his foot, and I told him not to worry as it was probably just a tigersnake, because I wanted to go back and did not want to see my father’s look again. All the while as we slipped and struggled through the mud from stump to bank to fallen trunk, with the waterbirds winging on ahead and cutting long straight trails through the water in front of us as they came
back to rest, our dad would just slip silently from tree to tree, filtering backwards and forwards across the spaces between the great white gums, always a little further away from us than the distance we had just travelled.

There was silence in the car on the way back to the farm, with the Debt Adjuster driving with bare feet clad in dried black mud which came off in great chunks, his clothes wet through and his face streaked with slime. There was silence in the car because the Debt Adjuster was a great believer in respect and in families, but later I could hear him arguing with our mother out on the verandah as he washed his feet in a bucket. He told my mother that he would be back as soon as he heard that the swamp was dry, and that he would bring others with him. And he told my mother that she had a duty to tell him if ever he came in off the swamp, and that he would be informing the police of what was going on, and that this was a pretty small return for all that he had tried to do for her and for her family. And I heard our mother say some scathing things about our not needing his charity and that he could look after his own family thank you very much, which was pretty outrageous when you think about it because charity was just about all we had, by that time, to keep us fed – the odd sheep that had died which the neighbors would allow us to pick over, and things like that, the bits of clothing that people would pass on to us at church, and the bags of stock feed that we found, some mornings, unloaded at the gate.

Since then, as the years have passed, we’ve just had to get used to the idea of our dad, out there on the swamp, moving silently in and out of the trees, blown from side to side by whatever breeze filters down through the gums, with new generations of town kids sometimes going out there on their bikes to see if they can creep up on him, and taking their shanghais with them and pitching rocks and sticks and even bits of old dried horseshit in his direction, but with no-one ever getting closer to him that I did that day when I took him the sugar and the salt; with even the policeman up from Sealake, sent up long ago by a new Debt Adjuster to sniff around a bit, just standing in the murk on the edge and shaking his head and maybe half wondering if he shouldn’t be out there, himself, because it all seemed to make about as much sense as anything else happening around these parts. We’ve had to get used to waiting, because all we do now is keep the place going with help from our mother’s brothers, and the bit we kids have been able to do as we’ve gotten older, and wait for the waters to dry away and for our dad to get stranded on a bank. By now, just about everyone has stopped talking about him. The little ones have just about forgotten about him, so they can act like other kids, with dads that are just dead, or gone away. Even my mother seems to have forgotten, and often justs sits around in silence, with the blinds all drawn against the light. In some ways that’s the worst thing of all. I’ve gotten used to the idea that, when we lie in bed at night listening to the mopokes calling to each other, that our dad
is somewhere out there with them, in his boat or maybe curled up somewhere beside the swamp, in a place of his own where none of us can find him. Sometimes I think that the mopokes we hear are really just our dad calling to us, cupping his hands together and blowing those sounds that used to draw real mopokes from miles away.

I still go out there now and then, and each time I can walk further and further out through the mud, and now and then I seem to get a little bit closer to him as he slips between the trees and makes for the other side of the swamp. I even saw him, one day, stepping out of the boat and hauling it across a mud bank – the first time that anyone had seen anything other than him just sitting there, thrusting in short jabs with the paddle. So, I wade out into the mud and the slime and the rotting bark just as far as I feel is safe, and sometimes I talk to him even though he probably can’t and doesn’t want to hear me, and I still sometimes leave bits of things on the edge of the water, though I’ve never seen footprints the next day, and nothing has ever been touched. I still like to think that if ever he wanted to talk to anybody ever again, it would be me that he would want to talk to, and that maybe he even started off with some notion that he was going to explain it all to me, back all those years ago when we first slipped the boat into the water, but he just couldn’t find the words. So I find myself a stump, some way out into the swamp where I can get a decent view of things for a quarter of a mile or so and I sit there and I imagine the kinds of things that he might have been wanting to say to me.

So I still go out to the swamp to try to catch glimpses of this father who is dead as he moves silently across the waters in a boat that should have sunk long ago, on a swamp that should have dried up long ago, in a body that should have starved itself apart long ago, in a silence that should have broken long ago, in a grief or a rage that might have spent itself out on those peaceful waters years before if I’d not backed away. I still go out to the swamp, especially in the evenings, for all that the singing insects can do to make my life a misery, and I sit amid the snakes and rabbits and the screeching jays and peer out through the gums and dream of the thousand ways in which maybe we all let him down, and wonder about that time when he might have come in off the swamp, and I wade in the thick black waters and wonder what kind of peace he might be finding as he shrinks back from the earth and what kind of peace I can ever hope to find while he still slips back and forth, out there amid the trees, ever a little further away, wondering always if he might yet again turn the boat around and turn it towards me and just take me off in it, and we might then spend the last part of the day netting redfin and hauling in yabbies, and then we would draw the boat out and hump it onto the wagon and he would come home with me and Old Kitchener and no kind of word ever, ever needing to be said.
He watched the first snowflakes abseil into the yard’s stink, melting on dung he’d forked there, making the farm dogs whimper, yelp, snatch at their chains.

That morning lapwings had dropped into the fields, surprising him with their jester’s flight: too early for spring, the wind was in the north and each bud a blackened tip of steel.

The week before he’d watched cherry blossom in the graveyard. Now this wind would strip each branch to its filament, its wake of frost clamp shut the throats of crocuses.

Last night the sun had fallen slobbering at the red lips of clouds, pleading to be out into the bloody world; it sank unheeded and with it sank the light.

Then the wind had moved a compass point, its anticyclone whorling over the North Sea, bringing its inheritance of cold to dull him – like uncashable war-bonds, the Fordson, the land.

It frayed his knuckles where he worked the fields’ need of him, walling up gaps where frost and thaw had shunted stone downhill to let his pregnant ewes stumble through.

It froze the promise in his mouth, stung him with hailstones’ unrelenting kisses. She was in the valley, bellyful of his child, a thin acre of this farm already sown in her.

That night, alone, he cradled his head at the fire, smelling sweet muck dry in its heat; alone, letting the wind go over the fell, the river glitter towards imagined cities.

He went outside to lean against a solid wall of cold, blinking the Plough’s stars from his eyes, letting the door creak on its hinge of light, his breath drift, white as a moth’s flight.
SOUTHBOUND

Last night we went missing from the world, had to drag sleep's drowning to surface for this train, southbound, late and slow as a cortège.

Pigeons flocked into apricot clouds from the station's roof of glass; we walked the platform, rolled newspapers into wads and thumped our legs.

Now there's rain, the train swishing over sleepers, the conductor reciting his poem of destinations, warming each town's cold consonants Jamaican-style.

At Warrington chimneys spindle the mist, spinning hanks of smoke; the track's drawn threads gleam under a gnawed moon's waning into day.

Those travellers watch us and wait, their breath white, their faces vague as ingots cooling in a tank. We judder on the squeal of brakes, slip into the suction of gathering light. A woman eats her yoghurt with a silver key, a man spins a yellow pear, that girl sleeps with folded hands and will wake soon to make her face. Rain flecks the windows, slakes dried sorrel in fields below where a white mare runs by the fence flicking back her head from the brink of our din. A signalman stares from his lit box, hands parting the track, neat as sugar tongs to send us south. The conductor's voice comes again, its hymn sing-song and sorrowful, pronouncing each place's name until we're almost sure it's there.
SPIDERS

The spiders stayed awake again.

I call you and you leave the bed
to see: at work all night
wiring up the apple trees,
the windows, the angles
of the broad bean canes,
all aerialised for some broadcast
far beyond our frequencies.

Their threads gleam like fishing line
disappearing into the air's depth,
melting in the sun which has risen
again to burn off the dew, dust shadows
from under roofs, shape-shift hills
that smoulder in heaps of cooling slag.

Spiders' reproaches are everywhere:
Work! Work! Work!
each one a steeplejack welding
his steel filaments to a frame,
a tight-rope star burnishing her own
glittering steps above the night.

They know how to wait
and how to betray,
how to say nothing and lie still,
how to seem a shadow of shadows
a silence of the silence,
how to look away whilst looking on;
their eyes multiply the frail-winged
prizes of the day.

They are hidden and waiting –
everywhere –
for that first faint touch
to bring them unblinking to the light.

It comes: expected, surprising
as my mouth reaching to kiss
pale hair on your neck's curve,
sudden as your tears, stopped
on my unbuttoned sleeve.
Claire McNamee, ‘Old Chamber - Sheep Dip’
Claire McNamee, 'Old Chamber - Triangles'
Claire McNamee, 'Macpelah Dome'
Amanda Dalton

HOW TO DISAPPEAR

First rehearse the easy things.  
Lose your words in a high wind,  
walk in the dark on an unlit road,  
observe how other people mislay keys,  
their diaries, new umbrellas.  
See what it takes to go unnoticed  
in a crowded room. Tell lies:  
*I love you. I’ll be back in half an hour.*  
*I’m fine.*

Then childish things.  
Stand very still behind a tree,  
become a cowboy, say you’ve died,  
climb into wardrobes, breathe on a mirror  
until there’s no-one there, and practise magic,  
tricks with smoke and fire –  
a flick of the wrist and the victim’s lost  
his watch, his wife, his ten pound note. Perfect it.  
Hold your breath a little longer every time.

The hardest things.  
Eat less, much less, and take a vow of silence.  
Learn the point of vanishing, the moment  
embers turn to ash, the sun falls down,  
the sudden white-out comes.  
And when it comes again – it will –  
just walk at it, walk into it, and walk,  
until you know that you’re no longer  
anywhere.
SOMETHING HAS DIED IN HERE

Something has died in here,
something the cat dragged in and lost.
It's probably been festering for weeks
but hits us suddenly,
a rotten stench that fills the freezing house
and makes me gag for air.

You move the sofa, shake out wellingtons,
shine a torch in every gap.
It's hopeless, there's no trail to follow.
*Bring the dogs in,* I say. *Watch the flies for clues.*
*Give up.* You light a fire, burn josticks,
throw my perfume everywhere.

I dread the maggots most
but dream instead a vole falls down the chimney,
dead already. Its body twists and hisses
in the flame and skin around its teeth dissolves
until there's only bone and splitting fur
and smoke that stinks.

AND THE MAP'S NO HELP *for Gillie In Canada*

Lost in the rain on my own and the map's no help.
I'll sling it in the back and drive
to Ottawa, to East Farndon,
to the house with the drive at the side.
I'll check the mirror for light blue Skodas
and the sky for loons, off-course. You never know,
maybe something's seeping through the sky.

A puddle the size of Hudson Bay on the road.
I'll hold my breath as I drive through.
And you? Are you diving?
Staying under for as long as it takes
to surface clutching so much more than mud.

The rhythmic slap and donk of your canoe
is shifting in this tired engine, in these wiper blades,
and I think I'm on the wrong road in the dark
when a signpost caught in the lights
names somewhere familiar
and somehow, with just one turn of the wheel,
I'm almost there.
This paper is about Wordsworth's 'daffodil poem' and what has been made of it since it was published as 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' in 1807. In this paper I take issue with postcolonial writers like Jamaica Kincaid and Michelle Cliff who position Wordsworth's 'daffodil poem' at the centre of British imperialism. I also take issue with J. Edward Chamberlin who has recently repositioned the poem as marginalized and radical. My position, as my title indicates, is that 'Daffodils' has been deployed in both colonial and postcolonial contexts: that it is neither central nor marginal to British imperialism in itself, but has been found very useful at certain historical moments. My interest in this idea of 'deployment', probably quite reactionary and not all that exciting in itself, is in what is also swept up by implication when 'Daffodils' is deployed and redeployed.

It is the contention of this paper that daffodils have become metonymic of 'Englishness', and that this has happened both through the pedagogical deployment of William Wordsworth's 'daffodil poem' in Britain and in the colonies of the British Empire from the mid-nineteenth-century onwards and through the more recent counter-discursive resistance to this pedagogy by postcolonial writers and critics. Symptomatic of this positioning is Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford's *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*, a text which repeatedly uses a drawing of a daffodil as emblem of the way in which (clearly divergent) experiences of Empire were 'constructed in terms of sameness' by the colonial administration of England. Neither Chew, Rutherford nor any of the writers in their volume problematize this identification of daffodils with 'Englishness'. They take it as read that a postcolonial 'campaign against poems about daffodils' is both long-standing, legitimate, and well-known. Typical of *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* is the way in which Meenakshi Mukherjee writes of her desire as a schoolgirl in India to be as 'elegan[t] ... and fluen[t] ... in spoken English' as those girls who attended the elite boarding schools and convents. Mukherjee figures this desire to speak perfectly cadenced English as the longing to be 'daffodilized'. It is signally natural for her to figure this desire in terms of Wordsworth's poetry. Ishrat Lindblad also naturalizes the connection
between Wordsworth and Englishness in her contribution to the volume. When Lindblad makes a pilgrimage to the Lake District soon after her arrival in England from Pakistan she remarks: 'for the first time the world outside corresponded to the world I had been reading about!'.

Lindblad arrives in London, but it is the Lake District which she perceives as the sacred heart of England.

Along with daffodils, Wordsworth and the English Lake District have been positioned at the imperial centre by texts like *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*. This paper attempts to unsettle the apparent inevitability of this positioning. By retracing colonial and postcolonial deployment of 'Daffodils', I hope to resituate both Wordsworth and the Lake District as complex and contradictory sites of possibility, mobilized in reductive ways at certain historical moments for particular reasons.

