Abstract
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Kunapipi is a bi-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 editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with notes gathered at the end, and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Microsoft Word) and should be accompanied by a hard copy. Please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.

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

Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford (the founding editor of Kunapipi) were friends, professional colleagues and 'unbecoming daughters of empire' who edited a book together that featured the critical and creative work of other unbecoming daughters of empire. What prompted them to collaborate on the production of such a book was, in their own words, 'a desire to investigate further the common ground which we shared and, more importantly, to uncover the differences' (n.p.).

It is fitting then that Kunapipi should be given the opportunity to honour Shirley's contribution to the study, promotion and appreciation of writing that grew out of the disparate yet similar worlds of that empire. It is also particularly apt that the editors of this special issue should have chosen to feature the work of Guyanese artist, Aubrey Williams, on the cover. The painting from which the detail is taken, Warrau Star Wheel I, is owned by Shirley and provides another connective link to Anna, who published a beautiful book on Aubrey's work in the year of his death.

Aubrey Williams made a significant contribution to 'Black British Art' in the latter half of the twentieth century, and was honoured with a retrospective of his work at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 1998. He was a founding member of the Caribbean Artists Movement and spoke at the first conference of the association, held at the University of Kent in 1967. His words are pertinent to the creative-critical interchange of this issue:

I would be far happier if I could see a greater interchange between all the arts in the Caribbean. Caribbean art seems to me up to now terribly isolated. Everybody is in his niche, using up endless energy working alone without the help of his colleagues. We should have more interchange, we should have dialogue between the novelist and the painter, the musician and the dancer, the potter, the weaver; even the artisans should be included in this. And the dialogue with the people would then be automatic.

(Guayana Dreaming 19–20)

A festschrift is the culmination of disparate and sometimes isolated energies brought together in the spirit of commemoration and celebration of a special individual with whom they share relationship. Thank you to the editors, Catherine Batt, Elleke Boehmer and John McLeod, for bringing together such a wonderful diversity of contributions. Due to the imminence of Shirley's retirement from her position as Professor of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Leeds, this issue of Kunapipi has taken precedence over the General Issue which will now be published in September, to be followed by a special issue on the Caribbean at the year's end.

Anne Collett

1 Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford (eds) 1993, Unbecoming Daughters of Empire, Dangaroo Press, Sydney.
This special issue of Kunapipi is a tribute to the work and career of Professor Shirley Chew, who retires in June 2003 as Professor of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures in the School of English, University of Leeds, UK. She has occupied the Chair at Leeds since 1993, but her association with the School of English dates from 1974. Along with other scholars at Leeds, such as Arthur Ravenscroft, William Walsh, Lynette Hunter and David Richards — and in association with international figures such as the late Anna Rutherford — Shirley has dedicated her academic career to the teaching, researching and promoting of literatures in English from Commonwealth countries.

This rich diversity of essays, memoirs, poems, and impressionistic fragments has been specially commissioned from Shirley’s colleagues, former students, co-editors and collaborators, and many friends, to mark her retirement and celebrate her unique achievement in the field of Commonwealth and post-colonial literatures. Shirley’s remarkable, often fierce, and demanding, yet always generous attention to both the politics and the aesthetics of the literatures in English, has touched the lives and work of many over the years. These writings bear witness to those valued interventions and, we hope, take them into interesting, or unprecedented creative and reflective directions.

Born in 1938, Shirley Chew was educated at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Singapore. A graduate of the National University of Singapore and Oxford University, she arrived in Leeds in 1974. She expected to stay only for one academic year; instead, Leeds was to become her home. The late D.J. Enright wittily recalls these early years in his contribution, ‘Curriculum, Curricula’. As a teacher of generations of undergraduates and the supervisor of numerous doctoral theses in the area of Commonwealth and post-colonial literatures at Leeds, Shirley has guided and inspired a wealth of students from around the world, many of whom have proceeded to work centrally in the area. She has also acted as editor of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature (1992–1996) and Kunapipi (1997–1999), arguably the two most important academic journals in the field. Numerous contributors to each have benefited from her editorial excellence and wisdom over the years. In addition, she has edited several important books which include Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire (1993, with Anna Rutherford), Into the Nineties: Post-Colonial Women’s Writing (1994, with Anna Rutherford and Lars Jensen), Borderblur: Poetry and Poetics in Contemporary Canadian Literature (1996, with Lynette Hunter) and Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics (1999, with Alistair Stead) which
Shirley Chew
(Photo: Courtesy of Catherine Batt, June 1996)
includes her celebrated essay on V.S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987). Her most recent success, which Nima Poovaya-Smith vividly describes in a memoir of their long-standing collaboration and friendship, has been to launch an important new journal, *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* (2001), a project she conceived and of which she is General Editor. In addition to these achievements, Shirley has maintained her research interests in Victorian and Twentieth-Century English literature — interests which have fed back into her post-colonial preoccupations. A new edition of Arthur Hugh Clough’s *Selected Poems* (1987), which she edited for Carcanet, is about to appear.

Importantly, through her editorial work for journals like *Moving Worlds* and *Kunapipi* and her support of bodies such as Yorkshire Arts, Shirley has energetically championed, encouraged and published the work of many creative figures — poets, novelists, dramatists and artists. Indeed, her selfless, often tireless promotion of the very best creative endeavours by artists from a variety of countries with a history of colonialism speaks volumes about the nature of her commitment to the field of Commonwealth and post-colonial studies, and many important creative artists — not only those collected in this issue — are quick to acknowledge the debt they owe to Shirley.

While this festschrift features a broad heterogeneity of topics, styles, and critical approaches, there are probably three key link-elements which match or map onto Shirley Chew’s achievements. The first element relates to the collection’s sheer diversity, which speaks eloquently of the generosity of Shirley’s critical perceptions, and her wide-ranging interests. For her there are no limits to where the post-colonial imagination may reach, or which territories, cultures and networks it may seek to embrace, which boundaries it may cross or ‘blur’. The second element concerns the interesting recursive loop characterising several of the contributions whereby the personal — memories of birth and friendship, moments of reading pleasure or of self-division — becomes a lens through which to focalise theoretical and critical concepts relating to representative post-colonial experiences; or in which those concepts are used to illuminate aspects of debates around identity and self-definition. The third element constitutes the crucial cross-over between creative and critical practice, which many of the essays here enact or think through.

