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Kunapipi 9(2) 1987 Full version

Abstract
Full text of issue.

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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.

The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet, and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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ISSN 0106-5734
*Kunapipi* is published with assistance from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body, and the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies.

*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.
INTERVIEW

Whilst Anthills of the Savannah is obviously about leadership in an African country, one senses that you were discussing the issues of leadership in general.

Yes, I think it is leadership everywhere. Certainly in Africa. Certainly in the Third World but also beyond the Third World to the First World, because corruption of leadership, tendencies to control, are not limited to any one part of the world. But specifically it is a book about an African country; the local habitation of the story is an African country in the modern world.

I had the feeling that what you were suggesting was that the society reflected the quality of the leadership; if the leadership was corrupt, the society would also then turn to corruption — in other words, the negative aspects in the society could be directly related back to the negative aspects of the leadership.

Yes, I would agree with that, but what I’m really interested in is how you could begin to solve this problem. If you’re going to do that, you have to pinpoint the responsibility specifically before you can even begin to break out of the vicious circle. And it is at the level of the leadership that this break must occur. Nigeria is made up of a hundred million people and it is no good saying to a hundred million people: ‘We must all behave better, we must do better.’ You can say that for the sake of completeness but the ultimate responsibility for getting us out of this bad patch is with the small group of people who, in one way or another, find themselves in positions of leadership. They have a special responsibility.

In the scene in the book describing the executions it seems that you are placing responsibility on the people themselves for their blood lust.

Yes, I do that. What I have just said does not mean that I am exonerating the people. No. The people get the leadership they deserve up to a point. But this does not exonerate the leadership. The fact that the people are prone to this kind of behaviour, that they could come to a stage where they could relish this kind of scene, must make the leadership say to itself, ‘Why is this possible? How can this happen? It is wrong. We must do something about it.’ So you find a leader like the editor of the National Gazette setting himself up to correct the situation. It is people like him who must initiate the action. It cannot be done by the group on the beach who are delirious and obscenely happy and enjoying the execution. It must be done by the few thinking people, call them leaders, call them the élite, whatever you like, it is this group who must say ‘This is not right.’
Do you think it is possible for so few people to change so many?

Yes, I think this has happened all the time in history. History is full of such instances. I know that some people think that it is not possible, not feasible. But if you look really seriously at revolutions, you will see that the great changes in history have been brought about by a handful of people. It is true also that you might say 'The times were ripe.' And no one can dispute that either; the two must play a part. But I think the spark, this little catalyst without which a chemical reaction will not happen, is vital. This critical element has to be brought in before you can energise the mixture into action. And this is the role of this leadership: to create the circumstance in which the people begin to act with awareness.

So if one looks at the ending of Anthills of the Savannah you would say that whilst things look fairly grim, it is not totally negative.

No, it certainly was not intended to be totally negative. It’s grim, it’s very bad, it’s almost hopeless, almost, but there is the possibility of a new beginning. A new dispensation could begin, slowly, patiently, painfully — it’s not going to be a mango trick, it’s not going to happen overnight, it’s going to be brought about by a group, by that small company around Beatrice, that group who have learnt something from their experience. Experience happens to everybody, but not everybody learns anything from it. Something can happen to a stone but the stone doesn’t become wiser, but if it happens to a sensitive, sensible, cautious, aware human being, then it becomes a creative agent. I think this group around Beatrice has learnt a lot in the course of the story. They have learnt, for instance, that the little clique that saw themselves as leaders was not big enough, that it had no perception of incorporating others. You have to incorporate the taxi drivers, the market women, the peasants, the workers, the students. You have to broaden out so that when you are talking you are talking for the people, you are not only talking for a section or a group interest.

Could we look at what you see the role of women to be in the new African state?

First of all let me say that, looking at the past and the present, I think that we have been ambivalent, we have been deceitful even, about the role of the woman. We have sometimes said 'The woman is supreme — mother is supreme', we have said all kinds of grandiloquent things about womanhood, but in our practical life the place of the woman has not been
adequate. At the same time I'm not saying 'This is how it is going to be from now on' because I am aware of my own limitations. In mapping out in detail what woman's role is going to be, I am aware that radical new thinking is required. The quality of compassion and humaneness which the woman brings to the world generally has not been given enough scope up till now to influence the way the world is run. We have created all kinds of myths to support the suppression of the woman, and what the group around Beatrice is saying is that the time has now come to put an end to that. I'm saying the woman herself will be in the forefront in designing what her new role is going to be, with the humble co-operation of men. The position of Beatrice as sensitive leader of that group is indicative of what I see as necessary in the transition to the kind of society which I think we should be aiming to create.

Have you changed your own ideas about what you think the role of women should be since you wrote Things Fall Apart?

No, I haven't really ... I think the difference is this that Things Fall Apart is dealing with a past period in our cultural history. This is where we were at that point in time. Even the novels that deal with the present, that is No Longer at Ease and A Man of the People were also descriptive of the role of women frozen in time. In Anthills of the Savannah there is more of looking into the future, not just for women but for society generally; how, for example, we can use our past creatively. I have always know that there was some crucial role which women played in times past, of which our ancestors have kept a memory but which, somehow, we have tried to suppress. There are so many folk stories telling you what catastrophe would be unleashed on the world if women were to get into power that you know that there is some kind of conspiracy going on; and I was always aware of that, but until this recent book I did not grapple with it centrally; that is the main difference. But then you grapple with things one at a time.

I was at the 1987 Stockholm Conference for African Writers, and there the women writers made a series of accusations which I thought were justified.

I wasn't there but I read about it. That kind of thing does not interest me very much because I think these are women who are dealing with the problem from the position of the feminist movement in the West and I think this position is untenable. This is not what I am talking about, I am talking about something which is grounded in our own culture,
something which you can actually derive from looking closely at our own culture. This culture is actually there and it recognizes the distinction between man and woman and doesn’t aim to abolish it. The culture never says there is no difference; it says this difference does not authorize you, the man, to step on the woman, to make woman a second-class citizen.

*It's Elewa, who represents the mass of the people, not Beatrice who bears a child. Are you indicating that it is through the ordinary people that ‘the beautiful ones will be born’?*

Yes, I think this is obvious because the people are the owners of the country. When you talk about the owner of the country, of the society, it is the people. They are so many. God must love the people, otherwise he wouldn’t have made so many of them. These are the people who matter. So anything which is not rooted in them is superficial and in the end is bound to float. The élite are important because they have been given special training and education and qualifications and their duty is to use it to initiate the upward movement of the people.

*Whilst the book is obviously about leadership, it is also very clearly about the art of story-telling. Would you like to say something about this?*

Yes, the very nature of the story is one of the key issues in this novel. The way my people traditionally viewed the story, their history, their legends, is being explored. How does the role of the story as the escort of the people compare with other factors that attend their lives? You have the story, you have the story-teller, so it is an exploration of the story and the story-teller and the way in which those who commandeer power would wish to commandeer history and so would be afraid of story-tellers. Stories are not harmless, they are not innocent. The budding dictator would be afraid and quite anxious about the story and the story-teller and the story-teller could be in deep trouble in such a situation.

*The story is told from different points of view. Is this your way of indicating there is no single or simple solution?*

Yes. Actually this is something I have done for quite some time. If you go back to *Arrow of God*, for instance, you will see large sections of the story, almost set pieces, presented from the European side and then from the African side and you see how different the two stories can be. So I have
used this technique once more in *Anthills of the Savannah* to indicate that nothing is simple and that we must not aim for naïve simplifications. We must accept life with all its complexities and this is where I tend to be a little impatient of slogans. Slogans are the ultimate in simplification; they simplify everything so that it becomes one word, or one sentence, or one party; whereas in fact life is not made that way, you have to have this variety, this multiplicity, which is both a problem and a beauty. Therein lies the beauty of the Commonwealth which we were talking about today. The single-minded person can only see one truth, one culture, one country. Such a person cannot see the beauty of the interaction of peoples.

*This issue relates, then, to the varieties of English, standard English plus pidgin, which are found in your novel?*

Yes, and even more the indigenous languages which, of course, you cannot represent in a novel which is written in English. But by implication one is again saying that there is this marvellous variety and richness which is unlimited. Also there is the question of attitude and the question of respect. If you respect the people, you respect the way they speak and you report them in their own words. This creates not only greater credibility but greater richness. I find it surprising that some people, in this country for instance, are irritated by the use of pidgin. You occasionally hear some kind of irritation in the voice of some of the people. ‘Oh, this pidgin, I couldn’t cope with it, why does he introduce this problem?’ And this is a pity because you know it is refusing to deal with the complexity of the people’s experience and the experience of the English language in different parts of the world.

*If I may come back to the political issue again. Can you see any way out of the military dictatorships that dominate most of Africa south of the Sahara?*

This is something which gives us much anxiety because it has really got to the stage where it’s epidemic. Military regimes will come up in Country A because they are there in Country B and the soldiers in Country C see their classmates running the show in Country A and Country B and they want to do the same in their own country. I think when the military first appeared in African politics they had programmes, they had ideas. Perhaps they were mistaken, perhaps we were mistaken in thinking there was a possibility that they could solve the problem. Today it has become
so cynical. It’s a case of ‘O.K., you’ve had your turn, now I want my turn’. We must really pray and work for the end of this.

*The problem, of course, is that the military mind must be the most narrow of all minds.*

Exactly, which means the kind of things we have been talking about, the need for multiplicity, is something they can’t understand. There is a possibility under certain circumstances, where you have a society stuck in the mud, in corruption, and cannot move either way, forward or back, that you really need some violent push to get it out of this trap and this might take the form of a military revolution. But having got it out of this situation the military must really hand the thing back to discussion and argument with the possibility of dissent. And they have no inclination to do this.

*But the military mind is not trained to cope with dissent.*

I agree, but it is here that I think the people themselves can play a direct role by making it clear to the military that it is not wanted. We have seen in Africa, e.g., the situation where the students in the Sudan rose up and told the military to go and it went.
Achebe’s *Arrow of God*: The Kinetic Idiom of an Unmasking

The Igbo world is an arena for the interplay of forces. It is a dynamic world of movement and flux. Igbo art, reflecting this world-view, is less tranquil than mobile and active, even aggressive.

It is the need and the striving to come to terms with a multitude of forces and demands which give Igbo life its tense and restless dynamism and its art an outward, social and kinetic quality.

(Chinua Achebe, ‘The Igbo World and Its Art’)

The various levels of rhythm in Achebe’s fiction, from stylistic to structural and thematic, have been explored before this. My project is a related one: it is to focus on the human body as a verbal signifier that encodes movement iconographically as a condition of culture. The complex kinetics of *Arrow of God* relates directly to a theory of action, from which develops a hermeneutic practice: reading as a dance of attitudes, criticism as participation. I begin by looking at certain key moments in the fictive ‘history’ of the body: the moment when the eye coincides with the knee; the moment of awkwardly sitting; the symbolic moment of decapitation; etc. And I move toward a discussion of masking and motion — for the critical context of posture and gesture is the dance, where we modify our attitudes as we partake in the resculpting and renewal of our symbolic selves, constantly, from one moment to the next — moving from frame to frame in the cross-rhythmic overlap of solo-and-circle.

I am opposed to the Eurocentric appropriation of Achebe’s ‘canon’ for the metropolitan ‘Great Tradition’ and my purpose is to consider in detail the counter assertion, often announced but rarely argued on the evidence. If this is a truly decolonising fiction, the case cannot be argued simply at the level of content (by authenticating social setting, folklore, the use of proverbs, etc.); meaning needs to be explored in terms of
mode. My interest is in the attitudes of the image, the strategies of the narrative, the placing of the reader, the cultural coding of those aesthetic principles that inform the whole process of the fiction.

When Ezeulu, Chief Priest of Ulu, decides to send Oduche to learn the ways of the whiteman it is an extension of himself, saying: 'I want one of my sons to ... be my eye there.' But it is also as a sacrifice:

> it may even happen to an unfortunate generation that they are pushed beyond the end of things, and their back is broken and hung over a fire. When this happens they may sacrifice their own blood. This is what our sages meant when they said that a man who has nowhere else to put his hand for support puts it on his own knee.

Oduche is not only the eye; he is also the knee. But it is not only vision and sacrifice that are linked in the duality of Ezeulu’s motive for sending his son to join the whiteman: the eye is to see, so that he may know the secret of the whiteman’s power, and the knee is to lend support to the arm put upon it in order to stabilize a collective body on the brink of collapse. The connection between the two is inescapable. The knowledge that is to come from what the eye sees and to stabilize the traditional power-base of the villages of Umuaro is correlated with a physical gesture, and that is aimed at maintaining the vertical position and balance of the body under the severe stress of imperialism.

I have had occasion elsewhere to refer to the West African tradition of cultivating divinity through a tradition of personal balance; here two further tenets of the associated ideology are relevant. First is the importance of ‘straightness’, in the context of normative stability of stance, traditionally correlated with social well-being. Second, stability is extended in significance through its various modes, the important one for our purposes being that of ‘supporting’. The broken body that maintains ‘straightness’ by putting hand upon knee presents itself in terms of an indigenous mode of thought (directly associated with the eye). At the end of the novel this helps to explain why it is ‘not simply the blow of Obika’s death’ (229) that drives Ezeulu insane. It is Oduche who, failing to report what he sees of the whiteman (in effect blinding Ezeulu), becomes the ‘lizard that ruined his mother’s funeral’ (221), an image of betrayal that is apt for its horizontal nature: the leg has given way, and the priest balances precariously on the brink of ‘the collapse and ruin of all things’. He ‘stood where he was’ (221), without resolution and as though one-legged, for one more blow will put him totally off balance. With Obika’s death, he ‘sank to the ground’, in an attitude of body which expresses an ironically ‘haughty splendour’, that of ‘the demented high priest’ (229, my italics).
Many critics have pointed to the moral ‘no man however great was greater than his people’ (230). Ezeulu is accused explicitly of being ‘a man of ambition, he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all’ (27). Such ambition runs in the family, for Ezeulu’s own father had to be shown ‘that Igbo people knew no kings’ (27). His mother, on the other hand, had a tendency to madness at the new moon, on which occasion her feet would be put in stocks. No wonder, then, that Ezeulu retains throughout his life a fear of the new moon, that while part of him rejoices in the haughty splendour of his high office another part (fear) ‘lay on the ground in the grip of joy’ (2). It is an image that relates obviously to his mother. But the awkward seating of the new moon at the beginning of the novel is not only linked with Ezeulu’s personally inherited potential for instability through the image of his mother in stocks. It is also ominous with regard to the whiteman.

When we first meet Tony Clarke, the new Assistant District Officer, he is reading an inspired rendition of the call of Empire in ‘The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger’ (the imperialist fiction that Things Fall Apart internally defines itself against). But we are immediately taken back a little in time, so that we may see him seated ‘uneasily on the edge of a chair’ (34). Unfamiliar with colonial etiquette, he has arrived too early to His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor’s dinner and has been kept waiting nervously in the Reception Hall. This is not the only time we see him awkwardly seated. His ‘worst moment’ comes when he enters the Dining Room and finds that no place has been allocated for him: ‘After what looked to Clarke like hours the A.D.C. noticed him and sent one of the stewards to get a chair. Then he must have had second thoughts, for he stood up and offered his own place to Clarke’ (34). Rather than an isolated incident, this is a symbolic anticipation of the role Clarke awkwardly plays in the novel when he sits in the ‘seat’ temporarily abdicated by Winterbottom (a name suggesting all manner of discomforts).

No doubt the whiteman’s postures and physical attitudes have generally connoted awkwardness for the African, whose cultural kinetics is rooted in the stylized iconography of the dance rather than yielding to uncritical naturalistic assumptions. Achebe relies upon his reader to make this connection with the whiteman when he writes, in ‘Beware, Soul Brother’, of those ‘others … lying in wait leaden-footed, tone deaf’. And the same iconography of awkwardness runs through Arrow of God as a motif. If the omen of the new moon that ‘sits awkwardly … like an evil moon’ (2) refers as much to the whiteman as to Ezeulu’s mother in stocks — as a type of his own potential instability — then the threat to tradi-
tional society, as it was in *Things Fall Apart*, is both internal and external. It is change, in the form of the whiteman, that poses the external threat. ‘The world is changing,’ Ezeulu tells Oduche. ‘I do not like it. But I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied: «Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching»’ (45). This is Ezeulu’s explanation of why he wants Oduche to be his eye. Of particular interest is the concept associated with Oduche-the-eye of adjusting to change by being constantly on the move; for, at the same time, the response to change that is embodied in Oduche-the-leg (upon which the hand seeks support) is the *arrest* of motion. This latter response is ritualized in the sacrifice of Oduche, while the ritual counterpart of the former is the dance: ‘If anyone asks you why you should be sent to learn these new things tell him that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time’ (189). The attitude to change, then, is a complex one, of neutralizing it by embracing it, or of arresting it by making sacrifice to the god that is bringing it about. Dance bridges the poles of opposition embodied in this complexity of response to change.

If the image for responding to change by moving with it is the dancer, it must be admitted that the significant point, flexibility, focuses to a great degree on the legs. Peggy Harper writes: ‘A characteristic body posture in [Nigerian] dance consists of a straight-backed torso with the legs used as springs, the knees bending and stretching in fluidly executing the rhythmic action patterns of the dance, and feet placed firmly on the ground.’ The hand which seeks body-support upon the leg, then, implies the arrest of motion; not only is this ‘logical’, it refers as well to the traditional principle of ‘supporting’ as a stabilizing mode. This particular ‘supporting’ image requires the leg to bend, to provide a plane against which the hand can push, in order to gain the vertical impulse of stability. This seems obvious and pedantic perhaps; but it is worth stressing that the ultimate intention is ‘straightness’, so that, although motion is arrested, the image is underlined by an active potentiality — straightening. The iconography of the bended knee in sculpture often suggests the same context. The implication, centring on the knee, is of flexibility — which moves us considerably closer to the image of the dancer than the apparent contradiction in Ezeulu’s responses to change might at first suggest. Although the African ideal of stability is generally vested in a flat-footed approach to the dance, and embodied in performance by a straight-backed torso, the complementary ideal of flexibility relies upon *bended* ‘buoyant knees over stable feet’ (*African Art in Motion*, 10). As the image of the dancer and the image of the ‘supporting’ knee are seen to
merge, so do the respective associated poles of Ezeulu's apparently contradictory responses to change, in accord with the traditional dance dialectic relating flexibility to stability.

In sending Oduche to learn the whiteman's ways, Ezeulu bases his response to change upon the principle of flexibility, or, in other words, innovation; but the principle behind sacrificing the boy to the whiteman's god is one of stability, or tradition. One might even see the two responses as relating to two different perceptions of time, 'real' and 'mythic', the one permitting individual innovation and the other sacrificing the individual to the tradition of community. If this is so then we should not wonder that the image of the dancer and the image of the 'supporting' knee are not so polarised as Ezeulu's responses to change at first seem: as 'real' and 'mythic' time mesh. Positive proof of this is given in the form of call-and-response (and solo-and-circle), which provides a potent organisational metaphor throughout the novel. As Thompson writes, there is an 'overlap situation' in call-and-response that

combines innovative calls (or innovative steps, of the leader) with tradition (the choral round, by definition blurring individuality). Solo-ensemble work, among the many other things it seems to accomplish, is the presentation of the individual as a figure on the ground of custom. It is the very perception of real and mythic time.

(African Art in Motion, 43)

That Oduche is sent to the whiteman as both a sacrifice and 'to learn a new dance' (169) in fact suggests the mesh of tradition and innovation that is at the core of Ezeulu's response to the threat of the whiteman. This becomes most apparent when he makes use of the whiteman's attitude to time, an attitude expressed first by keeping the Priest waiting (as Clarke himself had been kept waiting while being 'broken in' at the Lieutenant-Governor's dinner) and then by imprisoning him. Imprisonment and other forms of coercive waiting enslave one to a future that makes the present meaningless — as Camus, Beckett and other Absurdists have demonstrated. But Ezeulu attempts to exploit the temporal condition of meaningless imprisonment (a symbolic condition of Western life, tyrannised as it is by imperial structure) so as to manipulate the traditional year of people, in revenge for their disrespect: 'his real struggle was with his own people and the white man was, without knowing it, his ally. The longer he was kept in Okperi the greater his grievance and his resources for the fight' (176). The whiteman, of course, is not his ally, and so in the end he fails (and falls).

If one is to move with the rhythm of change as the dancer to the drum,
one must contribute one's own rhythm and not merely mark time. This, in effect, is what Ezeulu asks of Oduche:

'It was I who sent you to join those people because of my friendship to the white man, Wintabota. He asked me to send one of my children to learn the ways of his people and I agreed to send you. I did not send you so that you might leave your duty in my household. Do you hear me? Go and tell the people who choose you to go to Okperi that I said no. Tell them that tomorrow is the day on which my sons and my wives and my son's wife work for me. Your people should know the custom of this land; if they don't you must tell them. Do you hear me?' (14-15)

To say that innovation and tradition mesh in the overall motivation for sending Oduche to the whiteman is another way of saying that he is expected 'to learn a new dance' while maintaining in his mind the rhythm of the old. In other words, what Ezeulu requires of him is conceived by Achebe in the same terms as 'apart-playing': in the terms of cross-rhythmic interpretation. Oduche is to learn the ways of the whiteman without losing his commitment to the ways of his people. Unfortunately, however, the rhythm of the whiteman is not merely different in kind. The Western 'approach to rhythm is called divisive because we divide the music into standard units of time', Chernoff tells us:

As we mark the time by tapping a foot or clapping our hands, we are separating the music into easily comprehensible units of time.... It is this fact, that Western musicians count together from the same starting point, which enables a conductor to stand in front of more than a hundred men and women playing in an orchestra and keep them together with his baton. Rhythm is something we follow...

(African Rhythm and African Sensibility, 41-42)

Accordingly, Oduche is unable to cross the rhythm of the 'new dance' with the rhythm of his people; instead, he takes it on its own terms, and follows it. The next time we come across Oduche, after his father's command to tell the whiteman the old custom even as he learns the new, we see him instead 'speak up for the Lord' (49) against the Sacred Python — following instead of interpreting. The irony of his subsequent Christian naming (an imperial act of claiming), as the rock upon which the Church will be built, is that it is an image of solid inflexibility totally alien to African notions of support and stability. This anticipation of the Christian baptism of Oduche as Peter, being conceived in terms of a rejection of the traditional modes of stability, also prefigures the final collapse of Ezeulu when his son pulls his leg out from underneath him. Tradition and innovation, integrated in the dual symbolism of Oduche's
role, become mutually exclusive when the father ‘cannot count on’ the son (221). Innovation triumphs, tradition collapses; and the Church offers sanctuary to those who wish ‘to escape the vengeance of Ulu’ (220).

The subsequent loss of vitality (in the socially symbolic sense of Achebe’s next novel, *A Man of the People*) is suggested not only by the inability of Ulu’s priest to remain standing, but at the same time by his failure to maintain a ‘cool’ face, a mask to match his grief: ‘For did they not say that a man is like a funeral ram which must take whatever beating comes to it without opening its mouth; that the silent tremor of pain down its body alone must tell of its suffering?’ (229). A traditional focal point of idealised stance, as an icon of vitality, is the ‘cool’ head, expressive in its inexpressiveness. Oduche’s betrayal not only links him (as a lizard) with his father’s sinking to the ground: Ezeulu’s ‘utter amazement’, such that he ‘hid his face on Obika’s chest’ and heard no explanation of the death (229), also looks back upon his recognition of Oduche as the eye that does not see: ‘I sent you to see and hear for me. I did not know at that time I was sending a goat’s skull’ (220).

The failure of the Chief Priest to ‘cool’ his grief by putting on the face of unexpected mental balance brings us to another of the novel’s organizing principles that are grounded upon the traditional aesthetics of dance — that is the principle of the mask. Jonathan A. Peters, referring rather obliquely to ‘Achebe’s mask idiom’, writes:

> the characters in *Arrow of God* may be seen as masks involved in a bizarre masquerade within Umuaro, within the British administration and in contacts between the two.... As a result, the pageant of masks looks different to the characters on different levels and only the reader, through Achebe’s ministrations, can see the often tragic implications on all these levels.  

Without disagreeing, it must be admitted that Peters’s discussion of the novel does little to provide evidence of this assertion’s truth. He draws our attention to the various explicit instances of a mask in the narrative, such as during the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves. He points out that Achebe’s language is enriched by a number of metaphorical allusions to masks, again explicit. But there is no attempt to connect the actual appearances of masks with the allusions made to them. Although Peters does convince his reader, somewhat impressionistically, that the question of power in the novel is related to the presence of masks, his insights are for the most part isolated and undeveloped. It may be true that Ezeulu ‘develops the strategy of masking his personal decisions and aims behind the divine will of Ulu’ (*A Dance of Masks*, 120), but what does this have to
do with literary idiom? How are the other characters to be seen as masks? Extending the implication of mask as defined in motion, a definition which Peters (himself born in Sierra Leone) subscribes to in his preface, how does the interrelation of characters locate them in the context of dance? Or, to put the question as posed by Peters, but left unanswered: what (precisely) are the 'ideational parallels' of the novel? How do they influence literary meaning and mode? (*A Dance of Masks*, ix-x)

African masks in the main are not just worn on the face but carried on the head. They are a weight to be borne, an often quite considerable burden. As we see in *Arrow of God*, this correlates with a spiritual burden that the wearer must carry when the mask is put upon him. The balance he must display in keeping his head immobile while his body is in motion is a blend again demonstrating the ideal complement of flexibility and stability; ‘real’ and ‘mythic’ time fuse as the body of the present is spiritualised by the face of the past, itself in turn revitalised. A person may be a match for the literal burden, but not for the equally real spiritual one, unless he is ‘supported’ in his balancing by community, its music ‘supporting’ his steps. As might be expected, all of these principles, at once aesthetic and metaphysical, are invested in the masking of the first Chief Priest of Ulu:

The six harassed villages got together and said to Ezeulu’s ancestor: *You will carry this deity for us.* At first he was afraid. What power had he in his body to carry such potent danger? But his people sang their support behind him and the flute man turned his head. So he went down on both knees and they put the deity on his head. He rose up and was transformed into a spirit. (189)

What is most important is not the way in which anthropological detail authenticates the literal descriptions of traditional ceremony; rather, these occasions make manifest principles that organise the whole novel, fulfilling in fiction the same function that ritual does in life. The dialectic that relates mask to person, and the iconography of head portage that correlates physical balance with mental stability and spiritual equilibrium, is idiomatic.

In some ways, Ezeulu’s children can be seen as his masks. But, instead of dancing to the tune he plays, their actions call the rhythm of his destiny, dancing him toward his doom and moving the novel toward its ironic conclusion with a rhythmic inevitability: ‘Thereafter any yam harvested in the fields was harvested in the name of the son’ (230). The reverberations from sentence structure are undoubtedly Christian, reminding us that the son’s name is Peter. Much has already been said about the relation of Oduche to his father the Chief Priest. But another
way of expressing what his father requires of him is that he be the mask of the new god, which Ezeulu will wear, if need be, to gain access to the spirit of the whiteman's power. In the sense that Oduche is intended as the mask of Christ, his sacrifice by Ezeulu is the counterpart of ritual, which normally ensures the potency of transformation from mere matter into mask. Since the carving and the consecration of Oduche as mask are intended concurrently, Edogo's rejoinder to Ezeulu's remonstration against carving deities, that he is carving a mask and not a deity, although technically correct, is not to the point. Coming in the first few pages, Ezeulu's rejection of debate on this technical point is ominous, as his preparation of Oduche in various advisory situations throughout the novel runs parallel to Edogo's carving of the new mask. In the end, Ezeulu is the victim of a confusion of masks. Instead of making himself available to his father as the mask of the new god, Oduche offers himself as a mask of the old god to the new. The arrow of Ulu turns out to be the apostle of Christ. The Chief Priest is left exposed to the Christian god — as an enemy, rather than, as he had hoped, as an ally.