II

The earliest reference I have found to the long-running 'campaign against poems about daffodils' is made by V.S. Naipaul in 1962 with respect to Trinidad.\(^4\) Naipaul's understanding of this campaign is that it arose because some Trinidadians found it offensive that William Wordsworth's 'daffodil poem' was taught in schools when the daffodil is not a flower known in the West Indies. Naipaul clearly finds this campaign absurd. He fails to see why Trinidadians should reject an aesthetically beautiful poem just because it is grounded in the English countryside. He points out that there was no analogous campaign against American culture in Trinidad – a cultural presence which Naipaul personally feels to be far more damaging to local customs. Naipaul adds that this campaign is rendered even more ludicrous by the fact that Wordsworth's 'daffodil poem' is the only poem that most Trinidadians know; the campaign leaders have no way of contextualizing their attack just as they have little hope of appreciating the beauties of the poem. Daffodils are identified with 'Englishness' here in a way that is positive for Naipaul and negative for those Trinidadians he condemns.

Daffodils are also metonymic of 'Englishness' for Michelle Cliff, Jamaica Kincaid, and Albert Wendt. In contrast to Naipaul, however, these writers find the idea of a campaign against daffodils far from ludicrous. Cliff and Kincaid attest to children in the West Indies being made to learn the poem by rote and recite it in class 'with as little accent as possible'.\(^5\) Cliff estimates that 'probably there were a million children who could recite "Daffodils", and a million who had never actually seen the flower, only the drawing, and so did not know why the poet had been stunned'.\(^6\) In Cliff's reconstruction of a Jamaican one-class school, the teaching of 'Daffodils' symbolises the way in which the colonial administration was completely oblivious to the needs and geographic specificity of Jamaica. Kincaid, on the other hand, dramatises the way in
which the sight of a real live daffodil might effect one of the millions of children who were forced to learn a poem about something they had never seen. For Lucy, the protagonist of Kincaid’s semi-autobiographical narrative, *Lucy*, daffodils immediately signify ‘an old poem I had been made to memorize when I was ten years old’. As Alison Donnell has noted, Kincaid’s source of objection here is the way in which a veneer of ‘Englishness’ – English elocution, English manners, English subject matter – is forced upon Lucy, stifling what she feels to be her true self and aligning her subjectivity with the ‘motherland’. Wordsworth’s ‘daffodil poem’ is positioned as the carrier of this ‘Englishness’ by Kincaid as it is for Cliff. Wendt objects to the poem for similar reasons. His English education in New Zealand included Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’ together with texts such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Coral Island* and *Ivanhoe*. Wendt believes that the pedagogical use of these texts promoted the idea that there was no Maori culture or literature worth studying; that the ‘good native’ of the colonies should aim at assimilating a universal English culture. In contrast to Naipaul, Wendt feels that the ‘map’ of the world offered by texts like ‘Daffodils’ bears little relation to his experience and is designedly misleading and damaging to the identity of the Maori people.

The anecdotal evidence of Cliff, Kincaid and Wendt suggests that the incongruity of the English subject-matter of ‘Daffodils’ to its audience, the way it was impressed on their minds through rote-learning, and the superior English culture that it was designed to represent, are the main reasons why a campaign against the poem has emerged and should be sustained. As Edward Chamberlin put it at the Caribbean Studies conference last year, ‘Daffodils’ has ‘come to represent English literary imperialism’ for many postcolonial critics. And yet this anecdotal evidence does not really explain why another Wordsworth poem, a poem by another writer, or another kind of text altogether, could not ‘come to represent English literary imperialism’. ‘Daffodils’ was not the only poem taught in schools. It both belongs to the canon of verses recited and sung on Empire Day throughout the colonies and to the smaller sub-set of culturally privileged poems. Any one of these verses or poems might, conceivably, have been singled out as representative of ‘the forced adoption of the motherland’. Furthermore, seeing as Cliff also refers to Tennyson and Keats being taught alongside Wordsworth in the manuals sent out to Jamaican teachers, I would imagine that ‘Daffodils’ was not the only poem with a subject unfamiliar and incongruous to a Jamaican audience. At least, I very much doubt that nightingales are any more prevalent in Jamaica than daffodils and suggest that any selection from Keats and Tennyson is as likely to confound a Jamaican reader with classical mythology as is Wordsworth with daffodils. The question therefore arises as to just why is it that Mukherjee writes of the longing to be ‘daffodilized’ and not of the longing to be ‘nightingalized’.
In his paper, ‘Dances with Daffodils: Wordsworth and the West Indies’, Edward Chamberlin reminded the audience at last year’s Caribbean Studies conference of other reasons why they should be surprised at this. ‘Daffodils’, Chamberlin argued, ‘appeared in the midst of a set of arguments about language ... and nationality ... as well as about race and gender ... which have a close analogue in the discussions that have taken place in the West Indies over the past fifty years about language, literature and identity’ (p. 2). Wordsworth’s choice of a natural and local subject was as deliberate as his use of ‘the language really used by men’. In the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, he negotiated a path through the topical issues of his day by proposing a poetry of action that creates feeling and meaning rather than simply describing them. This credo, Chamberlin argued, is manifest in a poem like ‘Daffodils’. The poem is a description of an experience which has changed the speaker. But, in Chamberlin’s words, it also ‘enact[s] rather than merely indicate[s] in language’ an ‘instability of mood and manner that was for Wordsworth a condition of the imagination’ (p. 8). This credo is one which many West Indian critics affirm today. Chamberlin connected Wordsworth’s argument for the use of dialect and the ‘words of life’ with similar arguments for the use of dialect in West Indian poetry (pp. 3-4). Both arguments assert that dialect is important because it enacts the presence and subjectivity of the people in their own terms.

Chamberlin also pointed out to his audience that when Wordsworth’s ‘daffodil poem’ was first published in Poems in Two Volumes it was not received at all well by Wordsworth’s contemporaries. It is easy to forget the radical nature of Wordsworth’s enterprise and what Thomas De Quincey terms ‘the unutterable contempt avowed for all that he had written’ before 1835. Francis Jeffrey’s abiding impression of Poems in Two Volumes at the time of his review was that it was full of ‘low, silly, or uninteresting’ subjects, and he later singled out ‘dancing daffodils and sister Emmelines’ for particular censure. Anna Seward and Robert Southey also found it hard to understand why the poet would want to ‘look at pile-worts and daffodowndillies through the same telescope which he applies to stars’. Coleridge, too, had his doubts. After restituting Wordsworth’s poetry in this context, Chamberlin concludes that far from inhabiting ‘the imperial centre of poetry ... of all the great poets ... Wordsworth is the most marginal in terms of his language, his subjects, his home; and the marginalities of race and gender that he himself did not represent, he wrote about ...’ (p. 25). Given all this marginality and bad press, ‘Daffodils’ status as symbol of ‘English literary imperialism’ becomes very surprising indeed.
In the rest of this paper I want to suggest some answers to this conundrum. For there is more at stake here than the reputation of one poem. By deploying ‘Daffodils’ as a key site of English literary imperialism, Kincaid, Cliff, Wendt and others construct an idea of Wordsworth which Chamberlin has noted is based on a very selective reading of the archive. It is a negative and reductive conception of Wordsworth – and, through him, Romanticism – which is frequently mobilized by postcolonial critics. On the other hand, by redeploying ‘Daffodils’ as a site of radicalism and marginality, Chamberlin constructs an ‘innocent’ Wordsworth who has been strategically misrepresented by writers such as Cliff and Kincaid. Chamberlin reminds us of all Wordsworth’s political poems – his laments on the Extinction of the Venetian Republic and the subjugation of Switzerland for example – and even points out that in the very same volume as ‘Daffodils’ is a sonnet about a silent and rejected Negro woman. He defies his audience to call this poem inappropriate or petty. Chamberlin chastises those who demand poetical subjects that reflect social and political reality, calling this attitude to representation ‘as narrowly Augustan as anything one could imagine’ (p. 8). Such an ideal overlooks the ‘idea of rhetoric’ and the underlying importance of poetics which, Chamberlin asserts, West Indian critics have already acknowledged elsewhere (p. 8). In effect, Chamberlin demonstrates that positioning this little poem ‘at the imperial centre’ has serious ramifications. Of utmost importance to Chamberlin is the way in which ‘demonization’ of Wordsworth deities West Indian poets a connection with a tradition of resistance, an ‘attitude ... towards language in literature ... that is much more than a political gesture or a post-colonial style’ (p. 4).

Chamberlin’s arguments are persuasive. He seems to be putting Wordsworth back where he belongs; back at the cutting edge of early nineteenth-century thought and very much on the fringe of critical fashion. And yet the implication here is that Wordsworth has been positioned at the imperial centre quite wrongly by the deliberately selective readings of postcolonial critics. It strikes me that this construction of Wordsworth fails to take into account the fact that not all nineteenth-century audiences – let alone all twentieth-century audiences – are presented with the entire Wordsworth archive. Most of us encounter Wordsworth selectively. I would go so far as to suggest that, apart from a few students of Wordsworth, everyone who has encountered the poet at all has done so through editions or compilations of his work selected by institutionally sanctioned men and women for particular pedagogical reasons. The anecdotal evidence of people like Cliff, Kincaid and Wendt demonstrates that the Wordsworth they encountered was not the Wordsworth who lamented the subjugation of Switzerland. The Wordsworth sent out to the colonies was a man who
wrote about daffodils rather than politics. Might this historical fact not be enough in itself to explain why it is the Wordsworth of ‘Daffodils’ who is redeployed?

And yet, the possibility that the prominence of ‘Daffodils’ in postcolonial accounts mirrors the historical prominence of the poem in colonial education surely only shifts the terms of this enquiry: why was this poem selected for colonial dissemination? With due respect to Edward Chamberlin, I suggest that these questions are ultimately the same. The work of Gauri Viswanathan and Alan Richardson is useful in shedding light on this connection. As both writers make clear, the canonisation or management of a poet like Wordsworth is historically linked to the social uses envisaged for their work at home and abroad. Moreover, it is always a particular interpretation of ‘their work’ which is mobilized.

In Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India, Gauri Viswanathan suggests that ‘the English literary text ... function[ed] ... as a surrogate Englishman’ in nineteenth-century India. The literary text was presented as the sublime product of English knowledge by the colonial administration; it posited the ‘true essence’ of the Englishman in his ‘mental output’ rather than in his material presence. Viswanathan believes that in this way the ‘sordid history of colonialist expropriation, material exploitation, and class and race oppression behind European world dominance’ was ‘efface[d]’. The ideals and high moral standards of the English literary text became a ‘mask’ for what Englishmen were actually doing to the people of India. Although Viswanathan barely refers to Wordsworth in her study, I think it is useful to see ‘Daffodils’ in the light of this thesis. On a very literal level, ‘Daffodils’ locates the Englishman in English countryside composing poetry in joyful and gentle touch with Nature. It would hardly be possible to convey an Englishman more ideal and less like those involved in ‘commercial operation[s], military expansion ... [and] administration of territories’ in India. This short poem also presents an idyllic, pre-industrial picture of England which a department of propaganda would be hard-pressed to supersede. I suggest that it posits the Lake District against London in the same way that it posits Wordsworth against the Englishman in India. In a colonial context, the Lake District is here presented as a ‘mask’ for London, the real centre of British imperial power. The Lake District is presented as the imperial centre, the image each Englishman has in his heart; its very brevity serves to conceal the complications and contradictions inherent in any society. On a very literal level, deployment of a word-picture like ‘Daffodils’ was incalculably useful to the colonial administration.

Viswanathan also points out that, after the institution of English as the official language of education in India in 1835, there were initially several schools of thought as to the proper kind of literary text for Indian people to study. Viswanathan shows that the Romantic curriculum favoured by
missionaries such as Alexander Duff gradually won precedence over the older, classical model. It was felt that the 'highly imagistic poetry of Cowper, Wordsworth, Akenside, and Young' was better equipped to produce the kind of imagination necessary to feel the 'truth of Christianity' than neoclassical verse. In addition to containing a highly emotive image of England, 'Daffodils' was exactly the kind of poem recommended by Duff. As I have already pointed out, it required the reader to imaginatively enter a situation and re-enact the emotion of the poet. For this reason I consider it highly probable that 'Daffodils' would have been one of the Wordsworth selections on Duff's 1852 curriculum.

Alan Richardson also charts the rise of the "Romantic" idea of literature' in the second half of the nineteenth century. Richardson argues that previously derogated forms of literature became highly regarded forms in the mid-nineteenth century. Like the didactic conduct books in vogue earlier in the century, fairy tales and imaginative poetry encouraged adherence to a strict moral code and social hierarchy - but they did so 'through awakening a common, essential human selfhood' rather than by 'prescriptive maxim ...' (p. 262). Imaginative literature was acknowledged to be a better way of teaching people a moral code because it engaged the minds of people deeply; it required participation in the process of gaining consent. The mandate for imaginative literature envisaged by Wordsworth and Coleridge moved from being the idea of an isolated group of radical thinkers to being widely endorsed by influential educators, publishers, and colonial administrators in the mid nineteenth century. Imaginative literature became a socially useful way of dealing with the changing conditions faced by the British Empire - the nascent proletariat, increasingly frustrated by industrialisation, the burgeoning women's movement, the 'well-entrenched learned class' in colonies like India. While Viswanathan positions the role played by India in the parallel rise of English Literary Studies and the 'Romantic' idea of literature as central, Richardson prefers to stress the way in which the canonisation of imaginative literature was a response to a number of threatening situations within Britain and the British Empire (p. 261). Both writers agree, however, that a poet like Wordsworth fulfilled the changing needs of those in power and enhanced his reputation accordingly. From his position of 'unutterable contempt' before 1835, Wordsworth rose quickly in critical fashion, becoming poet laureate in 1843 and being firmly canonised by Matthew Arnold in 1879.