Inspired by Shirley’s lifelong engagement with both creative and critical accomplishments, a number of the contributions take as their theme the interrelationships between creative and critical acts — in fact, this may be regarded as the overarching theme of the collection. Rather than conceiving of the critical act as dependent upon or subsequent to a creative work of the imagination — or, contrariwise, the creative text as an antecedent to critical thought — this collection engages with the many ways in which the dynamics of creativity and criticism function multifariously within *both* critical and creative texts. It explores such questions as: in what ways might a poem or memoir
establish a critical consciousness about its own production or the creative works of others? Can the writing of a creative piece of work be considered to engender a critical reading of an existing text, historical situation, or tradition? In what ways do creative texts constitute their own kinds of critical consciousness which contribute, but are not irreducible, to the institutions and practices of 'cultural criticism'? To what extent is scholarly translation creative? In what ways might creative writing act as a form of critical reading? How might a response to a painting or a photograph inspire the critical consciousness of a creative artist? Is it possible to distinguish absolutely between creativity and critique?

These issues are, at one level, theoretical; but the contributors explore such dynamics in practice. Poetry becomes a space for critical consideration of both reading and writing. Romesh Gunesekera’s poem ‘Second Reading’ celebrates the ‘illuminated page’; Steven Matthews’s ‘Amours De Non-Voyage’ pays tribute to Shirley by wittily engaging with Arthur Hugh Clough’s ‘Amours De Voyage’ (1858); while in ‘She Travelled’, Elizabeth Cook hauntingly traces childhood recollections in a revisiting of places past. The conventional critical essay connects with the memoir as means of exposing the fertile conjunction of creative and critical impulses, as in Elleke Boehmer’s searching critique of the ‘chromatics of identity’ in apartheid South Africa. Recalling how Shirley once encouraged her to write of her childhood, Meenakshi Mukherjee too offers a recollection of her time as a lecturer which, although in a very different cultural context to that of Leeds, resonates intriguingly with Shirley’s experience. John McLeod brings together the personal, the creative and the critical from another perspective in his reflections on the literature of post-colonial London.

South Asia has been a key area of Shirley’s academic and intellectual interests. Appropriately, several critical essays engage with the history and culture of the region. Ranjana Sidhanta Ash explores the cultural politics of the translation of women’s writings in Indian vernaculars into English. Alex Tickell’s essay excavates how S.M. Mitra and S.K. Ghosh’s ‘informative romances’ negotiate a transnational yet patriotic collaboration with the British Raj. In a characteristically photographic piece, Mick Gidley investigates the interplay of mirrors, memories and camera lenses in Mukul Kesavan’s fiction. Githa Hariharan soberly investigates V.S. Naipaul’s political responsibilities along the trajectories of the Indian and Caribbean diasporas. A Caribbean theme is central to the essay by David Fairer, which re-reads James Grainger’s The Sugar-Cane in the light of twenty-first century views of this eighteenth-century poem. David Richards dwells upon Derek Walcott’s painterly responses to the art of Watteau as a way of engaging with the Caribbean poet’s historical sensibilities.

The rapport between creative and critical purposes lies at the heart of Stuart Murray and Lynette Hunter’s post-colonial readings of Tim Winton and Frank Davey respectively. Befitting Shirley’s enthusiasm for transcultural writings and exchanges, there are contributions which also engage with British and European
literatures. John Barnard’s essay looks at Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as a self-reflexive meditation on critical reading in a secular age, while Alistair Stead interprets Henry Green’s 1920s English novels as a relentless quest for a creative-critical idiom. Catherine Batt looks at how a Middle English romance, *Sir Orfeo*, in constituting itself as a critical reading of a classical myth, itself becomes part of a creative vernacular dynamic. Finally, Inga-Stina Ewbank, in ‘Open to Encounters’, discusses translation as an always inadequate and yet powerfully responsive act.

Ultimately therefore, this issue collectively questions the binary of creative contra critical, as well as exposing the ways in which each term is cross-hatched with the other — replacing the cutting edge of the virgule (creative/critical) with the engendering passage of the hyphen (creative-critical). It aims to offer no final theory but rather a range of practices which demonstrate ultimately the myriad ways in which the creative-critical relationship has been, and can be, excitingly re-configured.

The production of this issue of *Kunapipi* has been made possible by several people, to whom the editors are extremely grateful. We wholeheartedly thank Anne Collett, General Editor of *Kunapipi*, for her support, editorial advice, often at short notice, and the space to work in; the School of English, University of Leeds, which has provided financial assistance for this issue; the Department of English and Media Studies at Nottingham Trent University for support; Ges Houghton of the October Gallery, London, and David Richards for their concerted efforts and delicate diplomacy in securing the image for this issue’s cover (it is a reproduction of an Aubrey Williams painting which Shirley in fact owns). Thanks to Eve Williams, estate of Aubrey Williams, and each contributor for his or her generosity, efficiency and effort. Ultimately, of course, the greatest gratitude we express is to Shirley Chew. This festschrift cannot possibly begin to convey this gratitude, which so many people acknowledge; it can only gesture to the range, scope and depth of her influence. We offer this volume to you, Shirley, with gratitude, warmth and much love.
— running, skipping, barefoot on the covered pavement of the shophouse where they lived; her mother not best pleased: unholy infant! No one reports seeing her walk like a tender young willow shoot in a spring breeze exactly. What was the point of pointy feet? You couldn’t even play hopscotch with them. Three-inch lotus petals my foot!