This unmasking of Ezeulu relates to his exploitation of imprisonment to punish his people; Oduche's betrayal reveals the impotency of his father's masking strategy of identification with the whiteman. The unmasking is completed by the defection of his people to the new god, the mask of which, as he is unable to assume it, becomes the vehicle of his downfall. The irony is that the supposed sacrifice to confirm Oduche ritually as the mask of Christ does indeed activate the power of the new religion, but not in terms of the traditional principle of relation vested in masks, rather as an unbalancing and repressive influence. A further irony, given the principle of head-portage that is central to the masking tradition, concerns the metaphor of 'supporting'. Whereas Ezeulu's failure at the end of the novel to maintain the 'cool' facial expression that is 'the ground of objects-on-head masking traditions' (African Art in Motion, 96) signifies his unmasking (concurrent with his loss of physical support — the leg), his unwitting instigation of 'the Christian harvest' (230) puts him in the inverse role of supporting the whiteman. This is the irony of his earlier claim to 'see things where other men are blind' (with Oduche-the-eye) and of his criticism of those who 'have shown the whiteman the way to our house and given him a stool to sit on' (132).

But if Oduche is the false mask, Obika is finally the load that cannot be carried. Aneto's reference to him as 'a broken pot' (224) is ominous, for it implies the physical instability of the bearer, and, metaphorically, a loss of equilibrium that must in the end relate to Ezeulu. It is important to realize that Obika's death occurs at a time when 'his body is not all his'
(223-24). His fever may well manifest infection, referring symbolically to Ezeulu’s attempt to identify himself in alliance with the leper whose handshake turns out to be an embrace. In narrative terms, it is obvious that Obika’s death while carrying Ogbazulobodo anticipates his father’s mad grief. But the relation is made more profound by the terms of the masking tradition in which it is cast.

Obika’s death is the concrete expression of his father’s destiny, the ritual run of Ogbazulobodo being the objective correlative of Ezeulu’s dream-state of mind that night. He dreams that his family has deserted his compound and that a burial party trespasses unchallenged as they sing the song of burial. Then, as he runs toward Obika’s hut in alarm, he is brought to a sudden halt by a single voice of profound sorrow: ‘The sweet agony of the solitary singer settled like dew on the head’ (222). This is the python-singer, whose song ends in the demented laughter of Ezeulu’s mother. The prophetic note obviously pertains to the insanity which will overtake Ezeulu at the end of the novel; but, at the same time, in settling ‘like dew on the head’ the song alludes to a previous designation of Obika, as a Night Mask ‘caught abroad by daylight’ (79). This is the image of Obika which precedes his whipping. It relates literally to the effects of a night of palm-wine drinking. But its metaphorical import is in the context of head-portage as the masking mode of displaying balance: ‘Obika felt an emptiness on top as if his head had been numbed by a whole night’s fall of dew’ (80). The feeling that his head does not belong to him has serious implications for the balancing of masks, ominous in relation to his death at the end of the novel, when the burden of the Night Mask of Ogbazulobodo proves too much for him. Effectively, the palm wine has left Obika without a head. Note that it is his unbalanced judgement, lacking ‘coolness’, which rewards him with a whipping, when he responds to the whitemen’s postural and facial expression of ‘uncool’ irritation by putting ‘more swagger into his walk’ (81). In the first permutation of metaphor, Obika’s feeling of numbness, as though he has no head, refers to his lack of a sense of gravity, or responsibility for his actions. In contrast, ‘The young man’s behaviour was like a heavy load on his father’s head’ (79). This is partly because Obika has not fully assumed his own identity, for he has not yet married. Formally he is still a child, his actions representing his father (the ‘head’ of his compound) rather than himself. As Ezeulu tells Nwafo: ‘In a few days his bride will come and he will no longer be called a child. When strangers see him they will no longer ask Whose son is he? but Who is he?’ (93). Nwafo sees his father’s face glisten with perspiration as he tells him this, as if what he speaks of is a physical burden. The fact that Obika is
not yet a man and already dances to his own tune means that instead of supporting his father-the-head, he is a load which his father-the-head must bear. At the end of the novel, the dew falls not on the head of Obika but on that of his father, the effect of the song of the python-singer in his dream. And when we come to the phenomenal parallel to this 'more than ordinary' dream (221), Obika carries the Night Mask with the feeling that it is his body, rather than his head, that is 'not all his'. The image of the father that accompanies the death of the son is of the funeral ram, recalling the ritual decapitation of this sacrificial beast during the induction of the new mask carved by Edogo. By an iconographic inversion, the 'uncool' manifestation of Ezeulu's 'utter amazement' at his son's death suggests the metaphor of the priest's unmasking. We have seen already how this facial display of instability relates to an unbalanced state of mind and anticipates Ezeulu's insanity from unmoderated grief. But the implication of the metaphor extends significantly further: 'uncool' facial expression, as a display of unbalanced mind, signifies in head-portage a loss of 'the power to surmount the natural head with the head which comes from the gods' (African Art in Motion, 96).

This explains why the final unmasking of Ezeulu — when Ulu, finding himself a god without power, abandons his Chief Priest — is conceived in terms of the symbolism of a ritual beheading. For in Africa, the mask is the head of the spiritualized wearer. The madness of unmasked Ezeulu signifies a profound loss of spirit, culturally symbolic in its coincidence with the 'Christian harvest'.

It is this ritual context of Ezeulu's fate that makes sense of the realignment of symbolism associated with Obika and his father. We see Ezeulu first through his own eyes, as the whip of Ulu, which will punish Umuaro; and then as one who is whipped by Ulu, struck down and covered with mud. Inversely, we see Obika first as one who is whipped and then as the whip itself. Finally, from his being a load on his father's head, he is transformed into the 'axe' (229) which removes all weight from his father's shoulders, a symbolic gesture prefigured by his role as executioner of the sacrificial ram during the ceremonial induction of a mask at the New Yam Feast.

To understand these metaphorical inversions we must keep in mind that ritual derives its meaning from beyond its immediate dramatic context, the individual status of those most directly concerned in its enactment being annihilated in favour of their symbolic figuration. It is not so much Obika who becomes the whip to punish Ezeulu as the son who flogs the father. That the symbolic death of the father as a funeral sacrifice to the son should occur in the context of Ogbazulobodo implies an
ironic reversal of this ritual, for the traditional purpose of this second burial rite, here arranged by the son (Aneto) for his father (Amalu), is to keep the deceased from the finality of Death.® The final sentence of the novel points to the consequences of this ritual inversion: ‘Thereafter any yam harvested in his [the father’s] fields was harvested in the name of the son’ (230). The son is Oduche, Peter, Christ the Son of God — the son many a father ‘sent ... with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity’. Oduche is the type of sacrifice, a Christ-figure — which makes the ritual conclusion all the more ironic, for it is the sacrifice of the father in the name of the son.

It would be misguided to see the ascendancy of the son as the total triumph of Christianity. After all, at a further point in the history of the Igbo, sons like Obi Okonkwo in No Longer At Ease will reject the Christian faith of their fathers (who are the sons in Arrow of God), Christianity is the only real choice that the people have if they are to harvest their yam and not collectively commit suicide.

Achebe’s comments on Christianity, although not directly concerned with the novel, are pertinent to its conclusion:

[I] wonder whether there is a suggestion that because of this great disruptive historical force, people were able to exercise infinitely less choice than perhaps might be the case, say, in Nigeria now. That of course there are still problems, moral choices and dilemmas and all the rest of it, but that the incredible tidal wave of the whiteman bringing his Christianity, which came in two or three generations and then receded, served to create enormous problems: not only politically but socially, even within family structures: and that the conflict in values was so sharp that for all but the toughest whole areas of choice had been taken away.®

With the removal of choice comes the loss of responsibility, which is the most tragic consequence of colonialism and really what Arrow of God is all about: ‘You see, we’re no longer in charge of things. And once you take responsibility away from someone he becomes irresponsible. And my third book, Arrow of God, dramatises this problem ... there you find the struggle by the chief priest to hold on to a sense of responsibility.’ 10

At the end of the novel, Christianity offers the only way of survival: immunity from the will of Ulu. But the origin of Ulu is, as the novel makes quite clear, as a conscious construction in the minds of the people, an innovation of the past reflecting their desire for unity against other invasions — a spiritual invention. In this sense, their defection from Ulu does involve relinquishing responsibility for their own fate, although, ironically, they have no choice but to do so, or be wiped out by famine: ‘For a diety [sic] who chose a moment such as this to chastise his priest or
abandon him before his enemies was inciting people to take liberties; and Umuaro was just ripe to do so’ (230). The initiative passes to Christianity when the Chief Priest loses the struggle to keep responsibility for his people. But giving up responsibility, behaving irresponsibly, is a very different thing from enabling the complete colonisation of the religious imagination. Christianity is accommodated and Ulu abandoned in a gesture of sheer pragmatism. There is no suggestion that the other gods of the Igbo pantheon will not continue to function as they always have in the mind of the people. Only Ulu has failed in his purpose and so become expendable.

It is the fault of the novel that there is no hint in the conclusion that the other gods will continue in their sphere of influence. But how else are we to explain the fact that, despite its significance in making Obika’s death a symbolic mode of sacrificing Ezeulu upon the alter of the Christian god, the image of the funeral ram is perfectly consistent with the burial ritual of decapitation that the first priest of Ulu transferred to his own cult from that of Idemili the Python?

Many aspects of the novel suggest that Ezeulu’s fate is as the priest of a god that loses the struggle for power and is stripped of its anklet by Idemili. I am not the first to notice this. But here too the supporting mode of the masking tradition, and the kinetic iconography of stable/flexible ideals, is important. For instance, although Ezeulu interprets the weather that overtakes him on his journey from Okperi to Umuaro as part of the suffering to which his people expose him by sending him there in the first place, the rain is personified to remind us of Idemili, the Pillar of Water that holds up the Raincloud as the pillar of a house supports the roof: ‘the rain seemed to say: Now is the time; there are no houses on the way where they can seek shelter. It took both hands off its support and fell down with immense, smothering abandon’ (182). Achebe’s italics here might just as well represent the voice of Idemili, and the rain can be seen as a blow struck against Ulu, blinding his priest, making him stiff, inflexible: ‘the water that blinded him ... went on and on until Ezeulu’s fingers held on to his staff like iron claws.’ (The staff is a traditional symbol of spiritual power. We see in the death scene of Chapter Eleven that an inability to hold on to one’s personal staff signifies desertion by one’s personal god, prophesying death. There the sick man’s fingers ‘close, like claws,’ around his staff in a desperate but futile attempt to grasp it, to continue in the active idiom of saying ‘no’ to death.)

In the end, the Chief Priest’s insanity is implicitly associated with Idemili by the song of the python-singer in his dream, a song which ends with his mother’s demented laughter. It is this python-song that affects
him like ‘dew on the head’, which recalls Obika’s headless feeling on the way to his whipping and anticipates Ezeulu’s own symbolic decapitation. At the same time, I would suggest, it looks back upon the ‘heady’ feeling he had when caught between Okperi and Umuaro in the rain, linking the symbolism of his ultimate fate with the suffering he experiences under Idemili. That the final image of Ezeulu as a figure ritually beheaded has its place in the normal burial rites accorded to Ulu’s priests is ironically appropriate: he is in a sense manoeuvred into the role of ritual victim by Idemili. Through the sacrifice of Ulu to the Christian god Idemili ensures that the new religion’s triumph is only a partial one, ironically aiding his own survival.

In the end there can be no one interpretation of *Arrow of God*, and, true as this may be for any literature, here it relates less to the Lockean subjectivism that is at the root of Western individuation of perception than to a specifically African kinetic conception of reality: ‘The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place’ (46). Standing in Ezeulu’s place we see him abandoned by his own god, a god stripped inexplicably of its power: ‘What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things?’ (229). From the perspective of Umuaro and its leaders the issue is simple: ‘Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest’ (230). It is perhaps a fault that we are not given Idemili’s point of view (but then we are not given Ulu’s either; and through which character could the gods communicate to us at the novel’s conclusion?). It is probable that Idemili sees in the outcome of events that something has been lost as well as gained: his old rival is destroyed, but now there is a new one to contend with, its power untried. At a later point in time, beyond the novel, the sky (to which he belongs) will recede from him, leaving him to lament his betrayal by ‘empty men’ who hearken to

A charlatan bell that calls
Unknown monotones of revolts,
Scandals, and false immunities.13

Winterbottom is accustomed to monotones and scandals: ‘If you saw, as I did, a man buried alive up to his neck with a piece of roast yam on his head to attract vultures you know...’ (36; 56). Unable to move from this mental position, he sees and hears nothing of Ezeulu. Nevertheless, he offers another way of interpretation. Even Winterbottom’s imperialist image of Africa (*Heart of Darkness*) refers parodically to all of the intersecting symbolic motifs of the conclusion: sacrifice, burial, division of
head and body (at the ground-level, dividing earth and sky), head-portage (the yam).

The hermeneutic principle of *Arrow of God* is one of fluid movement from one position to another, a dancing of attitudes which, in the reader's way of relating them, composes his/her own contribution to what the novel is doing. A sense of rhythm and of balance is needed to activate the shifting patterns of metaphor and to relate the different faces of truth, where truth is 'like a Mask dancing' and its 'characters' are permutations of its essence.

Psychology is not equal to this complexity of masks. Essentially, the procession of masks marks a ritual of disunification, dividing village from village, father from son, and driving a wedge into religious sensibility to divide its allegiance into potential conflict.

The six villages of Umuaro are ritually united in the first place through the symbolism of masking, when the first priest of Ulu receives the god's head: he kneels down a man and stands up a spirit. Inversely, what we witness throughout *Arrow of God*, the disintegration of unity and the movement toward Christianity, is raised 'to the stature of a ritual passage' by being consecrated (as Achebe tells us in his preface) by the priest's own personal agony. That is, the historical process of the novel is ritually concentrated in the unmasking of the Chief Priest, what the author calls (again in the preface) 'his high historical destiny as victim', as a symbolic figure beheaded in the image of his god.

The potential and the limits of individual participation in the communal context are dramatised as they are encoded by idiom in *Arrow of God*. At the core of the colonial relationship, as T.O. Ranger declares, is 'the successful manipulation and control of symbols'.14 Ezeulu undoubtedly fails in this power struggle; but the novel does not. Nor does Idemili. Implicit in much 'criticism' of Achebe's fiction is the honorific judgement that it extends the Great Tradition of the Nineteenth-Century Novel in its European Heyday; were this true, from a post-colonial point of view it would be an accusation, for, as Gayatri Spivak and others have demonstrated, that form of fiction encodes the ideal of Empire (by investing narrative authority in omniscient or centralised perspective, by proposing concepts of universalised value, etc.).15 The accusation, of course, is false. Achebe has captured the symbolic form of the novel from the 'central' tradition, and grounded it upon an aesthetic of movement and motion and agility — which, as he says, 'inform the Igbo concept of existence' and so, by a paradigm shift, reconstitute the nature and experience of fiction. The reader must engage with a kinetic performance, must participate in a process: 'Ada-akwu ofu ebe enene mmoo; you do

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not stand in one place to watch a masquerade. You must imitate its motion.' The process is one of socialisation and constant renewal, functioning by an ‘overlap’ of multiple perspectives — individual and communal, call-and-response, solo-and-circle — that redefines the imperial concept of the centre in African terms, in terms of slippage: as that blank space where innovation inscribes itself on the ground of tradition.

NOTES


2. This critical model is an adaptation of the ‘metronome sense’ advocated as essential to an understanding of African music by Richard Alan Waterman, ‘African Influence on the Music of the Americas’, in Sol Tax, ed., Acculturation in the Americas (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1952), p. 211. I am indebted also to John Miller Chernoff’s discussion of African music as an energising educational force, in African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms (1979; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 154 ff: ‘As a style of human conduct, participation in an African musical event characterizes a sensibility with which Africans relate to the world and commit themselves to its affairs. As a cultural expression, music is a product of this sensibility, but more significantly, as a social force, music helps shape this sensibility. . . . music’s explicit purpose, in the various ways it might be defined by Africans, is, essentially, a socialization. An individual learns the potentials and limitations of participation in a communal context dramatically arranged for the engagement, display, and critical examination of fundamental cultural values.’ Further references are given in the text.


8. The ritual running of Oghazulobodo would traditionally mark a passage from one stage of ‘living death’ to another, calling the deceased ‘inside’ from suffering since first burial, ensuring ‘personal immortality’ in the ‘now-period’, on the human side of
Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: A Critical Survey

In general terms, Nigerian poetry in English before the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) was marked by an excessive preoccupation with private grief and emotions over and above societal tragedies and triumphs, undue eurocentrism, derivationism, obscurantism and private esotericism. This tendency may be attributed to, among other factors, the fact that until the Civil War, Nigeria had no major public historical rallying point. The colonial struggles were waged by the various tribal kingdoms with little or no inter-ethnic co-operation; amalgamation was carried out by agents of an external force; the struggle for independence was neither violent nor concerted on a national scale; and independence itself was merely another gimmick for entrenching a few greedy members of the native élite. The Civil War on the other hand was a crystallizing experience as it was the one time when virtually every Nigerian was forced by the nature of the issues at stake to take a stand, primarily, a
public one. It should, therefore, not be surprising to find that the temper of Nigerian poetry has been altered drastically by the events of this period in the history of the country.

More than anything else, recent Nigerian poets of English expression seem to have moved from the obscurantism of their forerunners to the writing of accessible and socially anchored poetry. The move towards the demystification of Nigerian poetry in English had been irrevocably started by the pre-1966 coup crises in the country. These events inspired Christopher Okigbo to write his most lucid and accessible poetry ('Path of Thunder') which set the tone and texture for a lot of recent Nigerian poetry in English. On both sides of the war, many came face to face with death, dehumanization and various forms of betrayal. There was a physical, spiritual, and psychological brutalization of the nation on an incomprehensibly large scale. In such a 'season of anomy', the poets could no longer afford to speak in inaccessible riddles and occult tongues. New and strident voices were needed for the immediate and unambiguous expression of the nation's tortured and fragmented psyche. The shells and the bullets made sure that there were no closets left from which the closet-poets could operate. The physical destruction of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, remains the most vivid poetic metaphor for the death of ivory-towerism in Nigerian poetry in English. In addition, the pervading aura of danger and death, especially in Biafra, made directness and 'immediate delivery' the sine qua non of the poetry of this period.

The Nigerian Civil War was, however, not the only modifying influence on Nigerian poetry in English. Since independence, the geo-social bases of this poetry and the consciousness of Nigerian poets of English expression have been modified in accordance with the new realities of the country. There has been a proliferation of universities in the country and such universities have usually tended to become additional breeding and practice grounds for prospective poets. In addition to this geographical expansion, a few poets have also emerged from outside the university system, especially from the Armed Forces who, though still at a fledgling state, will hopefully bring a new social perspective to bear on Nigerian poetry in English and join many of the recent university-groomed poets in the demystification of this poetry.

As an important corollary to the expansion of the geo-social context of Nigerian poetry in English, it should be noted that it has become more difficult for any single view of literature or culture to exercise a stranglehold on this new poetry in the same manner that Leeds single-handedly played the midwife to the poetic endeavours of the first generation of modern Nigerian poets, inculcating in them an Anglo-modernist sensi-
bility and a lopsided application of the universalist-individualistic approach to literature. Duality, or even a multiplicity of views and ideological cultures now seems to be the defining factor in most of Nigerian educational institutions. At Ife, Ibadan and Zaria, for example, radical scholars have made a significant impact on both staff and students alike, and it is to be expected that the new poets emerging from these campuses would consciously or unconsciously reflect the dialectical relationships which are germane to the right-left ideological debates in their communities.

The prophetic and lucid example in Okigbo's 'Path of Thunder' became a model for the younger poets at Nsukka who have now matured to become the legitimate heirs to the Okigbo mantle. In documenting the emergence of the post-Okigbo poets at Nsukka, Chukwuma Azuonye suggests that post-Okigbo poets were informed by a 'mood of utter disgust over the incipient brutalization of their country' and that their reaction was a 'wounded outrage ... against the crisis and war that threatened, and restively still threaten, the future of our people'.

One of the most tragic repercussions of the coup and counter-coup of 1966 was the civil violence which led to the cold-blooded massacre of Easterners in several parts of Nigeria, especially in the North. In the words of Olusegun Obasanjo, a one-time Head of State of Nigeria, these events 'altered the political equation and destroyed the fragile trust existing among the major ethnic groups' in the country. The dehumanization which resulted from the violence led many Easterners to flee from the North to the East in search of refuge. They went to the East by air, land and sea, in pathetic and shocking conditions. Most of them had one or the other part of their bodies either broken or completely missing. Thousands of children arrived, some with severed limbs and many others emasculated. The adults bore the full brunt of the killings and very few arrived from the North unharmed. Those whose limbs were not severed, brought them back shattered and had to be amputated anyway. Many others had their eyes, nose (sic), ears and tongues plucked out.... Women above the age of ten were raped and many of them came back on stretchers.... There was hardly a single family which did not suffer a loss through these massacres.

Predictably enough, Enugu as the political capital of Eastern Region and Nsukka as its only university town, functioned as the centres for the political and intellectual debates about the future of the violated Easterners. While the political debates crystallized into the declaration of the
independent Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967, the creative energy unlocked by the nightmarish events found expression in the vibrant poetry of young poets such as Chukwuma Azuonye, Kevin Echeruo, Ossie Enrekwe, Dubem Okafor and Obiora Udechukwu.

Whether as a reaction to the orgy of blood consequent on the massacres and the Civil War or as a reaction to the failure of the Biafran ideal, the poetry of this generation of young men has logically been threnodic both in tone and content. The mangled limbs and dismembered bowels of the victims of the crises and the frustrated hopes of the people have metamorphosed into images of death, aridity, decay, putrefaction, betrayal and hypocrisy. The mournful tone of the dirge has thus become the dominant mood of the poetry by the post-Okigbo ‘Nsukka poets’. The poetry of Pol Ndu, Ossie Onuora Enekwe and Obiora Udechukwu displays the profound anguish which has emerged as the defining characteristic of the poetry of this generation.

The dance macabre which characterised Nigerian life, especially on the Biafran side, has been lyricised in Pol Ndu’s Song for Seers where he explores the ambivalence, the dilemma and the frustration which define the awakening creative spirit caught in a cauldron of chaos. Song for Seers is suffused with images of death, void, decay and aridity and it presents a picture of modern Nigerian life as a wasteland where the only consolation remains the immortal song of the poet who is the ‘dying immortal’. The gory details of war, its accompanying misery and despair are evoked in ‘Reflections’ when Ndu affirms that ‘smiles have fled men’s faces/ drawing wry skin over dry bones’ and the communality of the tragedy finds poetic expression in ‘Reburial of the Dead’ where the poet vicariously experiences the plight of ‘heads severed in seven nights on seven stones/ ...awaiting the planting season/ resting on seven palms’.

Enrekwe’s Broken Pots opens with the poet as an exile speaking to his host audience about himself and his perception of his sanctuary (‘The Joker’). This opening prepares the ground for those poems which focus on non-Nigerian subjects and which demonstrate that the modern African psyche is, of necessity, nomadic. But more specifically, they inspire questions as to why the poet has abandoned his land ‘where the sun smiles in the day,/ the moon at night/ and (where) electric has not killed the stars’ for a sojourn in a land of bitter cold where ‘all shoot white clouds through their nostrils/ into the mist like pipers in a crowd’. The reason for the poet’s exile is to be found in the social, political and economic realities of Biafra both before and after the war. In articulating these realities, Enrekwe ventures beyond the immediate and the parochial by universalizing the sentiments which inform the Biafran ideal.
In the title poem of this volume, Enekwe, employing the folkloric mode, evokes the picture of a confrontation between innocence and experience — a confrontation which inevitably leads to the souring of innocence by experience as was the case in the confrontation between the innocent ideals of Biafran youths and the stark realities of the Civil War. The poet-protagonist goes to the top of a neighbourhood hill with his sister in search of the king of animals only to be confronted with ‘The voice of a virgin/ whose pot of water/ has slipped and crumbled’. The virgin with the broken pot of water becomes a symbol for all those whose dreams of a better future have been cannibalized and consigned to the rubbish heap of the present. Such frustrated hopes are amplified in sharper relief in this volume through the poet’s focus on the absence of good things, the permanence of the ugly and the bad, and the pervading presence of fear and death.

The magnitude of the Biafran tragedy is most evident in the cluster of poems which celebrates the victims of the war. In ‘No Way For Heroes To Die’, Enekwe laments the loss of ‘those who died to be forgotten —/ carcass of heroism stung by rainbows,/ stung till blanched, it was abandoned by flies’ and in ‘To A Friend Made and Lost In War’, he captures the tragic loss which accompanies civil strife and wars.

Throughout this volume, Enekwe finds himself returning again and again to the premature termination of the life of members of his generation; young men and women who pass away, like comets in the gloom.

In spite of the personal and the collective tragedies which characterized Biafra, however, Enekwe suggests that the only way through which we can transform our past tragedies into a positive future is by being guided by the courage, dedication and love of the martyrs of our past and not by building a fence between the dead and the living. It is in the spirit of this philosophy that he celebrates the patches of love in our scorched wasteland.

To move from Enekwe’s poetry to that of Obiora Udechukwu is to move from the literary but direct to the traditional and oblique. While the threnodic tone in Enekwe’s poetry is recognizably that of the poet: realistically portrayed, sombre and depressing, the predominant poetic voice in Udechukwu’s What the Madman Said is that of a light-hearted,
licentious, illogical (but by no means irrelevant) mad persona. Udechukwu is primarily a visual artist — an exponent of the *uli* tradition of line drawing — but he believes that ‘the painter should also be a poet and that all arts are somehow interlinked’.

Like his paintings and drawings, his poems make poignant satirical social statements in defence of the underdog. The Prologue to *What the Madman Said* crystallizes the major preoccupations of Udechukwu, who in the face of the ‘scarlet sorrow’ and the ‘faded laughter’ of our age, would wish for songs of courage which will propel us past present obstacles into a brighter future. He wonders, rhetorically:

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For when the agonies of a generation are measured
And the tree-trunks of the people laid out
shall there

in the bayonet-fenced field be left
voices to raise a song
for the totem lost in the whirlwind?
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The unvoiced answer is, of course, in the affirmative. His poetry and that of the other ‘Nsukka poets’ can be regarded as songs raised to Biafra — ‘the totem lost in the whirlwind’.

*What the Madman Said* covers the theme of the Civil War as well as our twentieth-century maladies. In a manner similar to Enekwe’s, Udechukwu pays homage to some of those who made personal sacrifices, including the supreme sacrifice, for the Biafran cause. For example, he portrays Okigbo as the one

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who changed your lunar flute
for a gun
that future generations
might not bite sand.
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The ‘ashes of the sensual years’, he concludes, have left us searching for shelter from the rains and for shields against the storms which continually threaten our every forward step.

The war is only a distant echo in the second part of *What the Madman Said*. The poet’s major preoccupation here is with the more immediate realities of social disruptions, political betrayals and economic exploitation. He is direct in his indictment of our ‘heroes’ whose ‘promises are baskets of water/ ...are words spoken to the wind’.