The possibility that Wordsworth was a marginal poet before 1835 is, I would argue, therefore fairly irrelevant to a student in the colonies. It was the very ascendancy of Wordsworth and the Wordsworthian idea of literature after 1835 that bespoke his inclusion on Duff's curriculum. And yet it could also be argued that this 'Wordsworthian idea of literature' was as much a construction of Arnold and earlier editors as of Wordsworth himself. In the introduction to his seminal edition of
Colonial and Postcolonial Deployment of 'Daffodils'  

Wordworth’s poetry in 1879, for example, Arnold argued that ‘to be recognized far and wide as a great poet ... Wordsworth needs to be relieved of a great deal of the poetical baggage which now encumbers him’. Arnold believed that Wordsworth’s ‘best work [was] ... in his shorter pieces’, especially those produced between 1798 and 1808. Appreciation of these pieces was impeded for Arnold by the ‘mass of inferior work’ surrounding them and by the ‘artificial arrangement’ of poems within a volume that Wordsworth himself insisted upon (pp. 223-4). Arnold sought to correct these problems in his 1879 edition, thereby producing a version of Wordsworth which Englishmen could glory in unreservedly (p. 235). Later editors have also tended to ‘correct’ Wordsworth, usually by preferring his earlier versions of poems. Wordsworth’s constant revisions and retreat from some of his former radicalism are an embarrassment to those who would deploy him to illustrate their own particular theses.

Arnold’s redeployment of Wordsworth has been enormously influential. And yet one consequence of the important but nonetheless supplementary role of poetry in Arnold’s curriculum was that Wordsworth’s ‘formal philosophy’ had to be excised from his poetry (p.229). Poems like *The Excursion* were no good to Arnold; they usurped the role of the more instructive literary texts on his curriculum and did not exhibit the universal joys and disinterested beauties that he had designated the domain of poetry. Poems like ‘Daffodils’, on the other hand, fulfilled these criteria most capably. ‘Daffodils’ was promoted by Arnold because it was acceptable Wordsworth: short, written in the ‘great decade’, and free from ‘elevated but abstract verbiage, alien to the very nature of poetry’ (p. 229).

The interest of Arnold and other editors in disseminating an apolitical Wordsworth explains why it is also this apolitical Wordsworth who is resisted by postcolonial critics. It should not, however, be forgotten that Wordsworth was himself very interested in promoting and producing a version of ‘Wordsworth’ pedagogically. As Richardson points out, Wordsworth was not merely ‘done unto’ by anthologists and editors with their own agendas to pursue. As early as 1831 he allowed Joseph Hine to publish *Selections from the Poems of William Wordsworth, Esq. Chiefly for the use of Schools and Young Persons*. Richardson suggests that Wordsworth was only too willing to cede editorial control at Hine’s promise of circulating his poems among ‘every private family, and every school in this and other countries where the English language ... is cultivated’. Wordsworth not only recognised the huge potential audience for his poems in the diaspora but, as Richardson puts it, saw ‘the poet’s role [as] ... help[ing] hold an extended, fragmenting, increasingly far-flung social group together through creating a “common “human discourse”’ (p. 265). Indeed, Wordsworth’s almost obsessive concern with the text and order of his complete works seem to me
symptomatic of the pedagogical vision he had for his poetry and the (ever-changing) moral legacy he wanted to leave. I think it is important to remember Wordsworth’s own desire to have his poetry widely read as well as his significance as one of the thinkers whose ideas became strategically useful for others to deploy in the mid to late nineteenth century. By resituating Wordsworth amidst his early hostile contemporaries Chamberlin seems to settle an aura of innocence around Wordsworth. The poet emerges from Chamberlin’s account as a potential ally to the postcolonial cause. But Richardson shows that Wordsworth was intimately concerned with educational issues and schemes – and was fully aware of the application of these in the colonies. While Wordsworth might not have sanctioned Arnold’s removal of philosophy from his poetry, I think it is likely he would have approved the increased readership consequent to the 1879 edition.

Interestingly, Chamberlin’s reclamation of an ‘innocent’ Wordsworth has parallels with Jonathan Bate’s recovery of a ‘green’ Wordsworth in Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition. Both writers reclaim Wordsworth for their marginalized/radical ontologies by emphasizing Wordsworth’s focus on the specific geography and native inhabitants of the English Lake District. In this respect they can be seen as participating in the recent bid to reassert the importance of spatial/regional study in critical theory. By considering daisies, daffodils, leech gatherers and so on to be part of a highly specific landscape articulated by Wordsworth in ways inflected by Westmorland speech patterns (p. 25), Chamberlin overrides the notion that these are incidents and subjects drawn from ‘common life’ and aimed at creating a ‘common “human” discourse’. As I have noted, the critical reception of Wordsworth’s contemporaries to the specifics of his subjects is a crucial factor in the framing of Chamberlin’s argument. Chamberlin implies that Wordsworth’s contemporaries criticized the poet because to them he was hopelessly provincial. Similarly, Bate redirects our attention to Wordsworth’s Guide to the Lakes and his philosophy of unalienated labour in The Excursion, which, Bate points out, reached more editions and sold more copies than anything else Wordsworth wrote in his own lifetime. Bate uses the critical reception of Wordsworth’s contemporaries to authenticate his view that Wordsworth has been misrepresented both by Marxist critics and by those who emphasize individualist ontologies. He claims to be excavating the ‘real’ Wordsworth by basing his own interpretation not in extra-textual politics but in the intuitions of the Victorian reader who knew to ‘locate ... Wordsworth firmly in nature’ (p. 10). Like Chamberlin, Bate moves Wordsworth’s relationship with the Lake District from the periphery to the centre of Wordsworthian study.

Bate’s thesis is fascinating. He argues that the true ‘Romantic Ideology’ is not ‘a theory of imagination and symbol embodied in ... self-consciously idealist and elitist texts ... but a theory of ecosystems and
unalienated labour embodied in ... self-consciously pragmatic and populist texts’ (p. 10). Bate traces the influence of Wordsworth’s popular work in forerunners of the environmental movement such as John Ruskin and William Morris and in the formation of the National Parks movement. His book attempts to valorise the ‘common sense’ approach to Wordsworth; to remember the grounds of the poet’s popularity in the mid-nineteenth century and to recover in Wordsworth a figure of relevance to the political formations of the 1990’s. I must admit to feeling quite a bit of sympathy for this position. Bate appeals to those disillusioned with ‘modernist’ privileging of time over space – with the developmental model of evolutionary progress in time as a way of understanding social formations. By focusing on Wordsworth’s relationship to the Lake District, Bate engages with – and profits from – theories of geographically uneven development and synchronicity formulated by people like Edward Soja which posit spatially distinct experience and conditions as the explanatory model. And yet, far from positioning his own thesis as a (perhaps more useful) construction of ‘Wordsworth’, Bate claims to be recovering the ‘writer’s purposes’ themselves. This is a move which overlooks Wordsworth’s own involvement with the pedagogical dissemination of his work as it sidesteps issues of how it has been employed by others. It is thus a move which I believe fundamentally ignores – as it ostensibly examines – the impact literature can have on human geography.

For me, the main problem with Bate’s thesis is that it fails to interrogate why so many non-Victorian readers might not ‘locate ... Wordsworth ... in nature’. Bate does not consider the possibility that critics bring sociopolitical frameworks to bear on Wordsworth because Wordsworth’s poetry was often deployed within sociopolitical frameworks. To insist upon the veracity of one Victorian response to Wordsworth is to deny the poet’s ongoing impact in the broader sociopolitical sphere. Another problem that I have with Bate’s move is that it also denies the possibility that Victorian readers might ‘locate ... Wordsworth ... in nature’ for non-environmental reasons. Bate claims that ‘most people know two things about Wordsworth, that he wrote about daffodils and that he lived in the Lake District’ (p. 4), but he does not consider that this image of Wordsworth was the result of careful selection and dissemination of the poet’s work in Britain as well as in the colonies. I argue against Bate that the association of Wordsworth, daffodils and the Lake District in the minds of many readers is not so much the accidental result of a provincial nature poet called Wordsworth being born in the Lake District, as the result of this conjunction of elements being particularly useful to British educators and deliberately deployed.
IV

At this point in my paper I turn, finally, to the third element in the Wordsworth/daffodils/Lake District conjunction cited above. As I have shown, when Wordsworth’s delight in Lake District daffodils is presented to a reader in the West Indies, it is not Wordsworth’s status as a local nature poet that stands out but the irrelevancy of these images outside the imperial centre. I would even go so far as to suggest that, in a colonial context, the Lake District becomes the imperial centre — the source and ideal of Englishness — just as Wordsworth becomes the ‘surrogate Englishman’. I have already mentioned that Ishrat Lindblad expresses satisfaction in finding a correspondence between English Literature and English landscape in the Lake District. Lindblad’s pilgrimage demonstrates colonial investment in the notion of an idealized Lake District as the sacred heart of England, rather than industrialized London. Similarly, by deconstructing ‘Daffodils’ as ‘the forced adoption of the motherland’, postcolonial writers like Jamaica Kincaid and Michelle Cliff reveal the way in which the clean and pristine Lake District functions as a ‘mask’ for the dirty machinations of London. The point that I have not hitherto considered, however, is that, in doing this, Cliff and Kincaid also participate in perpetuating the myth that the Lake District is ‘clean and pristine’.

Cliff and Kincaid are not interested in any analogies that could be drawn between exploitation of the local inhabitants and landscape of the Lake District and the West Indies, but only in the historical assertion of their difference. Alan Richardson points out that some of these analogies are fertile ground for study. In 1811, for example, Wordsworth helped institute a school in Grasmere on the ‘Madras plan’ — a system ‘initially designed to facilitate the socialization of the “half-caste children” of British soldiers in India’ (p. 96). George Ford’s essay on ‘The Cottage Controversy’ in the Lake District is also suggestive of parallels with the aestheticisation of poverty in colonial contexts. But postcolonial writers like Cliff and Kincaid are no more interested in mobilizing these complex ideas about the Lake District than the colonial administration was in disseminating them under the British flag. The reductive postcolonial view of the Lake District neatly inverts the idealistic colonial image. Although contemporary West Indian writers undoubtedly have the resources to position Wordsworth differently, it seems that the formative impact of the ‘daffodil’ Wordsworth has the overriding significance for many writers. ‘Daffodils’, because it is taught to children, represents the pedagogical aspect of British colonialism. As I have suggested, it has become metonymic of Englishness in this context. Until ‘Daffodils’ is disengaged from this meaning I suggest Wordsworth and the Lake District will also continue to be limited in their signification by postcolonial discourse.

Indeed, the reclamation of Wordsworth attempted by both Chamberlin
and Bate attests to the interrelation of geography and literature. Both critics seek to reposition Wordsworth and do so by re-mapping the Lake District. For Chamberlin and Bate, the Lake District is a marginal space either outside the discourse of imperialism or itself 'colonised' by the imperial centre. Chamberlin emphasizes how Wordsworth was born in the northern 'border country' in a time when there were virtually "two nations"—north and south, poor and rich, rural and urban (p. 23). Bate does not so much insist upon the marginality of Wordsworth as on the centrality of the Lake District to his thinking and the absence of a colonial sphere. The point that I want to make here is that Bate and Chamberlin require a certain image of the Lake District to requisition Wordsworth on behalf of their cause—just as Cliff and Kincaid require the obverse image. Because of the way it has been deployed historically and continues to be deployed, I consider the representation and construction of Lake District geography to be a highly significant marker of British imperial and post-imperial power.

NOTES

2. Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'Growing up by the Ganga', in Chew & Rutherford op. cit., p. 112.


19. Ibid.


22. Unfortunately it seems impossible to verify this. The Selections from Southey, Montgomery, Campbell and Wordsworth on Duff’s curriculum that Viswanathan cites (from an appendix to the Parliamentary Papers of 1852-53) is not listed in the British Museum Catalogue under any one of its key words. It is possible that this was an abbreviated title of another anthology or that individual ‘selected works’ were implied.

23. Alan Richardson, Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1789-1832, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 265. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


25. Matthew Arnold, ‘Introduction to Poems of Wordsworth, 1879’, in McMaster, op. cit., p. 223. All further references are to this reprint of Arnold and are included in the text.


27. The introduction to Wordsworth in the fifth edition of the Norton Anthology of Literature (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986) still speaks in terms of Wordsworth’s ‘greatest poetry [having] ... been written by 1807’ (p. 143) and offers a selection drawn on very Arnoldian lines. It is also salutary that Arthur Applebee’s study of curriculum and instruction in the United States found Wordsworth to be the seventh most anthologised author (after Dickinson, Frost, Shakespeare, Poe, Whitman and Tennyson) and ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’, ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’ and ‘Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey’ to be his most anthologised poems (Literature in the Secondary School: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States [Urbana: National Council of Teachers, 1993], pp. 105,113).


Thomas Kretz

BLINDNESS

On his own down counted steps
left twenty paces from a prison
of silent darkness
eyes behind bars

No problem crossing the street
as colors of traffic lights
have different hums
his ears humongous

One metal claw scratching up
the other side where trouble
arches the backbone
muting any purring

Slicing the hostile atmosphere
while reading the hard braille
of anger rising
to cobra venom

Browsing a library of emotions
with every block until home
behind friendly locks
visitors denied
SUFFOCATION

Not a real holiday
without the tartan clan
spread like disciples
around her wee altar;
ribbons fell away,
the lid came off
a yellowed hatbox,
pale rigid photographs
gasping for oxygen
paraded hand to hand.

Each time passed around
another corner chipped,
faces became more distant,
strange historical fashions
of the Highland days
from which every glimpse
and grin of Aunt Rosey
had been extracted with pain
or excised with scissors
from granny’s memories.

When we were still
stealing green apples
Rosey married some taboo
never quite spelled out
and went away to Paris;
we missed the dancing,
her songs and teacakes,
understanding where mum
could not, long hugs
making summer of winter.

When we were almost ready
to strike out on our own
Rosey came back broken,
fatigue fractured alcoholic,
crying all remaining time
out of her one-room flat
where we sneaked visits
without mum or granny
until remorse ran out
and she hung herself.
In August the lakes ran dry. The temperature was in the nineties most of the time and I slept particularly badly the first few days in my new apartment. At night I smoked, read or watched TV until the early hours; sometimes I got dressed, leaving my apartment to walk the streets, listening to the eerie sounds of the sleeping city as I wandered wherever my footsteps took me.