Born in the Year of the Tiger (inauspicious for members of the officially gentler gender). Obscurely named after some ancient agriculturalist, or perhaps an earnest work of fiction described by its author as ‘unromantic as Monday morning’. Also known mandarinly as Zhou Lan. Native (watch your language!) to Zhongguo, centre of the known world and (so some say sometimes) source of all civilisation and culture, although domiciled in Singapura, Lion City, where the only lions are paper ones.

By which time it was possible for Chinese women to study and do well in the examinations without disguising themselves as men and getting executed. This was just as well since (quote unquote) ‘I liked sitting and passing exams’.

At the Holy Infant Jesus the Irish nuns of a French order who taught English were not altogether convinced that it was better to raise geese than girls. Girls might conceivably be maggots in the rice, they were sometimes nuggets in the classroom.

‘I vow to thee, my country,’ they chanted. Which country would that be? Golden daffodils (white man’s yellow culture) were infiltrated via Wordsworth, whereas decent homegrown orchids are not given to tossing their heads in unsightly prance. On the whole the authorities frowned on strange fits of passion. But so what? You can’t keep a good colonial down.

At the U, all those expatriate lecturers (often spelt expatriot) including mendicant professors, outcasts of academe, unwitting relics of the Raj, hatching vain empires in the staff club, neither imperial nor empirical. ‘Land of our birth, we pledge to thee, our declining years as an OAP.’

Then an interlude at Oxford. But all roads lead to Leeds. And William Walsh, the Muse’s judge and friend, who justly knew to blame or to commend, to failings mild, but zealous for desert, who when he saw one knew a cert.
The chair she sits in…. Were it anyone else you’d take the view that she’d bitten off more than she could —. But it’s time for a tiger. Mistress of magical methodologies! (Madness in them?) Worlds are moving! Elide the 1, it does as well. Watch out for the daughters of earth. ‘History must be paid with history,’ observed our Malay poet (we taught him English and how to profit…). The empire writes back. You can’t keep a good colonialist down.
'Open to Encounters': Some Thoughts on Translation as Criticism and Creation

Clearly it belongs far below good literary creation, and below good literary analysis, but I think it demands much of the same sensitivity as both of these. (Frame 70)

In the family of literary activities, translation used to be seen as a stepchild, doomed to be looked down on as being derivative rather than original. From a consciousness of belonging 'below' — in the words of Donald Frame, himself a distinguished translator of Montaigne’s complete works — translators have written of the lack of recognition of the nature and demands of their work, and of the thanklessness of doing hard work for which the best praise is ‘transparent’ — not the ideal colour for the spur of fame.

Happily in recent decades there has been a change, a re-shuffling and revaluation of literary family relationships, brought about by several, at least partly interrelated, phenomena. Translation studies have become an academic discipline with a rich critical and theoretical literature of its own, examining the nature and conditions of the translator’s work in its full socio-political and intellectual as well as linguistic context. At the same time the idea of translation has come to be central in postcolonial thinking about permeable — or impermeable — borders, geographical, cultural and linguistic. In a discourse both critical and creative, translation can figure as a key concept in exploring otherness, exile, even belongingness. To cite just two outstanding examples, Salman Rushdie can describe himself as ‘a translated man’ (Rushdie 1991 15), and Shirley Chew subtly analyses the activity of translation in the negotiations between past and present, and between parts of the map, in V.S. Naipaul’s The Enigma of Arrival (Chew 137–55). I have been privileged to be a colleague of Shirley’s at Leeds and so to follow this discourse as it were from the sidelines while pursuing my own work on other and older literature in English, but also on translating Ibsen and Strindberg plays into English. This paper is an attempt to organise the thoughts resulting from that experience: from practising interlingual translation in a still relatively new climate where it is natural to think of literary translation as an activity in which the critical and the creative co-exist, collaborate and interpenetrate, until they are virtually inseparable.
Translating works from two northern European, uncolonialising and uncolonialised nations whose languages, thanks to Viking and Anglo-Saxon invasions of the British Isles, have quite strong family relations with English — this may seem, both culturally and linguistically, to be a walk-over compared, for example, with the ‘transcreation’ (Mukherjee 85–93) practised in the Indian subcontinent, between its many indigenous languages and between each of these and English. Yet in my case, too, the difference, the gap to be bridged, is real, and many of the issues raised are of general application. Ambitious and radical writers in nineteenth-century Scandinavia could becrippingly conscious of belonging to a marginalised culture. ‘Isn’t it disastrous to be buried alive as we now are with three dead languages and two and a half royal houses’, Strindberg wrote from Paris in 1885 (Robinson I 186); and both he and Ibsen spent much (in Ibsen’s case most) of their creative lives in voluntary exile in France or Italy or Germany. For all his desire to reach an international audience, Ibsen remained staunchly monoglot (Dano-Norwegian), but Strindberg could find a creative stimulus in abandoning Swedish for French: ‘My brain crackles when it has to give birth to the right word in the foreign language, but this exertion produces a full vision of what I have experienced’ (Strindberg VI 389). But despite the crackle he never truly changed languages, unlike Karen Blixen/Isak Dinesen for whom the foreign language of English was an essential part of the creative process. And English is a foreign language to Scandinavians, with expressive possibilities quite different from those of their own (closely related) languages. From a position of Swedish-English bilingualism acquired only in my twenties, I never stop being amazed at how soft and pliable English feels: how the vast polyglot vocabulary urges one to pursue nuances of meaning; how the malleable grammar encourages syntactic adventurousness. In contrast the Scandinavian languages feel hard and unyielding: a smaller and more exclusively Germanic vocabulary, a far more restricting grammar. If I dare generalise, the genius of the Scandinavian languages tends towards the larger-featured, more blatant rendering of extreme states of mind, while English is the more helpful medium for the intricacies and complexities of human relationships.