In many regards, Udechukwu’s poetic sensibility is as sharp and imagistic as Okigbo’s. His madman persona, while recalling the
enigmatic madman in Achebe’s short story ‘The Madman’, is a composite of Okigbo’s Jadum and Upandru and, like them, he is vociferous in his unashamed and unrestrained condemnation of our alienated and deluded leaders:

Promises and three-piece suits
Cannot climb palm trees
Briefcases and files
Cannot plant cassava
Ora Obodo, can one eat yam with petrol?

I am the one speaking
If I do not wake the cock
The cock will not wake the sun.

In both his subject matter and style, Udechukwu displays a concern for the poetic tradition of his people and succeeds in conveying his themes through appropriate and graphic images and metaphors in a manner reminiscent of Okot p’Bitek and Okigbo. The sense of loss and hope which characterizes the poetry of Pol Ndu, Ossie Enekwe and Obiora Udechukwu is also present in many of the other post-Okigbo poets from the eastern part of the country. Even in Chinweizu’s *Energy Crisis and Other Poems* which is predominantly set in the West and permeated with its soggy and sentimental sexual obsessions, the Nigerian Civil War features in a few poems which, incidentally, are the more eloquent and significant ones in the volume. In these poems, he suggests that the Nigerian Civil War, like any other war in Africa, is a tragedy which must be blamed on our leaders and their foreign (mis-education):

Son, should they ask why we died,
Tell them:
Our leaders were paralysed
By festering greed
By ethics and statecraft mislearned
From alien lands.\(^{11}\)

In addition to the Nigerian poets on the Biafran side, the crises and the war left their imprint on other younger Nigerian poets who did not necessarily witness the actual war. While the ‘Nsukka poets’ who were directly involved in the war expressed disgust at the massacre of their people in various parts of the country, jubilation at the birth of Biafra, and frustration at the failures of their new nation, drawing on the details
of the Biafran tragedy as the raw materials for their poetry, the other Nigerian poets saw and used the war as a concrete metaphor of the night-marish state of the nation. Like the ‘Nsukka poets’, these other young Nigerian poets were set to make poetry as relevant to the realities of their daily existence as possible: no more the pursuit of the clever and esoteric lines of Soyinka, the latinate phrases of Okigbo and Echeruo or the Hopkinsian syntax of Clark.

Odia Ofeimun (The Poet Lied), Niye Osundare (Songs of the Marketplace and Village Voices), Harry Garuba (Shadow and Dream), Femi Fatoba (Petals of Thought) and Tanure Ojaide (Children of Iroko) are some of the major new poets who have emerged from outside of what was Biafra. The first important observation about these poets, who incidentally are all connected with the University of Ibadan in the same way that the ‘Nsukka poets’ are connected with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, is that they are neither homogeneous in their style nor have they been ‘victims’ of the same literary influences. The monolithic presence of Okigbo which is discernable in the ‘Nsukka poets’ is absent from the work of these new ‘Ibadan poets’. The nearest to a monolithic influence on their poetry may be that of the radical perspective which has made substantial inroads into some of our university communities.

The rigorous self-criticism to which these poets often subject themselves and their country may be illustrated with Ofeimun’s poetic reaction to the Civil War, the military in Nigerian politics and the relationship between the artist and his society. The tragic experiences of the Civil War find expression in Ofeimun’s violent images and in his implicit references to the details of the ‘senseless abattoirs’ and ‘un-healthy hate’ which have come to characterize Nigerian life style. The title poem indicts opportunistic pro-establishment artists, who, in spite of the evident brutalization of the masses, choose to camp at the foot of the high table of power, waiting for the crumbs from the plates of those whose praises they have condemned themselves to sing. It is callous, Ofeimun insists, for such artists to use the suffering and dehumanized members of their society as mere ornaments in their fables when they should be fighting physically or metaphorically for their liberation. For any such artist,

...as for the many handy serfs
  to whose lot it fell
  to whitewash the public idols-
  with termite-eaten insides,
  there was no place for raised fingers

31
even when human adders
gobbled the peace of the market place
even when famine snaked through
his neighbours' homesteads^{12}

Ofeimun's concern for the oppressed, his anger at and impatience with opportunistic artists, public morality, cultural inadequacies, economic mismanagement and his acknowledgement of the few positive archetypes are qualities which he shares with Niyi Osundare whose two published volumes — *Songs of the Marketplace*^{13} and *Village Voices*^{14} — by their very titles, proclaim the public slant of his poetry. The public with which he is obsessed is a clearly defined one — the oppressed peasants who may be found in our marketplaces and villages. Osundare's poetry is the best Nigerian example (in English) of the poem as song and performance. His poetry is

not the esoteric whisper
of an excluding tongue
not a claptrap
for a wondering audience
not a learned quiz
entombed in Grecoroman lore.

Poetry, for him, must be a direct descendant of

the hawker's ditty
the eloquence of the gong
the lyric of the market place
the luminous ray
on the grass's morning dew

i.e. 'man meaning to man'.^{15}

In Osundare's poetry, one confronts an understanding and internalization of the contrastive and convergent cultures and ideologies which shape our daily lives. These contradictions are, as a result of the poet's ideological choice, resolved in favour of the masses. As in Ofeimun's poetry, a justifiable anger is present in his work, in addition to an abundance of humour and satire. With an eye to the absurd and the grotesque, Osundare caricatures members of our ruling/ruining class while providing very sympathetic views of the masses whose fates are determined by the policies and antics of the leaders. Apart from the social relevance of Osundare's poetry, his work is distinguished by its sustained lyricism and the use of the dramatic tone, both of which are reminiscent of the oral traditions of Africa. The banter of the market place, the
garrulous and living voices of street fighters, the spontaneous wit of touts, and the poetic work-tunes of farmers are encapsulated in Osundare's poetry. The various drums in 'A Dialogue of the Drums' become characters in a well-orchestrated symphony of the pains, poetry, prophecies and hopes of the people. Their conclusion that 'the people always outlive the palace' stands out as Osundare's thematic and ideological creed. Without any doubt, Osundare is the public poet, the town-crier, briefly glimpsed in the Okigbo of 'Path of Thunder'.

The return to roots which is evident in Osundare's poetry is also manifest in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide and Kemi-Atanda Ilori. Both of these poets can be classified as neo-traditionalists. Ojaide, like most of the new Nigerian poets, empathises with the downtrodden and employs a poetic style which is, as in the case of Osundare, derived from an indigenous poetics. His poetry is marked by the generous presence of sonorous phrases, parables and rituals and the absence of the obscure. He uses traditional forms to achieve poetic validity, intensity and relevance.

Kemi-Atanda Ilori's *Voices of the Hurricane* shows that he is a poet whose sensibility is firmly rooted in the Yoruba culture. In his use of cumulative details and fragments, he recalls Fagunwa's repetition of situations and motifs to underscore major thematic preoccupations. Kemi-Atanda Ilori's bias is that of a neo-traditionalist dirge chanter who revels in the incantatory, the gnomic and the expansive.

Kemi-Atanda Ilori's love of the expansive contrasts sharply with Femi Fatoba's economy of language and emotions. In *Petals of Thought*, Fatoba examines the familiar terrain of the decadent political and religious arena of contemporary life with specific emphasis on the falsity of the Nigerian scene. Deceit, cynicism, corruption and false starts are the hallmarks of the land/man-scape which emerges from Fatoba's poetry. Whatever his theme, he always seems to be able to introduce an original and witty perception and assessment. The humour often takes the bite out of his indictments while, ironically, also making them more memorable and enduring. His language is subtle, impersonal, occasionally mischievous (with his chuckling voice in the background) and his images are bold and vivid. Fatoba's brand of poetry, despite the pervading grim realities, is light-hearted without being irresponsible, terse and crisp without being obscure.

Thus far, it is obvious that public-spiritedness is one of the defining qualities of new Nigerian poetry in English. However, to move from poets like Osundare and Fatoba to Harry Garuba is to move from the basically public to the basically private. Garuba's *Shadow and Dream* is informed by a reclusive intelligence: an alienated psyche which is set
apart from its society. Garuba's poet-protagonist is the ear which hears the unspoken and weaves webs of dreams out of such celestial materials. His poetry is devoid of that essential anger which keeps rebels and those on the fringe alive and active. His is the calm reflection of a retiring philosopher who has

...learnt without the beard of age,
to shelter it all within the shell of my life
for the spider has woven my broken shell
into a web of fantasy in which is contained
the metaphoric lore of all my journeys.  

Riddles, gnomic phrases, romantic tragedy and fantasy are the central attributes of Garuba's poetry, and except in a poem like 'To all Compatriots', he is a prisoner in his castle of dreams. Not so Idi Bukar, the author of _First The Desert Came and Then The Torturer_. In the best tradition of revolutionary poetry now gaining currency in Nigeria, Idi Bukar, one of the few substantial poets of English expression to have emerged from the northern part of Nigeria, is an explorer of the collective psyche of the people. He constructs an elaborate parable of a neo-colonial nation which is presided over by aridity, uncreativity, brutalization, mediocrity and death-inducing leadership. His Torturer and Death 'are both real life and metaphorical forces of infertility and destruction, and they symbolise the threat of a transition through hunger from dependent capitalism to dependent fascism'. Can such a pessimistic view of life be revolutionary? Yes. For, to ask the right question in a season of fear and lurking death is a revolutionary gesture, but Bukar takes the debate beyond the asking of the right questions and presents the image of a revolutionary who is courageous enough to challenge the hunger-inducing, the labour-exploiting and cliche-ridden leadership of the nation. Bukar's Dan Foco is Dedan Kimathi, Patrice Lumumba, the Agbekoya and all of Africa's revolutionary guerrillas reincarnated. He is the undying moving spirit herding the people toward their liberation:

When the paid news reader was announcing he was dead
someone noticed him watching the screen
someone glimpsed him on the bush road
someone was listening to his lecture before
a rag-and-kerosine-lit backboard.

How could they have expected to kill him?

Idi Bukar's revolutionary message is a logical extension of Niyi Osundare's unambiguous identification with the oppressed. That is the major
concern of contemporary Nigerian poetry in English, be it in the fiery lines of Idi Bukar and Niyi Osundare or in the sensitive stance of Catherine Acholonu who, sadly enough, is the only female Nigerian poet of any significance to have emerged in recent times. Acholonu’s poetry focuses attention on the plight of the twentieth-century African. Her parables about ancestors who have ‘lost track of their graves/ In a strange land’, of a goddess who is entrusted with the task of bringing beauty to an ugly world and of the creative water women are, in essence, parables about our precarious modern existence. Acholonu’s poetic persona reminds one of Garuba’s introspective protagonist but her personalization of the poetic voice does not lead to closet-poetry. Rather, her poetic persona portrays experiences which it has vicariously undertaken on behalf of the community; it is thus at once personal as well as communal.

The shift from the obscurantism and eurocentrism of most of the first generation of modern Nigerian poets to the preoccupations of the present crop of poets whose focus as well as literary antecedents are more indigenous than foreign, can be said to have signalled a much desired alter/native tradition in Nigerian poetry in English. There is, of course, still a lot of scope for development, even in the application of this alter/native tradition. Individual poets would, for example, be expected to evolve, through experimentation with the component forms of this tradition, distinctive personal styles which, while being personal to them, can also be traced back to the base tradition. As one waits for the inevitable maturation of some of the poets whose works have been examined in this survey and other up-coming poets such as Besong Bate, Ishola Dina, Ada Ugbah, Teju Olaniyan, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, and the handful of soldier poets like M.J. Vatsa and Pater Atuu, one hopes that many of them would succeed in extending the frontiers of Nigerian poetry in English to new technical and thematic limits so as to reinforce and invigorate the emergent alter/native poetic tradition.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 2.
A Night Out

For a long moment, Mika sat awkwardly, without his usual self-assurance, despite the alcohol singing in his veins. But suddenly feeling a fool for his unease, he cleared his throat, a trifle too loudly, and ventured: ‘What’s your name?’

‘Mama Tumaini.’ (Mother of Tumaini)

She did not lift her eyes but went on busying herself with putting the child to sleep on the mat on the floor; quite unexpectedly, the child began to cough, a violent, racking outburst that threw his little body into spasms.
Mika leaned forward and felt the child. His brow was damp and hot with fever. ‘Has he had treatment?’ he asked, relieved to find something neutral to say.

She replied, ‘There isn’t an aspirin to be had at the dispensary.’

Under the mother’s soothing, the child Tumaini eventually lay still, asleep, his breath rasping in and out. Mama Tumaini wrapped herself in a *khanga*, then lit a mosquito coil. Smoke rose in a spiral, spreading over to the mat. The child stirred and sneezed. The mother, squatting, gently patted him to sleep.

‘God grant you health, my little one,’ she murmured, ‘God grant you health and strength, good little mama’s soldier!’

‘Why soldier…?’ Mika asked, rather pointlessly.

‘Yes, soldiers don’t starve, or get sick.’ She spoke with such toneless simplicity, it could have been a child talking.

‘Yes, they don’t starve,’ Mika said, ‘they get killed!’

‘Better to die than this nameless misery of ours,’ she shot back. ‘Better a quick clean bullet in the head than this slow dying and burning from hunger and disease!’

‘Oh, soldiers starve too, you know, when there is nothing to eat…’ Mika said hardheartedly.

But she was sunk deep in her thoughts, she might not have heard. Then, as if to herself, alone in the room, she said, ‘Tumaini’s father was a soldier…’

‘Was…?’ went Mika.

‘…a real bull of a man he was, with none to equal him. Life was easier then, with him around. He was like a father to me, to my mother, to all of us. He looked after us. Now living has become such a task. You have to struggle for each small thing. Everything, everything, you have to pay for in blood, if you can find it! If Tumaini’s father were around still…’ She seemed almost on the point of bursting into tears, but she didn’t.

‘Why, is he dead?’ Mika asked, but purely out of curiosity, his voice too loud and untouched by the woman’s dull sorrow.

‘I don’t want to talk, don’t ask me, please…,’ she pleaded, then she began to cry and said through her tears, ‘He went off to Uganda, to war, he might be alive, he might be dead…’

Mika said nothing. The child Tumaini was still again, his mother’s hand on him, still patting, absenty. At last Mama Tumaini straightened up and turned off the small tin lamp in the room. In the dark she submitted herself, silently, dutifully, and professionally. But afterwards when Mika rolled his body off her, there wasn’t the usual feeling of having conquered; though fully sated, he lay back less than happy,
vaguely unsettled, the laboured breathing from the mat adding to his sense of deflation.

He did not know when he finally fell asleep and woke up with the panic of one who does not know where he is; it was not until he felt Mama Tumaini’s body by his side that he remembered where he was.

He got out of bed and lit a cigarette. The coil had burnt out and mosquitos buzzed angrily. He sat frowning in the dark, something troubling him though he didn’t know what. Suddenly he was aware of the silence in the room.

Mouth dry and head faintly throbbing, he got up putting out his cigarette, and went to the mat. There was no sound from the child and in the darkness he could only make out a mute, still haze, but he dared not strike a match to light the lamp. He put his hand out towards the child, and his eyes, gradually used to the dark, gazed down fascinated at the little body, lifeless and cold to his touch, its form now becoming distinct under the first stabs of dawnlight.

Mama Tumaini stirred, mumbled something, then went back to sleep. Mika waited until her breathing grew deep and even again before he sat back on the bed, gingerly, and lit another cigarette, his mind busy.

Then, moving softly, he picked up his clothes from the floor where he had dumped them in a drunken pile. Dressed, he paused awhile, his eyes involuntarily seeking the child’s body. No, he must leave immediately, he urged himself. It wouldn’t do to get caught in the mourning and the funeral ceremonies. There was no point and it would delay him further. And anyway, he found himself thinking, what was the child to him, or the mother for that matter? Mechanically, he took out his wallet, peeled off several notes, and with no attempt to make out the amount, placed the money on a stool by the bed, and set the lamp on it as a weight.

The door squeaked as he unbolted it. He paused, his heart pounding, his ear strained towards the bed.

Mama Tumaini stirred. ‘You’re going already?’ she asked him.

‘Yes,’ he answered.

‘This early?’

‘You know that transport is a problem, and I have to travel today.’

Come what may, he just had to get out today, and try and make it to Dar es Salaam by nightfall. For two days now he had been stuck in this dreary little town, because a petrol shortage had crippled transportation and inundated the small town with stranded travellers. It was to get away from the sweating hordes hopelessly milling all over the town in search of transport, that on the previous day he had decided on an evening of entertainment and action. Drink had appealed to him as just the antidote
he needed for his despondency. But the search for beer, which he preferred, was doomed from the start. There had been no beer in town, he was told at the first bar he stopped in, since the day the beer truck went crashing over a bridge leading into town. The truck was still there, a useless wreck of scrap metal. Mika did not want to believe this although he suspected it was probably the truth. He would have given his little finger for a drop of beer, and he went all over town, which didn’t take long as there was little of it besides the bus stop. A couple of depressing, dusty, narrow lanes made up the backbone of the town and beyond that was only a patchwork of slums. But he had no luck whatever in his search and had to make do with the local *pombe* which was in abundance. He had little stomach for local stuff but even though he imbibed it slowly and grudgingly, gradually the booze took hold and he felt some of his despair lift. He even felt cheerful enough to join a group of local drinkers at a nearby table. But just as the evening seemed to be taking off, he suddenly found himself abandoned, his fellow drinkers having left for other bars or their homes. He had left too, and gone stumbling through the night. He would never remember how he ended up in Mama Tumaini’s place, or why he decided he could not spend the night alone in his bed in the room he had rented at the lodging house. Funny, he thought aimlessly, paying for a room then sleeping elsewhere; wasteful, he concluded grimly.

Mama Tumaini was talking. ‘Even so,’ she said, ‘won’t you wait for me to make you a cup of tea at least, to start you off?’ That was the last thing he wanted, her getting up and finding out about the baby. He had to get away first.

‘No, no,’ he said quickly, ‘my things are at the lodging house, I have to get ready. I’ll eat somewhere.’

‘Suit yourself,’ she said, turning over. Then faintly, almost inaudibly, as if it was an afterthought, she wished him a safe journey.

He thanked her, then limply, guiltily mumbled, ‘Your money... I’ve put the money... your money... on the stool.’ But she might have gone back to sleep or she might have had enough of him, as she made no response.

Mika opened the door walked away in quick, tense steps, as light broke out over the rooftops and wisps of smoke from the early morning cooking lazied over the slums, announcing the start of another day.
‘The Loved Ones’. Racial and Sexual Relations in Ayi Kwei Armah’s Why are we so Blest?

Ayi Kwei Armah is one of the most powerful psychological novelists writing in Africa today. He is also one of the the most controversial, not only because of his aggressively one-sided view of colonialism, but also because his depiction of human relations, including sexual ones, is a challenge to complacency.

Armah’s novels are novels of quest: For authenticity or for the true African identity which constantly slips away — eluding all attempts to be pinned down. Characteristically it is in his historical novel Two Thousand Seasons (1973) that he gets closest to establishing this identity as a force which is socially adequate. ‘The way’, he calls it in that novel. Modern African states, which provide the settings for Armah’s first three novels, do not offer social relations which encourage people who are in search of ‘the way’.

His novels are stories of the forces they are up against: first and foremost colonialism and neo-colonialism which brutally kill, abduct and destroy, and in more direct ways undermine culture and identity.

But there is another principle and historical fact which frustrates the heroes in their quest: The female principle and women as a changing force in history. Whereas the theme constituted by the opposition between colonizer and colonized is fairly obvious in the three early novels by Armah, the more fundamental opposition between man and woman does not emerge in the same open manner. It generates imagery and surfaces in abrupt ways as if it has to fight its way through authorial censorship, but the opposition nevertheless structures the novels, particularly Why are we so Blest?

The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born (1968) is an indictment of a newly independent African country in which all moral standards have been eroded by the powerful attractions of easy wealth and western goods. The
novel is remarkable for its consistent use of one metaphorical complex: Society and the individual are seen in terms of the human digestive system. As in Armah’s later novels women are, in the main, agents of corruption. The protagonist’s wife and extended family, especially the mother-in-law, urge ‘the man’ to disregard standards of decency and honesty and jump on the merry-go-round fuelled by corruption and lust for power. These women are ‘the loved ones’ in the novel.

We find a similar pattern in Fragments (1969). Baako returns to Ghana after five years of study in America. He is very critical of that particular society, but at the same time he has become deeply influenced by it. He cannot and will not live up to the high expectations with which his family receive him. To them, and especially to the women, he represents the good life: By staying in America he has been touched and transformed by a magic wand and they want to be part of that transformation. Baako does not fit into modern Ghana which he finds dominated by the values he came to dislike while in America, and his family will not let him lead the modest but uncorrupted life which he knows is his only option if he wishes to stay sane. In this novel the hero is helped by a woman which indicates a theme which is to be developed in Armah’s later novels: Women are capable of spanning the whole range of moral choices, they can be utterly corrupt or saintly.

Juana is a psychiatrist, a healer from Latin America, an intermediary like himself after his stay in the West. She is neither white nor black, but brown. She may have found ‘the way’, her moral integrity, but her salvation does not transcend the personal level. The anomaly of her position as a highly educated, foreign and single woman in a context where women are defined by their position within the family, and are usually not highly educated, excludes the possibility of her having any impact on her surroundings. She is of assistance to Baako, but her support aggravates his isolation from his family and the rest of the community.

Both Juana and Baako are products of a global structural dislocation brought about by colonialism. The dislocation can be traced back to differences in economic and military power which in the course of history have assigned nations and peoples their roles within a system of dominance and subservience. Ultimately this dislocation becomes a disturbance in the individual psychological constitution. Both the powerful and the powerless have been warped and made one-sided by the unequal distribution of power.

The central preoccupation of Why are we so Blest? (1972) is the psychology of colonialism as experienced by three characters, two Africans,
one American, displaced within the global system of power and knowledge, always closely related to power. In passages the lessons of dependence are spelt out in the language of a treatise:

This loneliness is an inevitable part of the assimilationist African’s life within the imperial structure. Because of the way information is distributed in the total structure — high information in the centre, low information on the peripheries — overall clarity is potentially possible only from the central heights. The structures in the peripheral areas are meant to dispose low, negative or mystificatory information.¹

The ensuing existential deadlock is set out in an equally lucid way: The displaced person, i.e. the colonized individual, must either sacrifice access to knowledge and power in favour of a sense of belonging, or sacrifice belonging at the cost of ‘the constant necessity to adjust to what is alien, eccentric to the self’².

These ideas are clearly influenced by Frantz Fanon’s writings on the psychological influence of colonialism on subject peoples. The colonized male comes to reject himself and all his values, comes to envy and depend on the colonizer and lust for everything white, including the wife of the master.

Other writers, contemporary with Fanon, have applied similar kinds of psychological analysis to the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Psychologie de la colonisation by the psychoanalyst and philosopher Octave Mannoni is an analysis of racial relations in Madagascar in the 1940s, based on prolonged field work.³ In his work, which was known to Fanon, Mannoni utilized case studies and psychoanalytical techniques, including interpretation of dreams.⁴

In 1957 appeared Portrait du Colonisé précédé du Portrait du Colonisateur by Albert Memmi. His political and psychological thinking is based on his own experience as a non-Moslem Tunisian, an intermediary: Of his own ethnic group, the Jews in Tunisia, he writes, ‘they live in painful and constant ambiguity.’⁵ Like Mannoni and to some extent Fanon, Memmi wants to understand the extra-economic benefits reaped by the colonizer — the pleasures of superiority. An American edition of Memmi’s work was published in 1965, The Colonizer and the Colonized and dedicated to ‘the American Negro, also colonized’.⁶

The same year saw the publication in the United States of Sex and Racism in America by Calvin Hernton, a black American poet and sociologist.⁷ His insights into racial relations provide the closest parallel to those of Armah in Why are we so Blest? Hernton did his doctorate in sociology at Columbia University, one of the places of study which
Armah frequented during his stay in America in the 1960s. Hernton’s preoccupations are similar to those of his predecessors, but his work is an important innovation in that it focuses on changing sexual relations and explores their explanatory value in making sense of racial relations in the United States of the 1960s.

Hernton’s small but compact book is a survey of the sexual politics of American racial relations. His observations are based on qualitative research and interviews with black and white women and men. According to his findings sexual relations not only between blacks and whites, but also inside the two groups have become perverted because of the way in which ‘sex’, ‘race’ and ‘power’ are historically interconnected in America.

Hernton situates the origin of the distortions in the slave society of the American South. This inhuman and exploitative social system needed a justification in defense of existing racial relations, and fostered the mythology of the pure white woman to whom everything was due: ‘Sacred white womanhood emerged in the South as an immaculate mythology to glorify an otherwise indecent society.’

The manipulations which were necessary in order to place this ideal as an ideological and emotional centre of Southern society meant the misdirection of sexual energies of both whites and blacks, and also that the sexual drives became closely linked to aggression: Straightforward aggression against white dominance in the case of the black male, inversion of guilt and the invention of the black man as a threat from which the white woman had to be protected, in the case of the white male. The white woman in her enforced chastity was secretly attracted to black men and punished them rather than herself as representatives of her tabooed sexuality. At the same time she strongly resented black women’s sexual hold on white men. A situation arose in which she ‘did not actually lynch and castrate Negroes herself, but she permitted her men to do so in her name’.

As we shall see this paradigm for sexual relations is very close to the one we find in Why are we so Blest?

Sexual and racial relations at the level of individual psychology form a strong undercurrent in Armah’s novel. The main flow of the narrative, however, can be understood in relation to a different set of ideas, worked out in the writings of Frantz Fanon, those dealing with the politics of power and liberation.

According to Fanon genuine liberation from colonialism must be based on the collective will and efforts of the masses. The petty bourgeois intellectual must sever all ties to the corrupt national bourgeoisie, puppets of
international capital, and become part of the masses. This can only happen when the liberation struggle is in its highest phase, which makes possible the fruition of the national culture. In this situation the intellectual can be admitted to the traditional culture of the people and may take his place within the leadership of the liberation movement. The harmony between the intellectual and the people is the third stage of his development. Before reaching that magic moment he must pass two tests: He must get beyond the stage dominated by his wish to imitate and coalesce with the colonizer, and the one in which he desires to throw himself into the most stagnant and hidebound customs of the people, into the exotic.  

In Armah’s early novels the possibilities of personal salvation through the struggle are explored, whereas the emphasis in Fanon’s political writing is on the necessity of the collective endeavour. In these novels about modern Africa Armah is concerned precisely with the relationship between the colonizer, the intellectual and the national bourgeoisie and disregards the role of the masses. The three protagonists of *Why are we so Blest?* are motivated by their desire for participation and perhaps leadership in the struggle, but they are hopelessly isolated, cut off from ‘home’. The novel has the form of extracts from the notebooks of the three main characters. Solo is one of them. After having been touched by the magic wand of western civilization as a student in Portugal he becomes a freedom fighter in one of the Portuguese colonies. He fails in that line of action and now finds himself in Laccryville, the capital of a newly independent African country which is obviously Algeria.

He makes his living as a translator and occasional journalist and keeps up a life style which is wholly out of tune with his surroundings. He drifts from café to bookshop in search of intellectual stimulus, drowns himself in foreign film magazines and American novels. But he also keeps up a half-hearted contact with the local office of the People’s Union of Congheria, Congheria being the name of the Portuguese colony where he grew up. His self-hatred is as deep as his need to find an uncorrupted person to love and hero-worship.