On the fifth day – in the middle of the afternoon – an unexpected knock at my door made me jump. I wondered who it could be, not knowing anyone in the city yet; Jehovah’s witnesses perhaps? I opened the door and there was a small bearded man, probably in his early sixties, standing there; nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. He spoke to me in Danish.

‘Good day,’ he said. ‘I’m Johannes Vig. I live on the first floor.’

‘Yes?’ I said, eyeing him suspiciously, not sure whether I had seen a ‘Vig’ on any of the other apartment doors as I had walked up the stairs of my building.

‘I wonder if you might undertake a small amount of work for me? May I come in and explain?’ He looked behind me. ‘You’re not busy, are you.’ It was a statement, not a question, and I wondered if he had seen me return alone.

‘No, I’m not busy,’ I confessed, beckoning him into the entrance hall and in he strode, going over to my hatstand at once. He studied it admiringly and I took particular notice that he hadn’t bothered to extinguish his cigarette, although I did not comment on this.

‘What a wonderful piece of craftsmanship,’ he said, touching the wooden hatstand with his left hand. ‘Wonderful. A wonderful stand,’ he repeated and I couldn’t tell if he was speaking to me or to himself.

I’d bought the hatstand the previous morning from an antique dealer on Gustav Adolfsgade. I had gone out intending to buy rye bread for lunch but as I was coming back from the bakers I noticed it standing just inside the doorway of the shop. If the shop door had been closed I would have passed by without a second thought, perhaps briefly glancing in the window to study the flotsam and jetsam on display as I went by. However, the door was open and within five minutes I had emerged from the shop having handed over more than a week’s wages.
for a piece of furniture that I — I would readily admit — had little use for. It was an impulse but, uncharacteristic of myself and once home, I’d stood it in my tiny entrance-hall, trying to convince myself that it contrasts eccentrically with the polished wooden floors and grey-chrome IKEA furnishings the owner of the flat had preferred.

Johannes Vig took a drag on his cigarette and flicked some ash onto my floor.

‘What exactly is this about?’ I said, irritated by his manner and unexplained intrusion: I’d been working.

‘I understand you’re English?’ he said, now clearly addressing me.

‘That’s right?’

‘But you speak perfect Danish!’

Again, it sounded more like a statement than a simple question and I wondered how he knew this. Perhaps he had overheard me introducing myself to my neighbour, Siri Hou-Larsen.

‘Yes,’ I said guardedly.

‘Why?’

I mumbled something about my mother being Danish.

‘I see. I see ... good ... very good. Well, I wonder if you could do me a favour?’

‘That depends?’ I said, and as I did he put his left hand into his breast pocket and took out a thin wad of what looked like old envelopes; three or four, tied together with a piece of old string.

‘They’re letters,’ he told me. ‘Just ordinary, everyday letters. I’d like you to translate them into English for me ... They’re not long and I’m sure it wouldn’t take up too much of your time.’

He offered the bundle of letters to me and I looked at them hesitantly before taking them, not really knowing what to say; I don’t usually do translation work.

‘I’ll pay you three-thousand kroner.’

I untied the string and took the first letter out of the envelope and glanced at the first few lines. Although hand written, it seemed straightforward enough; something about the weather, someone called Nana and a necklace.

‘Yes, I could probably do it for you,’ I told him, turning the bundle of letters around in my hand to examine them. ‘But why?’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ he told me, smiling mischievously. ‘Let us say that it is the fervent wish of an old man! You concentrate on the task in hand and I’ll worry about the rest.’

The upturned corners of his mouth revealed a gold front tooth that, together with his white flecked beard, made him look like a pirate. ‘So you’ll do it?’ he wanted to know, perhaps rather impatiently.

‘Three-thousand kroner you say?’ — I knew this was well over the going rate for translation work.

‘Three thousand,’ he reiterated, offering me his hand as a gentleman
might.

'When do you want it done by?' I asked, flicking through the envelopes again.

'Two weeks today? Would that give you enough time?'

'I'm sure it would.'

I figured I could fit the work in between preparing for my courses. Besides, it didn't look like it would involve very much work and the three-thousand kroner would certainly come in handy, especially as I'd just blown such a large sum on the hatstand.

'Three thousand it is then,' I said, shaking him by the hand.

'Splendid,' he said, looking very pleased with himself. 'Splendid.'

Before leaving, Johannes Vig touched the hatstand one final time and announced to no one in particular: 'A wonderful piece. A wonderful piece,' and then, raising his hand as if making some kind of salute, he said good-bye and left.

That was how it started.

***

The First Letter.

October 2, 1952

'My Dear Nana,

It is now more than two months since we walked along the beach at Charlottenlund. You have probably heard from Pia Glostrup that I have got a job on Anhalt. Did she tell you that I have become the new school master?

I am living in the old school-house where Palludan used to live. It is hard to believe I have ended up here of all places: the return of the prodigal son, don't you think? The four beech trees still hide the house from the lane, although they are not as tall as I remembered them. I have been thinking about cutting them down because I could then watch the lane from my window but it seems such a shame to cut down something which has lived for so long.

The children come to class at eight o'clock every day. I have fourteen pupils. You know the Egebæks? Their eldest son, Torben, is in the class. He is fifteen now. I am trying to persuade him to stick with his studies because he is a bright lad but he will insist on joining his father on the boats, come spring.

Most afternoons after school I take Pigro and my rifle and we walk along the dunes, hunting. Yesterday Pigro spotted a woodcock that had not yet left for the winter; it made quite a prize. Ib Lauritzen, who still runs the store in the village, was very impressed. I bet he will be out there now, trying to out-do me as ever.
Rigmor visits me quite often, so thankfully I am not very lonely. Lars is always away on the mainland and she tells me his business is doing well. Everyone in the village admires his car although I am not particularly impressed: it’s just to parade his wealth. If I were him I would spend more time at home with my beautiful young wife. — Rigmor has invited me for supper tomorrow so that will make a pleasant change from the usual routine.

What have you done with the necklace, Nana? Remember to keep it safe. Have you worn it or is it still in its box? I’d like to know.

My dear Nana, I must stop now as it’s getting dark and I have to chop some wood for the fire before I run out. The nights are drawing in, here, and the beach at Charlottenlund and the warm summer seems so long ago.

I trust your studies are progressing.

Yours,

I couldn’t quite make out the signature: it could be Bo or even Pål, or perhaps something completely different, I just couldn’t tell. I imagined that it was as if, having got to the end of the letter, the writer had purposely obscured his or her identity by making his signature illegible. I took the second envelope and quickly glanced at the second letter but the signature was equally illegible so, on the off-chance, I went down to the first floor to ask Vig if he could explain what it meant. My translation felt incomplete without the name.

I knocked on his door and waited for him to answer. I could make out the faint sound of music – jazz, I think – coming from inside. He did not answer so I knocked again, this time rapping my knuckles fiercely on the door. I waited expectantly and then knocked again, this time even harder. The door to the next apartment opened behind me and I turned guiltily around, fearing I had disturbed Vig’s neighbour.

‘Sorry,’ said the young woman, standing in her doorway. ‘I thought it was mine.’ She quickly closed her door before I could apologise and I read the name plaque: Maja Madsen, and thought nothing more of it. I then turned again to face Vig’s door and raised my hand to knock again but I did not: the old man was probably having an afternoon snooze and I didn’t want to disturb him.

Early the next morning I took the metro from Nordhavn to the main station. From here I took the bus to the university where I spent the morning laboriously going through some paperwork. Later in the day, after a time-table meeting which dragged on for far too long in the hot afternoon, I decided to visit the library and take the opportunity to look up some information on the island of Anholt: Vig’s letters had remained persistently at the back of my mind throughout the day.
I locked my things in my office and made my way down the long white corridor towards the stairs. The corridor walls were lined with notice boards announcing class lists, research seminars and miscellaneous items for sale, like any other university department building, I suppose. But what made this building different was the absence of people. Even though it was only just past four, the place was eerily quiet. I figured my colleagues had gone home to make the most of the hot weather while it lasted. It struck me that it would have been nice if someone had invited me to go with them, being new in town, but I figured it was one of those things I had to put down to the infamous Scandinavian reserve.

At the end of the hall I went through a glass fire door which signalled the boundary of the English department, then down three flights of stairs to the ground floor. At the bottom of the staircase I found a door which opened up onto three corridors which, although leading in three different directions, were exactly identical. Unfamiliar with the building, I had absolutely no idea which one led to the library. I glanced about me, looking for a sign or a clue as to the direction I should take but all I could see were posters offering private tuition; a band advertising for a bass-player and a few pleas scrawled on tattered bits of paper looking for accommodation. Completely disorientated, it felt as if I had inadvertently walked into a maze. To think that some architect had had plans for this building approved!

I stood there contemplating my next move but thankfully, quite by chance, someone came walking towards me.

'Which way is the library?' I asked, seizing the opportunity.

The girl stopped and sighed slightly, as if I wasn't the first person to have asked her this, so I added, 'This place is like a labyrinth, isn't it.'

She smiled at me pityingly and agreed, 'Yes. It is. ... The library is just down there,' she said pointing to one of the corridors. 'By the diner. You can't miss it.'

Before I had time to thank her she was already hurriedly bounding up the stairs, so I continued in the direction she had pointed to but, typically, the library was closed; VACATION OPENING read the sign on the locked glass doors. Irritated, I turned around and quickly retraced my steps along the corridor, knowing what I could do instead.

The Second Letter

December 7, 1952

'Dear Nana,

Anholt is a cold and desolate place at the moment. In spite of this, the village is preparing for the Yuletide celebrations. I do not feel like
taking part in the festivities this year so I keep mostly to the schoolhouse. Sometimes Pigro and I go for long walks along the cliffs down on the headland.

Do you remember how on a clear day you can see Jutland? Well, the weather has been so bad recently I haven’t even been able to see Pigro: I almost lost him on one occasion so now I keep him close to me at all times.

The old school-house is very cold to live in but it suits us fine. It does lack a sophisticated touch but Pigro and I have simple tastes so I suppose we manage; he sleeps by the fireside while I work at my desk, although I sometimes read by the fire of an evening.

I heard from Pia Glostrup in the village that you are staying in Copenhagen for Christmas and New Year. Your father must be very disappointed but I suppose you have your reasons. Your brothers and their families will take care of him, I am sure. What an opportunity you have, staying in the city: I was there one Christmas, it was fantastic. I remember walking down Strøget, quite intoxicated by the extravagant windows. I recall how the Christmas lights cast a magical spell over the city. I should like to experience it all again, but I know that, unfortunately, it is not possible this year.

You must excuse the brevity of this letter but I am expected at Højbro farm for dinner in an hour with Rigmor and Lars – I can assure you they are both very well – so I must close now. I just wanted to let you know that I am thinking of you and wish you a very happy Christmas.’
seemed a ludicrously inflated amount to pay for something perceivably of such little worth, and I guiltily wondered if I wasn’t taking advantage of an old man, out of touch with reality. Still, there remained the final two envelopes which, I hoped, would – when I worked on them – shed greater light on my task and reveal just why the work commanded such an extraordinarily high fee.

When I got home that evening it was sometime around eight thirty. I opened the door to my apartment and, stepping into the hallway, I noticed a white envelope lying on the mat. I picked it up and saw that it was addressed to me. I took my jacket off and hung it up on my newly acquired hatstand and then opened the envelope. It contained a hand written note from Vig, telling me that he was going away for a few days. He hoped that my work was progressing and was looking forward to reading the end result. Was I settling in at the university, he wanted to know. I read this line again, carefully. How did he know I worked there? I replayed our earlier conversation in my mind, carefully going over each detail as I, coincidentally, stood on the very spot where he had so admired my hatstand. I was certain about it; I had never mentioned to him that I worked at the university.

The Third Letter

February 14, 1952

‘Dear Nana,

It has been a long time since I last wrote. Please excuse me. I have not forgotten about you. It’s just that I’ve been busy with my work.

A lot has happened since my last letter. Did you hear the terrible news about Torben Egebæk? I think it was even on the national radio that he drowned. It was a dreadful accident. He was out walking on the lake with a friend when he fell through some thin ice. The boy that was out with him tried to help him but it was too late by the time he got him. It is a terrible shame; everyone in the village liked Torben.

I don’t think I know anyone who hasn’t been touched by the incident; school is certainly not the same without him.

Ironically the day after Torben died the weather turned much colder.

It’s been so cold since then that the island has been cut off from the mainland: the ferries can’t get through because of the ice. There is no sign at the moment that it is getting warmer. At night it is very eerie walking along the headland without the sound of the waves breaking on the shore. I think Pigro is suspicious of it because, for some reason, he doesn’t like walking there at the moment.

I have noticed, of late, that he is beginning to show his age. He is not as young as he used to be. It will be a sad day when we take our last
walk along the headland together, but when it comes I shall think of the good times we have spent hunting together; the game we have captured. He has always been a trusty friend and an expert hunter.

One piece of good news: Rigmor is to become a mother. I shouldn’t tell you really as I am sworn to secrecy. Not even Lars knows! He is stuck in Jutland due to the ice. I only know because Rigmor told me. She was bursting with excitement and simply had to tell someone. Still, I doubt it will do any harm telling you because the whole village will know when Lars returns.

I spoke to your father recently. He was doing his shopping when I met him. I asked after you and he told me you were well. Your studies are progressing, I gather. Who would have thought that you would have done so well? I suppose you will never come back to live in the village now you are such a well-educated woman. Your father tells me you have changed quite a lot since you moved to Copenhagen. Have you really changed so much since our day on the beach at Charlottenlund? My recollection of that day still remains clear. We cycled from the house down to the beach and then sat there in the sun watching the sailboats flitting about and the tanker going over to Sweden. As I sit here now at my desk, the light from the fire flickering on the walls, I can still smell the apple you peeled for me. You laughed when I told you that you were the first woman to do that for me. Do you remember the old fat woman who kept tutting at us because of the noise we made? Do you think we looked like people in love?