My point in dwelling on perceived differences is one made more forcefully by the great German Shakespeare translator, A.W. Schlegel, when he referred to translation as a task ‘in which one is continuously tormented by the sense of ineluctable imperfections’ (Atkinson 4): ‘ineluctable’ because no language system metamorphoses immediately into another (as the young Jude the Obscure finds out when at last he gets his coveted Latin and Greek grammars), and because the linguistic process of translating is itself a cultural one. The negotiation with another language involves so much more than finding lexical equivalents for the words of the original text. There may not even be such equivalents. Japanese translators of Shakespeare struggle, they tell us, to find substitutes for ‘to be’ in Hamlet’s ‘To be, or not to be’, and — since their language has no habit of profanity
and no oaths rooted in the religious sense of taboos — for “zounds” in Othello’s imaginings of Iago lying with and on Desdemona. As a result an English person who knows Japanese would find the (translated) line more like Nick Hornby than Shakespeare: ‘Lie with her? Shit, that’s fulsome!’ And then again words are not neutral counters but culturally conditioned and laden with associations, so that since the Second World War German Shakespeare translators find it difficult to translate ‘leader’ in the Histories as ‘Führer’ and ‘All hail, Macbeth!’ as ‘Heil!’ . Eva Hoffmann puts her finger on the point: ‘You can’t transport human meanings whole from one culture to another any more than you can transliterate a text’ (Hoffman 1998 175). Her Lost in Translation (1989) gives a wonderfully poignant insight into what it means to live uprooted and therefore in a language where ‘the signifier has become severed from the signified’ (106).

So, aware of ineluctable imperfections in the very concept of translation, the interlingual translator faces a dilemma: do I aim for semantic accuracy or for what sounds plausible in the language into which I am translating, for ‘good English’? Do I want a translation that aims at faithfulness to the original or at an effective cultural translation? Ibsen makes a strength out of the smallness of his given vocabulary; his characters signify their obsessions by hammering away at one and the same word: do I, as a translator, fear flatness and draw on the English thesaurus of synonyms? Strindberg shuns nuances and makes his people speak the unspeakable; his men and women pull each others’ guts out with words: do I normalise his dialogue? If one believes (as I do) that a cultural translation does not have to mean normalisation, this raises the challenge of retaining in the text an alienness which will not alienate but enlighten the reader or audience. I was never so pleased as when, without of course mentioning my translation, a reviewer of Katie Mitchell’s RSC production of Strindberg’s Easter praised Lucy Whybrow’s Eleonora for convincing him ‘that this is how a girl might turn out if she’d been wrongly dumped in an asylum with only the Bible for company’ (Taylor 1992). I had read Walter Benjamin’s essay, ‘The Task of the Translator’, and taken from this dense and often difficult, not to say self-contradictory, document what I most needed, which was two sentences: ‘The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [Intention] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it an echo of the original’ (Benjamin 76), and ‘it is not the highest praise of a translation … to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language’ (Benjamin 79).

But what if I had been translating Easter into a language and for a culture where young women don’t read bibles and celebrate Easter? This brings up another dilemma, which undercuts any comfortable solution to the first. If the first is made up of questions of how to stay faithful to an original while communicating with a readership or audience in another language, the second involves a questioning of the value of faithfulness as such and of the status of any original — a questioning that has lately been rife in post-structuralist
Shakespeare studies, which here find common ground with postcolonial studies. Both disciplines clearly meet in explorations of Shakespeare as an icon of the high culture associated with British imperial expansion; but what I am concerned with here is a stated desire to delete from our critical language any reference to Shakespeare (i.e. his texts) as an authority and instead to inscribe ‘Shakespeare’ as a number of historically specific versions and performances. In this reading, native speakers of English are said to be at a disadvantage in that ‘[t]he Shakespearean text continues to exert a tyranny’ over them, whereas ‘[t]he very act of translation subverts the authority of Shakespeare’s text’ (Bulman 7). To anyone who has struggled in ‘the very act of translation’ this is likely to seem so far from the truth of one’s experience as to be an anathema. Can practice and theory be reconciled?

Walter Benjamin again comes to the rescue. Other, far more distinguished, readers have, like me, taken from the essay on ‘The Task of the Translator’ what they wanted. Poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida and de Man use it to explode the binary opposition between ‘original’ and ‘translation’ (Venuti 6). If any ‘original’ text is itself a translation, a deferred, or incomplete, process of finding a signifier for the signified, then, according to Derrida (translated), ‘[t]he translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself in enlarging itself’ (Derrida 188). I find this a far more creative notion than the belligerent and needlessly politicised idea of the translation subverting, by definition, the original; it allows for respect both for the ‘original’ as the best the author of it could do (and, hopefully, for most of the authors one translates this is pretty good), and for the translation as a privileged and joyful sharing in the growth of that original.

If this is at worst a naïve and at best an eclectic position, it does take the horns out of the second dilemma, enabling one to remain at heart an essentialist believing in the value of faithfulness to the original even as one (a) recognises that any translation ineluctably involves a greater or lesser element of adaptation and (b) welcomes serious ‘transcreation’ in the sense defined in the 1996 edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary* as ‘creative translation seen as producing a new version of the original work’ (Mukherjee 85).

Though the use of the term seems limited to the Indian context, recent literature from literally every continent is rich in accounts of such transcreations, where works in one language and from one culture acquires new historical/cultural and often political specificity in another. Within my own specific interests, this applies of course particularly to Shakespeare, but Ibsen is also a case in point. *An Enemy of the People* becomes in Satyajiit Ray’s film (1989) a beautiful piece of didacticism with an almost utopian upbeat ending. *Ghosts* in a multiple translation — into Bangla from an English translation of the Norwegian original, and into a Bangladeshi Muslim society from its original Norwegian Protestant setting — was performed in 1996 by the Centre for Asian Theatre, under the
title of *Krishnabibar*, meaning ‘black chamber, or hole’. The title alludes, the director explains, to the thematic centre of the play, since the Norwegian title, *Gengangere* (the dead who reappear), has no meaning in a faith with no concept of reappearance after death, and the English title is misleading, ‘because “ghosts” only has the meaning of devils’ (Nilu 121). Ibsen himself would no doubt have thought this a creative translation, since women, who made up the majority of the audience as the production toured the country, recognised the problems of family life and religious oppression; and since the more liberal press hailed it ‘as an example of how theatre can be used to change society and socio-cultural values’, while a fundamentalist newspaper demanded that it be banned (Nilu 124).