Modin, the second narrator, appears in Laccryville to fill that love. He is a Ghanaian who has dropped out of a Harvard scholarship, feeling that the logic of power implies that access to privilege and knowledge for the élite is granted only at the expense of the masses. Co-option of a cadre of leadership is a pre-condition for a smooth relationship between ex-colonizers and ex-colonized.

Modin is in Laccryville to join the Liberation Movement of Congheria. He has brought with him a white American woman, Aimée
— another ‘loved one’. She is the third keeper of notebooks. She is also a university dropout in search of adventure and the exotic. She is one of several ‘Africanists’ Modin got to know in America, Modin being one himself. He is doing work on the Tanganyikan Maji Maji wars in the early years of the century in order to draw the lesson for modern African resistance to colonialism. Aimée is pretending to study the Mau Mau revolt, in reality using her interest in Kenyan history and politics to sleep with as many prominent nationalist leaders as possible.

Modin has moved from the centre of power and knowledge with a woman who apparently shares his insights into the structural dislocation brought about by colonialism. Her understanding of the destructive results of colonialism in Kenya parallels his own of the consequences for Tanganyika. They both agree that by limiting their activities to the study of colonialism they take their places within the privileged sections of the neo-colonial system, and they decide to fight colonialism where it is still a fact. What becomes increasingly clear is that they are both powerless pawns in a game whose structure places her on the side of the oppressors, him on the side of the oppressed.

The recognition of this fact is one and the same thing as Modin’s disillusionment. Aimée betrays their joint cause and sides with the oppressors in the way she conducts her sexual life, the way she constitutes her sexuality. According to the novel sexual relations is the one form of human communication in which there is no room for dissimulation. Aimée’s intellectual understanding and her wish for equality with Modin is undermined by her sexuality. Like Mrs Jefferson, the wife of Modin’s professor whom he has an affair with while staying in America, Aimée is interested in Africa and Africans for perverted sexual reasons. The two white women are equally destructive. Mrs Jefferson is a nymphomaniac, Aimée is frigid. Another instance of the range of possibilities over which women are able to span. They both seduce Modin, ultimately in order to punish their own white men and make them punish and destroy the black man.

If we follow Hernton’s analysis: The core of the racial problem is the problem white women have with their sexuality, and the key emotion is frustration. White men have to be punished as potential or actual deserters, black men as projections of the women’s unfulfilled and guilty sexual needs.

Mrs Jefferson acts out the seduction — destruction sequence in reality: She tells her husband about her affair with Modin, he catches them while they are making love and stabs Modin while she is watching.

Aimée uses Modin as a figure in a sexual phantasy in which she
imagines herself as the wife of a German settler in Tanganyika, Kapitan Reitsch, a historical figure and relative of herself whose existence she has unearthed in her research. In her phantasy she pictures Modin as her black, handsome servant, Mwangi, whom she seduces while her husband is out, hunting for rebels in the forest. The peak of this experience which frees Aimée from her frigidity is the moment her uniformed captain/husband strides into the bedroom.

With her conscious mind Aimée regards Modin as her equal, but in order to be fulfilled as a woman she needs phantasies in which she is superior and Modin her servant — an inferior human being whose sexuality is at her beck and call. Power as a historical fact and category has subsumed white sexuality, according to the novel. White women are expert users of their sexuality as an instrument of power, perhaps because it is their only weapon in an economic system in which they tend to have less power than men.

Aimée is an unusually unpleasant specimen of the category of women classified by Hernton as the ‘misfit white woman’. They generally come from middle class backgrounds, are well educated, and, according to Hernton (and Armah), ‘become associated with liberal activities for but one purpose: to fraternize with black men’. Hernton diagnoses: ‘Deep in the psyche of the young, misfit white woman there is a need not for a Negro but for a nigger. For the nigger is a monster, a wish-fulfilling creation of the white woman’s own deformities.’ Once again Armah illustrates the point in his fiction.

In Modin’s notebook entries towards the end of the novel the image of Aimée has merged with that of another American woman he has read about, who cut off her lover’s testicles with her nail scissors. So the outcome of the love affair for Modin is the persistent phantasy of a vagina dentata. The image anticipates Modin’s horrible death by castration by a group of French counter-revolutionaries he and Aimée meet in the desert outside Laccryville.

Solo is in Laccryville to observe Modin’s ‘long free slide along slippery paths’, i.e. his relationship to white women in another vaginal nightmare vision (p. 158). Solo’s impulse when he sees Aimée with another American woman after Modin’s death is to compare the relation between white women and black men to that between beasts of prey and carrion. This simile is made authoritative by the prediction made by Naita, the black American woman, who is the heroine and soothsayer of the novel. She is talking to Modin whom she has met shortly after his arrival in America, and gives him the first of many warnings against white women: ‘Their men box you in so you feel all tight and lonely. Then their women
move in to pick you clean and you too dumb to know it's got nothing to do with love and sincerity' (p. 134).

Naita is the perfect sexual partner for Modin. Their union is 'entirely natural' (p. 123). Her status as the moral yardstick by which the other characters are measured is stressed by Modin's search for her after he has understood how right she was.

Her voice in the novel, which we only hear in direct speech, is very different from the soul-searching, intellectual prose of the three narrators. Her words are few and to the point: 'White folks got you surrounded', 'White folks gon mess with you', and 'You talk some silly stuff' (pp. 123, 122). But she is only a fleeting presence in the novel and disappears when Modin persists in his pursuit of education and white values.

The preoccupations and voices of the two black male narrators are very similar. It is tempting to see Solo and Modin as representing two stages of what in the novel is called 'the fate of the évolué' (p. 84). The American sections of Modin's notebooks record the kinds of experience which Solo must have been through while staying in Portugal. Solo made the same decision as Modin makes, to participate in the liberation of one of the still colonized African nations. Modin's fatal mistake is to believe that a white person, and a woman at that, can be equally serious and dedicated to that cause. Solo's Portuguese girl friend was pressured to let him down by her Portuguese friends, and he therefore returned to Africa alone.

Even so both his and Modin's plans of taking part in the struggle are thwarted, not by external obstacles, but by the psychological effects of the structural dislocation resulting from colonialism. The oppression caused by that system constantly calls for liberation, but at the same time secretly undermines its possibility by its effect on the personality. The outcome is a double-bind situation which transforms a political problematic into an existentialist problematic, and this predicament is the source of the restless energy which permeates Armah's text, and also of its cyclical nature.

When the novel ends Solo is still alive, although a helpless victim of the structural dislocation. He is a lonely existence in the periphery, the immobile recipient and interpreter of information from Aimée and Modin, whose notebooks he has got hold of, living on that and on scraps from the white man's table. His very profession as a translator points to his alienation, and his ambition to become a writer in his own right comes to nothing because he does not belong: 'Even before my death I have become a ghost, wandering about the face of the earth, moving with a freedom I have not chosen, something whose unsettling abundance I
am impotent to use’ (p. 11). These are the opening words of the novel, spoken by Solo, but they might as well have been the closing words.

One of Aimée’s final words is ‘Nigger’, which she screams at Solo with ‘that American intensity’, when he refuses to let her have Modin’s notebooks (p. 270). So she has ended her experiment with liberalism and come back full circle to her white, Southern, American sisters. The ultimate indictment of Europe, the United States, the white world in general comes out in the indictment of Aimée, the white woman. Her sexuality and the uses she makes of it epitomize the exploitation of the third world by the first. She seduces Modin by being different, makes him dependent on her, even makes him love her, only to turn her real nature against him, to lay him open to castration the moment he is roused. Aimée does not literally kill Modin, but the female principle in its particular white variant does.

*Why are we so Blest?* is a highly complex novel which deals with dislocation at many levels. Apparently the main imbalance is the one between white and black, between the first and the third world. But the text articulates another dislocation whose impact is even stronger and which structures the novel at the basic level: The one between man and woman which has affected the balance between the sexes and put an end to the belief in natural male superiority.

In Ayi Kwei Armah’s historical novels which follow *Why are we so Blest?* there are no women who attempt to step out of line. The women in *The Healers* and *Two Thousand Seasons* are patient, heroic, closely linked with nature, in short, the salt of the earth, and none of them are white. Naita, the black American woman, represents ‘the way’ in *Why are we so Blest?*, and the women in the historical novels are also more clear-sighted than the men. The source of their vision and understanding is their close kinship with nature. In black women nature is still natural, in white women the social principle has taken over in the same measure as they have moved into the territory of men. The real enemy in the novel is the free, western woman, and the fact that the novel’s main focus apparently lies elsewhere does not make the warning against following or accepting her ‘way’ less effective.

It is not difficult to agree with this warning against the individualistic and self-seeking values of the West, but the eloquence and passion of the warning points to the absence of a counter force to these values in modern African societies, as depicted in the novel. Considering the hidden agenda of *Why are we so Blest?*, criticism of contemporary sexual relations, I think it lies near at hand to suggest that the absent centre of the novel might well be the modern African woman.
Armah grapples with the problem of the role and place of women in African societies, and he does set up possible ideals. But they are distant, either in space (Juana in *Fragments* and Naita in *Why are we so Blest?*), or in time (Araba Jesiwa in *The Healers* and Abena in *Two Thousand Seasons*). It seems to me that Armah needs to come to terms with a new role for women in Africa, a social role which is not backward looking and idealized. If he does, his contribution to the development of modern African literature is going to be even greater in the future.

NOTES

1. Ayi Kwei Armah, *Why are we so Blest?* 1972 (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974), p. 33. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Ibid.
4. For Fanon's use and criticism of Mannoni, see Jock McCullock, *Black Soul White Artefact. Fanon's Clinical Psychology and Social Theory* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), Chapter 1 and Appendix 1.
6. Ibid., p. V.
10. Some of the episodes in Armah's novel have an almost uncanny similarity to episodes recounted by Hernton's African informants. The seduction of Modin by Mrs Jefferson in her car is very close to a story told to Hernton by an African student of sociology, also about a car ride with a white married couple during which the woman makes open sexual advances to him. (Hernton, p. 45.)
11. This is a very simplified rendering of some of the ideas in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, especially the chapter 'On National Culture'. Fanon's ideas and theories about the colonized individual are pioneer contributions, not only to the study of the sociology and psychology of colonized people, but also to the study of culture. Fanon reads culture in a way which anticipates later semiological analyses of culture. See, for example, his essay about the significance of 'the veil' during the Algerian struggle for liberation: 'L'Algérie se dévoile' in Frantz Fanon, *Sociologie d'une révolution 1959* (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1972).
Now When It Rains

A kid on an early paper round had a go at breaking the windscreen of Miller’s Ford Customline with bricks, and woke Miller up. The pattern of cracks pulsed and Miller was reminded of those bullets coming through the perspex of the chopper that was bringing him back to Nui Dat. He thought: Hair of the dog. Miller’s two-tone home rocked on its springs as he felt beneath the seat. He had his eyes closed in case there were spiders in the windscreen web. A spring in the back seat pulled a thread on his trousers. A good car in its day, the Customline.

‘Bugger off,’ he said to the kid, who was chanting now that Miller had raised the bottle to drink.

Miller settled against the door like a man accustomed. Customline, custom-tailored, custom, unaccustomed as I am with white-wall tyres and automatic gears, customer, cussed, cusp, rusk, Farex for Customline families, cusp, cusped, cuspidal shape. Miller made finger sculptures in the air, curving his fingers, his hands meeting at the fingertips.

He got out. The door shut like a dream, as rich and secret as a Rolls. Passing a Prefect, passing a Vanguard, spinning his bottle against the side of a Bedford truck, dew wetting his boots. Miller entered the lane. The rot must stop. I need a drop. I must mop up the lot.

In the park Miller put his hands in his pockets and stopped and spoke consideringly to a man with a pram collecting bottles. ‘I put them down,’ said Miller, ‘and you take them away. You need me, sport.’

The bottlo tiddled by on his obsessed little legs, his pants flapping, the pram pitching and bouncing enough to hurt Miller badly in the guts at the sight of it. Miller turned, watching the man rush down paths to rubbish bins or across the grass to a tree. He had wet lips opening and closing without words, lips kissing bubbles in the air within the privacy of his shoulders hunched over to sort and stack and balance his load of bottles.

‘Take it easy,’ called Miller from the path. ‘You’ll get a gut’s ache.’

Give a man a gut’s ache like mine and he’s stuffed for good.

The bottlo pouted and ducked his head away.
‘I put them down and you pick them up,’ said Miller.
Squinting wetly the man darted down a path. He met a woman in a brown coat with no socks or joy about her, and a matching pram.
‘Family business, eh cobber?’ said Miller, observing. ‘Got any that aren’t empty?’
The man and the woman wheeled around to make for the last rubbish bin. Miller leaned into the wind and came in on their leeward side.
‘Keeping fit?’
The woman sniffed and Miller saw the splits for her toes in her sandals. Miller told her: ‘If it wasn’t for me.’ He pushed down on her pram handle and squinted for tell-tale surges of liquid in the top-most bottles.
‘Springs like a Customline,’ he said, rocking the pram again.
‘Clear out of here,’ said the woman.
‘Bloody dero,’ said the man.
That’s a laugh. You dried up old turd. Load up your utility three times a week, right? I put them down and you pick them up, and most probably you roll your own three times a day, you haven’t caught up with tailor-mades yet, you old dickhead, give the wife here a kick in the cunt once in a while. Dry guts. Pure guts. ‘That’s a laugh,’ said Miller aloud, rocking the pram.
‘You’re not sober,’ said the woman.
Not sober. Miller, offended, sailed away, his head down. You think his head’s down because he’s a dero or ashamed or tired. No, his head’s down because he depends on the odd cigarette butt, coin or note, or woollen cap, or bottle not quite empty. Keeping warm. Booze keeps Miller warm, calms the pain in his stomach; he sleeps, he doesn’t need to eat. If you had a bed in a Customline, you’d sleep a lot. Not sober. Christ.
‘I put them down and you pick them up,’ yelled Miller at them from a distance. What we’ve got here is a precious balance going. A balance situation. A balance-type situation. A pacify a region situation. A terminate with extreme prejudice situation. A pre-emptive, re-active strike situation. The doctor tells me I’ve got delayed stress reaction syndrome, a name for all the things that have gone wrong. You come back and you’re the arsehole of the world. It was the Americans who lost — we didn’t lose anything.
You’re on patrol in the jungle, right, keeping off the tracks, along comes a Yank patrol, guys in ten-gallon hats and t-shirts and aftershave, doped to the eyeballs, there’s this guy with a transistor to his friggin ear, singing ‘Sky Pilot’, they’re all coming down the track, you can smell them and hear them, but you keep quiet, keep clear of the bastards,
that’s the first thing you learn, that the friggin Yanks attract a fire fight, they’re so stupid you can get 50 dollars off them for a boomerang. So, the Viet Cong fire one shot, right, the Yanks dive into the mulga, only there’s these panjee stakes point upright in the bushes, smeared with poison or shit or something, and soon there’s guys squealing like pigs. You bloody melt away, call up a chopper maybe, you don’t bloody go in and free the bastards.

‘We have a fine balance-type situation here,’ said Miller alone in the park. Would you prefer me to hoard my bottles or drink in the pub, eh? Eh? ‘I’m straight with you — don’t bloody bite the hand that feeds you,’ yelled Miller into the empty air. I’m straight with you, like a plumbline. A plop, that’s what I need. Ease my guts.

Miller dirtied a cubicle but washed his hands and splashed his face for the new day. His guts hurt him. He would scrub and scrub his hands but always they would film up again. He felt it every day, a hot, corrupting film of oil creeping across his skin, burning to get inside him and stuff up his guts and his head. There was this fixed-wing plane spraying the jungle; the doctors painted our sores with this pink paint and called it tropical ulcers. Not like any tropical ulcers I ever saw.

Miller considered the morning on a park bench. Somewhere there was a band playing, with whistles and a parade-ground cry now and then, people gathering. A fly complained around spots on his clothes, causing him to cross and uncross his arms and legs. ‘Oh, bugger off,’ he said.

The Edinburgh Castle would be open. Miller traversed the park; and, at a point half-way across, he began to jig and reel, on top of the world, calling out, ‘Missed one, you evil little shit,’ pointing one blithe foot and then the next, hands on hips everybody, gentlemen to lead, one two three: a bottle in a paper bag, empty on the ground for all to see, waiting for to be collected, and they bloody missed it. Wacko.

Miller stood and correctly looked left and right. Like pitfalls, like bars on a ladder, like entry wounds tapping one ahead of the other up the back of some coon, the zebra lines on the road linked Miller to the Edinburgh Castle on the other side. Delicately Miller gathered himself and stepped out, putting his heels on a white bar, perhaps, and his toes on the tar, stepping on lines: I couldn’t care less about what’s going to get me around the corner because I’m not going around any corner, I’m going straight inside.

But, ‘Be on your way,’ they said, or words to that effect. Miller swayed on the footpath. People were gathering, men in suits or jackets and ties who were conscious of their age and health. Miller watched them shake hands and say, ‘G’day, you’re looking well.’ Men were gathering and
Miller was fascinated. Big men in expensive outdoor suits and shoes for walking went to the front row, and tired men with cardigans on underneath smoked with the burning tip pointing in to their palms, and here and there an untidy fellow rocky on his feet, tolerated and passed from group to group. Miller warmed to these fellows but had his eye on the other kinds.

‘You wouldn’t have twenty cents for a cup of coffee?’

Some of the reactions he got Miller wanted to say: You must really hate yourself, dressed like that, those buttons and collars and ties pinching in your soul. But after ten minutes Miller learned his lesson. He could run a bludging school, the lessons he was learning these days. The impulse was right but the wording was wrong. Never give the bastards an escape route, right? Ask a question like you wouldn’t have twenty cents for a cup of coffee and they’ll say straight away no I wouldn’t, and think they’re bloody clever to boot.

So, one hand in his pocket, collar up, a cold hand pinching together his lapels, Miller stammered, a small man diminished in the chilly air: ‘I can’t get warm, mate. Could you let me have twenty cents for a cup of coffee.’ No question mark either. They wouldn’t like it but more than one would say: ‘You’ll need more than twenty cents I should think. Here, take a dollar.’ A nod or a short thanks will do. And don’t bleed your territory dry. Get out while you can and come back to new faces later. Miller got out with eleven dollars in his trousers, wanting to say to more than one man: You must hate yourself, dressed like that, binding yourself at the neck and wrists like that, cutting off life, cutting out light.

In the bottle shop Miller chose thoughtfully, going for cheapness and impact. He warmed to the woman serving him. All the fractures of the day were mending. It was like a three-day leave, when he wore his Hawaiian shirt and some hippie beads in the hair at his throat, and went to wipe himself out in some bar, some place smelling of come and dope. It wasn’t home, I told myself, but it was a way out. So, some bar chick switches your money when you’re having a bloody shower after, or their feathers or brothers or pimps roll you in the bloody lane out the back, well, you bloody don’t let it happen again. Next time, you hide your money in her clothes while she’s having a shower. It kept the adrenalin going. And then if you’re really after some action the White Mice have closed off the street to do a sweep for deserters or VC infiltrators or guys in the black market. Blow you away, you look sideways at those White Mice bastards.

‘Been a bit of a bad boy, I hear,’ said a voice.

Oh, Christ, what now. Miller, his poor bony behind on a cold
flagstone in a doorway near the Edinburgh Castle, looked up at the policeman. According to Miller’s gestures the bottle in a paper bag on the step next to him might well belong to someone else, might well have been left there from the night before, missed by the bottlos this morning. And, for all the policeman knew, judging by the way Miller now eased his limbs up and fussily brushed away the dust, Miller might well live behind this door.

‘I’ve had reports you’ve been botting money off people,’ said the policeman. ‘That’s an offence.’

‘Don’t know what you mean,’ said Miller.

‘You just knock it off, all right pal? Stay away from here or some bloke’s going to put the boot in and I can’t say I’ll be able to get to the scene on time to prevent a serious injury, if you get my drift.’

Miller and the policeman moved along. Back at the Customline it would be warm and soft; a bloke could lead his life in peace and quiet in its back seat. ‘All I want is peace and quiet,’ said Miller on the footpath. His guts were acting up, there was no peace and quiet until he had another snort. All around him blokes were getting into lines and other blokes held banners, and then the marching tunes on bagpipes set them off and away, group by group down the road.

Miller was consumed. Like a sergeant-major, he goose-stepped alongside them, beaming, matching some old duffer pace for pace, doing a little hop and skip with him to help him get back into step. Miller hooked his finger under one bloke’s medals. ‘Twinkle, twinkle,’ said Miller, ‘little star.’ Off into the crowd on the footpath sometimes, beaming at some old dear shocked with him. Miller stood at rocky attention, eyes wild, chin in, beaming at the crowd.

‘Out of the way, mate.’ Channel 2 was covering the event. Poor old diggers marching, they couldn’t stop or look away, straight into the gobbling camera and out at mum sitting home in the lounge-room. Miller got in on the act, but they pushed and shoved and he spun round and then he heard positive, definite, affirmative clapping, not the other kind, getting closer too. People craned to see, then nodded yes, clapped hard and proud and stern, hands clapping high at chest level, a way of telling the boys that, while the rest of the country raised a clamour back then, they had been behind them all the way. Personally, Miller clapped for the orange arm bands. Poor buggers, they aren’t sure what they’re doing here.

Miller, absurdly marching and an embarrassment, careened on down the road with them, deflected by light poles and here and there his difficulty in judging distance when it came to putting down a foot on the
ground. Until a smart khaki arm nabbed him, spinning him round.

'Okay, pal,' said the soldier. 'You've had your little joke.' Everyone
wants to be Miller's pal today. Spitting chips, beside himself with
bastards like you, stirrers who had it easy while these blokes. The soldier
couldn't get his words out. On and on, giving Miller hurtful little jabs,
bending his arm up his back.

Good on you said the crowd to this smart young lieutenant marshalling
away the troublemaker. 'Well, well,' said Miller. 'So they made you a
lieutenant, did they Jessop?

Because Miller was small and quick Jessop had made him forward
scout. You know, you went some distance ahead of the main group to
make contact or check things out, you're completely by your bloody self
out there, it's you the VC zaps first, silently so as not to alert the others,
or sometimes you surprise one another and you find yourself in the centre
of a firefight. Creepy, out there in the mulga by yourself. Three bloody
months I did that job. It was nerve-wracking. Gave me the willies. You
know, you're only supposed to do it for a short time because it's such a
tense job. High risk and all that. So I ask Sergeant Jessop if I can have a
break from it. I was really getting the willies. I thought I'd stuff things up
if I didn't get a break from it. The bastard refused, so one night when I
got pissed I took a rifle to him in his tent. Bailed him up in his tent for a
few hours. He'd try and talk me out of it and I'd let him think I was
having second thoughts, then I'd stick the barrel up under his chin again.
Had him bluffed for hours. Then the next day they dock my bloody pay,
take away my leave, and I find myself forward scout on some bloody
patrol again. Cruel. It was cruel.

'Do I know you, pal?' said Jessop, marshalling away Miller, an
embarrassment on this day and occasion. He bustled Miller between
parked cars, across the footpath and with a hard bang against a
warehouse door. 'Do I? Do I know you, pal?'

'I should have fragged you properly, Jessop,' replied Miller. 'I should
have chucked a grenade in your tent or shot you while I had the chance.'

'I know you,' said Jessop, dancing on the spot. 'I know you...'

Because he had been tired and jumpy, Miller had led the patrol into an
ambush. The jungle was wet, deadened by falling rain. They were all
shot dead and Miller, forward of the shooting, smallish, quick and
scared, hid until it was hours later and quiet. Rain fell, wetting the leaves
and chilling him. Not like the VC to make a mistake like that, mis-count,
allow him to go ahead of the ambush and then forget about him. So he
stayed until it was hours later.

Then it was time he found the radio and called in a chopper to pick up
the dead. In the ambush clearing Miller found an old woman searching
the bodies. I saw red and blew her away. I emptied a whole magazine
into her, criss-crossing her and up and down. She bloody didn’t have a
chance, she was cut off like a light switch, pieces flying off her. And then I
stabbed her.

I told the inquiry I had reason to believe she was booby-trapping the
dead, but I don’t think she was. Something snapped. The rain was falling
and I’d just done the worst thing I’ve ever done in my entire life.

‘You should never have sent me out on that patrol, Jessop,’ said
Miller. ‘I had the willies, I needed a rest. All the blokes killed.’

Wrought up, Miller battered at Jessop down a side street of the city, in
the padlocked doorway of a warehouse, while, on the road above, the
crowd was packing up to follow the last of the marchers, to hear the
Governor’s address, observe two minutes, and go home.

‘You can’t go around saying things like that,’ said Jessop. ‘You’ll get
into strife saying things like that.’ His mind wasn’t quick on its feet.
Clearly this wasn’t a case of if there’s any trouble today, and no
policeman to deal with it, officers marshalling the march may, with
discretion, deal with it themselves. ‘Settle down, pal,’ he said. Miller was
windmilling in the grip of awful memories and would not be calmed
down. Inspired, Miller got at Jessop’s officers’ pistol on its lanyard,
cocked it, and said, his eyes alight:

‘I’m going to blow you away.’

He pulled the trigger and the hammer clicked on the empty chamber.
Officers marshalling today’s march will, of course, make certain that
their weapons are not loaded.

Miller’s energy drained into the ground. Jessop backed away, poking
his retrieved pistol approximately at his holster and getting into a tangle.
Miller — he just wanted to get back to the Customline with something to
keep him warm and ease his guts.

A student with a tape recorder after varieties of experience for her
media assignment swooped down and overwhelmed Miller cadging
coffee money outside the pub. They came to an arrangement. Beaming,
Miller talked and talked into the tape recorder. He has developed a nice
turn of phrase over the years. ‘And now when it rains,’ he said, ‘I can
smell death.’
JOURNEY INTO THE BLUE DISTANCE

Strangers all, in this land
We crouch in hopes of a great
And glorious Resurrection
Gazing towards Europe
Longing for our lost mother
But watched by a black goanna.

There, in its dry red heat
Our harsh island waits
Where no Gothic shadows are
But blinding light on glass rock
Desolation where the crow is
Desert where the eagle flies.

As sheep huddled by ghost gums
We occupy fragile green places
Our abstract, planned cities rise
With their rational water supplies
Utopias for bureaucrat or lawyer
Benthamite model pantopicons.

From these we must trek, as mad
Leichhardt, beyond reach of sextant
Or compass into that blue distance
Though we sink in clay’s silence
We may find there our great
And glorious Resurrection.
Obsolete in an age of diesels
Brake blocks welded
Cold and black
It stands in the park
On a length of track
Leading nowhere.

Last of Stephenson’s children
Amid alien green
Far from the roundhouse
And friendly smells
Of oil and steam
It waits here.

Still now are the gauges which guided
Butterfly hunters on branch lines
Through limestone cuttings.
Silent the whistle which greeted gangers
Or called schoolboys to dream journeys
To a future waiting just down the track,
And immobile the iron wheels
Which obeyed the call of the city
Telegraphed urgently on tense wires
Hauled red trucks in the heat haze
Through golden paddocks
With wool for Liverpool
Wheat for Harbin.

Black whale harpooned by progress
It rests, cast up on a green beach
Children shake the rusted levers
Shout from the smokestack, play in the bunker
Tourists photograph the great machine
Lilliputians torment the iron Gulliver.

Yet this is still a better end
Than breaking on a scrapheap
Or the slow destruction
Of a locomotive graveyard.  
Here at night it can hear other engines  
And dream its cast-up whale’s dreams  
Of the days of glory  
When its headlamp lit  
The rails of a continent  
When the furnace glared red  
It could thunder through darkness  
Free to roam the oceans of earth.  