Forgive my foolish witterings. Since the island has been cut off I have not been myself.

I shall close now but will write again soon.’

It was signed, simply, ‘Your friend.’

The fourth envelope did not contain a letter. Instead there were two faded newspaper clippings. I laid them out on the desk and studied them. The first, which was undated, was incomplete so I could only translate the portion that I had:

... for the village. In his closing address, the coroner remarked that he had been a well-liked and respected member of the community. He ruled that death was by misadventure.

The body has now been released and the family are making plans to bury the body of the deceased.

In handwriting that I didn’t recognise, someone had written ‘June 22, 1955’ at the top of the second clipping. I tried comparing it to the
handwriting of the letters and Vig’s note which was still lying around my desk but it was noticeably different. It said:

Nana Flusfeder, nee Elliason, has had the degree of PhD conferred upon her at a ceremony held by the Faculty of Arts, The University of Copenhagen for her thesis, ‘Gothic Fictions in Contemporary Danish Writing’. Flusfeder is to join her husband, the eminent American historian F.W. Flusfeder, at the University of Wisconsin where she is to take up a teaching post. The Nordic Department wishes her the very best for the future and is holding a leaving party on Wednesday July 2 at 7.30 in her honour. All members of faculty welcome.

I felt cheated by these final two pieces. Although I had come to the end of my task, neither shed particular light on Vig’s motives. Furthermore, I could only tentatively assume that the first newspaper cutting concerned the unnamed letter writer, but I could not be certain. At least I now knew something of what had happened to Nana but her departure to America and marriage to Flusfeder told another story; it revealed nothing of her relationship to the unnamed letter writer unless, of course, he was Flusfeder, but that was unlikely.

It seemed to me that my translations were utterly pointless, nothing but exercises designed to test my linguistic ability. They formed the skeleton of a story but a number of vital pieces of information were missing which rendered it incomplete. It was as if I was now forced to interpret and deduce the missing information, but this was not something I was prepared to do.

Hastily, I printed out copies of each of my translations and, having collected them in a blue paper folder, went down to the first floor, prepared to demand an explanation from Vig.

I knocked on his door impatiently and waited. I knocked again but it remained silent. Vig was out.

Thirty minutes later I tried again but to no avail; I returned to my apartment feeling thoroughly frustrated.

Seated at my desk, I re-read the original Danish texts that Vig had given me, hoping that there was some piece of vital information I had overlooked but there was nothing. My translations were, as far as I could tell, perfect: I had left nothing out.

What transpired during the month after I translated the contents of the fourth envelope proved even more frustrating than on that particular day. At first I paid daily visits to Vig’s apartment to see if he had
returned but each time I called he was not there. This didn't overly concern me because of his earlier note. Nevertheless, when the deadline came and went for completing the work and still he did not return I grew alarmed. Was the rotting corpse of Vig lying somewhere in his apartment, I wondered. Had he gone and died on me, his knowledge dying with him? On one occasion, when the stairs to the building were quiet, I pushed open his letter box and stuck my nose in to sniff the air, but all I could smell was the faint odour of stale cigarette smoke and musty books.

Things finally came to a head one Wednesday sometime in late September when the leaves on the trees around the lakes at Østerbro had begun to fall. On this particular day I returned home to discover that Vig’s name had been replaced on the door to his apartment. It now read Consuela and Mads Beck. I was astonished. Almost without thinking, I rang the bell and a young woman promptly answered; she had long black curly hair and was wearing bright yellow dungarees.

‘Yes,’ she said, speaking Danish. ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m sorry to bother you,’ I told her. ‘I’m Paul Beckett from the fourth floor. I wonder if you could tell me what’s happened to Johannes Vig?’

She looked at me blankly.

‘The man who lived here before you.’

‘Never heard of him. We’ve rented the apartment through an agency.’

‘So you don’t have a forwarding address or anything?’

The woman looked at me impatiently; I could see boxes strewn along her corridor and she obviously wanted to get back to her unpacking.

‘It’s just that I need to contact him urgently,’ I told her. ‘It’s important.’

The woman scratched her head. ‘You could try the housing agency who handled the lease,’ she suggested. ‘2V. They’re on Nordre Frihavnsgade.’

I thanked her; she shut her door.

Before going up to my own apartment I decided to give the neighbour a try but, predictably, she was out.

As it was still only four, I decided to go over to 2V and try and see if they could help me. I dropped off my things in my apartment and walked along Silkeborggade, past the five-storey building where builders were working and the post-office until I came to Nordre Frihavnsgade. Then I went into 2V and asked to speak to whoever was in charge. A woman – I don’t remember her name – dressed in a short grey skirt and a faded blouse asked if she could help me.

‘I’ve come about the apartment on Odense gade. Number forty three, first floor, to the right.’

‘It’s already been let, I’m afraid,’ she told me, picking up some
papers from her desk. 'But I'm sure we've got something else you might be interested in.' She flicked through more papers but I stopped her.

'I haven't come about the apartment,' I told her, reaching inside my coat pocket for my wallet. 'It's about Johannes Vig, the previous tenant.'

The woman looked at me, unsure of what I wanted so I showed her my social identity card which gave my address and explained the situation to her.

'You see, I'd like to contact Vig as he's left some things that belong to him in my apartment.'

The woman eyed me suspiciously.

'Vet's furniture, you see,' I told her, quickly deciding that this sounded more plausible than the truth. 'He asked me to look after it and it's taking up a lot of space.'

At this, the woman – one of those dreadful types that do their best to keep people out of the office – looked at me sympathetically.

'It's a large hatstand,' I told her, again lying.

'Hold on a minute,' she said, and typed something into her PC.

I leaned forwards, trying to get a look at the screen but it was at such an acute angle that I couldn't read it. A minute or so went by; she tried typing something else; eventually she spoke. 'I'm sorry sir ... Our records show that Mr Vig was the previous tenant but he hasn't given any forwarding address.'

I sighed. 'Don't you have a previous address for him?'

The woman checked her screen.

'No. I'm afraid we don't. It appears Mr Vig was previously of no fixed abode.'

'So you're telling me that he's practically vanished,' I said, my voice now beginning to reveal my exasperation.

'It appears so ... unless ...' The woman thought for a moment, 'unless you know who his employer is,' and she began to check her screen again, 'but I see that according to our records he is, in fact, retired.'

I sighed. I didn't know where else to turn.

'Perhaps Mr Vig meant for you to keep the furniture,' the woman suggested helpfully.

'It's possible,' I muttered, 'but I doubt it.'

I thanked her and left, walking slowly back to my apartment.

Outside my door, I took my keys from my pocket, but as I went to unlock the door I noticed, to my horror, that it was already open. A pulse of fear went through me. Tentatively, I pushed the door and it swung open. I stepped cautiously into the hall, looking about me, half expecting an intruder to be going through my personal items or to find them strewn across the floor but the place looked exactly as I had left it
that morning.

‘Hello?’ I called, my voice trembling slightly but the apartment remained silent.

I stepped gingerly into the living room; I noted that the TV and Hi-Fi were thankfully still there and my computer was on the desk exactly where I had left it. I checked the kitchen and the bathroom, too, but, as far as I could see, nothing had been touched. Everything was just as I had left it; nothing was missing. I let out a sigh, relieved. I told myself that I must have forgotten to pull the door shut when I left for work that morning.

Casually, I went back to the front door and closed it behind me, this time making doubly sure that it was firmly shut before I finally took my jacket off. It was only then, as I went to hang up my jacket, that I noticed that my hatstand had gone.

***

The police never discovered who stole my hatstand. Although they contacted me a number of times during the first two weeks after I reported its theft, it was always to tell me that they had nothing to report. The calls grew more sporadic and eventually stopped. Ten days after the last call, I called them and spoke to the desk sergeant who informed me that the case had, regrettably, been closed; murders and armed robberies had taken place during the interim; man-power was required to solve more pressing cases.

I never heard from Johannes Vig again. He simply vanished from the face of the earth, leaving only his wretched letters behind – which I kept in a box in the bottom drawer of my desk: reminders of his very existence. Sometimes I almost thought I saw him; an old, shabbily dressed man, puffing on a cigarette, padding along Østerbro gade, but when I got closer it was always someone else.
Looking back on the nineteenth century and beyond from her vantage point of the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf wrote that ‘if we [women] had the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think ... then ... the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down’.¹ This body of which she speaks is the form of our artistic choosing – the body of mind – the only body over which we have shaping control. The choice of form and the consequences of that choosing is the subject of this paper. Emily Dickinson chose the hyphenated hymnal, Elizabeth Barrett Browning chose the verse novel, Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson chose the literary ballad but regretted what she perceived as the lost poetic status involved in not choosing lyric.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century Emily Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson (born of English mother and Mohawk father) became a cult figure in Canada, known as ‘The Mohawk Princess’, and briefly touted her exotic image around the salon circuit of London, to die some fifteen years later in virtual obscurity. Her poetic performances were marked by a schizophrenia, one half of her programme dressed in ‘traditional’ (although markedly sexualized – even vamped) Indian moccasin, bead and feather, and the other half in English evening dress of pale rose or white (a marketable sexuality of a very different and ambiguous nature). Although her poetry addressed the politics of indigenous people’s rights to self-representation in its many meanings and forms, it was a poetry whose effective political and poetic possibility was curtailed by her own and her audience’s perception of what poetry, more particularly, women’s poetry, could and should be, and indeed, by her indeterminate status not only as a woman poet but as a ‘halfbreed’. However, although her voice was partially contained by and within nineteenth-century notions of a poet, woman and native, what that voice achieved within its lifetime, its influence upon contemporary North American indigenous writing, changing attitudes to women’s poetry, and the degree to which her voice eluded containment should not be underestimated.

In fact, Tekahionwake’s chosen dramatic form, the literary ballad, allowed her the malleability to acknowledge and make use of the
continuum of a European tradition whilst giving her the means of imposing the difference and the distinctiveness of an indigenous North American heritage. The literary ballad offered access to a literary canon and a measure of aesthetic/poetic credibility whilst affecting a highly emotive and polemic orality, at its best capable of capturing and swaying audience opinion. It is within her use of the ballad rather than the lyric that she balances on the knife edge of acceptable 'women's poetry', and it is in her treatment and response to this form, and the resultant success or failure of that form that I am particularly interested. It is here, in her literary and dramatic understanding and presentation of the woman in a shadow-land between indigenous and white cultures, colonized and colonizer, that, as George Lyon has proposed, she 'strains against the semiotic (or indeed, artistic) boundaries of her time'.

Tekahionwake first came to critical notice when her poems, included in a collection of Songs of the Great Dominion (1889), were selected for special attention by the English critic Theodore Watts-Dunton who proclaimed her to be the poet of 'the Red-Man's Canada': 'a poet so rare - so full of the spirit of the open air'. Watts-Dunton's ecstatic reaction to Tekahionwake's poetry and her person was to be repeated many times over by academic and plebian audience alike throughout the years of her performing-life; but apart from a brief resurgence of nationalistic fervour in the 1920s when the Canadian content of her poetry was again in demand as the symbol of native/natural heritage, she fell into critical disfavour. By the early 1940s, the influential Canadian critic, A.J.M. Smith, was dismissing the earlier nationalistic acclaim of her poetry, declaring it to be neither Indian nor Canadian, but 'empty of content as any devotee of pure poetry could wish'. Patronised and denigrated as a mere versifier, a music-hall entertainer and a 'mock Indian', she disappeared from anthologies, school texts and literary journals. It is possible to surmise that she has perhaps lost value today because she was so much of her time – sentimental, romantic, nationalistic. The poems that Betty Keller lists as most popular in her day include poems that are generally dubbed by modern readers as melodramatic, sentimental or even ludicrous; but what these poems have in common gives us an important clue that will go some way towards explaining the polar swing in critical response.

Firstly they are poems that demand performance – they are written for recitation. As such, they fall outside the restrictive nature of much literary criticism that no longer has access to that performance for which the poet was so famous: value judgements applied to the printed word are often inappropriate, but we have no method or precedent to judge otherwise. Secondly, they are the Indian poems of her collection. When The White Wampum, her first volume of poetry, was published in 1895, it contained not only the ballads of Indian legend and recitation pieces on the contemporary and historical plight of the Indian, but personal lyrics
of love, death, Christian faith and doubt, and the nature of art. True worth has in fact never been accorded her because she has always been appreciated within the boundaries of the exotic: Canadian Indian and female entertainer. To understand the force behind the critical rise and fall of Tekahionwake’s literary credibility, we must return to Theodore Watts-Dunton’s catalytic reaction to her person and her work in which he remarks particularly upon the significance of her ‘famous Indian family – the Mohawks of Brantford! that splendid race to whose unswerving loyalty during two centuries not only Canada, but the entire British Empire owes a debt that can never be repaid’. This admiration for the perceived nobility of the Mohawk is echoed by Charles Mair whose memorial tribute in 1913 defined Tekahionwake as ‘a girl whose blood and sympathies were largely drawn from the greatest tribe of the most advanced nation of Indians on the continent’. A similar response to the romance and exoticism of ‘the wild’ comes from Gilbert Parker, who writes in memorium:

she brought a breath of the wild; not because she dressed in Indian costume, but because its atmosphere was round her. The feeling of the wild looked out of her eyes, stirred in her gesture, moved in her footstep. I am glad to have known this rare creature who had the courage to be glad of her origin, without defiance, but with an unchanging, if unspoken insistence.