Transcreations such as *Krishnabibar* testify to the power of a great text to be a generative source, not primarily providing a verbal language to be translated but a means of holding a mirror up to a particular cultural situation. Drama, where the translator-adapter often also works with a director, can inevitably offer the most striking examples of creative translation. But this should not obscure the essence of the creative demand made on any translator in any genre, the demand that, again, I can best define by quoting Eva Hoffman:

> I have to find a way to lose my alienation without losing my self. But how does one bend toward another culture without falling over, how does one strike an elastic balance between rigidity and self-effacement? How does one stop reading the exterior signs of a foreign tribe and step into the inwardness, the viscera of their meanings? (Hoffman 209)

Bending without falling over, striking an elastic balance — this, I think, is a translation into body language of what Donald Frame says in the lines quoted at the head of this paper, about much the same demands of ‘sensitivity’ being made of the translator as of both the creator and the critic of literature. Translation is an act of reading as well as writing: of reading the text as closely and contextually as only the ideal critic would and then, when creating a new text, not (as the critic would) writing your own interpretation into it but using your critical intelligence to find the ‘balance between rigidity and self-effacement’. And in a world of easy encounters with ‘foreign tribe[s]’ offered by global travel and mass communication, the real test is whether the translator, as reader and writer, is able to ‘step into the inwardness, the viscera’ of the two ‘tribes’ between whom he or she is the communicator. Frame defines that ability as ‘sensitivity’, which can be a slippery word. To hold on to it, I finally reach for two recent novels, neither of which claims to be about translation, but both of which seem to me to illuminate the ‘sensitivity’ needed by the translator.

In the modern Bombay of Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002) cultures and languages translate, or fail to translate, into each other. Yezad Chenoy shares a nostalgia for Bombay as it once was with his boss, Mr Kapur, who articulates it through Shakespearean quotations. Mr Kapur is bizarrely knifed to death by
extremists while wearing his Santa Claus outfit; and Yezad eventually retreats into Zarathustri fundamentalism, with a deadening effect on family life. These translations go wrong, but at the centre of the novel’s world is the interchange of languages and cultures between the boy Jehangir, Yezad’s son, and his grandfather, once a Parsi Professor of English and now slowly dying of Parkinson’s, bed-bound on the sofa in the family’s overcrowded flat, among the odours and sheer physical problems of bed-pan and ‘soo soo’ bottle. Jehangir is a sensitive translator. At the end of the novel, now aged fifteen, he has discarded his nine-year-old self’s desire to be like Enid Blyton’s ‘topping’ ‘Famous Five’ (Mistry 2002 110) and learned to live in a world ‘much more complicated and painful’ (486), but a world which also accommodates the past of his much-loved Grandpa, ‘the words he taught me, the stories he told me, to describe and understand the world’ (486). He is finding a balance, in Eva Hoffman’s words, ‘between rigidity and self-effacement’.

Julie Summers, the heroine of Nadine Gordimer’s The Pickup (2001), is a product of the new South Africa, while living, as the novel opens, in a half-hearted rejection of its moneyed middle-class lifestyle. Her own world centres on The Table — the miscellaneous circle of friends who meet at the EL-AY café, ‘her elective siblings who have distanced themselves from the ways of the past’ (Gordimer 2002 23). Endlessly talking, they think they are ‘open to encounters’ (10) and have ‘solutions for everything that happens to any one of them’ (88). But when Julie falls in love with an Arab working illicitly as a garage mechanic, and when he is facing an implacable deportation order, she waits in vain ‘for answers that do not come’ — except from ‘[t]heir old hanger-on’, a poet, who scribbles on a bit of paper some lines from a poem by William Plomer: ‘Let us go to another country / Not yours or mine / And start again. […]’ (88). So she goes with her lover to the poor village, in a nameless desert country, which is his home. To start with, it is not her country, nor is it ever his: his whole endeavour is to find a capitalist country that will receive him as an economic migrant. But when he finally obtains entry permits to the USA, she has to tell him ‘I am staying here’. Her country is now the desert and the family of women to whose culture she has almost imperceptibly drawn closer and closer. This bare outline gives no idea of the delicate inwardness with which Nadine Gordimer conveys to us Julie’s growth and development, from being a ‘sibling’ of the Table crowd with its facile ‘reading [of] the exterior signs of a foreign tribe’, to an identification with the desert and its life. My point is, however, that Julie goes through a process of translation; that the essence of this translation is sensitivity, in the author and in the heroine; and that Julie’s translation is a matter of ‘step[ping] into the inwardness, the viscera’ of another ‘tribe’ (Hoffman 209).

Neither Jehangir nor Julie face, at the end of their respective novels, an uncomplicated future. But in no sense are they stepchildren, nor is any translator as long as he or she is ‘open to encounters’.
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As a genre, the eighteenth-century georgic poem seems to embody a compromise between the creative and the critical. Not only is it a conscious imitation of a specific literary text (Virgil’s *Georgics*), but it grounds itself in the critical impulse: it offers judgments, gives advice, discriminates between right and wrong methods, and investigates questions of use and value. It has a duty to be both descriptive and didactic. In combining exact observation with specific recommendation, the georgic is conscious of the critical nature of its text. When John Dyer, in *The Fleece* (1757), offers advice on how to spot liver-rot in sheep, it is important that his facts are correct:

That dire distemper, sometimes may the swain,
Tho’ late, discern; when on the lifted lid,
Or visual orb, the turgid veins are pale,
The swelling liver then her putrid store
Begins to drink: ev’n yet thy skill exert,
Nor suffer weak despair to fold thy arms. (I, 266–71)