**CATTLE ON THE MORASS**

At dusk the herd travels  
Under a grey, winter sky  
Icy breath rises, snorting  
The red heifers stumble  
Over sedge grass and claypans.

The herons shriek  
In cold air  
As drovers whip and shout  
Driving the great beasts  
Fearful: a doomed army.

The hooves clatter  
Pitiful to watch, from the cliff  
This Golgotha.  
So many cattle who grew with me  
Whose brown eyes followed  
Gently down the fences  
In summer days.

Dull roar of the sea  
A drover’s whip urges them on  
To the saleyards of the town  
Pitiful to hear them  
Lowing, all the long night  
From their last home.
Frank and Jim and Seal

An extract from *Irishtown and After*

In the wooden house next door live the O’Reilly brothers Frank and Jim, together with Jim’s wife Seal. Frank, the older, is short, rotund, shiny-faced; a devout Catholic, he has achieved, at the age of fifty or so, the distinction of having converted a Baptist friend to the True Faith. Over a cup of tea in the boy’s house Harry the ex-Baptist, a darkly handsome young ambulance man, relates to a soberly sympathetic audience how his family has all but rejected him, accusing him bitterly of allowing his mind to be warped by Roman Catholic propaganda. Each of his listeners without exception wishes he or she could have been the one to bring this mild but determined soul into the Church; and each simultaneously longs to be Harry, to be in the convert’s position of affirming a rock-solid faith in the face of the jibes of unbelievers. They click their tongues in muted, angry solidarity each time they hear of themselves being referred to as ‘Roman’ Catholics; these people are Catholics pure and simple and as they so regularly assert the term ‘Catholic’, since it means ‘universal’, cannot in all commonsense be qualified and reduced by the word ‘Roman’.

Harry is largely unaware of the burden of symbolism he bears, of the near-mystic aura the convert rubric confers: for it bespeaks someone who has had to discover and live his knowledge of Divine Truth rather than simply be born to it, and thus calls up those heroes of Roman times — nobody ever asks if they were Roman Catholics — who embraced their new-found faith in full and fearless acceptance of the persecution and possible death to which they laid themselves open. Converts make the best Catholics, Sister Francis tells the class, because they have made a mature, conscious choice; the possibility of such a choice’s leading anywhere but into the arms of the Catholic Church is never raised, for it goes without saying that the authentic exercise of free will can tend in no other direction.

Harry smiles a little in a wry, self-effacing way as he gives his account of the treatment meted out to him by his family: The boy laughs aloud at
the sheer bigoted ridiculousness of such a reaction, but the reproving looks of the adults silence him at once. For them Harry epitomizes the exclusion and victimization that are their lot in a fundamentally anti-Catholic society; he embodies the situation of what they call ‘the Church Suffering’ and if Harry himself seems less concerned than they about derision and persecution it can only be because he has not yet been one of them — ‘one of our own’ as they often put it — for long enough to appreciate that what they are all going through is no laughing matter.

Modest, tubby Frank O’Reilly is much respected for having guided a soul to the Church and is generally thought of as having thereby guaranteed himself a place in Heaven when the time comes. And yet he is confronted, literally on his own doorstep, with a contradiction so flagrant that the boy has no choice but to ignore it: for neither Jim nor Seal — her Christian name is Celia — ever goes to Mass at all, and so are presumably living in an entrenched state of mortal sin, with its attendant risk of eternal damnation should anything dramatically unexpected happen to them.

If anything dramatically unexpected ever happens to Jim O’Reilly it should by rights do so in the Victorian Railways shunting yards where he works. For Jim is frankly a boozier and it is not comforting to think of him making his way, in the altered state he prefers, through the clashing anarchy of the rolling stock. But he has, it seems, a charmed life. Early each morning he sets off late for the station at an enchantingly flatfooted bow-legged lope, his collapsed gladstone bag in his hand and his black, flat-crowned shunter’s hat squarely and soberly on his head; to return intact in the evening but with his gait a trifle slower and looser, hat tipped back and bag clanking with bottles. He may stop briefly to discuss the weather or the football with a neighbour — doing this in tones whose raw diphthongal angularity is impressive even in Australia — but thanks to the beer he has already consumed and the bagful awaiting his attention his mind is clearly elsewhere. Reaching home he unlatches the double gate of the driveway — it is one of those houses whose front gate and front door are never used — and clanks down the twin strips of concrete that lead to the garage. The rear screen door moans open, slams; there comes the unmistakable sound of bottles being transferred into an ice chest; a silence intervenes during which the first beer of the evening is opened and poured and then the summons Seal! Seal! evokes a flat, nasal Yeah, what? from somewhere in the front part of the house. Where’s me tea? Jim cries, where’s me tea? His voice like a circular saw running across a nail. His tea — his evening meal — is coming, Seal calls back in a tone carefully calculated to reveal nothing of her feelings about her situation.
Her situation: she is, perhaps, thirty-five but manages to look indeterminately older; her face is plainness incarnate and she suffers from a shyness so paralysing that she virtually never ventures beyond the confines of the quarter-acre block she lives on. If spotted over the side fence as she hangs out the washing she retreats indoors at once, leaving the wet clothes in the galvanized iron tub until it seems safe to emerge and try again. At a time when even Protestants have relatively large families she and Jim remain childless: nobody knows why, but the folklore of the street has it that Seal, although tonally indistinguishable from normal people, is part-aboriginal and that the two of them have decided to forgo children rather than risk having a ‘throwback’. Even the local Catholics, despite the repeated thunderous warnings about birth control they are subjected to, seem implicitly to accept this as a sensible course of action. However unfortunate it may be, the day of the aborigines is past: their failure to adapt has doomed them to a process of gradual extinction which cannot now be halted, least of all by Seal and Jim’s bringing into the world a half-caste, a creature destined to be rejected by both black and white all its life. They are — although it is never put as explicitly as this — showing a sense of responsibility by choosing not to obstruct their country’s advance towards the unquestioned ideal of racial homogeneity.

Where’s me tea, Seal? comes once more the querulous, half-pissed demand from the kitchen — one of those quasi-afterthought skillion kitchens whose iron roof slants down from what should be the back wall of the house and whose floorboards are rotten because the bearers have been laid directly on the earth. The boy, listening from next door as Jim’s demand to be fed underlines the silence of a house that in a street swarming with children has never been home to any, tries to imagine what it would be like if a throwback — whatever it is and however it is made — were to materialize there. Would it look, he wonders, like the aboriginal — the only aboriginal and the only non-white person he has ever seen — he once watched capering drunkenly and playing a gumleaf for heedless rush-hour crowds in Bourke Street? But it is the word itself that has seized him, rather than any possible actualization of it, the word ‘throwback’ with its intimations of a darkly hidden past, its irresistible mingling of mystery and threat. A throwback in the house next door, he ultimately decides, is worth the risk of wishing for: its presence would constitute a challenge, although to what, and of what kind, he has no idea; and even if not as desirable as a standard Australian child it might help to alleviate the stoic, animal helplessness he senses in Seal.
Apathetic Seal, now coming down the central passageway — what can there be to occupy her in the rest of the house? — to draw Jim’s tea from the oven. She eats with him, then does the dishes as he drinks on. And as the evening takes its course with them sitting in the kitchen alone — Frank being out most nights doing voluntary work for the St John’s Ambulance Brigade — the beer, with a dreadful regularity, induces in Jim a basic insight in respect of his marriage: while he is out risking his life in the shunting yards Seal is conducting a liaison with Frank. Arrh, y’bloody slut! he moans despairingly. Rootin’ me own brother! Me own flamin’ brother! A man’d be a dingo not to’ve spotted it before now! Struth! His voice rises and falls between accusation and angry self-reproach as the wrongs he has suffered parade themselves tauntingly. Bloody slut! he bursts out again and rails boozily at his wife until she says Oh shuddup Jim in the same dead-neutral voice as before and asks if he wants a cup of tea. If the stock of beer is exhausted he accepts the tea, then wanders out to urinate noisily in the backyard, muttering to himself about the treachery of women and the blindness of the men who marry them.

Where’s me pyjamas, Seal? he can be heard calling from the front bedroom. I can’t find me bloody pyjamas! Eventually, it seems, the errant pyjamas are found; the lights go out and Jim and Seal vanish into a silence that will only be breached, briefly, when Frank comes home in his black Pontiac with the Indian-chief mascot in majestic profile on the bonnet.

Frank dies one day of a heart attack without ever being made privy to his brother’s suspicions. Jim inherits the house and the Pontiac, both of which are thereby embarked on an inexorable process of deterioration. He sells off the vacant block on the far side of the house to a Christian fundamentalist family who build there, neatly: the husband is modestly but determinedly successful in business, the wife and daughter wear their clothes plainly and their hair severely, and the three of them, for fear of being morally polluted, speak to nobody at all. Seal has found the perfect neighbours. Jim works on in the shunting yards and drinks the rest of the time until, after a generous period of grace, his own, preliminary attack comes along. The doctor orders him off the grog, so he cuts down to a mere six bottles — about four and a half litres — a day, thus hastening the second and decisive attack. Seal sells up, moves away without a word and is glimpsed by a neighbour one day in a distant suburb, smartly dressed, elegantly made-up and doing her shopping in perfect confidence.
The Home Triptych via Modernism and Post-Modernism: Naipaul and Kroetsch

A major theme in discussion of Commonwealth Literature is that of its defining characteristics. Everyone (or almost everyone) agrees that politically there is such a group of national or regional literatures (Caribbean, Canadian, etc.) produced in former British dependencies and colonies, but there is considerable dispute about the degree to which they can be defined in formal terms which distinguish them from works in the older European tradition. The strength of the argument of those who support the notion of a single literary tradition would seem to lie particularly in the inherent conservatism of language and forms: it seems undeniable that to use English or (for example) to write novels is de facto to embrace continuities, no matter what an author's intention. But the strength of those who see ruptures and new beginnings lies in their awareness of differences in basic experience (of climates, histories, and the like), and their perception of an artistic self-definition which is, if not determined, at least conditioned by these. This essay is intended as a contribution to the second position, and argues the case for one major formal departure of the 'new' literatures from the old. It is not, I believe, the only such departure, but it is frequent and significant.

Home and its environs — the 'home place' in the phrase of Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch — have traditionally featured in literature as emblems of security and identity for author or characters. We may easily refer to works whose titles drawn from place — George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Dickens's *Bleak House*, or Forster's *Howard's End* — underline its centrality and make this point, or we may cite others, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Trollope's Barsetshire novels, or Lawrence's *Rainbow*, which establish it with almost equal force. Home is, of course, not always
harmonious in such works, for various reasons: amorous in *Wuthering Heights*’ titular place, marital in Middlemarch’s Lowick Manor, or social at the Forge in *Great Expectations*. It may be an ideal, but it is scarcely idealized.

In Commonwealth literature, in works like V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* or Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, we find the home place similarly represented as ideal and less-than-ideal, and in this broad sense there is little departure from continuities. From the ‘less-than-ideal’ spectrum, however, I would like to draw attention to a specific and distinctly Commonwealth phenomenon. It derives from a source of cultural disquiet which scarcely has an European equivalent: the home place here represents an abandonment of one culture, usually that of the ‘Old World’, and an imposition on another, often (though misleadingly) deemed that of a ‘New World’. It compels writers to sense problematics in the concepts of ‘belonging’ and place. As Andrew Gurr puts it, for them home may be ‘neither here nor there’.

Two texts which bring out this feature very powerfully are Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul’s prose collection *In A Free State* and the first three poems in Robert Kroetsch’s ‘continuing poem’ *Field Notes*. Naipaul’s work gathers two short stories (‘One Out of Many’, ‘Tell Me Who To Kill’) and a novella (‘In A Free State’) between a frame of two autobiographical travel sketches, while Kroetsch’s poems are explorations in extended form, with the first, ‘Stone Hammer Poem’, notably shorter than the two succeeding, ‘The Ledger’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’. Naipaul’s three main narratives take as their subjects an economically marginal East Indian immigrant to the United States, two West Indian brothers leaving home as immigrants to England, and, finally, an expatriate English man and woman in a post-independence unnamed African state at a time of civil war. Kroetsch’s three poems are concerned with the associations attached to an Amerindian stone hammer originally found in a field on his grandfather’s farm, with his family’s establishing itself in the ‘new land’ in Bruce County, Ontario, and with his homesteading childhood in East-Central Alberta. Naipaul’s modernist narratives follow a classic realistic pattern of enigma, quest and closure, yet leave an image of appalling disorder on the reader, while Kroetsch’s post-modernist work, with its anti-formalism undermining order, paradoxically leaves a bracing and even cheering effect.

Despite obvious surface differences between the works of the two authors, there are strong affinities in their treatment of home. For both it may be seen as represented through a triptych-like structure, with its
centre the actual dwelling-place of the speaker or characters, and the flanking panels the home place as imaged elsewhere or in an earlier time. 'Elsewhere' is usually but not always an Imperial centre, while the earlier time is normally the period prior to European conquest. (The only works to which this model does not fully apply are 'Stone Hammer Poem', lacking the 'elsewhere' panel because of its preoccupation with the other two, and 'Tell Me Who To Kill', whose uneducated narrator is unaware of the vanished native peoples of the Caribbean islands). The triptych model has the advantage of underlining the fact that the 'home place' is seen in comparative terms, with constant reference being made to the other loci, but it is, of course, a metaphor and provisional only. In particular its static associations sit uneasily with the more dynamic reality of its referent, as should become evident further in this study.

The centre of the triptych reveals above all minimality, with place one of poverty, always spiritual and usually material as well, with little to provide continuity, security, and nourishment for the self. 'Stone Hammer Poem' underlines the insignificance of settlement activity vis-à-vis the antiquity of the maul, while in 'The Ledger' the everyday business of providing basic shelter and humble amenities allows only materially marginal conditions and ensures the spiritually void. Henry Kroetsch speaks to brother John:

Have another glass, John.
Ja, ja. What the hell.

What's the matter, John?
My bones ache.

Take a day off, John
No time.

'Seed Catalogue' speaks of the Western homestead, barren of trees, buffeted by wind, weathering January snow, summer sun: 'the home place:/ a terrible symmetry' (p. 49). In 'One Out of Many' the central character, Santosh, faces a bewildering urban environment in Washington, D.C., and finds refuge only in his room, a cupboard in his employer's apartment. Home in 'Tell Me Who To Kill' is exemplified in the West Indian family dwelling of the unnamed brother and Dayo, obsessively present in the narrator's consciousness, with 'the old galvanize roof, a muddy yard, smokey kitchen, bare rooms, and, somehow very movingly, a donkey at the back in the rain (pp. 60-61). In 'In A Free State' Bobby and Linda live in a compound set aside for Euro-
peans, guarded and clearly out of place in Africa, its destiny fore-
shadowed in the colonel’s rundown hotel at the abandoned European
suburban-style settlement at the lake where the two stop for the night.

The flanking panels enhance, by contrast, our impression of depriv-
ation at the centre, for while they refer to outside and indigenous cultures
in terms suggesting absence, the absences are, so to speak, resonant with
suggestions of unattainable plenitude. The first panel may represent
cultures of personal or family origin (often those of colonizing powers),
presenting images of grandeur in various forms to which the ‘home place’
stands as inadequate, impoverished, or failed. They may be shown as lost
forever to the central character, as is the India in ‘One Out of Many’, its
warm though humble street culture in Bombay seen in bitter retrospect
by a Santosh now an American immigrant, married miserably and
feeling his life is over. In ‘Seed Catalogue’ the largely European models
function similarly: in contrast to the utilitarian artifacts and dreary
surroundings of the rural community stand the splendours of the Old
World as contexts for the development of the artist. ‘How do you grow a
past?’ Kroetsch asks in one of the series of growth and garden questions
that form the book, in the absence of ‘Lord Nelson’, ‘the Parthenon, not
to mention the Cathedrale of Chartres’, ‘the Seine, the Rhine, the
Danube, the Tiber and the Thames’ — and the like (p. 54). The
European models may be monumental like these, but even in lesser utili-
tarian forms such as ‘silver serving spoons’ stand as elegant contrasts to
the local equivalents (p. 53). In ‘The Ledger’ Europe is less a nostalgic
presence, more a ghostly phenomenon, gradually fading, as Kroetsch’s
German forbearers in Ontario, losing contact with the old language com-
munity, struggle to come to terms with the new: ‘Henry. How do you
spell Henry? H-e-n-e-r-y’ (p. 42). In ‘In A Free State’ Bobby and Linda
perceive everything African from a Eurocentric point of view and predict-
ably find it wanting, though Bobby, a theoretical liberal, does so
obliquely and self-deceivingly.

The representation may not be of cultures of personal or family origin,
but rather of simple colonial dominance, with, however, virtually
identical effect. When Kroetsch’s mother is buried in ‘Seed Catalogue’
the boy puzzles over the relation between this event with its powerful
subjective impact and the coincidental one of public import: the playing
of the American world series. In Naipaul external models are frequently
provided by images from advertising and British and American movies.
In ‘Tell Me Who To Kill’ the cinema provides a major source for the
first-person narrator’s knowledge of the outside world (and, presumably,
a similar source for his community at large). Rebecca, Jesse James, Waterloo
Bridge and especially Hitchcock’s Rope all run through his consciousness, as do (misspelled and mispronounced) the names of such actors as Farley Grainger and Tyrone Power. Related to and obviously fed by such images of worlds of action, glamour and high life is the community folklore about opportunities opened through emigration and education abroad. In an image from Waterloo Bridge the narrator thinks of his cousin, sent off to Montreal for ‘higher studies’. ‘He is wearing an overcoat to keep out the cold and he have a briefcase under his arm. That is how I think of him in Montreal, furthering his studies, and happy among the maple leaves.’

The second flanking panel represents the displaced indigenous cultures, and, as the first, offers them as lost alternative places, with significances not found in actual home. Whether absent, in retreat, surviving vestigially, or otherwise marginalized, they perform a resonant function in relation to the ‘home’ culture, speaking of appropriateness and legitimacy. ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ subtly impugns the Eurocentric concept of ownership in contrast to a native disregard for such possession, even as the hammer, its original provenances and functions lost, survives as a mere trace of that once viable Amerindian culture. Such a trace is again represented in ‘Seed Catalogue’ in a tribal battle site on the Oldman River visited with Rudy Wiebe. In ‘One Out Of Many’ native Amerindians are not present at all, but urban American blacks, to the fascination of Santosh, have a vitality, energy and folk togetherness not found in the whites and perform, in this respect, the functions of the indigenous. In ‘In A Free State’ native people are shown in a defeat which seems irrevocable, as the King’s people of the bush (valorized as the true Africans) are conquered by the President’s troops with Western weapons and representing Western economic interests.

The awareness of a native culture displaced or under pressure of displacement may be doubled in the awareness of the nature of which it is so frequently the metonym. In ‘In A Free State’, bush and folk are closely associated through the dominant narrative voice, and linked with timelessness, unconscious biological existence and ‘the immemorial life of the forest’ (p. 205). Thus, hauntingly, towards the narrative’s conclusion, in implicit analogy to the forest people, emerges a Nature fecund and profligate, in butterflies: ‘like flakes of snow ... white, on the asphalt, on the grass, on tree trunks, in the air, millions and millions of white butterflies, fluttering out of the forest’ (pp. 234-35). And dying with equal extravagance. In Kroetsch there are traces of the natural world (a magpie, a badger, gophers in ‘Seed Catalogue’, for example), but the emphasis is less on what has persisted than on what has been lost through
European intervention, with the buffalo of ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ an obvious example and the brome grass of ‘Seed Catalogue’ a less foreseeable one. In ‘The Ledger’s’ brilliant register of gains and losses a plenitudinous natural world is prominent among the losses:

To raise cattle and hogs;

- kill the bear
- kill the mink
- kill the marten
- kill the lynx
- kill the fisher
- kill the beaver
- kill the moose (p. 26)

Attempts to identify with either the outside or the ‘native’ culture are underlined as usually futile, at best painfully incomplete. Santosh in the United States recognizes the third-world person’s alienation from first-world culture: comically seeing the U.S. through its television images, he poignantly reflects ‘No television life awaited me’ (p. 56), and though he marries a black woman, he knows he cannot be one of her people, a ‘Soul Brother’ (p. 57). No more can the brother and Dayo find niches in the English society that has fed their dreams: even Dayo’s marriage to an English woman hints emphatically, with its inauspicious beginnings, at a marital destiny parallel to Santosh’s. In Kroetsch the stone hammer may inspire poems, but this is scarcely its original function, while at the Oldman site in ‘Seed Catalogue’ the author with good-humoured irony addresses Rudy Wiebe, writing of native people but in novels modelled on the nineteenth-century Russian: ‘Rudy: Nature thou art’ (p. 59). In the same poem the alienation from place of family origin is ironically underlined in the account of the first member to return to the homeland doing so with a planeload of bombs in World War II. In ‘In A Free State’ westernized Africans dressed in suits, their hair ‘parted low on the left and piled up on the right ... English style’ are strikingly inauthentic (p. 104), while, virtually their mirror image, the liberal Bobby expresses his futile repudiation of his objective link with the dominant Europe by wearing a bright ‘native’ shirt in ludicrous taste.

As one would expect, personal identity is threatened: a sense of subjective annihilation runs through all the works, and suicide, murder, and madness are leading themes. Associative memory, traditionally a source of solace and even joy, is woefully impoverished: for Kroetsch an impoverishment expressed in fragmentary recall and the breakdown of
sustained narrative, for Naipaul in details of nervous collapse and of rundown, disputatious, or monotonous domestic and often working life. Sexual love is similarly beleaguered. In ‘Seed Catalogue’ the innocent and unitary sex play between the narrator and Germaine with its underlined link to Eden is ‘named ... out of existence’ by a moralizing priest and becomes a source of guilt and humiliation (p. 52). In ‘The Ledger’ the chief representative of sexual union is the poet’s great grandmother, who ‘married three Bavarians .../ buried three Bavarians’ and is dubbed, in a scarcely reassuring way, ‘the terror’ (pp. 37; 39). For Naipaul sexual love is a grotesque travesty: Santosh in ‘One Out of Many’ engages in a terrifying coupling with a large black woman whose race is sexually taboo for his people; Bobby in ‘In A Free State’ indulges in exploitive exchanges with young black boys, or, more sustainedly in the narrative, engaged in a bitter, marriage-parodic relation across the African state with a promiscuous Linda who is his equally sterile alter ego. ‘Tell Me Who To Kill’, of course, concludes with Dayo’s joyless wedding.

The images in the central panel are fluid. Self is put in a place, but it is a transient one, with no stability in relation to imperial splendours or native resonances. For Kroetsch the transience is largely temporal, as in all three works he concentrates on historical process, though with a different concept of history in each poem. Though ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ is the shortest of the works, its historical reach is the longest, going back through three generations of family association with the hammer to generations of native use down to the ice age. The historical concept is closer to those of archaeology or geology than to that of conventional history. ‘The Ledger’ spans the shorter period between the coming of the Europeans to North America and the establishment of Kroetsch’s family in Ontario and (more briefly) their move to Alberta, and comes closest to history in the usual sense. ‘Seed Catalogue’, dealing with the poet’s childhood experience on the prairies, with some adult experience also incorporated, covers the briefest time, representing history as autobiography. But though models from history are encouraged by these works, they are equally discouraged, or, to put the matter more precisely, they are raised for the purpose of their dismantling and denial. History, after all, implies a recovery of the past, the sustenance of chronicle and the plenitude of restoration, whereas Kroetsch’s work presents a record of discontinuities and loss. Hence his dominant figurations of it in relation to place are in terms of breaks and absences.

Perhaps the most subtle rendering comes in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’, which treats the hammer as a ‘trace’ of occasions and uses, barely discernible and hardly verifiable, whether as possibilities (‘a squaw left it
in/ the brain of a buffalo or’ (p. 14)) or illusions (the young owner of the land ‘who did not/ notice that the land/ did not belong’ (p. 17)). Elsewhere in Kroetsch the transience of ‘home place’ is particularly expressed in other kinds of reduction: above all reduction to the ultimate abstractions of mathematics, in such forms as mileage directions, the straight line of a road, or upright fence posts. The very organization of ‘The Ledger’ is arithmetical, its bi-columnar structure (used less formally in ‘Seed Catalogue’) that of the bookkeeper’s entries, and within that structure there is frequent play with the lucid stripped structures of geometry.

the poet: finding
in the torn ledger
the column straight
the column broken (p. 25)

‘How do you grow a prairie town?’ Kroetsch asks in ‘Seed Catalogue’, and gives the answer again with a vertical, but an evanescent one: ‘The gopher was the model’, rising erect on hind legs one moment, vanishing underground the next. So the ‘telephone poles/ grain elevators/ church steeples’ and the Heisler hotel, burned to the ground on 21 June 1919, and rebuilt ‘Bigger’ (pp. 53; 55). Or place may be represented in records, bare and scanty: in ‘Seed Catalogue’ by the survey description of the homestead; in ‘The Ledger’ by the bookkeeping ledger that is the source of the poem, or by names on documents of birth, marriage, and death. When one figure, the poet’s great-grandmother, ‘the terror’, moves into larger-than-life, legendary status, it is in no contradiction to the prevailing reductiveness, for she serves as a symbol of that great zero, death.

Transience in space rather than time is the motif in Naipaul’s stories of the uprooted, who find the ‘home place’ neither in country of origin or country of desire and exile. If in Kroetsch the movement through time is seen through historical models, in Naipaul the movement through space is seen in paradigms of contemporary travel, for purposes of tourism, immigration, education or employment. In ‘One Out of Many’ Santosh journeys to the United States in the service of his employer, an agent of the Indian government, while in ‘Tell Me Who To Kill’ the unnamed brother joins Dayo, in England, ostensibly pursuing his studies. In ‘In A Free State’ two movements dominate: the first, anterior to the narrative proper, brings Bobby and Linda to Africa as civil servant and the wife of one, and the second, largely comprising it, takes them in a car across country from the capital to the government compound for Europeans. The situation of all, embodied in extremis, is exemplified in the tramp on
the steamer from Piraeus in the 'Prologue', self-styled 'citizen of the world', always on the move, belonging nowhere, tormented and rejected by fellow-passengers.

Though the spatial movement is seen in terms of travel, its traditional plenitudes are denied as systematically as those of history in Kroetsch. Self emerges from the alleged stimuli of culture and landscape unenlightened and unenlarged. As in Kroetsch, the visual effects are reductive, though the reduction is not to the austerities of mathematical unit but rather to particular deprivations of desuetude, decay, or defunctiveness, which may be numerically abundant, but are collectively poor, like a starving multitude. In Washington Santosh views the aftermath of race riots: 'every signboard on every shop was burned or stained with smoke ... the shops themselves were black and broken ... flames had burst through some of the upper windows and scorched the red bricks. For mile after mile it was like that' (pp. 40-41). Or Bobby and Linda arrive at the post-liberation European town: 'The drives of villas were overgrown, disgorging glaciers of sand and dirt through open gateways. The park was overgrown. The globes and imitation coach-lamps in walls had been smashed and were empty. Metal was everywhere rusty' (p. 166). A dominant figuration of transient and unnourishing place is an ironic metonym of home: that of a cramped confine. In 'Tell Me Who To Kill' the brother and Dayo in England live in a series of squalid rooms. And in 'One Out of Many' Santosh, in a parody of Horatio Alger upward mobility, lives in a large cupboard, then in a small room, before moving into an inner city house with his black wife. The transience is equally underlined by frequent actual transit within such confines: passage from Greece to Egypt in a steamer, an airplane en route to the United States, Santosh bewildered by an apartment elevator, a liner to England, and, most strikingly, the automobile in which Bobby and Linda drive through most of the narrative.