In a sense, the canonization of indigeneity, as represented by the colonizer’s legitimisation of Tekahionwake’s poetry by critical acclaim, is an act of appropriation that authenticates settler status by association, and which then allows the origin of indigeneity to be discarded, as indeed, Tekahionwake has been discarded and dismissed as a Canadian curio of value only to the nostalgic and the ingenuous – memory seekers, defined by Charles Lillard as either grandmothers or tourists. The Tekahionwake-Johnson ballads, lyrics and legends were used by the literary critic and politician to create and define the idiosyncratic nature of the Canadian nation, and to lend the aura of indigeneity to the settler, thereby validating settler rights in the conquered land: Tekahionwake’s mixed race, and indeed, the legendary fealty of the Mohawk tribe to the British, was very useful. Despite the many poetic and polemic attempts to awaken the conscience and consciousness of her audience to the untenable position of the indigene, and more poignantly, the halfcast, under the regime of Canadian colonization, Tekahionwake was, and is still, viewed as through a blurred glass. As Betty Keller has observed, ‘for all her idealization and defiance of the red man, she did not change the average white man’s attitude’, and neither did she change the critics’. Bernard McEnvoy’s image of her work as ‘a gracious mantle of romance’ is an invidious and disturbing one, consistent with the critical acclaim of other contemporaries. Of one of her recitals in the 1890s the Toronto Globe writes:
Miss E. Pauline Johnson’s may be said to have been the pleasantest contribution of the evening ... It was like the voice of the nations that once possessed this country, who have wasted away before our civilization, speaking through this cultured, gifted, soft-voiced descendant.

Costume, performance, person and poetry are veiled in a soft light. It is as though poet and audience are ennobled in her ‘brave expose’. It is astonishing that Gilbert Parker could perceive a life-time’s crusade declaiming the plight, the poverty, the beauty and the strengths of the Indian peoples, over fifteen years, across thousands of miles, as ‘unspoken insistence’, ‘without defiance’. How could the intent and impact of poems that so obviously cry out with insistence and defiance against the historic and prevailing image of the Indian, be so misconstrued and somehow diluted? It would seem that the language and structures of an English literary tradition have brought her ‘on side’, in the wake of her loyal forefathers: any political edge to her poetry is dulled and glazed over with a romantic shimmer.

Despite her many poems, articles and letters that refute the prevailing semiotic of the soft and rather silly Indian maiden, there is an extent to which Tekahionwake was trapped within that semiology, if she was to be heard at all. Tekahionwake romanticised her political stand, claiming herself to be ‘the saga singer of her people, the bard of the noblest heroic race’. The language of her self-image is rhetorical rather than polemic, normative rather than radical. The song her paddle sings is ‘soft’. It is this soft-sell, this image of the genteel Indian poetess, that modern critics find superficial and dishonest.

Yet, early angry resentment against a culture that condoned and in fact demanded an image of the indigenous woman as ridiculously infantile, indeed, ‘silly’, was expressed by Tekahionwake in an article, published in 1892, entitled, ‘A Strong Opinion on the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction’. She writes:

Yes, there is only one of her and her name is ‘Winona’. Once or twice she has borne another appellation, but it always has a ‘Winona’ sound about it ... She is never dignified by being permitted to own a surname ... In addition to this most glaring error this surnameless creation is possessed with a suicidal mania.

After an extensive discussion of the absurdities and the indignities of ‘Winona’ in Canadian fiction, Tekahionwake asks ‘is the Indian introduced into literature but to lend a dash of vivid colouring to an otherwise tame and sombre picture of colonial life’ and makes a plea to ‘let the Indian girl in fiction develop from the “dog-like”, “fawn-like”, “deer-footed”, “fire-eyed”, “crouching”, “submissive” book heroine’.

Pauline Johnson, or Tekahionwake, as she wished to be remembered, was not the ‘pure white star’ imaged in the ballad ‘Ojistoh’ – the brave Mohawk princess, but shadow of that image. As Norman Shrive (perhaps sardonically) suggests to ‘those interested in symbolic acts and gestures',
her change of image for the second half of her performance, from Indian costume to English evening dress, is 'significant'.²¹ Being white and Mohawk, her self, and the poetic image of that self, are the expression an artistic attempt to bring together or hold apart in a single form (of person or poetry) the two divergent cultures. Despite a rhetoric that advertised herself in the acceptable visual and verbal semiotic of her time, Tekahionwake's chosen poetic form allowed her to transgress boundaries, and contest that semiosis, albeit softly.

Her first published collection *The White Wampum* is emblematic of this desire to bring the two factions of racial, cultural and literary allegiance together into a resilient hybrid whole. The 'white wampum' is the wampum of peace, and significantly 'white' and 'wampum' are brought together in an attempt to combine and perhaps placate the warring worlds of white and Indian (settler and indigene). The poetry of this volume, as Margaret Harry has observed, 'combine Indian traditions and feelings with the conventions of English verse':²² this transgression of boundary is in fact the distinguishing characteristic of literary ballad, the form in which I would suggest she most successfully conveys the problematic of her split identity. The twilight world of Tekahionwake's poetry (that A.J.M. Smith condemns), is not romantic ambience or sentimental escapism but image of her twilight existence – not dark and not light, not white and not Indian. She was not just 'Tekahionwake', but 'Emily Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson', and the literary ballad can be seen as the expression of that multiple identity, that shifting status.

In fact, the transitional nature of Adam Lindsay Gordon's Australian balladry²³ that results in the contestation and the transgression of boundary between worlds and between cultures, is a feature of Tekahionwake's poetic response to her hybrid Canadian identity, expressed in her art as the trope of twilight. This trope is inclusive of images of half-light – dusk and moon-shadow, mist, smoke, snow blizzard, the image of distance as a horizon that is never attained, and the illusory river-shadow of a reflected, refracted reality. Tekahionwake's 'river shadows of dreaming' are tropologically analogous to Gordon's 'smoke wreathed dreaming': both shadow and smoke provide a measure of protection for the dreamer – edges are blurred, boundaries are ill-defined. They also act as a medium of artistic and spiritual transportation through time and space, and as a metaphor of self-definition and its negative corollary, lack of definition and a confusion of identity and indeed, reality.

From our end of the century, the twilight of trope and form, of poetics and politics, can be seen to be not an insipid, amorphous and ineffective light, but an energized zone of confusion, loss and anger – a choice of light that best reveals the complex anomaly of that legendary exotic 'halfcast' – the white indigene and the woman poet. From the mythic and historic material available to her, Tekahionwake selected what was of
importance to her and reset character and story within a poetic landscape and a poetic form representative of her own hybridity. Intent upon the middle ground, foreground and distance are blurred. Her poetry focuses upon the indeterminate ground of border territory, a no-wo/man’s land. Most of Tekahionwake’s balladised Indian legends are the legends that image the difficulties of forced choice. The protagonists are caught ‘between’; and very often it is the woman whose forced choice relegates her to a twilight world.24

Midway ‘twixt earth and heaven,
A bubble in the pearly air, I seem
To float upon the sapphire floor, a dream
Of clouds of snow,
Above, below,
Drift with my drifiting, dim and slow,
As twilight drifts to even.25

Both as a woman poet and as a ‘halfcast’ Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson is caught between worlds, forever in twilight, dimly perceived – her outline blurred, but this world of shades also allows her the power of creative expression:

Mine is the undertone;
The beauty, strength, and power of the land
Will never stir or bend at my command;
But all the shade
Is marred or made,
If I but dip my paddle blade;
And it is mine alone,

O! pathless world of seeming!26

This shadow river is a ‘pathless world’ where definition is not only momentary but malleable, easily disrupted by a ripple of wind on water or deliberately changed with the stroke of paddle blade. Her attitude toward the shadow world is ambivalent: ‘I only claim the/The shadows and the dreaming’. Yet her personal hybridity and the hybridity of her poetics is energizing. An indefinite personal and artistic status allows her to disrupt the images of the real world, to shift or transgress the boundaries, in a way that would be impossible if she were clearly defined as Mohawk or white: ‘Mine’, she declares, ‘is the undertone’. The word ‘undertone’ would seem to imply not only the shadow world of reflected life – a twilight world, but also the invisible power of undertow – the powerful force that runs beneath the river’s surface. (The assonance of the two words is too close to be coincidental). The canoe is vessel of her art, moving her through doubt, confusion and turbulence of this shadow world with an apparent power of its own, a momentum in fact derived from the river’s undertone/undertow.

The undertone/tow of Tekahionwake’s choice of poetic/ performance
Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson: Her Choice of Form

form, and indeed the undertone/tow of contemporary and current critical discourse on that choice is a fascinating current to explore. The questioning of Tekahionwake’s literary status is multi-faceted: it asks us to rethink our attitudes to, and assessment of, a performance based ‘literature’ and to attempt to understand the difficulties of effectively communicating the experience of the female indigene to an audience blinkered by the semiotics of colonization and indeed of a gendered poetics. Using the language of the conqueror constrains the reaction, response and retaliation of the vanquished; but this does not imply that Tekahionwake’s work stands in need of an apology or an excuse. If Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson’s sole support was gleaned from what price she could command for performance, this does not make her a whore but a professional: she was poet and artist not ‘poetess’ and ‘artiste’. Her Mohawk heritage gave her an exotic aura, but the ‘costume’ of her poetry should not relegate her to the back-stage of faded literary starlet or the museum of primitive curiosity. Her mode of dress and indeed her mode of poetry need not be viewed as a dishonesty but a valid attempt to bridge the gap between English and native American cultures, (between settler and indigene, colonized and colonizer) and between literary and performing arts. The literary ballad was an apt vehicle for this agenda. When Betty Keller and Ethel Wilson27 claim her to be a valiant woman and a superlative performer, but then disclaim her artistic status with the appellation of ‘poetess’, this is not acceptable, and is typical of a biographical, apologetic approach not only to a performance based literature and its creators/performers, but also too often to women poets.

Like her Canadian poetic foremother, Isabella Valancy Crawford,28 Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson was a single woman, whose livelihood was dependent upon sales and performance of her literary output. It was an unfortunate, but not altogether unhappy situation, that she clarified, regretted and apologized for in reply to the disappointed expectations and criticism of her recital programme by a friend. In a letter to Harry O’Brien she accedes to a labelling of her ballad art as ‘brain debasement’, ‘literary pot-boiling’ and ‘dramatic padding’, excusing herself with the observation that the public would not listen to lyrics, could not appreciate ‘real poetry’, and declared her dream of ‘“educating” the vulgar taste to Poetry, not action’ if she were allowed.29 Pauline Tekahionwake Johnson underrates herself and her art, not only falling victim to a literary view of a popular performance art, but perhaps also recognizing the restrictions, the consequences and the politics of a choice of form.

NOTES
4. His review appeared in *Athenaeum*, 3231 (Sept 28, 1889) and was recalled in his memorial tribute in *Flint and Feather: The Complete Poems of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912).
16. This is a reference to a line from Tekahionwake’s most famous poem, ‘The Song My Paddle Sings’: ‘For soft is the song my paddle sings.’ *The White Wampum* (1895), *Flint & Feather*, p. 31.
23. English-born Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-70). Volumes of poetry include *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift* (Melbourne: G. Robertson, 1867) and *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* (Melbourne: Clarson, Massina, 1870).
24. These ballads include ‘A Cry From an Indian Wife’, ‘Ojistoh’, ‘The Pilot of the Plains’ and ‘Dawendine’, *Flint & Feather*.
26. Ibid.
27. See Ethel Wilson, ‘The Princess’, review article in *Canadian Literature*, 9 (Summer 1961).
29. Tekahionwake’s reply to Harry O’Brien’s criticism is quoted by Keller in *Pauline*, p. 72.
Peter Bakowski

WHEN THE TIGHTROPE YOU’RE WALKING IS UP AROUND YOUR NECK

The heart on my sleeve
is at the dry cleaners,
a flock of tea-bags
just circled the house
and the kettle won’t boil:
says that it wants to be
a poet.

The grandfather clock’s
taken up line-dancing,
the hairs on my legs
have gone off to Borneo
to do missionary work
on a bald man’s head.
Someone’s gone and got the salad
a girlfriend,
and my goldfish
is wearing dark sunglasses:
says that it wants to be
a detective.

All my theories about life
are on sick leave,
tonight, I feel I couldn’t even
dial a wrong number.
It’s a good time to
get out of Melbourne:
my undone shoelaces and I
hop into a cab.
Leaving feels good
to my bones and my heart:
I watch the meter’s red digits
wink me free.
A PAINTING OF WEST BERLIN, 1989
for Susan Holder

Courtyard voices vine up,
the traffic grinds its raw noise.
The waitress would like to bring you
a bowl of her tears,
but she just presses down harder
on her pencil instead,
thorning your order
to the cook's board.

A long, beautiful bug
climbs the dusty afternoon window.
You have another coffee,
wondering, where are
the new world kings?
the press barons ... 
but it's better instead
to think of fishermen
under a cathedral of mist,
with chess white swans,
all poised upon
their fluid dominion.

The old Turkish men
snap at the calves of passing young women.
But, pigeons at their feet,
leaning on their canes,
I am still moved by
something in their pride-burnt faces,
that speaks to me
of knowledge earnt
in exile's hard season.
And the artists too
evacuate afternoons
in the cafes where
their loud intimacy
is almost expected,
talking of
projects in the making
and
relationships in the ending.
They preen and confide,
spill rumour and envy,
they hang their hats and hearts
on that artists' scarecrow cross
of enthusiasms and excuses;
and the moon, that gladly collides
the egos of lovers,
shines down
and abides
their feverish, exhaustive
searching.

And so the people sit,
amongst fountains and jugglers,
looking for
the truth in books and lovers:
swans of word and touch
that will take them beyond
the pummelled history
of all this city's
nights and streets.
WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

Ravenous hands:
the heat of their swimming
over bare back and belly.
The lock of eyes
that dare the pulse
to cross the flaming bridge
of a kiss ...

It has begun:
nights of bile and storm.
Threats boil and toss,
to lie shipwrecked
in old wounds.
Hatred is an art,
lovers do it very well,
a shoe explodes a window,
logic is a burning fuse.