At this critical moment, as John Goodridge notes, the poet takes the role of veterinary surgeon, ‘standing aside the animal to lift the eyelid; pointing to the pallor of the blood vessels, explaining how the disease swells the liver and advising the shepherd with the kind of confidence only doctors and vets can muster, not to panic’ (Goodridge 147). *Ev’n yet thy skill exert* — some of the key words in georgic are *skill*, *art*, and *care*, and in this the poet has to set a practical example, taking care in his turn to find a tone and vocabulary that will do justice to the topic and simultaneously entertain and inform the reader. The emphasis is on responsible art rather than creativity. The poetry’s inventiveness must not invalidate the information. When in his *Lives of the Poets* Dr Johnson came to discuss *Cyder* (1708), John Philips’s poem on apple-growing, he handed over to someone who could speak with more authority than himself: ‘It is grounded in truth’, Johnson wrote, ‘the precepts which it contains are exact and just…. This I was told by Miller, the great gardener and botanist, whose expression was, that “there were many books written on the same subject in prose, which do not contain so much truth as that poem”’ (Hill I, 319). With the georgic, it seems, the best reviewer is the one who will dirty its pages.

But how can this kind of critical demand result in anything other than poetic compromise? The georgic poet is bound up with stubborn fact (what has been or
should be done, where, and how) in ways that a creative genius might find irksome. In assuming the additional role of botanist, farmer, geographer, economist, or doctor, the poet becomes inevitably ‘tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things’. This is Sir Philip Sidney in *An Apology for Poetry*, describing the ‘historian’, his anti-poet figure who is ‘captived to the truth of a foolish world’. ‘The poet’, Sidney pointedly adds, ‘delivers a golden’ (Sidney 107, 111, 100).

Trapped between the pragmatic critic and the idealist critic, the georgic poet seems forced to compromise between *praxis* and *poesis*. The situation is made worse by the fact that Virgil triumphed over these twin demands. During the eighteenth century Joseph Addison’s 1697 tribute to the original *Georgics* was forever being quoted: ‘[Virgil] delivers the meanest of his precepts with a kind of grandeur; he breaks the clods and tosses the dung about with an air of gracefulfulness’ (Addison II, 9). It is Addison’s most famous critical pronouncement, yet even here there is a patronising smile. The poet may be stylish, but he is still performing a menial task. It is an unavoidably mock-heroic picture.

One poet who was keenly aware of the problem was James Grainger (?1725–66), author of *The Sugar-Cane* (1764), a four-book georgic on Caribbean sugar production. Grainger was a British army surgeon who travelled to the island of St Kitts in 1759, married, and settled there as a physician. In true Virgilian style the poem includes passages on the depredations and diseases that affect the crop — but with a related account of the illnesses of the slaves who tend and harvest it. In his preface, Grainger admits that as a poet and a doctor he has a divided responsibility, and he even proposes that two separate critical criteria should apply to his work:

In a West-India georgic, the mention of many indigenous remedies, as well as diseases, was unavoidable. The truth is, I have rather courted opportunities of this nature, than avoided them. Medicines of such amazing efficacy, as I have had occasion to make trials of in these islands, deserve to be universally known. And wherever, in the following poem, I recommend any such, I beg leave to be understood as a physician, and not as a poet. (Gilmore 90)

It is a remarkable pronouncement, and seems to mark out a faultline between Grainger’s creative and critical intentions. Given this statement, his poem offers itself as a test-case for asking if there is a fundamental divide running through the georgic, a split loyalty to two sets of readers. Is the georgic poet compromised by trying to play two roles, and failing in both? Grainger’s preface inclines us to expect the answer ‘yes’; but taking his *Sugar-Cane* as the focus, I want to argue that it was under pressure from these constraints that eighteenth-century georgic developed its own characteristic poetic language, and that to appreciate its qualities it is useful to keep the creative/critical distinction in mind. We need to think of them not as a binary, but as forming an intriguing mix of ingredients in a genre that values the principle of mixture itself. Throughout its history the
A Caribbean Georgic poem plays with Addison’s image of graceful dung-tossing, indeed such dirty elegance becomes georgic’s badge of pride in its ability to mingle high and low.

*The Sugar-Cane* has recently returned to prominence through John Gilmore’s edition and study of the poem, and Thomas Krise’s inclusion of it in his *Caribbeana: An Anthology of English Literature of the West Indies, 1657-1777*, a volume that elicited an uneasy review by Derek Walcott (‘AFrowsty Fragrance’). Walcott raises the issue of the problematic relationship between the western European literary tradition and the colonial West Indies, one that is centred on language and history. For Walcott, the material in the anthology, of which *The Sugar-Cane* forms a substantial part, represents an unwanted legacy of documents. A dead history has been retrieved to stand in for a lost spirit. In place of the smells, sounds and rhythms of the cane-fields, captured in Walcott’s hauntingly lyrical prose, there is a lifeless, imported archival language: ‘Not one of these pieces can claim to be art’, he writes, ‘but they are certainly history, and if they are virtually worthless as art, as literature, our instinct to preserve them simply because they exist is the wrong instinct’ (61). This is not the heritage a contemporary West Indian poet like Walcott needs:

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With Misnian arsenic, deleterious bane,
Pound up the ripe cassada’s well-rasp’d root,
And form in pellets; these profusely spread
Round the Cane-groves, where sculk the vermin-breed:
They, greedy, and unweeting of the bait,
Crowd to the inviting cates, and swift devour
Their palatable Death; for soon they seek
The neighbouring spring; and drink, and swell, and die. (II, 83-90)
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Grainger’s advice on rat-control would seem more appropriate in booklet form. Walcott’s review quotes the passage for its curiosity value only to shoulder it aside with the briefest comment about ‘all those bloated carcasses of “the vermin-breeds,” meaning heaps of dead rats’ (60). On a first reading the lines may appear embarrassingly bad, but they are artful ones, and their art is of the kind that knows when not to talk about ‘heaps of dead rats’. Visualisation is not the purpose here, and the things that ‘sculk’ amongst the cane are very much alive. This art knows where vermin breed, and that ‘breed’ has an unsettling activity, unlike the more endearing and familial ‘brood’. The planter is given specific details of materials, tools and processes: the best imported German arsenic (from Meissen) mixes with the staple local food; the root of the ripe cassava is thoroughly scraped and shaved with a rasp before pounding. Poison runs through the passage, and the poet understands how it works deceptively in the tricks and trickles of language: the tautology ‘deleterious bane’ is a suspicious concoction of Greek and Germanic. We register the temptation of the banquet ‘profusely spread’ with ‘inviting cates’ (‘delicacies’), and we sense its quickening allure as the vermin
'sculk', then 'crowd', then 'swift devour'. It is important that the bait is 'palatable', but the word 'food' is properly withheld (this is luxury, not necessity); instead 'palatable Death' makes an exquisite oxymoron. From that moment 'the neighbouring spring' lets nature take its course, and the final three stages are efficiently dispatched: 'and drink, and swell, and die'. It is a poisonous passage, and it reveals its tricks. The end product may be 'heaps of dead rats', but it is the process that interests Grainger. This is the kind of poetry that has work to do, and everything must justify its presence. Each word in those eight lines has a specific function. There is no room for luxury, for poetic delicacies that don't contribute.

The passage is in this sense economic, even thrifty, and there is a critical decorum in the way the poem repeatedly observes its own criteria of good management. But alongside this constraining element there is a more creative impulse at work in Grainger's fascination with the idea of mixture — how different elements or ingredients can be made to work together effectively. This is of obvious interest to an experimentally-minded physician, but it is also a concern of the eighteenth-century georgic, which on the Virgilian model celebrates appropriate mixing and adding. Two of its characteristic images are engrafting and manuring, both of them organic processes that bring new growth out of the old. 'In plants, in beasts, in man's imperial race', Grainger writes, 'An alien mixture meliorates the breed' (I, 458–59). He seems to enjoy the idea that the 'alien' can bring improved strength and vigour. He also relishes his power to remind the 'imperial race' that it is subject to the processes of nature. He continues: 'Hence Canes, that sickened dwarfish on the plain, / Will shoot with giant-vigour on the hill' (I, 460–61). Everything has potential for growth, given the right conditions, just as it is bound to decay if it cannot adapt to its surroundings. 'Britain, remember this important truth', he adds in a pointed parenthesis (I, 464).

In The Sugar-Cane Grainger's mixtures are a continual reminder that nothing exists in a perfect self-sufficiency. The eco-system of a georgic poem is a dynamic one in which adding, adapting, and mixing all play an important role, and imported skills respect local conditions. As a genre it exploits traditional wisdom, but combines it with a degree of practical curiosity. At such moments experience must make room for experiment — 'Trials must decide', Grainger concludes over one knotty point (I, 246). Both the raw materials of nature and the processes of art can benefit from new combinations and fresh directions. The soil in which the sugar-cane flourishes most is a mixed one ('the dark deep mould, / With clay or gravel mix'd' [I, 127–28]), but human skill can also 'tutor' other soils by artful experiment:

Say, shall the experiene'd Muse that art recite?  
How sand will fertilize stiff barren clay?  
How clay unites the light, the porous mould,
Sport of each breeze? And how the torpid nymph
Of the rank pool, so noisome to the smell,
May be solicited, by wily ways,
To draw her humid train, and, prattling, run
Down the reviving slopes? (I, 141–48)

Once again Grainger’s poetry is working under a self-imposed critical pressure (his ‘experienc’d Muse’ functions less as inspiration than as an advisory editor). This is where the interest of the passage lies. It is about struggling with difficult materials and making them workable. To release the stiffness of the clay is as important as getting the sand to cohere, and an appropriate mixture will unlock their potential. This move into fresh activity is enacted in the final sentence with the draining of the stagnant pool. We are given a glimpse of a miniature Ovidian metamorphosis, one that is appropriately coy and playful while remaining within the responsibilities the passage has set for itself. The phrase ‘run down the reviving slopes’ is effectively animated without losing its literal truth. In these eight lines Grainger’s poetic language of earth, air, and water, is consciously operating in terms of constraint and potential. It is acting out its acknowledgment of the persistent georgic theme of organising its resources effectively.

As with all georgics, such organisation is both the subject of the poem, and its responsibility. The genre shuns hierarchical models, and values things for their usefulness, whether it is Christopher Smart in The Hop-Garden (1752) advising on how to look after the hop-poles during the winter (their supporting role is vital), or Virgil himself discussing what tools are appropriate for different tasks — and when to use your fingernails (II, 365–66). The critical emphasis is on practical application. Nothing is too low or grubby for use. It is one of the refreshing aspects of georgic that dung can be called dung, and a spade a spade (Smart, in fact, carefully distinguishes the tasks suited to the spade and the shovel). These poets were not linguistically squeamish, and Addison’s embarrassment in 1697 at low vocabulary proved less a warning than a challenge to the poets (he was also wide of the mark: dung was ‘dung’ for Virgil too — or rather *fimus* was *fimus*). For James Grainger, good husbandry means getting to know the character of the local soils, and what type of manure will improve them: ‘Record the different composts’ (I, 151), he urges the planters. He calls on them to get their hands dirty and build up the fertility of their soil. His own poem sets the pattern, and Grainger is refreshingly clear about the fact that he is not writing Paradise Lost: ‘Of composts shall the Muse descend to sing, / Nor soil her heavenly plumes?’ (I, 218–19) he asks with a wry smile, inviting the reader to recall that in Milton’s epic the Fall introduces the decay into Paradise (IX 893). In the organic world of The Sugar-Cane even sordid decay can be profitably incorporated:

Then, Planter, wouldst thou double thine estate;
Never, ah never, be asham’d to tread
Thy dung-heaps, where the refuse of thy mills,
With all the ashes, all thy coppers yield,
With weeds, mould, dung, and stale, a compost form,
Of force to fertilize the poorest soil. (I, 222–27)