I now turn to a second stage in this essay. The first has concerned a formal feature of Commonwealth literature, the representation of home and the tropal emissions from that representation. One of its implicit points has been the commonality of these despite wide differences in artistic and aesthetic assumptions, that the differences between Kroetsch as post-modernist and Naipaul as modernist have been found to be superficial in relation to this shared cultural figuration. I want now to pursue those differences somewhat further, and to enquire whether they at least encourage modifications in the commonality. In this discussion I
shall be setting to one side the triptych model (like a ladder that has served its purpose), and turning to one more appropriate at this stage.

Self is put in a place. So far I have discussed place in terms of representations within the work, both literal and figurative. But place, or home, may be also seen as the work of art as well as elements within it. In that work dwell not only the selves of characters but also the image those selves and other elements make of their creator, the figure that Wayne Booth in an inspired phrase described as the ‘implied author’. Looked at from this perspective, the works may yield several impressionistic comments based on Naipaul’s modernist and Kroetsch’s post-modernist practices. Naipaul’s dwellings are superbly constructed and finished, while Kroetsch’s are characterized by disorder and incompleteness. Naipaul’s are made of harmonized materials, with theme, character, and point of view blending flawlessly, while Kroetsch’s seem to be improvised from disparate materials at hand, undermining any suggestion of integral form. Naipaul’s places are superbly insulated, the prose seamlessly stitched, while in Kroetsch’s, moving from fragment to fragment, we note the wind blowing dust between the chinks in the wall, the gap at the base of the ill-fitted door, the leaking roof. The light of intelligence burns brightly inside Naipaul’s places, though the fixtures lack shades, while in Kroetsch’s it is sporadic, uncertain, though not without warmth: kerosene lamps in a drafty place. Yet the internal furnishings do not differ that much. They are shabby, second-hand, in poor taste, an offence to the eye and sometimes the nose. But in one place there is no way of escape (or entry); the doors are all sealed, they have been locked and the key lost, while in the other one sits, apparently trapped, but unaware of the broken latch on the main floor window, the grass growing between the grey shrunken floorboards through which the moisture has penetrated, and the visitors approaching, with refreshments.

To put these matters somewhat more analytically: form in Naipaul is more radically at odds with content than in Kroetsch. Naipaul himself has recognized this, speaking of his uneasiness in using European forms for non-European experience, while Kroetsch has similarly spoken of the discontinuities of Canadian history making modernism an alien medium for its writers.\(^5\) Content in both draws on a nihilism which may in part be traced to the acknowledged influence of Conrad’s work,\(^6\) denying ultimate significances in concepts of origin, destiny, and ‘presence’, denials represented in narratives of home place reduced, shrivelled, stripped, and gutted. But Naipaul writes of this disorder in an ordered form: classic realism as refined by the modernism of such as James, the early Joyce, and Hemingway. In such narrative the emphasis is on linear
time sequence (however modified by foreflashes and flashbacks) with a
beginning in enigma, a middle marked by gradual revelation, and an end
in formal closure. In character there is stress on deep psychological
significances as part of that revelation, while in overall form there is a
striving for unity and wholeness. Though Kroetsch cannot help being
touched by this tradition (which perhaps embodies inescapable elements)
he strives to avoid it. Time sequences in ‘The Ledger’ and ‘Seed Cata-
logue’ are scrambled rather than ordered (though there is a method in the
madness of the scrambling). There are no formal enigmas or closures
preceeding and concluding revelations, but rather a mosaic of apparent
fragments leading to a gestalt-like perception. Character, where it is
given identity at all, is flat (though at times the suggestion of mythic
counterparts somewhat undermines this effect). Unity is, of course,
exploded, particularly in ‘Seed Catalogue’ and ‘The Ledger’, where
multiple tonalities, points of view and emphases are created by multiple
texts from diverse sources or from diverse aspects of self.7

Analysis of two passages from ‘Tell Me Who To Kill’ and ‘Seed Cata-
logue’ respectively should illustrate most of these points. The passage
from Naipaul tells of a crucial event in the narrator’s retrospective
account of his life: the knifing and probable murder of one of a group of
British youths who have been tormenting him in his attempts in London
to run a roti and curry shop purchased out of his hard-earned money.

The glasses and the plates are breaking. The words and the laugh are everywhere.
Let everything break. I will take Dayo on that ship with me, and his face will not be sad, his mouth will not open to scream. I am walking out, I will go now, the knife is in my hand. But then at the door I feel I want to bawl. I see Dayo’s face again. I feel the strength run right out of me, my bones turning to wire in my arms. (p. 96)

The passage provides an excellent example of modernist unity: the im-
pression of madness dominates in the clipped clauses and sentences, the rapid change of focus and image, the intense magnification of detail (‘The words and that laugh are everywhere’). The impression is rein-
forced by the reader’s awareness of the origins of several of its images elsewhere in the text, that this present is subjectively filtered through
details of past experience. ‘That ship’ is the immigrant ship that brought
the narrator to England, now seen in a fantasy of a return journey; the
breaking of plates, ‘everything’, is also the breaking of every significant hope that the work chronicles.

Most salient of these details is the face of the brother Dayo, visualized
twice, once trying but unable to scream, just as it is frequently visualized
in the larger narrative, also sometimes trying but unable to scream.
Because the narrative deals with the brother’s obsession with Dayo, an obsession with homoerotic overtones, characterized by admiration of his movie actor beauty (‘Errol Flim’ (p. 61)), identification with and financial support for his quest for education, and hatred of his failure, the image of the face is clearly a powerfully overdetermined one. It is an image of fear and guilt, but the feelings are not entirely Dayo’s though so attributed. The fear and guilt are also the narrator’s homoeroticism denied, as well as of his own failure. Such projections are further distorted in recall: at one point it is Dayo who is being stabbed, at another it is Dayo, not the narrator, who is guilty of the stabbing, and at several there are versions of another kind of re-run of the episode, from cinema. The faces of the narrator and Dayo merge with those of the thrill killers of Hitchcock’s Rope, the two wealthy young men in the Manhattan apartment, convinced that their Übermensch status puts them above the law. But in the re-run there are changes: a knife, not a rope, is the weapon, and the setting is not the apartment, but a dream of a home place, the opulent English mansion in the movie Rebecca, with details of jalousies and fretwork drawn from the house of a hated uncle in the West Indies (p. 77). Clearly we have here classic psychological depth, but there is resolution and closure as well. For to the enigma with which the work begins — how did the West Indian narrator come to be where and what he is, mad, in the care of a keeper, in England? — it provides the necessary answers.

The frustrations that lead to the outcome described are those growing out of an underlined impossibility of ambition: the ambition to rise, to achieve, to belong. The passage from Kroetsch similarly deals with impossible ambition.

*How do you grow a poet?*

This is a prairie road.  
This road is the shortest distance  
between nowhere and nowhere. 
This road is a poem. 

Just two miles up the road  
you’ll find a porcupine  
dead in the ditch. It was  
trying to cross the road. 

As for the poet himself  
we can find no record  
of his having traversed  
the land/in either direction
no trace of his coming
or going/only a scarred
page, a spoor of wording
a reduction to mere black

and white/a pile of rabbit
turds that tells us
all spring long
where the track was

poet ... say uncle.

How? (p. 58)

There are no enigmas behind this passage, no accretion of clues to which it provides a culminating final answer. Rather what you see is what you get, or, more precisely, what you get again and again. The mode is post-modern, that of the mosaic repeating the message in variant forms, but even post-modernism must carry its Derridean traces, and the major one here is that of Renaissance rhetoric: amplification. There is amplification in the catechismic interrogations of the opening and close, for, as mentioned earlier, they are of several playing on the idea of growth and making up a structuring principle in the work, others being How do you grow a gardener? How do you grow a lover? How do you grow a garden? and (earlier cited) How do you grow a past? How do you grow a prairie town? Amplification too is characteristic of the imagery: the failure to become a poet is also the failure to cross the road, traverse the landscape, or leave a significant mark, just as it is elsewhere failure to become a postman, to grow melons or to realize love.

Failure in identity is, if anything, more extreme than in Naipaul, for we find none of the deep psychological significance he is able to offer the reader in compensation, as it were, for the characters’ suffering. Self scarcely gets a start, does not become established enough to experience the devastation of disillusionment or tragedy. Comic absurdity is the dominant effect, that created by the image of a dead porcupine, or of a spoor of words like rabbit turds. Elsewhere this effect is reinforced by contrasting with real-life equivalents, incidents and situations from myth and folklore which suggest plenitude and significance: as opposed to the cowboy Pete Knight, legendary conquerer of the bucking bronc, we have the boy who not only falls off a horse but off one standing still; as opposed to the ‘Shono-Haku-u’ print from Hiroshige we have a catalogue listing of a Japanese morning glory. Multiple textuality and abruptly shifting tonalities undercut formal consolation in unity (such as in the theme of
failure): the formality of the italicized catechismic questions contrasting with the colloquialism of the Roman ‘Poet — say uncle’, the matter-of-factness of the right-hand column quatrains contrasting with the analytic, faintly lyric qualities of the left.

Without being deterministic, for any artist may overcome the tendencies towards which form drives his vision, one could say that Naipaul’s closed and Kroetsch’s open forms have encouraged major differences in the directions which their respective nihilisms have taken. In Naipaul’s end-stopped world there is little room for alternatives to a totalizing vision of failure, that ‘incendiary’ vision, to use Jack Healy’s telling adjective. The exhaustiveness and unity of that vision would be compromised and undermined if within it there were openness, loose ends, redemptive possibilities. Two related passages strike me as relevant here. In the first Bobby speaks to Linda of a dream of ‘driving through a cold and rainy night, driving endless miles, until I came to a cottage at the top of a hill. There would be a fire there, and it would be warm and I would be perfectly safe’ (p. 153). There are echoes elsewhere: we have already seen how for Santosh an India abandoned and for Dayo’s brother an image of an English mansion perform similar functions. But the most significant echo comes in the ‘Epilogue’ where the artist contemplates an Egyptian tomb painting, finding in it something like the solace denied to Bobby and the others, thinking that it might represent ‘the only pure time’, or that the vision ‘had always been a fabrication, a cause for yearning, something for the tomb’ (p. 246). Home for characters in Naipaul becomes finally dream or fantasy of a resting place they can never reach, but for the artist building his out of their loss this is not the case. Whether as evocation of a paradise lost or as decoration for a tomb his work speaks of the price paid for the perfectly finished home which he may contemplate and they must endure.

Kroetsch’s works, on the other hand, with their perpetual subversion of authority, encourage self-subversion as well. Though they deny the consolation of place as thoroughly as Naipaul’s, it is nevertheless present in latencies. Out of the multiple voices, perhaps through them, may be heard undertones which partake of qualities which the sceptical post-modern credo denies. It denies linearity, yet story emerges nonetheless, and associated with place in the hyperbolic absurdities of the prairie tall tale, such as that of the drinking session with Al Purdy in Edmonton’s Chateau Lacombe in ‘Seed Catalogue’: ‘Twice, Purdy galloped a Cariboo horse/ right straight through the dining area’ (p. 60). It rejects depth, yet in a manner whose subtle and almost covert insinuation demands further study, depth is present in the works in lyrical moments.
which speak of passion, passion again associated with place. Here is the father, retired, in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’:

He was lonesome for the
hot wind on his face, the smell
of horses, the distant
hum of a threshing machine,
the oil can he carried, the weight
of a crescent wrench in his hind pocket (p. 18)

One of the dominant features of post-modern thought is a resistance to closure. This resistance, in these poems of Kroetsch, may be seen not only in such formal elements as abrupt shifts of subject and style and the absence of a ‘rounded’ ending, but also in the large contradiction sketched above. Narrative and lyric undermine the prevailing rhetoric of despair, deny its once-and-for-all closure. In so doing they ultimately recover the home place in Commonwealth literature as a possibility based on our deep-seated powers of adaption, however much it may — perhaps must — be haunted by the ghosts of cultures abandoned, absentee, displaced and disrupted, so strikingly found in his work and Naipaul’s.

NOTES


4. Historically, of course, American blacks are a native people uprooted and brought to the United States to serve as slaves in place of an Amerindian population incapacitated for such work by mass extermination.


7. The multiple textuality is even more evident in the first editions of these two works. In *The Ledger* (London, Ont.: Applegarth Follies, 1975) two copies of original ledger entries flank the double-page title page. That page reproduces a survey map of the Bruce County family home area, with a holograph encircling of its precise location (in broad black) and a holograph note adjoining this: ‘Yes, that’s the place. RK’ (in thin red). On the left side of the page the title information is superimposed in red on map area which remains visible, palimpsest-like. The General Publishing edition contains none of this, and while it attempts to duplicate the exciting typographical juxtapositions of the original text proper, it barely succeeds in merely suggesting them. In *Seed Catalogue* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1977) the poem proper, printed in green, is superimposed on a palimpsest-like still visible copy of pages from a seed catalogue, complete with illustrations, reproduced in gold, and suggesting a recessive prairie intertextuality. The colour of the paper is light blue, and the three colours suggest spring and autumn wheat fields and a prairie sky respectively. Green and gold are also the official colours of Kroetsch’s alma mater, the University of Alberta. All these effects are lost in the General Publishing edition. The considerable impoverishment from the originals of the most readily available edition of these works is regrettable, and not only on aesthetic grounds.


9. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the Humanities Institute of the University of Calgary, whose award of a 1986-87 Fellowship allowed me to research this article.

KUSUM BHAMBRI

One Hot Summer Day...

It was hot and sticky, humid was a better word to describe the weather, with the sun sending down wave after wave of unrelentless sweltering heat. The sizzling temperatures made movement a problem, and laziness descended on Leila, along with a heaviness that made it difficult to think clearly. ‘These must come off,’ she said to herself crossly; the layer upon layer of clothing that covered her body, making it impossible to discern any visible shape, made her feel unattractive and nondescript. At first she had struggled valiantly against the imposition of another form, this strange covering, like another being hanging upon herself. It was an
unspoken rule of the regime that women must cover themselves in garments that did not fit tightly, leaving their hands and face free, or they must wear the chuddar, a kind of cape that covered their bodies completely so as not to attract or in any way tempt the opposite sex. She wore the chuddar like a shroud outside but in her own house, under her own roof, the only place she could do as she pleased, she refused to let it near her body and on her arrival home she would tear it off in disgust. But time, force of habit, pressures and circumstances had all triumphed, so that in the end she would simply don the ill-fitting garments she wore outside; the overflowing and drab array that transformed her into another person, like the countless many.

The blinding heat made her feel miserable and sticky; realising that moaning would not help her enjoy her only day off from work, she decided to go inside and change. Rummaging through her wardrobe she found a pair of comfortable jeans and a tight fitting T-shirt that belonged to another time. Donning the clothes hurriedly before she changed her mind, she then had a quick look at herself in the mirror. She was glad she had, the mirror was proof of how attractive and youthful she was. A bow to her hair added the final touch and feeling immensely pleased with her appearance she went to the garden to sit in a shady alcove with a favourite book.

It was some time later that she felt rather than saw something unusual happening. She could not quite place it, but the growing prickly sensation that someone was watching her persisted. ‘But,’ she reasoned with herself, ‘there was no one she did not know around her. This was her home and all those in it, Reza, the gardener or Ali, her husband’s chauffeur, had been working there for years.’ Shrugging the feeling aside but unable to concentrate on her book, she decided to write a letter. A few minutes later while engrossed in her letter-writing she was distracted by the buzzing sound of a bee nearby. The sudden sound startled her and as she jerked her head up abruptly, her eyes clashed with the gardener’s. Unexpectedly confronted by Leila he was unable to hide or disguise the expression on his face. It was full of longing, his eyes had a look of glazed desire while his face had a faintly suggestive air. Shaken but unable to bring herself to say anything, Leila hurried inside.

The warm familiarity of her room reassured her; tossing herself on the bed, she tried to collect her troubled thoughts. These, however, were soon broken by strange murmurings, a staccato beat in the background. Used as she was to all Ali’s songs, this one sounded totally unfamiliar. Deciding to investigate, she went out to the garage only to be confronted by a saucy look from Ali while he continued to sing some lewd songs.
Deeply disturbed she tried to pull herself together, it was all getting out of hand. It was like coming face to face with a bunch of strangers, people who had worked for her family for years were behaving very oddly. It was bizarre.

Chiding herself for imagining things, she felt she must do something to occupy herself and she went out to the garden to help Reza with the new vegetable patch they were planting. This pastime normally afforded her immense pleasure, but today for some unaccountable reason she felt uneasy and uncomfortable in Reza's presence. Whenever she dug a hole to plant a seed, he would correct her, telling her she was not planting it properly. He then proceeded to demonstrate how it should be done; this involved their hands touching, something which would not normally bother her, as he was an old man and almost one of the family. But it was happening much too often and quite unnecessarily.

Then it hit her like a bolt from the blue ... of course they were all behaving strangely, she had suddenly turned their ordered, carefully contrived world upside down and chaos reigned. In a situation such as this they no longer knew how to react and behave.

Used as they were to seeing women covered outside and modestly attired within the confines of their own homes, the sudden metamorphosis of Leila from one of many to a voluptuous and attractive body had unleashed long forgotten and suppressed feelings and desires. It was like looking at forbidden fruit. As realisation dawned, Leila hurriedly excused herself and went to her room. There, she immediately stripped off her jeans and T-shirt which some time ago had made her so happy. She knew it was dangerous to continue wearing them. Used for so long to seeing women covered it was not possibly to simply change and imagine men would not be affected. She saw the wearing of loose, unattractive clothes as an oppressive duty she had to obey. She realised now she must wear these clothes for she no longer had a choice. Even within the confines of her home she must remain covered from herself.

She put on the familiar drab clothing and resumed her household chores. At once she felt a sense of reality, of saneness and perspective as she saw the gardener planting the seeds and heard the chauffeur singing his daily avaz. Life for her had changed drastically both in and out. It was strange to feel that though she did not want to wear the chuddar, or the long loose skirts with buttoned shirts and headscarfs, she felt more comfortable in them than in what were ... the clothes of her choice.
Shaunt Basmajian

THE FANTASY AT 35

the beautiful young
blonde centrefold
is afraid she may
have aids
and has just given up
her five month old baby
for adoption
to a middle aged couple
living out of
the province

her boyfriend
whom she’s been with
for the past six months
was recently arrested
and sentenced to
five years
charged for possessing
an illegal weapon
and for running
a prostitution ring

her father
whom she hasn’t seen
since she was four
just sent her a letter
‘postmarked’ victoria
finally admitting to
his guilt
fourteen years
too late
while
in the plaster coated
kitchenette room
downstairs
infested with mice
and roaches
i continue to drink
a cup of black coffee
hungover
with her mother

ON HOLIDAY

indian peasants
lined up
one by one
on the busy
spanish street
begging for dollars
and pesos
hungry for
an american burger
a ‘big mac’ at the
mexican macdonald’s
while ravaged
in the ring
scanted bulls
remain massacred
to grab more
tourist money
with eyes radiant
and coiled
too poor to glare
everywhere you look
getting more jealous
as you drink
their beer imported
Jack Hodgins

INTERVIEW

Jeanne Delbaere interviewed Jack Hodgins in Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, on 7 September 1987.

Jack, we are here in the Bookstore on Bastion Street in Nanaimo where The Honorary Patron will be launched in a few days. Is it the novel you read from at the Vienna conference in 1983?

No, that one didn’t work. I had been working on it since 1981. It had started as a story but had quickly developed into something much bigger. I even tried to turn it into a play but somehow it didn’t come off. At the time of the Vienna conference I abandoned it for a while to work on a
new idea. Then I went back to it but came to the point when I had to admit that it would never click into place. So I gave it up and put it on a shelf.

*For later use?*

Who knows?

*This, then, explains the six-year gap that has puzzled so many of your readers. When and how did The Honorary Patron begin?*

It started as a visual image immediately after Vienna in 1983. I was sitting in a roof-top café in Zürich and had the vision of an elderly gentleman waiting anxiously for somebody. It was the sort of image that does not leave you alone until you have done something with it. I went home and wrote a quick first sketch of the man who — though I didn’t know it yet — was to become the honorary patron of my new novel. The next spring I was invited to a new theatre festival in Nanaimo. An important personage — someone from the House of Lords — had been invited from London to be the festival’s honorary patron. I tried to
imagine what it must be like for someone used to London literary circles to find himself suddenly confronted with the theatricals of a little town on Vancouver Island. I then remembered my elderly gentleman on the Zürich roof-top café and I had my story: he would be the honorary guest, a retired Canadian scholar brought back to his native place by his childhood sweetheart, now a cultivated woman in charge of the organisation of the festival.

So, in a sense, it was a trip to Europe that triggered it all? Do you make much use of the contrast between Europe and Canada in the novel?

Yes, I use the contrast between Europe and Nanaimo (though the place is not named in the novel), the shock it must be for this man used to the rich cultural life of Vienna and Zürich to come back after so many years to this wild place.

A 'wild place': that's how you see Nanaimo?

There is between me and this town a love-hate relationship which is not unlike the relationship between Crane and Blackie Blackstone in the novel. I taught high school here for seventeen years. When I was offered the creative writing course at the University of Victoria I was happy enough to go. Yet I often miss Nanaimo with its eccentrics, its colourful life, its marvellous variety. Zürich, because it is such a neat, tidy place, suggested to me a much more orderly existence, suitable for a man who'd lost interest in being involved in life.

In a sense, the return to Nanaimo means for your elderly professor a reactivation of memory, a new coming to terms with his real self.

Yes, and also a way of living his old age. He was fading into nothingness in Europe and he is suddenly forced into life again with of course all the complications which this entails. The town to which he is dragged back very much against his will is falling apart, not only because houses are in need of paint and repair but because some of them literally fall into the abandoned coalmines beneath the surface. This is actually happening here: now and then a house begins to sink because of the underground mine shafts. Likewise Crane falls into his past. The woman who brings him home, though she is about the same age, is more alive, she is full of projects.
Another wonderful female character like Maggie Kyle?

I’ve lived all my life surrounded by wonderful female characters. My life has been a parade of strong, energetic, tough, enthusiastic, accomplished women from my grandmother to my own daughter. I have known lots of Maggie Kyles and it was easy for me to turn them into fiction. But in The Honorary Patron I have created a woman character who is different from any of the previous ones. She teaches English in a high school, she is involved in the theatre festival: she is the first educated woman that I have dared to use as a character. I am rather proud of her. And find her very exciting.

Maggie Kyle had gone all the way to Europe to find her true self. Your honorary patron, asepticized and fossilized in Europe, must return to his native island to become alive again.

It is true, though I had not thought of that.

This search for a true self, an authentic voice, is a very typical post-colonial concern. Are you aware of yourself as a post-colonial writer?

I was not until I visited Australia and found out that people there were studying my work and calling it post-colonial. It came as a surprise to me but I like to hear that what I am trying to do is part of something larger. Certainly I have always been aware of the need to ‘invent’ a literature which can reflect life in this place, to use the English language in the particular way it is used here, to find ways of ‘unlearning’ the forms which were imposed upon us as inferior colonials who were expected to imitate the language and literature of the Old World and to create something new that says: ‘This is us. This is how we are. This is how we name things and how we use the language and make it ours.’

The Invention of the World was very typically post-colonial in its rejection of patriarchal and European myths and in its attempt to retrieve from oblivion or invisibility the true inhabitants of the land. Is there anything like that in The Honorary Patron?

At one point in the novel there is a dinner party at which people have an argument about the extent to which culture must necessarily grow out of your own story and not the story of others. The argument comes about
because one of the plays is based on fictionalized local history. I think that we should encourage the production of a culture of our own even if it should happen to be inferior by European standards. I do admire Europe but Europe is Europe and here is here. We must find our own voice.

*You use the plural: is it a general feeling here?*

I doubt it. The people I write about are not very interested in literature. Here is the paradox: I am a bookish person yet I’m convinced that a genuine literature must somehow come out of those people who are not bookish at all.

*You mentioned the love-hate relationship between Crane and Blackie Blackstone. Does it also stand for the tension between art and life?*

I suppose this is a very central tension in the book. Blackie is the former bully of the school; he has become very rich and successful, an unscrupulous capitalist who runs the town. Because Crane has been in Europe and has made himself successful in that way he regards him as his equal and invites him to his log cabin on a lake. They almost fall into friendship again but it turns out that Blackie had taken the art critic for an artist and had wanted him to paint a mural for him. He felt that because he was wealthy he could buy culture. When he hears the truth he breaks into one of his terrible fits of anger. He does not understand all the fuss about someone who has not done anything. The artist is seen as irrelevant and foreign and frivolous. Blackie Blackstone raises another problem for me. I know he is despicable: he is unscrupulous, beats his wife, raises terrorists. Yet he is so full of life that he may even steal the show and be found more attractive than Jeffrey Crane. I’m worried about the moral confusion that this may lead to but at the same time I cannot help making the most of him and liking him for being so full of life.

*You are an artist, not a preacher.*

You think it’s none of my business? No, it is my business, to be responsible for what I do.

*I haven’t asked you anything about the form of your novel?*

It is quite conventional. At least it begins in a European conventional style that gradually breaks down as the protagonist becomes more and
more involved in Vancouver Island life, that is, in the chaos and disorder of life itself. Towards the end it becomes metafictional when the third-person narration is interrupted at regular intervals by a conversation off stage between Crane and Franz, one of his friends in Zürich. They comment on the book's events while these events continue to unfold so that the reader may ask himself whether everything did not take place in the professor's head. It also leaves the future open.

At least there is a future.

Crane will keep going. He is no longer dead.

What about you? What are your projects for the near future?

I have a children's book coming out in the New Year. I must still find a title for it. Then there is the historical novel on which I am currently working. It is set in Victoria, San Francisco, Australia and England — a very different book from The Honorary Patron.

Will it bear any trace of your recent visit to Australia?

I think so. For me Australia was an extraordinary country because nothing, absolutely nothing was familiar: every flower, every tree, every animal had an exotic unfamiliar name. Here's post-colonialism! This was the English language yet I had to learn all these new names and they seemed exotic, rich, evocative, exciting. They belonged to that place — to those people. There is a scene in the novel in which a woman feels she is being strangled by a dense lush forest of unfamiliar names.

Back to magic realism then?

I don't know but for me Australia was magic and I suppose the magic will come out somewhere. Home is usually magic for me too. But that is another story.
Earthquake

Do you remember the earthquake of '46? Do you remember how the chimney fell through the roof of the elementary school and down through both storeys of classrooms and would have killed us all if this had not been a Sunday morning? Do you remember how the post office, which was the only brick building in the entire valley, collapsed in a heap of rubble where it had stood for 23 years, and how we were thrilled to think afterwards that it looked exactly as if it might have been bombed from the air? And how the bells on the little Anglican church went chiming, and the electric poles whipped back and forth like fly-fishermen’s rods, and electric wires hooped low like skipping ropes and snapped tight and clearly sang, and how the earth came rolling up in waves and sent Cornelius Baxter’s car out of control and up onto Millie Weston’s porch?