The man of the house is tired,
fill his bowl with gin
to blur the sight of the wife’s thighs
muddied by the neighbour,
empty another glass
to loosen the barbaric.

No last chance child
in this wish-spilt house
to gladden the stairs
with the 1-2-3 of innocence.
All these years of nights,
candles and promises burning down,
too many ending
in door slam
and the chess of hurt
that leaves
each player vanquished.
DOMINIQUE HECQ

The Hungry Lover

La langue de la vie nous fondait dans la bouche

Paul Eluard, 'Tout est sauvé'

A silhouette slipped through the orange-blue heat of an early summer evening and melted in a bower swollen to the point of bursting with vine leaves and unripe fruit and the gossamer discarded by caterpillars.

Hands put down a large tray on a dinky table spread with long streaks of sunset.

She sat down on one of the golden chairs with an erect back that reminded her of some ever absent, ever present, guest silently waiting for champagne to be poured. She sat and crossed her legs. Replete with sunlight, she glowed like an elf at dusk and waited, for waiting now seemed to be the answer to it all.

A long time ago, when she used to fancy herself as a natural dancer and painter who could re-invent the wording of the world, she had waited for eternity, seeing herself as a vigil who was a bird about to take flight or a gust of wind carrying messages of hope and oaths. Now she was a vigil beaten by the sun on a dead sea, convinced that horizons melt into mirrors or shrink to naughts, yet longing to drift along with some vessel, were the breeze about to whisper.

She heard the rolling and rasping and crunching of the gravel, the snoring and gasping of the motorcar. She saw him in her mind. He stood hidden behind the thick veil of greens and greys, eating her up with his eyes, then spitting the bones in disgust.

Gone were the days when she could have killed for love, she thought. And she checked herself. Whole and hollow, like a bubble of molten glass that will not burst.

Since she had recovered her childhood figure, she knew that her mouth always repelled him a little, with its look of dried shell gnawed off by time starved for void. Even she hated to look at the lip-brush in the mirror hacking at her mouth – with the lip-gloss never wholly covering the wound, and the lip-liner sucking flesh from chin to cheekbone, making her look like a famished hare. Yet seeing now more clearly in her mind the smile she had managed to sculpt in Pink Pearl Bourgeois lipstick, she felt a bit better. This surprised her, for though she knew that she was not quite past wanting, she had hoped to be
past feeling. As long as she could remember she had starved for something: freedom, love, knowledge, her passions, but also words as flat and drained as old flabby breasts. And so starvation had brought only starvation. Now she could see this, but it was too late. Her end would never be her beginning, nor anyone else's, for that matter, for the wounds she had inflicted on herself and on others with her sigh-lances were festering with unspeakable hatred — you don't lose a child just like that. The scales had tipped, subtly: the void was starving for time and time for her.

Her Eternity.

Molly, a godmother after her own heart, would never have starved, she thought. Molly had pluck. She married twice. There were stories of passions and potions and puzzles. When Molly found out that no child would come out of her first marriage she poisoned her husband. Then when Pina, her daughter, wept over a set of unnatural twins, Molly told her all about prickly-pears and how their furry prickles can stab the hearts of culprits unawares. The father of the twins died in his sleep shortly afterwards. He died of natural causes: a heart attack.

She looked at her sleeveless black cotton lace cardigan with gilded buttons and heart-shaped neck, her filmy yellow gazar skirt with Andalusian spots, and her jet black suede pumps. She slipped her sharp knees and smooth calves away from the shade underneath the fabric, rounded her chest in the lace and gestured her slim arms and fingers into life. She laid her nails of pearl on the Andalusian spots and looked at her thin wedding ring.

Still. Heart chilled. Memory roaming about.

Dim memories of the Northern hemisphere. Bright memories of longing to leave.

How ridiculous!

She must have hated him all along, she thought, for now she could see that she had borne the essence of her birthplace inside her throughout the story of her life. This, of course, she shared with those who talked about the burden of being born, which is not quite the same. The essence of her birthplace: the three borders fencing in the kingdom of boredom. Lack of air, lack of warmth, lack of sound. A fiefdom where all dreaming was of storms and heat and clamour. Dreaming fierce as fighting.

He will bring a bottle of champagne to celebrate the occasion, of course. Seven years of married life, away from home that was never home until all hope of making one dropped in the pit. A barren marriage. Ha! She could remember nothing of the wedding. There were photos, of course; a timely recording of fleeting instants of make-believe. These must be burned, she decided, now that all love was dead, now that there only remained the love of death. The utter fascination.
Champagne?

Not Veuve Cliquot, please.

That vow which almost took shape, that child who crumpled back to nothing before being fully fleshed out, that love which crumbled, turning a desire that never was to dead matter. Desire to be born and to be still.

Her fingers slipped on the Andalusian spots and she felt the only roundness on her body since she had been with child. And she remembered her delight in fasting – a compulsory fast meant to bring new life. But then she was not sure. For there had been the other fast – as if fasting could ever have given any life back. Or buried one perhaps and many mishaps in the same pit. Or covered the guilt and shame with the same blanket. Where had she been? For she did remember the newspaper headlines: INFANT SMOTHERED AT THE BREAST and then, of course, The Lethal Breast, the book he had given her. She never found the courage to read it. A pity, perhaps.

But why always the breast?

It is the womb which is a tomb.

This she will have to think about.

She now revelled in her weightlessness.

Pop! went the cork. And he, in the claret-orange light with a bottle of Veuve Cliquot in his big white hand, with its thick golden ring, filled two glasses with golden bubbles, then placed a dry kiss on her parched forehead.

Champagne flowing again, but words, no.

His eyes were hungry, it seemed, devouring the shape of her body, yet far from feasting on it. His, was a nasty kind of hunger.

Cheers!

And he uncovered his teeth, like a dog about to growl.

She thought of her first love. Or rather, the ending of her first love story.

She had just moved into a rented flat on the third floor of a seedy block of flats in Little Firenze, a swish area of the suburb of Carlton, near the mosque, which she re-named after the glorious view over waves of terracotta and skeins of green from the North window of her Tower of Rest. He was downstairs in the drive, changing over the starter motor of his clapped out Austin and chatting with his mate. She was enjoying whiffs of fresh breeze, watching them, catching bits of conversation.

When she saw them hop into his car, she knew that here was the end of more than one affair.

He wound his window down and shouted to her to get them a cut lunch ready as they were both off to the beach for a picnic. She laughed and shouted that what he needed was not a lover, but a dog.
And she shut the window on his snapping *the bitch*.
They drove off.
She packed her things and left.
The following weekend she came back and let herself in with a blue healer on the leash while he was playing tennis. She went into the bedroom and dragged her patchwork quilt from under the bed. She left the dog asleep on the quilt on the bed with a note saying *Here is a proper bitch for you*.

The mangoes were a screaming yellow and the wild rice black as death. But the rest of her *spread* had lost all appeal. The salmon was a mere shade of bronze with smudges of laminated pink, the asparagus a mess of green and dirty purple and the avocados had turned the colour of wet ash.
She felt sick.
One mouthful and she put down her knife and fork.
He stopped eating too.
They each looked into the distance. Past each other.
Her knife and fork were all glitter on the table and flickering tongues of fire on her face.
Already far away, she did not answer the question she had not heard.

She was way back in time. Back to when they first devised the house they had built together – a silly design meant to accommodate all of their needs and dreams. The topsy-turvy tower had been her idea, this is true, she had wanted a place where North and South, day and night, past and future, would collapse into one another in a space she had hoped to call home one day. And so they took the Jethro Coffin House they had visited at Nantucket and an old Flemish windmill, and merged them together. The result was a weather-board high-gabled but long rambling box for the use of *the family* with at the back a windmill tower merged into a lighthouse for her own use. There had been talks about installing glass solar panels on the house and removable sails on the cap of the mill, but nothing had ever been done about this. She had left the top of the tower unfurnished to hang her old photographs and new paintings on white-washed walls and she had turned the ground floor into a studio. But all of her paints and brushes and soldering material, all of her glass collection and all of her books and papers and half-written pieces had remained in fruit boxes along the walls of her tower for years now, together with her drawings of sails with the cloth in curled position, sword point, dagger point, and full sail position. Yes, in that order, she thought.
At this, her wedding ring seemed to loosen its grip on her middle finger.
She got up, threw her knife and fork and yellow napkin with lilac flowers on the white-washed lawn and rushed to the house.

He had got in first. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror, ready to catch her shadow. She stopped for a minute, watching this mask, his face, in the mirror, then went straight to the mahogany vanity table. She felt his gaze turning her flesh to gauze, ripping it, reaching for her bones. She got hold of a bottle and shook it; she unscrewed the top and dropped two green pills in her hand.

Hands.
But these were no longer hers.
The bottle smashed on the bathroom floor. The pills rolled and bounced on a bed of broken glass.

Glass.
Like her body: transparent and cracked. All broken inside.
She held her breath.
A jar with purple tablets shattered at her feet. SVELTESSE knocked the edge of the bath and spilled on the carpet. BIOPHILE flew into the toilet bowl. FORMYLNE crushed under his foot. Some appetite suppressant mixture was already swelling in the basin where bran tablets were melting away. Blue, yellow, red capsules: a shower of primary colours for prime labels. LUMINEUSE, CORFIT, LIGHT, CORFOU. Gone. All gone in the vandal-proof stainless steel bowl designed for prisons.


I love you.

Three days and nights swollen with silence rolled by. Unbearable swellings of time. Seconds. Minutes. Hours. Days. Bloated days and puffy hours and puffed up minutes and bulging seconds. All ready to burst under the sharp point of sorrow.

A blue-orange breeze blew in cool gusts through the bower. A shape all curled up under the veil of vine leaves shivered. Arms came untied, legs unlaced, and like an elf brought to life in the space of an eclipse of time, she left her shelter of faded light.

She found him in the kitchen.
He sat on a stool with his head in his hands, staring at the cover of The Hunger Artists. With his back arched, he looked frozen and about to break. He too, had had his fill of the insatiable lack of appetite.

A noise.
A word, perhaps.
His spine, shoulders, neck, and face relaxed. He glanced at the silhouette in the doorway.
'I'll give it a go, she said, taking a few steps forward.
She stopped and looked at his face: splashes of cream and pink on grey.
She shut the door and leaned against it.
He got up, went to the dresser, paused and twisted his head around. He stepped back and took the slide-tray out from underneath the butcher’s block and put it on the table. He got one knife and one fork out of the drawer, one white plate from the plate rack, then a bunch of red grapes, an avocado and a mango from the fruit bowl. He put the fruit on the tray, not even bothering to lock the castors.
Then in the manner of inexperienced lovers nervously trying to impress, he placed the tray on his fingertips and brought it back to the table while still feeling for the point of balance.
They both sat down at the table, carefully, poised as they were between their starved yet ever unnamed desires.
She waited, watching him peel and slice the mango and avocado pear, then arrange the perfectly proportioned segments of fruit in a dual arc of colours around a cluster of grapes on the now translucent white plate.
As though soothed by the colours of these late summer fruits, they started to eat, with him feeding her. First one piece of avocado, then a second, and a third one. She crossed her hands and he looked at the orange monochrome absorbed by the mango peel. He had a cube of the fruit, taking his time, as if looking for the answer to some riddle in the rich and tasty flesh. He took a second cube of mango with the tip of his fingers and offered it to her. She chewed it slowly, trying to recapture the complexity of some forgotten flavour. He fed her another piece, and yet another, then a grape, opening his mouth in imitation every time she closed her lips on a cube of orange, on a bubble of dark purple.
There’s something missing, she said.
Not your wings again?
No, that’s for later. What we need now, I mean, is to feast on words.
To cycle to school in the harmattan season. To watch the sun filter through the haze
deep in the Kufena valley a mighty wind arose. A girl walks ahead
To struggle to keep the eyes open through the dust. To watch the girl struggle with the wind. To see the wind battle the girl. And bind her loose dress around her.
To behold the delicate features thus revealed
To perceive the graying landscape. To watch wild flowers in raptures. Survivors of the drought. To watch butterflies at the feast of the living
To stop for a while by the river. To watch little girls do the number dance.
To recall the thought of their mothers by the same spot
To see little boys trek to school in the morning. A ball at their feet. Books under their arms
To cycle to school in the harmattan season. To feel the sun filter through the haze
Caste in Indian English Fiction: More Oppression?

Rephrasing Toni Morrison\(^1\) one may claim that the imaginative and historical terrain upon which most Indian English writers journey is in a large measure shaped by the obscured presence of the 'castial'\(^2\) other. Statements to the contrary,\(^3\) insisting on the meaninglessness of caste to the modern Indian identity, are themselves full of meaning. The world, Morrison has stated, does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. Similarly, India will not become casteless or unstratified on caste lines merely by assertion. However, the Indian English writer's attitude to caste is exactly that – assertive and evasive; and, sometimes, pitying or derisive. In that way it is slightly different from the white American attitude to the racial 'other' as examined by Morrison. The Indian upper caste attitude is more one of dismissal than of subdued confrontation. This is in keeping with the history of casteist exploitation in India, as this exploitation has been based on religion, apathy and a stable social order and, unlike Western slavery-based racism, not on direct force or confrontation. However, the danger inherent in the presence of this consciously overlooked and underwritten 'other' is felt by many Indian English writers – and forces the more traditional of them to favour a static world order which gets reflected in the settings of their books, their plots, their brand of humour and their selection of characters.