Then you may also remember my uncle, Neddie Desmond. Lived just down the road a ways from us in that little farm with the buttercup-yellow house. Well my Uncle Neddie was the first one out in our part of the valley to install an electric fence. Power had come as far as Waterville just the year before and none of us had become accustomed to its magic yet, nor learned to trust it. Neddie went out that morning to pull the inaugural switch, and to prepare himself to have a good laugh at the first cow to find out what it would mean from now on to stick her nose into a field where she wasn’t wanted. Well Neddie pulled his switch and immediately the air began to hum, the world began to heave and roll, the trees began to dance and flop about and try to fly. Two guernseys dropped directly to their knees and started to bawl; a third went staggering sideways down the sloping earth and slammed into the cedar-shake wall of his barn. Chickens exploded out of their pen in a flurry of squawking feathers as if the jolt of electricity had somehow jumped a connection and zapped them. Naturally he thought that he and his fence were to blame for this upheaval but he could not make it stop by turning off his switch. Poor old Neddie had never been so frightened; he started to curse and blubber, he hollered for Gracie to get out and give him a hand. Never much of a man for religion, he promised God at the top of
his lungs that he would abandon his lifelong fascination with modern inventions immediately. But God took far too long to think this offer over; by the time the earth’s convulsions had settled, all of his cattle had fallen and poor Ned had wrapped himself around a fence post and begun to cry.

Now the scariest thing about quakes is that they change the way a fellow looks at the world. You may also remember my other uncle, Tobias Desmond. Owned the little sawmill up at Comox Lake. Uncle Toby drove down from his mill an hour after the quake had worn itself out and told us the entire lake had emptied in front of his eyes. Truly! Right to the muddy bottom, he said — he saw drowned trees and slime. Drained entirely down a crack which had opened up in the earth, and must have gone right out to the ocean somewhere, because it came back with tangled knots of golden-brown kelp and furious crabs and bouquets of brilliant purple anemones torn off the ocean floor and flung up on to the driftwood and shoreline trees and the sorting deck of Uncle Toby’s mill.

He was uneasy about going back to his sawmill after that. Though the sound of the lake emptying all at once like water down a sucking drainpipe had been horrible enough to haunt him for the next few years, it would not have the effect upon him of those remembered moments when he stood and watched the water returning to the empty lake — leaking in at first, and spreading, then racing outwards across the mud, and swelling, deepening, rising up the nearer slopes. He had no reason to believe it would know when to stop. By the time the first waves slapped against the pilings under his mill, he was in his truck with the motor running, yet later confessed that he knew he would not have the will to drive out of there even if that water had kept on climbing up the posts and started out over the land. He would just have to hang around to see what happened next.

Now my Uncle Toby was a truthful man. We believed him. You only had to walk along the lakeshore yourself to see things drying in the sunlight that shouldn’t be there. The problem was that this incident would trouble him far too much, he couldn’t stop telling people about it. And every time he told it there seemed to be something new he’d just remembered that he hadn’t told before. A whole month had gone by when he turned away from the counter of the general store one afternoon, watched a car speed past outside, and turned again to Em at the till: ‘My God, I just remembered! Why didn’t I think of this before? There were two old men in a boat — I remember seeing them just before it started — two stiff gentlemen in coolie hats out on the lake in a punt.’ They weren’t
fishing or anything, he said. Just floating, talking, way out in the middle. When the waves started sloshing up they rocked and bobbed but didn't start rowing for shore. They started turning, slowly turning around, turning around and around this whirlpool that had opened up, this funnel that was sucking the entire body of water down a hole somewhere. They didn't stand up, they didn't holler for help, they just turned and turned and eventually slipped into the chute and corkscrewed down out of sight. 'Now what do you think of that?' said Uncle Toby. 'They didn't come back, they must've gone sailing out to sea.' Of course no one believed this new addition to his tale. But he continued to tell his story to anyone who would listen, adding every time a few more details that would make it just a little more exciting and improbable than it had been before. He seldom went back to the mill, or sold much lumber. He spent his time on the streets of town, or in a coffee shop, talking the ear off anyone who came along. The earthquake had given him the excuse he'd been looking for to avoid what he'd always hated doing most — an honest day's work.

So you see — that's the other thing. People will use an earthquake for their own purposes. My uncle's sawmill eventually collapsed from neglect, under a heavy fall of snow, but he hardly noticed. That's the worrying part. They're telling us now that we're just about overdue for another one. For an island situated smack on the Pacific rim of fire, as they like to call it, we've sat back for far too long and smugly watched disasters strike other parts of the world. Apparently all those tremors we've wakened to in the night have not done anything but delay the inevitable; we will soon be facing the real thing all over again, with its aftermath of legend.

Myself, I was nearly eight at the time. My brother was five. My sister was less than a year, and still asleep in her crib in one corner of my parent's bedroom. My mother, who was kneading a batch of bread dough at the kitchen counter, encouraged the two of us boys to hurry and finish breakfast and get outside. It appeared to be the beginning of a warm June day. My father had gone out to milk Star, the little jersey. He'd soon begin the task of sharpening the little triangular blades of his hay mower, which would be needed within the next few weeks for the field between the house and the wooden gate. Now, he had just started back towards the house with a pail of milk in order to run it through the verandah separator, when it seemed the air had begun to hum around his ears. Something smelled, an odour of unfamiliar gas. Off across the nearer pasture the line of firs began to sway, as though from a sudden
burst of wind. The hayfield swelled up and moved towards him in a series of ripples. Suddenly he felt as if he were on a rocking ship, in need of sea legs, with a whole ocean beneath him trying to upset his balance. He could not proceed. He stopped and braced his legs apart to keep from falling. The milk sloshed from side to side in the pail and slopped over the rim. Before him, our old two-storey house he was still in the process of renovating had begun to dance a jig. The chimney bent as if made of rubber bricks, then swivelled a half-turn and toppled. Red bricks spilled down the slope of the roof and dropped to the lean-to roof of the verandah, then spilled down that in a race to the eave where they could drop to the ground directly above the door I was throwing open at that precise moment in order to rush outside and join him. This was the end of the world he’d been warned about as a child himself; it was happening in exactly the way his own father had told him it would. In a moment a crack would open up somewhere and snake across his land to divide beneath his feet and swallow him, would swallow his house and his family and his farm and all his animals at once, but not until he’d been forced to stand helpless and unable to move on the bucking surface of earth while he watched his family bludgeoned to death by the spilling cascade of bricks.

My brother laughed, but wouldn’t leave his chair at the kitchen table. The sight of a fried egg dancing on his plate was not an entertainment to walk away from. Cutlery chattered on the table-cloth. Milk tossed up bubbly sprays from his glass and splashed on his nose. His piece of toast hopped off his plate and landed in his lap. This was a matter for giggling. The world had decided to entertain him in a manner he’d always thought it capable of and this would make a difference to his life. From this day on, he would take it for granted that he might demand any sort of pleasant diversion he wished and needed only wait for all laws of nature to be suspended for the purpose of giving him a laugh.

My mother screamed. Cupboard doors flew open and spewed dishes onto her counter. Drinking glasses and cups spilled onto the bread dough. Saucers crashed in the sink. Through the window she could see her husband swaying like a drunken man in the lane that led to the barn. When she turned — crying, ‘The baby!’ — she saw the drying rack above the stove sway like a gentle porch swing, swishing boiled underwear and shirts back and forth over the heat. She snatched the clothing down and tossed it all in a heap on a chair. ‘You boys — get outside quick!’ She went flying off through the french door and across the
living room and into the bedroom. 'I can't! I can't!' I heard her calling and ran to help. The crib had danced across the floor and was blocking the door. We pushed it open. She snatched up my sister and cried, 'Grab your brother and follow.' As it turned out, she was the one who would follow. The outside door off the living room was blocked by the china cabinet which had taken up the tune and gone dancing, its contents of silver and heirloom china clanging behind the glass. The baby cried at her hip. Between us we leaned against the cabinet but it would not move. 'The other door!' she cried. But we had only got out as far as the verandah, saw my father hollering something at us we couldn't hear over a clatter on the roof above us, saw him waving his arms — he might have been signalling us to hurry and join him, he might have been telling us to stay where we were — when that fall of cascading bricks came crashing down off the roof just less than a running step before us. Beyond it, my father, rushing towards us, fell to one knee. We looked at one another, my father and I, with that thundering fall of red clay bricks between us. He might as well have been on the opposite side of an opening chasm, he might as well have been on the shore while we were going down a drain hole, he might as well have been left behind on earth while we went sailing off into eternity. That's what he was thinking. Even trapped in a house that was shaking itself into collapse around our ears I could see what he was thinking in his eyes. What sort of a father could not put a halt to a tumbling wall of bricks? I was thinking the same myself.

Now what does it feel like to be an eight-year-old boy on a Sunday morning in June with the world deciding to throw itself into convulsions and scare everyone half to death? Why, how had I got to such an age, I'd like to know, still believing that earth would stay steady beneath your feet forever, fathers stay capable of heroic rescues forever, mothers stay calm in every sort of emergency forever, and houses you lived in stay solid and still and safe and true till the end of time? Let me tell you this: when I was two my mother came up into the attic bedroom to tuck me in every night carrying a coal-oil lamp. One night when she had kissed me she turned to go down the stairs but tripped and fell, and fell down the length of the stairs to the landing. I ran to the head of the stairs and looked: there she was in a heap, surrounded by flames, with fire already starting up the trail of spilled oil towards me. In no time at all, my father had beat those flames out with a blanket and helped my mother away. I didn't have even the time to think he might not. Let me also tell this: When I was in my first year of school my father did not come home one day from work in the logging camp at the time he was
supposed to. He did not come home that night at all; he came home the next morning from the hospital with his head wrapped up in great white bandages, nothing of him showing but two eyes, two nostrils, and a gaping hole for a mouth. He laughed. A falling limb had nearly taken off one ear, had opened up his nose. But he laughed. I could take him to school tomorrow for show-and-tell, he said, and tell that teacher and all those other kids I’d dug him up in the yard where he’d been buried by the Egyptians five or six thousand years before. He would lie stiff, he said, until everyone was through poking at him and smelling him and making notes for an assignment on the pleasures of archeology, and then he would let out a long groan and sit up and scare the teacher into immediate retirement. ‘This isn’t funny,’ my mother said. ‘You might have been killed.’ But of course my father could laugh in the teeth of anything that would try to kill him in the world. The earth beneath our feet stayed firm.

Then this. What do you make of it? The bricks stopped falling. The house settled. Not a sound could be heard. It was as if the earth, worn out from its convulsion, had taken in a deep breath, and held it, while it gathered up its strength to buck and heave some more and go into another fit. Still we didn’t move — my father down on one knee with his spilled milk bucket not far away in the grass, my mother holding my crying sister in her arms, my brother no longer giggling but looking as though he just might get scared at last. We held our positions as if we waited for someone’s permission to move. Something foul-smelling had been released into the air. The light was wrong. Far off, if you listened hard, a rumbling could be heard going away beyond the trees.

Inside, one final piece of china crashed to the kitchen floor. This was a signal. Now, could you heave a sigh and laugh to show that it was all right? Nobody laughed. My brother, like the baby, started to cry. My father stood up and whipped off his cap to slap the dirt from his knees. He picked up the pail, and stood looking into it. Was he wondering where the milk had gone? It was splashed out all around him and already drying on the leaves of grass and on the gravel along the lane. My mother made a tentative move down onto the top step, and staggered a little. ‘What was that?’ she said. ‘What was that? I thought for a moment the war might have started up again, an invasion or something.’

‘Quake,’ said my dad. He took a step towards my mother, found that he could keep his balance after all, and sort of threw himself into a lope in our direction.

‘You wouldn’t believe what went through my head!’ my mother said.
'I thought something might have happened in the barn. You and that cow —' She was almost laughing now, but almost crying as well. 'Blowing yourselves to kingdom come and taking the rest of us with you!' My father took the baby in one of his arms to hush her, and used his other arm to hold my mother against him. 'You okay?' he said to me. I nodded. He didn't smile. Not yet. He would make a joke of it later but for the time being he solemnly held my gaze with his to acknowledge what we both now knew what he must have known already himself but had kept secret from me too long. What was this thing we shared? That the world could no longer be trusted to stay steady beneath our feet? Perhaps, and that a father and son in such a world must expect to view each other across a space of falling debris.

Fifteen minutes later my Uncle Neddie and his housekeeper Grace were upon us in their pickup truck, to see how much damage had been done. By this time we had already heard on the battery radio that we'd been at the very centre of this quake, and that it had measured 7.3 on the Richter scale — the worst to hit the island since 1918. Grace drew fiercely on her cigarette, blew smoke down her nose, and viewed the world at a sideways glance to show she would never trust it again. She was not one to thrive on drama. Uncle Ned was white, and shaky. 'My lord, I thought I'd caused it!' he said. He wasn't laughing either. He looked as if he could still be convinced he'd been the one to blame.

'That sounds pretty normal,' my father said. 'I thought I'd caused it myself. I was just coming across from the barn and thinking how maybe we shouldn't've moved into this old house before I'd finished the renovations. Not with little kids — y'know? What a person ought to be able to do, I thought, was just pick up an old house like that and give it a shake and see what's left that's safe.'

'I was making bread,' my mother said. 'You know how they make fun of the way I punch down the dough like I'm mad. This time I thought well now I've gone and done it, this dough's begun to fight back.'

None of this was comfort to Uncle Ned, who was holding his hands together, then putting them into his pockets, then clenching them into fists that he pressed to his sides. 'I mean I thought I'd really started it!' he said. 'I pulled the switch on my electric fence and away she started to rip! I nearly peed my pants.' So Uncle Ned told us what it was like: how he pulled the switch, and the earth heaved up, and the cows fell, and chickens exploded out of their pen, and the fence posts shook themselves free of the ground. Naturally we laughed. Naturally he had to laugh himself. Then he said, 'I guess I had to come over and find out how far
my damage had spread. But that don’t mean I’m gonna get up on that roof and fix your chimney!’

Apparently it was all right to laugh. No one was hurt. The house was still standing. How important grownups must think they are! It had never occurred to me to think I was at fault. ‘Reminds me of that time we was kids,’ said Uncle Ned to my father. ‘You remember that? You and me and Toby was sleepin’ up over the garage and the Old Man he comes hollering out to wake us up? This was the time that fire got loose up behind Wolf Lake and started down across the valley towards us. The sky was red and boiling black, the whole world was lit up by its flames and you could hear them roarin’ across the tops of the trees. You could hear the cattle bellowin’ too, scared to death. Well you know what he was like, he got us up on the roof with gunny sacks slappin’ at sparks that flew our way. Even when that fire’d nearly surrounded us he wouldn’t let us high-tail it out of there.’ He was talking to my mother now. ‘Well it wasn’t until the next day when the wind had turned it away that we found out he’d been broodin’ about some little root-fire he’d started that he shouldn’t have, and couldn’t get it out of his head that he somehow might’ve sent up the spark that started that whole mountain burning — and sweeping down to give him his punishment. Hell, I bet every farmer in the valley had some reason for thinking the same! What’s the matter with us that we can’t believe things happen just because?’

My father looked at me for a moment before he said anything to that. ‘I’d know, Ned. Maybe we’d really rather be the cause of these things ourselves. On the other hand, maybe we’re right. Who’s to say it isn’t a person’s thoughts that do the damage?’

Uncle Ned shook his head. Of course he wasn’t satisfied. He wouldn’t be satisfied until he’d made some sense of this. He bent to pick up a brick from the front step, and then another, and stacked them up on the floor of the verandah. ‘I know this, I’ll tell you for sure. I’m gonna dismantle that fence. Barbed wire is good enough for any cow, I’ll just shoot the ones that don’t pay attention to it. I know this too: I ain’t never gonna flick a light switch on the wall of my house without flinchin’ a bit while I do it, just in case. How’s a fellow s’posed to know what to trust?’

My mother took the baby back inside. The rest of us started collecting the bricks, and stacking them on the verandah, and kept on picking up bricks until my Uncle Tobias’ truck came roaring in through the gate and down the driveway. We stood up to watch him approach. Uncle Toby was out of that truck before it had even come to its usual stop against the walnut tree, and was running across the yard towards us holding his
baseball cap on his head with one of his hands. ‘You feel that?’ he shouted. ‘You feel that here?’ I guess he was too excited to notice our stack of bricks.

‘Feel what?’ my father said. ‘What do you mean? We didn’t feel anything here.’ He put one hand on my shoulder. ‘Look around. You see anything here that’s *changed*?’

MANUEL FERNANDES

A Broken Pipe Dream

The night they broke the water pipe, Safia lay on the mat in a stupor, barely conscious of her husband rushing out with an empty pitcher. Later on the authorities described the breakage as an act of gross sabotage. A local welfare organization protested this description with a statement to the press and tried to organize the slum dwellers for a *morcha*. But the will to unite was lost for they felt guilty; not over the broken pipe but because of an incident which went along with breaking it. Finally, the slum was bulldozed out of existence. What really happened in the Gandhi Nagar slum was this.

Ever since she had married the watchman Kamruddin, Safia would walk with the women of the neighbouring huts to a well about a kilometer away. When her daughter Razia was a baby, the number of trips to and from the well were more as one arm had to accommodate the infant. But as Razia grew up, the trips became fewer, not only because the mother’s hand was freed, but also a small pot fitted snugly on the little girl’s hip. Safia, like the others, further reduced her trips by doing her washing at the well. The slum dwellers used the well water for washing, bathing, drinking. Sometimes they fell ill but recovered. Sometimes they died. Kerosene was too precious to waste on boiling water.

Many times, particularly before the elections — municipal, legislative, parliament candidates would come and promise the slum dwellers a tap.
They voted for these candidates turn and turn about, discarding one because he had not given them a tap and electing another because they hoped he would.

Then, one day they were startled to see a pipe line being laid. The well water users watched the laying with awe and reverence until they found the line going past their slum. They followed it suspiciously and saw it enter a walled-in area about half a kilometer away. They jostled each other to reach the wall and peered anxiously over it. Yes. It stopped there. A tap was fitted and kept locked.

The shattered pipe dreamers looked at each other in impotent anger, then burst out:

'It's a shame...'
'They promised us a tap...'
'Yes. And now they lock it behind a wall...'
'We must tell the corporator saab...'
'It's no use. We've gone to him many times...'
'And nothing's happened.'
'This time's different...'
'Let's try...'
'I'll tell my husband to go.'
'He works all day. How'll he get the time?'
'Safia's husband is free in the day-time.'
'Yes, yes. Night watchmen have lot of time during the day.'

Safia hastily, eagerly broke in:

'No, no. He won't mind. I'll tell him soon's I reach home. He'll go at once.'

'That he will. He's a good person.'

Safia sped home with her daughter, the others keeping pace. They waited outside the hut while Safia went in and woke Kamruddin. She said breathlessly:

'The pipe line ends behind the wall.'
'The wall?'
'Yes, yes. That wall. There.'

She pointed the direction. Kamruddin started up.

'Not where they're going to construct a bangla?'
'They're going to construct a bangla there?'
'Yes. I just heard last night. Ghanshyam Saab's bangla.'

'Ghanshyam Saab! The man who employs you!'
'Yes, My Malik.'
'But he like you. He'll listen to you.'
'Listen to me?'
‘Yes, yes. It’ll be better than going to that damn corporator.’ Safia was now eager, expectant. ‘You could ask him to let us use the tap. We’ll pay for the water. It would make life so much easier. No trudging to the well... No sickness.’

Kamruddin lit a beedi thoughtfully.

‘Yes. And Saab is kind to me. I don’t think he’ll refuse. I’ll go and talk to him at once.’

Safia ran out to tell the others. She didn’t have to, however, for the walls and doors of the hut could hold no secret and everything had been overheard. They were jubilant. They laughed and hugged each other and cheered Kamruddin as he left on his mission. Their chief problem would soon be solved. Even little Razia, not knowing reasons but wallowing in the importance her parents were being given, led the other children yelling and skipping and prancing over the rocks and ditches which lined the Gandhi Nagar slum. They were all happy, these simple folk.

Then Kamruddin returned.

What happened between Kamruddin and Ghanshyam Saab was this.

The watchman had deferentially entered his employer’s office and was surprised at the spontaneous greeting of the secretary.

‘Kamruddin mia! You’re like the devil! Just think of you and you come. We didn’t even know where you stayed. I was just thinking, how to get this message to you... and here you are.’

‘Message?’

‘Yes. Ghanshyam Saab wants to see you.’

‘To see me?’

‘Stop repeating like that. But why did you come now? Your duty is only at ten P.M.’

‘I came because...’

‘Never mind, never mind. It’s good you’re here.’

The secretary spoke into the intercom. Then, ‘Go in Kamruddin.’

The watchman entered the Malik’s room perplexed. He was greeted heartily:

‘Come in, come in, Kamruddin mia. I’m glad you got the message because I want you to start your new duty tonight.’

‘New duty?’ asked the bewildered watchman, blinking his eyes.

‘Yes. I have some property not far from here where I will be constructing a bungalow. The water connection has just been given. The plot is well protected by a wall which goes all round it. A high wall.’ Ghanshyam Saab leaned forward, his expression turning harsh. ‘But I wouldn’t put it past those hooligans to make a hole in that wall. Those hooligans from the slum close by. I can never trust these badmash slum
dwellers. They will be out to steal my building materials. Even my water. So I want someone to guard it. Someone trustworthy. I could only think of you.'

The Malik then leaned back and added with a benevolent smile, 'I'm also giving you a raise in wages. One rupee more a day!'

The property owner saw an expression of open-mouthed disbelief on the watchman's face and he nodded gently to affirm his generosity. He never saw the sunken hope in the servant's eyes, the utter defeat in the stooping shoulders as they left the room.

The slum folk had a sense of foreboding when Kamruddin returned and only fled past their hails to shut himself up in his hut. Wide-eyed with surmise; they glued their ears to the cowdung walls and to the cracks in the wooden plank door. Kamruddin knew that they were witness to what he was telling his wife, but he did not care, so long as he didn't have to face them in the telling.

After that, when the neighbours passed Kamruddin they always found something more interesting in the slimy ditches which bordered the rubble paths. The women sped to the well when they saw Safia coming. They occupied all the washing stones there, leaving Safia to stand long by the well holding her dirty clothes. The innocent children gave voice to the silent reproach of their parents. They echoed what they heard at home. They chased little Razia away chanting,

'Traitor's daughter, traitor's daughter.'
'Your baba's a Pakistani spy.'
'Shoo! Shoo!'
'Don't come near us.'
'We'll drown you in a ditch.'

Once a small boy yelled, 'Your mummy's Ghanshyam Saab's whore!'

The boy didn't know what the word meant. Neither did the nine-year-old Razia. She thought and thought about it and finally asked her mother as they washed at the well. Safia burst out crying, saying through the tears, 'Don't tell baba this.'

Razia understood it was something wicked, wicked. She ran from the well, found the boy and beat him up. His mother heard him crying and chased Razia, yelling after her, 'Whore's daughter! Stop!'

Razia ran straight into her mother almost knocking down the aluminium pitcher balanced on her head. The knocking down was completed by the boy's mother. She attacked Safia with venom, pulling her hair and kicking the pitcher into a ditch all the while shouting at the bewildered woman. Safia didn't even know why she was being attacked although she was sure it had something to do with the water pipe. She
fought back while the two children cried. The incoherent shouts of the woman finally made sense. Safia understood what Razia had done. She also understood through this voluble woman the extent to which the slum folk despised her family. The neighbours came and separated the two. Their resentment against the Kamruddin family was not yet strong enough to countenance a physical attack. Of course, they showed their preference when they merely pushed Safia aside while solicitously taking the other away. They saw Kamruddin coming out of his hut, his sleep. They spat and turned their backs. The watchman saw his wife and daughter sobbing and the aluminium pitcher in the ditch, water still trickling out of its dented mouth.

After that day the family’s isolation was complete. Safia went to the well only when she knew the others had finished. Kamruddin slunk to the bungalow site after dark and returned home before dawn. The little girl Razia was restricted to the hut though she never really understood what had turned all their friends against them. Then two weeks later the little boy died.

No, he didn’t die of the bruises Razia had inflicted. They were minor and had healed in a couple of days. He died of cholera.

But the residents of Gandhi Nagar were poor, illiterate and superstitious. They saw in Razia’s act a portent of the evil which followed. The little boy died; then another one; then a little girl. The well was once more taking its revenge on the people who plundered its water.

In their panic the slum dwellers changed their attitude against the Kamruddin family from resentment to hatred. A strong, vicious hatred. They mumbled, first to themselves and then out loud,

‘They stole our water.’
‘They brought bad luck.’
‘The daughter’s a devil. That’s why the boy died.’
‘That’s why we’re all dying.’
‘A curse on them.’

When the curse came to Kamruddin’s house, it struck Safia. It attacked her one evening and by night she had collapsed into a stupor. The hut was full of the sweet, fishy smell that the disease released.

Kamruddin paced up and down the small hut, his teeth clenching to his beedi. He felt this to be the culmination of all the mental torture he’d gone through during the last few weeks. He was bitter, bitter. Bitter against Ghanshyam Saab who had stolen their water. The watchman shared this idea with the others. Bitter against the bangla owner who had turned the slum folk against him, though the rich man did not know that Kamruddin was part of the slum. But what if he did? Maybe he’d have
taken the 'hooligan' off his employment altogether. The watchman was bitter against the slum folk who would not see that he was merely earning his livelihood. But was his livelihood more important than the people to whom he belonged? People like himself who lived in airless, leaking huts, walked through slush and slimy ditches, defecated behind rocks and junglee shrubs, worked through days and nights without respite, all their hopes pinned on gaining a water pipe? Shouldn’t he have stood up for them when the saab called them hoodlums and scum? He was bitter with himself.

He heard his wife groan through her stupor. He saw his daughter sitting by the mat, her eyes wide with fear and uncertainty. Her mother was ill. What was her father going to do? The watchman looked at those eyes which appeared haunting in the lamp light. A hoarse voice came from the mat,

‘Water… water…’

It was time for his duty. Tonight he would do his duty. That’s what he would do. His duty.

He took the keys of the gate. The keys of the water tap. He groped for an empty pitcher and picked it up by its dented mouth. Ghanshyam Saab belonged to the morrow and at the moment the morrow was far away. He ran out of the hut shouting to his neighbours,

‘Come out! Come out! I’m opening the tap. Water for everyone. Tap water!’

There was no response. He peeped into their doors. The huts were deserted except for the sick. He was frightened. Where had they all gone? Then he heard the noise. The hammering on metal. The shouts. He ran faster. They were all gathered near the pipe line. He ran to them. Someone spotted him. There were shouts:

‘The watchman!’
‘The traitor.’
‘Finish him off.’
‘We have no use for such people.’

They surrounded him. Someone pulled the pitcher from his hand and held it up.