The overwhelming concentration of the Indian English gaze on the middle and upper classes is a valid starting point of analysis. C.D. Narasimhaiah\(^4\) has remarked upon the fact that Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* might be the only authentic village-based novel in English by an Indian. Even if one notes other important novels based in villages (by Khushwant Singh, Kamela Markandaya and Sudhin Ghose, for example), one can not deny that the Indian-English gaze is concentrated upon the urban classes or the rural middle class. Add to this the fact – noted by Meenakshi Mukherjee\(^5\) – that Indian English writers tend towards the 'universal' and the 'pan-Indian' in a bid to address a readership which is thinly smeared across the length and breadth of multicultural India, and it becomes evident that the 'universal' and the 'pan-Indian' is being defined from a certain standpoint which might not be either 'universal' or even 'pan-Indian'.
As Chinua Achebe has suggested, on the world scene 'universalism' is a loaded term, fraught with colonialist undertones. Much of what passes for universalism, notes Achebe, is merely a species of Eurocentricism – the Euro-American values and images being particularly well-situated and equipped to propagate their own stereotype. It is pertinent to suggest that, in the Indian context, 'universal' is fraught with 'casteist' or upper caste significance. By defining the 'universal' and the 'pan-Indian' in largely middle class and (rural or urban) upper caste terms, the Indian English novelist denies the existence of the Indian 'other' which is neither middle-class nor upper caste. The fact that this 'other' constitutes the actual majority in India makes the denial even more significant. However, it is the middle class, upper caste reality which is passed off as 'universalism' or 'pan-Indian' by virtue of the class/caste affiliation or background of the author and the fact that these values or images dominate contemporary literate Indian perceptions.

It may be pointed out that some Indian English writers have dealt with lower caste characters. However, with the partial exception of Mulk Raj Anand, the lower caste character has been described from an upper caste perspective. A typical example is Javni – the low caste servant in Raja Rao's story of the same name in *The Cow of the Barricades* – who in spite of many tribulations remains constant in her loyalty not only to the village goddess but also to the upper caste family which employs her. Her thankfulness towards her 'betters' is reminiscent of portrayals of the 'faithful black servant' in much of nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature. Again, Bhedia, the low caste idiot in Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat*, simply desires to be a 'good servant'. And the 'simple Negro' of earlier Euro-American literature is once again called to mind when Rao (or his narrator – the two appearing interchangeable in this book) describes Bhedia: 'He is so lovable, is Bhedia, you would have to create him like Brahma himself if he did not be. For him all things are so real, so simple'. It is not that the castial 'other' is completely ignored in Indian English fiction, but that his/her presence – in most cases – has been subsumed, rewritten and marginalised. This is in keeping with the larger socio-political reality in India, at least until recently. An interesting metaphor can be drawn from Sudhin Ghose's *The Flame of the Forest*. In Ghose's novel, a low caste boy is killed and his spirit is 'tantrically' transferred to the body of an upper caste boy, who had died earlier. Thus, the upper caste boy is restored to life – for our purposes 'reincarnating' and obscuring the spirit of the low caste youth.

In other cases, one can also note the presence of low caste characters as a device to reinforce the status quo. In *The Cradle of the Clouds*, for example, Ghose clearly shows his preference for the forces of tradition
and 'stability' over the forces of change and 'modernism'. We have three 'traditionalist' characters in *The Cradle of the Clouds* – a Brahmin, a Christian and a low caste Hindu. However, the presence of the 'other' (two 'others', if one counts the Christian) is nullified by the fact that all three characters signify the same thing. They represent tradition – which, as defined by Ghose and most other Indian English writers – is always middle class and upper caste (if not outright Brahmanical). The 'castial other', then, is used as a filler, maybe even a symbol – but almost never as a flesh-and-blood character who might see reality differently from his creator-master-author. Raja Rao’s Patel Rangē Gowda in *Kanthapura* is a familiar case. Ostensibly he is a lower caste character as he belongs to the potter caste. But, on the other hand, the potter caste is nowhere near the bottom of the caste hierarchy and Rangē Gowda is a Patel, a leader of his community, a rich man, the owner of a 'nine-beamed house' and a person who has clearly imbibed middle class, largely upper caste values. It must be said that a number of Indian English authors – including Rao – stress the emancipation of the lower caste. But, significantly, the impetus to emancipation almost always comes from some upper caste character (such as Moorthy in *Kanthapura*) and the narration is from a middle class/upper caste viewpoint. There is an almost complete lack of independent lower caste characters in Indian English fiction – characters who have their own motivations and who are analogous, so to say, to the real-life (largely low caste) servants who collaborate in violent robberies in the 'liberal and kind' middle class and upper caste Delhi households that employ them.

We can also find the denial of the 'other' in the suspicion with which a number of Indian English authors look at change. Ghose’s case is evident in *The Cradle of the Clouds*, and R.K. Narayan’s novels always show a return to normalcy (which is almost always the previous status quo). This has been remarked upon by other critics: 'In a way which is perhaps traditionally Indian, Narayan sees any sudden change not for what it produces, for what new possibilities it brings into existence, in other words, not as a positive factor of being, but much more negatively as a play of shadows'. Similar in a way is Raja Rao’s preoccupation with the philosophical and the universal, his penchant for characters who prefer a life of renunciation (Moorthy in *Kanthapura*) and characters who are recluses (the vast majority in *On the Ganga Ghat*, Ramaswamy at the end of *The Serpent and the Rope*) – while these tendencies can be described as being Indian, they are also a backward-looking device on the part of the characters, if not the author. There are some authors, like Rushdie, who have an ambiguous attitude to change. But these authors – once again like Rushdie – are often themselves from sections of the obscured 'other'. Rushdie, for instance, comes from a Muslim background and, as such, would be perpetually outside the Hindu caste structure in spite of
belonging to the upper class. However, it may be noted here that the post-1947 generation is generally more willing to confront change without condemning it outright or by implication.

Of course, not every pre-1947 generation Indian English novelist is or has been opposed to change. Mulk Raj Anand is an obvious exception—thanks to his staunch socialist convictions which might spoil his novels in places but do make him more aware of the ‘other’. Then there are exceptions who turn out to be the rule when examined closely. Authors like the very ‘pucca sahib’ Manohar Malgonkar and the, well, more or less pucca sahib, V.S. Naipaul. Both have had no or little sympathy with traditions—though Naipaul has had a softer corner for Brahmanical traditions than non-Brahmanical ones as his travel books often demonstrate. But both of them are ‘shaped’ by the obscured and largely-detested presence of the ‘castial other’ in a roundabout way.

In their separate ways, Naipaul and Malgonkar belong to that part of Indian English literature which has been written by a secure, privileged ‘us’ about an ‘other’ that can be pitied for its inability or laughed at for its clumsy efforts to ape the rituals and rites of the new Eurocentric ‘Brahmins’. The earlier casteist division between the touchables and the untouchables has been replaced by the modern division between the properly (completely) Westernised and all the rest. No other writer brings this out as clearly as V.S. Naipaul, with his Mimic Men and similar ‘characters’. Malgonkar, on the other hand, uses the absence of a British ‘public school code’ to define the ‘castial other’. It is interesting in both their cases to note that they stress the stock colonialist images of the simple or unreliable, Janus-faced native, the ‘mimic’ and confused ‘half-native’ and the patient, reforming colonialist in their own ways. Their novels can be read in a different and revealing way if one bears in mind the following lines by Achebe:

To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: ‘I know my natives’, a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand—understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding ... Meanwhile a new situation was slowly developing as a handful of natives began to acquire European education and then to challenge Europe’s presence and position in their native land ... To deal with this phenomenal presumption the colonialist devised two contradictory arguments. He created the ‘man of two worlds’ theory to prove that no matter how much the native was exposed to European influences he could never truly absorb them; like Pester John he would always discard the mask of civilization when the crucial hour came and reveal his true face. Now, did this mean that the educated native was no different at all from his brothers in the bush? Oh, no! He was different; he was worse. His abortive effort at education and culture though leaving him totally unredeemed and unregenerated had none the less done something to him—it had deprived him of his links with his own people whom he no longer even understood and who certainly wanted none of his dissatisfaction or pretensions.
Put in different combinations, these two views of ‘native’ characters form the basis of characterization (and, often, humour) in most of the novels of Naipaul and Malgonkar and in two very different novels by Aubrey Menen.

The use of myth is another interesting case in point. Meenakshi Mukherjee has noted that Indian English authors prefer myths drawn from The Ramayana to those drawn from the other great epic of India, The Mahabharata. Though Mukherjee wrote her book about two decades ago, her observation holds good even today. Mukherjee has traced this tendency to other Indian literatures as well. She reasons that the Indian mind, which tends to idealize, finds it easier to accept the ideal characters of The Ramayana rather than the ambiguous, complicated characters of The Mahabharata. While agreeing with her, one also needs to point out that The Ramayana – and not The Mahabharata – is the epitome of upper caste, largely-Brahmanical value systems in India. Rama, the hero-god of The Ramayana, is maryada purushottam (ideal man) – and not any of the characters from The Mahabharata, including the god Krishna. It is not insignificant that Hindu revivalist and reactionary parties (with a predominantly upper caste base) have selected Rama as the central figure and the rallying cry in their on-going bid for power. This selection of myths once again places a number of Indian English authors firmly on the side of the status quo – which remains largely middle class, upper caste. The myths selected reinforce the upper caste image-making that has been internalized by most middle class Indians. For example, the widespread perception of the Indian woman as ‘chaste’ and economically-dependent on the husband/father does not take into consideration the sexual and economic freedom enjoyed by many low-caste, especially tribal, women. A rather obvious example is that of smoking. The ‘Indian woman’ is not supposed to smoke a cigarette: it is usually very westernised women who do so in Indian English (or other Indian) novels. This perception, however, does not take into account the fact that the vast majority of scheduled (low) caste women smoke like chimneys, and can be seen doing so on any Indian street.

The specific myth of Karna deserves special mention. Karna is one of the two figures from The Mahabharata who occasionally graces the stage of Indian English fiction. He is supposed to embody the outsider. But – as Meenakshi Mukherjee also notes – Karna is not an outsider in the full sense of the term. He is a dispossessed ‘kshatriya’ (the upper/warrior caste), fully aware of both his dispossession and his heritage; and his role as an ‘outsider’ in Indian English literature is clearly cosmetic. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that the ‘Karna’ myth enables Indian English and other Indian writers to use the interesting ‘outsider’ figure without having to actually confront the painful and disruptive dialectic of belonging and not-belonging.

It is also interesting to note that the closed worlds of some of these
novelists – particularly R.K. Narayan – are a mirror image of the closed social circles imposed by the earlier system of caste. From this point of view, the meat-eating taxidermist, Vasu,\textsuperscript{15} is as much a symbol of alien-casteist forces as he is a symbol of rampant power and a modern Faustian attitude. His destruction is inevitable to preserve the closed caste-like structure of Nataraj’s Malgudi. In fact, in all of Narayan’s novels, the essential Malgudi is preserved with very minor changes: an attitude to life which can be linked to the institution of caste and its centuries-old ability to preserve a largely ‘stable’ social system in India.

Having noted the ways in which many Indian English authors deny or obscure the presence of the ‘castial other’, it is pertinent to note that their worldview and art is itself shaped by the obscured presence of the ‘castial other’. The act of slotting the inconvenient ‘other’ into a traditional and convenient pigeonhole imposes certain restrictions on not only the reality portrayed but also the way it is portrayed, on – so to say – the art of the novelist. It is not sophistry to view Rao’s philosophical concerns and universalism, Narayan’s unchanging world, Malgonkar’s heroic code, Ghose’s ‘fantasy’, Naipaul’s westernised ‘rootlessness’ and humour as consequences of the obscured presence of the ‘castial other’. If these authors did not adopt their distinctive postures, they would be forced to deal with the reality of the ‘castial other’ on unfamiliar grounds. But to adopt these postures, they have to give a certain distinctive shape to their art. For example, we can say that the devices which go into the creation of Rao’s universalism – that is, his language, the type of narrator, etc. – are shaped by Rao’s (sub-conscious) desire to keep the ‘other’ under control. But this very effort to deal with the ‘other’ on one’s own terms – whether that involves distortion or evasion – ensures that the ‘castial other’ effects the art of the novelist concerned.

The ‘castial other’ – though rewritten, obscured or denied by these authors (none of whom would personally condone casteist discrimination, it must be noted) – is still a presence in Indian English fiction. But it is a presence that, so to say, is twice removed from reality.

NOTES
2. As ‘casteist’ has the same pejorative connotation as ‘racist’ and ‘the caste other’ sounds odd and resembles the ‘other caste’, I have been forced to coin the word ‘castial’ (based on ‘racial’).
3. Read, for example, V.S. Naipaul’s views on caste, contemporary India, the Dalit movement and Brahmins in \textit{A Million Mutinies Now} (London: Penguin, 1990).
4. C.D. Narasimhaiah, \textit{Raja Rao} (Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann India, no dt.).
7. Anand is an exception in more ways than one in his attitude to social realities and
his clear determination to take the side of the underdog even at the cost of artistic achievement.

8. Raja Rao, while sticking to a consciously or sub-consciously upper-caste/middle-class perspective, is one of the few Indian English authors who seems fully aware of the subtle ramifications of caste in contemporary India.


10. With the exception of *The Guide*, as pointed out by Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Twice Born Fiction*.


Each year they make goddesses out of straw and clay.

Each day on my way to school I saw them taking shape – like so many statutes of liberty.

How reassuring is your anger, O Mother!

Playing truant from school, some days later, the river turned teacher explaining stuff: in the shallows were broken limbs of straw and clay.
NEIGHBOUR'S DEATH

Our neighbour died this morning.  
Soon, over the widow's wails  
you could hear the sound  
of bamboo being cut.  
I put on my shoes  
knowing now it would not be long  
before they carried him past our house.

On the way curious shopkeepers  
leaned out of windows  
to ask the dead man's name.  
And at the cremation ground  
it was good to see his other friends  
who'd taken leave for the day.

There was a fine breeze blowing  
but to turn a man to ashes takes time.  
It was almost evening when I left.  
Too late to go to the bank  
or pay the electricity bill  
so I only bought the eggs  
for tomorrow morning.
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