‘Look! He goes to guard the tap with a pitcher!’
‘Oh! So you’ve been stealing water yourself!’
‘And what about us…’
‘Our children dying…’
‘Sly dog…’
‘Selfish bastard…’
‘We’re going to show you now…’
‘You and your saab.’
‘The thief...’
‘Break the pipe! Break the pipe!’
‘Yes. Let’s get on with the breaking.’
Kamruddin interjected horrified, ‘No, no! Stop. Listen to me. There’s no need.’
‘No need for you maybe.’
‘Chamcha!’
‘Deceiver!’
‘Beat him up. Beat him up!’
‘Yes! Yes!’
They beat him up. The hands, which when not working had only been joined in supplication for a better life, now formed fists. Their target was a watchman. The saabs were too remote. Here was something tangible. The blows came in fast and hard. Thud... thud... thud... thud. They had been deprived for too long, never really knowing who was their enemy. Now they had finally found him. It was this watchman. In the pipe they had found a common cause; now here was a common enemy to be united against.
‘Beat him, beat him!’
They did not remember the long years he was one of them. They did not know that his wife was as sick as any of theirs. They did not think he was a victim like themselves. Thud... thud... thud... The suppressed anger of years had found an outlet. If he hadn’t been a watchman — THE watchman — perhaps Kamruddin too would have been raising his fists. They beat him senseless.
Then they broke the pipe. The water gushed and gushed. They bathed, danced, splashed about to the crazy rhythm of the clanking and bumping of buckets and pitchers. They laughed and yelled like a people liberated. Tomorrow never crossed their minds. It was un-born and so for the moment non-existent. At last the municipal supply ceased and so did their carousel. They returned almost intoxicated, leaving behind a dead watchman to guard his broken pipe.
Later on the authorities described the breakage as an act of gross sabotage. A local welfare organization protested this description with a statement to the press and tried to organize the slum dwellers for a morcha. But the will to unite was lost for they felt guilty; not over the pipe, but because of the incident that went along with breaking it. Finally, the slum was bulldozed out of existence...
Myths and Masks in Two of Janet Frame’s Novels

The unifying principle behind all Janet Frame’s novels is the theme of fiction building which is central to human life. In each of her novels, a distinct but related aspect of these, acknowledged and unacknowledged, fictions is examined.

Two of these positions, for example, are considered in the novels The Adaptable Man¹ and Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room.² In these works the biblical and classical myths of the past are shown to cast light on the fictions of the present and the future.

With the development of a structured rationality, modern human beings can no longer be myth-makers in the true sense of the term. They no longer possess the ‘abstracting, god-making, fluid, kaleidoscopic world view of the ancients’.³ For this reason writers must revisit ‘the fabulous to probe beyond the phenomenological, beyond appearances, beyond randomly perceived events, beyond mere history’,⁴ to challenge the assumptions of ages which have passed and to set the Poetic Imagination on new journeys of exploration towards new worlds. It is this process of probing and this function of challenging, that Frame engages in through the use of myth in her fiction.

People today have retreated so far from their mythic beginnings, according to Jorge Luis Borges, that in place of the myth-making tools which allowed for the apprehension of a multi-faceted world view, combined in endless variety, only one tune, endlessly repeated, remains. Having lost ‘the mentality that doubts the validity of its own constructs’,⁵ which enabled myth-making to occur in its fluid form, modern mankind has reduced its scope to one choric chant, which it plays and replays without variation.

Frame’s re-exploration of our mythic heritage demonstrates the accuracy of Borges’ contention. In The Adaptable Man, Alwyn Maude, the representative twentieth century man, is engaged in unwittingly re-enacting the roles of Icarus, Phaethon and Oedipus, while firmly
believing that he is creating the universe anew. In this novel the modern age is regarded as over-confident, wilful and arrogant, traits which are also characteristic of the above mentioned mythic figures. In his emphatic espousal of the twentieth century, Alwyn displays attributes of all three. Alwyn is a descendant of Icarus, with all the apparent skill and cunning of that fabled ancestor. He can programme his flight through life to a lofty orbit, but his journey is headed towards disaster, for twentieth century adaptable mankind, in Frame’s view, is no more likely to heed warnings than did his high flying original. Consequences similarly unfortunate await modern human beings if they persist in their attempts, like Icarus, to ‘fly too close to the sun’, harnessing powers beyond their control.

Across the centuries human beings have orchestrated another recurring fiction, envisaging themselves as supreme commanders of the universe, in control, finally, not only of the physical world which contains them but also of worlds beyond which embrace the stars. Alwyn visualises himself as a space-age Phaethon commanding the chariot of his father, Phoebus, the sun. This image has both physical and psychological relevance, for the contention is that Alwyn, alias present day humanity, is repeating the follies of the past by fantasising that he is truly in control of the universe. Alwyn, for example, believes that his place in the scheme of things is a major advance on the position of any previous age. He likens the progress of mankind in the twentieth century to its ‘emergence from the mud’ of ignorance. In other words, to the emergence of human beings from that state of benightedness in which he believes all previous centuries have lived right up until the present.

Alwyn compares the new state of enlightenment, which he believes he enjoys, to that of moving into what he calls ‘the white darkness’ of the twentieth century. He is exhilarated by the feeling ‘as if he were responsible for building a new world.... His adaptability positively rippled with power’ (p. 149). This point calls attention to the fact that each generation not only invents and re-invents itself anew, but is constantly engaged in defining and redefining the universe also.

The use of myth in this work reminds us that each generation of human beings is only the latest version cast from the mould of the past. It emphasises that humanity cannot escape its fictional heritage, for it is endlessly engaged in a process of multifaceted image-building. Not only artists, as Yeats points out, poets, painters and musicians, but all human beings, individually and collectively, consciously and otherwise, make and remake themselves continually, but only in terms of what has gone before.
Myth is used here to point out that mankind has, perhaps, less vision to see beyond the past than it is commonly aware of, for what appears innovative and revelatory to each generation is often no more than the new generation's discovery for itself of knowledge already common to its ancestors. But revisiting our mythic heritage also has an aspect more positive than this. While it demonstrates that humanity is less progressive than it imagines, it also indicates that it is not entirely static. An advancing movement is clearly evident, but this is spiral in development, rather than following the rapid vertical progression which Alwyn, as representative of youthful Everyman, mistakenly imagines.

Alwyn's contention is that the present age is intellectually superior to the previous one because it has discarded the past's preoccupation with emotion. Referring to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, for example, Alwyn considers that two pages, rather than a whole novel, would be enough to describe a twentieth century Raskolnikov's emotions after killing, for genocide, in Alwyn's view, is the basis of survival in the modern world. He seizes the opportunity provided by a chance encounter with a stranger on a lonely road to test his ability to kill with the casual unconcern which, he believes, is a basic survival skill for twentieth century man. This act, along with the incestuous relationship which he forms with his mother, identifies him as a latter-day Oedipus. Oedipus, like Alwyn, was known for being 'too complacent in prosperity [and] too confident in sufficiency'. Oedipus, however, was capable of experiencing human passion at its widest range and highest intensity, while Alwyn, epitomising the new cosmic citizen, scorns such emotions as extravagance. He sets out to exert the strongest possible control over his feelings, believing that by doing so, both the pangs of guilt and the torments of conscience will be avoided.

After outlining the external aspects of global adaptable man, characterising him as confident and energetic, but also as amoral, emotionless and concerned only with the present, the narrator also reveals him as a very different kind of character. Alwyn points out that his own perspectives on the eternal happiness with which everyone credits him only partly match the perceptions of others. Modern adaptable mankind wears a mask of happiness and behind that mask lurks a creature 'exposed and alone against the buffetings of time' (p. 150). Faust-like, he feels threatened, 'almost as if he has sold his soul to time instead of to the devil so that he could act the Complete Contemporary The Adaptable Man' (p. 152).

In his doctrine of the mask, Yeats contends that human beings yearn for their opposite, so seek to present their outer selves in forms distinctly
different from the selves through which they live their inner lives. This relates to the outward projections of inner fictions which people, often unconsciously, generate to mask those traits of character which they would, were they aware of them, least wish to acknowledge either to themselves or to others.

The point is that human beings, as Alwyn demonstrates in dramatic form, are frequently unaware that their images of themselves, both inner and outer, are self-created, and therefore, fictions. They, like Alwyn, mistake their fantasies for that elusive something — that unobtainable illusion — they believe to be 'reality'. Alwyn's outwardly confident Phaethon-like behaviour is a mask which he adopts unconsciously, believing it to be a true reflection of his character. In fact the mask is exposed as such in the dreams that come to him during sleep. In the fiction he builds for presentation to the world, he sees himself controlling the globe in the manner of Phoebus himself, an image which, of course, Alwyn clearly hopes is accurate. But the dreams which emerge from his subconscious mind while he sleeps are less assured. In these instances he sees himself piloting a space craft, burdened with a monstrous, aching, encephalitic head.

Although Alwyn imagines he is cultivating God-like qualities he also inwardly fears that he is going mad, 'he was enclosed; sewn up in the present time, as a body is sewn at sea in a canvas shroud before burial' (p. 12). The immortalising self image which Alwyn, the modern cosmic citizen, fabricates is clearly only another disguise. Mankind yearns for its opposite as Yeats contends, and this desire is patently evident in Alwyn's behaviour. His persistent attempts to learn 'the furious adaption of his age' conclude with him concealing his true nature not only from others, but also from himself. Behind the fiction of the confident man of action, which is the mask Alwyn desires, there exists a less adventurous creature, anxious and uncertain, who shuns experience for fear of being overwhelmed by it. 'If you lived experience,' Alwyn declares, 'you were too easily drowned in it. Writing about it you could flail and splash your way to the shore' (p. 14). This viewpoint reflects his attempts to avoid emotion, but indicates that his rejection of feelings is motivated more by fear of them than by the scorn with which he claims to regard them.

The circularity of the mythic process is confirmed by Alwyn's alternative version of himself as controller of the cosmos, for the apparently over-confident cosmic Phaethon is little different from his mythical ancestor. Both suffer from swollen-headedness, lose control of their chariots and pivot helplessly among the stars, threatening the whole universe with destruction.
Frame's use of myth in this novel points up that in spite of their absence of myth-making tools, twentieth century human beings are still a fictionalising species who unconsciously search for their opposite by constructing personal fictions. Unaware that their interpretations of 'reality' are only fictional, they are often deceived by their own imaginings.

Until they become conscious of, and face up to, the fictions and fantasies they spin around themselves, human beings will remain incapable of much originality. Susan Langer explains why mythic beliefs and processes are so important. ‘They are pregnant,’ she writes, ‘and carry an unformulated idea. Myth is a figure of THOUGHT, not merely of speech and to destroy it is to destroy an idea in its pristine phase, just when it dawns on people.’

Thus myth-making in its original micro-cosmic sense is intellectually liberating in function and kaleidoscopic in process. It encapsulates the very act of concept formation at its inception. But personal, microscopic aspects of myth-making can be reductive and imaginatively deadening. This consequence is exemplified by the personal fiction building of characters in *The Adaptable Man* such as Muriel Baldry and Aisley and Russell Maude, who seriously limit their lives as a result of the private myths they construct. Alwyn’s mythic apprehensions lead him to destructive and dangerous behaviour, while the fictions constructed by Russell, his father, cause him to live like a modern Dis, presiding over Little Burgelstatham, a twentieth century village of the dead.

It is only by becoming newly aware of the unacknowledged and unquestioned limitations which constrict it, that the human race can learn to destroy its self-inflicted confining mould. The mythic world view is spiral at best and epitomised by stasis rather than vertical and essentially novel as each generation, like Alwyn, fondly believes. By re-examining classical and biblical mythic themes, and setting them alongside those contemporary fictions of modern mankind which pass for, and are hailed as, daringly innovative additions to the sum of human knowledge, Frame exposes the self-deceptive fictions of collective humanity, illustrating anew the circularity of most human endeavour.

What her novels also contend, however, is that there are periods, during the cyclic sweep of history, when the human mind genuinely shakes off the self-inflicted, psychic strait-jacket of now lifeless myths and the meaningless habits and rituals which cling to them. During these recurrent cycles of intellectual evolution the mind breaks free from the restrictions of its accumulated social and cultural patterning. These landmarks in the history of human intellectual development open the way for the mind to surge beyond past and present concepts and ideologies.
and to enter upon new realms of thought. When this happens, the latent potential of the human intellect for initiating new physical and mental constructs about the universe is released and the way is prepared for further authentic contributions to be made to the advancement of human knowledge.

The inspiration which Frame draws from mythic themes is further developed in her novel *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room*. This work explores the two boundaries of conscious adult existence, death the physical termination of living, and the subconscious which presents an equally inpenetrable psychic boundary to life. In this novel Frame continues to emphasise the far from simple truth that life is made up of a series of fictions. Our ideologies are fictions for we create them. Our philosophies and the beliefs and values that emerge from them are fictions, for we alter them as we see fit.

Godfrey Rainbird, the central character in *Yellow Flowers*, is linked symbolically with Dante and Orpheus as well as with Christ and Lazarus, all figures who have been associated in some way with death and a return to life. *Yellow Flowers* points out that knowledge of death gleaned from the past comes from our biblical and literary heritage. The myths and pseudo-histories on which this information is based are ‘fictions’; stories, narratives, parables or figurative interpretations of these, put together by artists, seers or believers of former ages. Godfrey Rainbird’s death and strange resurrection form the basis of the narrative in which Christian metaphor and Greek myth are linked.

Godfrey’s role as a questing Orpheus is indicated near the conclusion of the work when he states that he, like Orpheus, has attempted to lead Beatrice, his wife, through life from the world of darkness to the world of light. Referring to Beatrice’s hand he comments that ‘It is a wife’s hand ... I have shown it the way in the dark; I have picked it up and set it down — there, and there, and there’ (p. 210). The mythical Orpheus finally fails to lead Eurydice out of the underworld back to the land of the living, while this twentieth century Orpheus, because of his brief and inadvertent entry into the country of death, himself becomes trapped in a Lethe-like state suspended between living and dying.

In a reverse analogy to the Orpheus myth it is Beatrice, by her suicide, who frees Godfrey to return, not to THIS world, the human, apparently physical world of light, which Plato shows to be no more than an illusory world of shadows in which deluded human beings exist, but to THAT world, the world of the mind and imagination. Ironically, by taking her life, Beatrice releases Godfrey from his state of limbo and his imprisoning
love for her. Her death thus allows the process of Godfrey’s self integration to begin.

Godfrey’s identity as a contemporary Christ figure is signified by a whole series of allusive material. His name GODfrey, for example, indicates his divine associations, while the fact of his death and resurrection is underlined by the detailed account of his return to consciousness. At that time he feels as if ‘with great effort ... he hauled two stones from the mouth of an unfathomable cave’ (p. 125), a description which links him to New Testament accounts of events subsequent to Christ’s death and return to life.

Godfrey’s status as a neo-Christ is extended through a collection of small allusions. The comparison of Dunedin to the new Jerusalem of Revelations associates him with the visionary images of that Christian text. The local minister’s reference to ‘this biblical happening in Dunedin’ (p. 40), and the special relationship he forms with the children who are mysteriously attracted to him, all combine to develop the figure.

Classical myth and biblical metaphor are carefully but loosely intertwined as Godfrey gazes across the harbour at Dunedin, his modern Jerusalem, enjoying particularly the view when sheltered behind the windows. It is only his occasional awareness of fly dirt on the glass which reminds him that this barrier stands between him and his vision of the symbolic city. The New Testament premise that humans are beings of limited vision, who see only through a glass darkly, is rather sardonically reiterated in this allusion which also incorporates Plato’s convictions regarding the narrowly confined boundaries of human awareness. Plato’s metaphor of the cave is also used by Frame in *The Adaptable Man* where it is identified with the chandelier, which represents it symbolically in that novel. Those imprisoned in Plato’s cave assume that the shadows they see are in all respects real things. The inhabitants of Little Burgelstatham are also imprisoned in a cave, cavern or cavity, for the village is literally known as the burial place of the heathen, a title suggesting a subterranean resting place; and it is metaphorically associated with the underworld of the dead, through Russel Maude’s allusive position as an imitation Dis, king of that realm.

Those who live in Little Burgelstatham are analogous to the prisoners in the cave referred to by Plato: the latter mistake the shadows of reality for their living forms, whereas the former are unaware that the realities they live by are only self-created fictions.

Returning once more to *Yellow Flowers* it is found that the configuration of mythico-historical figures again converges, as the modern scribes and
Pharisees, represented by the townspeople of Dunedin, begin to stone Godfrey's house. The symbolism relates to the rejection and crucifixion of Christ on the one hand, and to the stoning of Orpheus by the maenads, on the other.

Recollections of the story from his childhood bible class connect Godfrey physically with Lazarus, the man whom Christ chose to raise from the dead. In this modern fiction where he is depicted as a Lazarus revenant, Godfrey's return is less enthusiastically greeted than in the biblical version of the tale. Considering the pragmatic consequences of his predecessor's situation, he notes that Lazarus would have had to pay for his shroud and his funeral, items with which Godfrey himself will have to contend.

The modern setting adds to his confusion, for death and resurrection, he believes, are easier to accept in their familiar biblical environment, 'a remote time in deserts and streets of dust', than in twentieth century Dunedin with 'shop windows full of electric frypans, electric heaters (and) televisions'. The mind enjoys the predictability of known and well-tried fictions and resists attempts to transpose the setting or outcome to a modern environment. The simpler life-style of biblical times may be part of the attraction these fictions hold for modern people, for Godfrey points out that even plague could seem paradisal when viewed from the entanglements of the twentieth century (p. 125).

Godfrey's Dante persona emerges most strongly when he is involuntarily being pulled back to that concealed territory from which he has so recently escaped. His love for Beatrice, to whom he is married, is frankly acknowledged and constitutes a limiting fiction from which he must free himself before he can find peace. His regard for her is tinged with a belief in her perfection, reflecting the admiration of Dante Alighieri for his earlier Beatrice.

By examining these modern rituals, and placing them alongside their mythic source, Yellow Flowers sets the apprehensions of our earlier ancestors in ironic counterpoint to the perceptions of human beings today. Death, for example, is an unknown entity around which our forebears built many fictions. In spite of their continuing preoccupation with mortality, modern sophisticated human beings still rely on the fictions of the past for their knowledge of the subject. Over the centuries mankind has invented a series of fictions to ease the pain of knowing it will die. The fictions surrounding Christ and Lazarus come into this category, for they assure human beings that death is not entirely invincible, but that, very occasionally, and only with great difficulty, it can be overcome, at least in figurative form.
The subconscious mind is a newer concept, or perhaps an old one that until recently has been forgotten. The fictions pertaining to Dante and Orpheus are associated with the human desire to understand that concealed aspect of the mind. The fictions surrounding both concepts, death and the subconscious, must allow for them to be held in awe, while offering comfort in face of our mortality and providing means to control our still inborn primitivity.

A separation has taken place between our basic human instincts and what is imagined to be our civilised consciousness; the division can plainly be detected in the prevalent attitude to rituals, festivals and ceremonies, an issue of some significance in Yellow Flowers. Through the use of mythic allusions Yellow Flowers is pointing out that the behaviour of modern social groups exhibits the outward manifestations of ancient rituals. Modern peoples, just like their early ancestors, create fictions to help them control the material world, their ideas, each other, and lastly themselves.

The message of these two novels, if they can be said to have one, is simply to urge human beings to make better use of their minds. By calling attention to the unacknowledged fictions people indulge in and live by, Frame encourages them to become more logical and aware but also more intellectually adventurous and imaginative.

NOTES
1. Janet Frame, The Adaptable Man (Pegasus Press, New Zealand, 1965). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Janet Frame, Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room (George Braziller, New York, 1969). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
5. Wheelock, p. 12.
Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah.*

A new novel by Chinua Achebe has been in prospect for almost as many years as I have been interested in African literature, but it had increasingly come to seem a chimera. Achebe has been fully occupied in the twenty-one years since *A Man of the People,* not least as a Commonwealth Poetry Prize winner and an influential essayist, but it is in fiction that his greatness lies. I don’t think that I dared believe that the novel, when it came, would be as good as *Anthills of the Savannah* obviously is, as complex as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* in its registers of English and more intricate than either in its narrative form.

Years ago I wrote an article for *The Literary Half-Yearly* suggesting that Achebe’s four novels before this one should be read as a quartet chronicling the creation and decline of modern Nigeria. To this quartet the bleak Civil War novella *Girls at War* was a kind of coda. *Anthills of the Savannah* continues the chronicle, for like *A Man of the People* it is set at the time of its publication in a fictionalised though attributable West African state. The reviews so far have concentrated on its themes of corruption and waste, out of which, at the end, there is a guarded hope that beautiful ones might yet be born. It is certainly true that Achebe continues the theme of his polemical essay *The Trouble with Nigeria,* with its morally desolate view of modern African leadership. *Anthills of the Savannah* is the story of three men who were at school together and who end up as President, Commissioner for Information and newspaper editor in a country on the verge of civil disorder. The tensions in their relationship bring tragedy to them all as the nation veers towards total despotism.

By emphasising the political themes of this careful and mature novel, however, there is a real risk that equally important themes will be lost. Achebe has, for example, always been deeply interested in the nature of story-telling. How fiction is made, what is the true version of a story, how to hang on to memories after the source of them is dead, whether the language used to describe an experience affects our perception of its reality and the almost Pirandellian matter of how best to adjudicate between versions of the same events — these issues are at the heart both of the oral tradition and of post-modernist fiction. Achebe does not always confront them with absolute clarity, but he certainly entices us into the labyrinths of interpreting history and experience.

But *Anthills* is neither politically dogmatic nor philosophically abstruse. It is sometimes quite funny. It gives a more central place to women than in any earlier novel, with the slightly too neatly counterbalanced heroines representing the extremes of education in modern Nigeria. Above all, the novel is going to reward the scrutiny of those who have long regarded Achebe as one of the true innovators in the use of modern English. I have no doubt that this will be one of the enduring works of modern literature. To speak from a purely British point of view for a moment, it is a shame that the judges of the 1987 Booker Prize, who had the wisdom to shortlist it, should in the end have passed over a novel of international value.

ALASTAIR NIVEN

The dimension of the distant past is beyond the experience of most Australian biographers. Yasmine Gooneratne brings the deep perspective of historical time to her reconstruction of the lives of her own family and forbears in a narrative extending beyond the centuries of Sri Lanka's colonial past to the days of the Sinhalese kings.

*Relative Merits* is a personal story built upon family lore retold with lingering affection. The memories of childhood are lovingly recalled with an intimacy that makes the exotic world of Ceylon before independence less strange. With the distant fondness of an expatriate for home, she remembers the games she played, the holiday homes where she stayed, the smell of favourite food; and the sweetness of her memories makes that alien world seem like our own.

If it were no more than the genealogy of an extraordinary family, *Relative Merits* would be a remarkable book. It weaves its way through the tangled family tree of the Diases, the Obeyesekeres, the de Liveras, the Pierises and the D’Alwises without bewilderment, avoiding the inevitable confusion of attempting excessively precise definition of relationships. The origins of the Bandaranaike family are traced back to a Brahmin High Priest in the Sinhalese court; through the years of Dutch and Portuguese rule to the one hundred and fifty years when the British were the admired and respected over-lords, and eventually to the coming of independence. For those who demand to know, an extensive genealogical table traces eight generations of the clan, the most notable of whom are presented in a gallery of family portraits observed with pride, affection and, sometimes, gentle irony; but in drawing on the oral history of her ancestors, Yasmine Gooneratne also gives us a unique view of colonial experience.

It is not the familiar story of imperial glory told by the British historians of more heroic times, nor the brave memoirs of life among the natives recounted by those who also served in the far flung realms of the Empire. *Relative Merits* is an unselfconscious chronicle of a class to which colonization brought power, honour and wealth; the more persuasive because it remains innocent of any attempt to be socially significant. Loyal subjects of the British Crown, those generations of Sinhalese gentlemen and their gracious ladies are the warrant of imperialism.

To them the English language became more familiar than their mother tongue; an English accent was essential; Oxford or Cambridge, every young man's goal; the Grand Tour, Royal Ascot and Presentation at Court, the height of each young lady's ambition. British customs, and the dress and manners of London were adopted enthusiastically by succeeding generations. Decent standards of genteel behaviour were firmly established in the moral tales told by revered uncles, and the admonishments of maiden aunts as forbidding as any from Victorian England.

We see the process of acculturation taking place just as it happened. It is observed with meticulous accuracy and recorded without shame or praise. That is the way things were. Yet it is the very substance of cultural history — the process by which invasion, colonization and imperial dominion everywhere have left their mark upon subject peoples long after the armies have retreated and the empires dwindled to insignificance — as the Roman Empire did; or the Mongol invasions; or the Norman occupation of England, or the Moorish Mediterranean conquests. Yasmine Gooneratne has given us a rare eyewitness account of the historical process taking place, as if social evolution were captured in her glass.
The work begun by her sister in 1961 was abandoned because no one would believe the eccentricities of her wide-spread clan. In this account they are made endearingly human, with all of the frailties of their humanity. Yasmine Gooneratne’s long labour of love has borne fruit in the year when the Government of Sri Lanka has chosen to restore the civil rights of the best-known member of her family, Mrs Sirimano Bandaranaike, the world’s first woman Prime Minister. But there is little in the history of her husband’s family that explains how one from such a background could have evoked the spirit of revolutionary nationalism with such passion that it continues today to divide the country.

There is irony in the fact that it was the same passions for which her uncle, the assassinated Prime Minister, Solomon Bandaranaike, is blamed, that drove Yasmine Gooneratne to escape to the relative freedom of her adopted homeland, Australia.

RIC THROSELL


In his preface the writer explains that he is concerned with ‘the use that is made of fiction as an instrument of propaganda’ (p. ix). Having finished the book the reader might feel inclined to retaliate: ‘What about criticism as an instrument of propaganda?’ The central weakness of *Land, Freedom and Fiction* is that it tries to bully the reader into accepting its Marxist view of the Mau Mau. Its strength is the obverse side of this; it is brilliant in its exposure of ‘liberal’ claptrap and is never pusillanimous, unlike that ‘mainstream metropolitan criticism’ which has a political position but pretends not to have, with such watchwords as ‘balance’ and ‘universality’.

Dr Maughan-Brown uses Althusser’s phrase, that fiction is a ‘rendering visible’ (p. 12) of ideology, and suggests that ‘it is the act of criticism which brings ideology to the surface by probing the work’s «unconscious» to reveal the social determinations which the work has sought to efface by giving its surface structure a veneer of naturalness and inevitability’ (p. 13). This together with his use of the word ‘unmasking’, conveys the rather melodramatic sense of the critic as counsel for the prosecution that pervades the book, and may incline the reader to look below the ‘veneer of naturalness and inevitability’ of Maughan-Brown’s accounts of Kenyan history, to do some unmasking on his own account. The chapters on the Mau Mau movement and on colonial settler ideology analyse incisively the myths and stereotypes underlying many white reactions to the movement; a former governor reveals a complex of prejudices when he writes: ‘Most of the strikes were fomented by the usual type of sorry rogue masquerading as Trade Union organisers’ (p. 76). Maughan-Brown undercuts his own persuasive argument with occasional knee-jerk reactions of a similar kind, so that the fact that the colonial government did not simply dispose of Kenyatta is not presented as a matter of principle but as reluctant conformity with the ‘Rule of Law’ in the metropolis.

The chapters on colonial and metropolitan fiction about Mau Mau are subtle, and alarming in what they reveal about the implied reader as they pander to crude stereotypical notions of black men as virile, mindless and barbaric and whites as restrained, humane and civilised. A characteristically iconoclastic reading of most post-colonial
Kenyan fiction follows, with Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds* seen as a sycophantic praise-song for Kenyatta. A *Grain of Wheat* becomes a 'crisis text' in that Maughan-Brown considers Ngugi to be trapped by a liberal humanist aesthetic so that he cannot make the novel an adequate vehicle for his ideology. The discussion arises out of a perceptive reading of the text and, unlike much metropolitan criticism, it has the intellectual complexity that the novel demands. One need not agree with the argument to find it stimulating.

*Land, Freedom and Fiction* is vigorous, irritating, and essential reading for anyone interested in African fiction and its criticism, which a recent essay described as typified by 'lucid dullness' (Robert Green, 'The Banality of Cannibalism', The *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. xix, No. 1, 1984, p. 53). The essay protests against the lack of adventurousness in the criticism and specifically against its obliviousness to fundamental questions about the literary text's relations with society. Dr Maughan-Brown's book might have been written in response to these complaints: it is not always lucid but it is never dull.

ANGELA SMITH

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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