Georgic language of this kind is deliberately unpromising, as if it is resisting any superficial poetic appeal. ‘With weeds, mould, dung, and stale, a compost form.’ If this is onomatopoeia, then its heavy monosyllabic tread emphasises the compactness of the mixture and its unprepossessing jumbled qualities. The poetry seems to be acting out how rejected materials can be turned to use. The emphasis is thus on reclamation rather than creativity; but in georgic the two things are not mutually exclusive. In georgic things are grown, shaped, or constructed, and the creativity comes from understanding how materials can be exploited. At every moment of a georgic poem we are given to know that a mere ‘creative’ impulse is not enough: things do not get made like that. The ‘creation’ of sugar depends on a complex organisation of materials and processes (which includes spreading dung and killing rats). It does not come into being without time, thought, and effort. The world of achieved beauty, of the ripening cane hissing on the mountain-side, and the mingled salty sweetness of the air, is a contingent one, the retail end of tough business, poetry’s shop-window. The georgic has an investment in the production-line, and with this agenda it works to guide, advise, and exemplify. In this way its creative elements are bound into a critical impulse.

A keen generic awareness is part of its critical self-consciousness. Georgic poetry deliberately seeks out the odd and the awkward, because one of its themes is the recalcitrance of the material world. Nature provides the raw materials, and its energies are there to be harnessed; but it is just as capable of retarding human endeavour as of forwarding it. Individual labour and skill must never flag in a world where ‘everything by nature’s law / Tends to the worse, slips ever backward, backward’ (Virgil, Georgics, I, 199–200). The physical dynamics of the georgic work against a universal tendency to dispersal, decay, and loss. The original founding text of georgic, Hesiod’s Works and Days (8th c BC), is premised on the bleakness of an age of iron, in which everything has to be worked for: ‘Countless troubles roam among men: full of ills is the earth, and full the sea. Sicknesses visit men by day, and others by night, uninvited, bringing ill to mortals’ (Works and Days ll. 102–104).

It is in this context of georgic’s fallen world that Grainger gives a full account in Book IV of the workforce of slaves. For a twenty-first-century reader it is the most uncomfortable aspect of the poem; but it is so because Grainger is interested in them, and values them. Had he ignored them, generalised about them, or sentimentalised them, the reader could be less uneasy. In The Sugar-Cane they do not function as picturesque atmosphere, because, as we have seen, the poem has little time for atmosphere. In the context of this essay on the critical constraints with which the georgic creatively works, the slaves play a significant and thought-
provoking role. The poem, as much as the estate, has an investment in them. It
would be simplistic to single out those passages where Grainger expresses his
liberal sentiments (his plea for abolition, his insistence on the slaves’ full
humanity, and so forth), though these need to be mentioned. What is most striking
about his text, however, is the degree to which the slaves are subject to the same
critical eye that registers everything else in its sights. In various ways they function
in the poem as a crop, and the effect of this is not to dehumanise them, but to
acknowledge their needs and their specific propensities. Grainger applies as
much critical rigour to the ‘blacks’ as he does to the other important materials of
his poem. As a vital part of its economy, they are given detailed attention and are
a topic for advice and specific recommendations. The African slaves are
differentiated by their various tribal sources; they are assessed for their particular
qualities and aptitudes; thought is given as to how they should be worked, and
how they should be cared for. Like the cane, they need appropriate nourishment
and conditions in which they can remain healthy. As a doctor, Grainger is
especially concerned to advise on the slaves’ illnesses:

Say, shall the muse the various ills recount,
Which Negroe-nations feel? Shall she describe
The worm that subtly winds into their flesh,
All as they bathe them in their native streams?
There, with fell increment, it soon attains
A direful length of harm. Yet, if due skill,
And proper circumspection are employed,
It may be won its volumes to wind round
A leaden cylinder: But, O, beware,
No rashness practise; else ’twill surely snap. (IV, 244–53)

Here is another careful job for Grainger’s ‘experienc’d Muse’. As we have seen
elsewhere, Grainger appreciates working to an agenda, and here the keynotes
are set by subtlety, ‘skill’, and ‘circumspection’. The Guinea-worm, as Gilmore’s
helpful note (296–97) explains, grows up to three feet in length and needs patient
handling: ‘winding a very little of it at a time around a thin stick or similar
object, remains the only treatment; complete removal of the worm can take weeks
or months’. Grainger’s worm is an evil as insinuating as Milton’s serpent, and
the vocabulary (‘fell’, ‘direful’) acknowledges this. The poet resists the word
‘grow’ as being too easy and natural, and chooses instead to make the idea an
impersonal and invasive one: ‘fell increment’ and ‘attains a direful length’ allow
the inhuman enemy to establish itself. Once its subtle winding-in is done, Grainger
can skilfully negotiate his benign winding-out. After that, his last warning ‘snap’
is all the more effective. In this kind of poetry there is no easy appeal to ‘Nature’,
whether as celebrating a harmonious universal system or reaching for pleasing
pastoral images. The Sugar-Cane is definitely not a ‘pastoral of the sugar estate’
(Walcott 57) with its implication of sepia-toned innocence, but a working georgic
that is committed to that genre’s practical concerns. As a georgic poet rather than a pastoralist, Grainger works his own language hard and deliberately (ease would be out of place here), and he binds its creative potential into a critical activity.

Grainger’s *Sugar-Cane* deserves to have an honourable place as an early achievement of Caribbean literature, and it does so because it is a responsible poem with a genuine artistic conscience. It is not visionary or lyrical, nor is it concerned to evoke the spirit of its place and time. Instead, like Sidney’s historian, it ties itself to embodied experience, to ‘the particular truth of things’. It is this grim, recalcitrant, archival history that Derek Walcott would wish to excise from the record, and Grainger’s ‘negligible’ document with it. For Walcott, ‘History has no reality until it turns to fiction’ (60); but alongside the modern poet’s ‘clear dream of the present’ there ought to lurk somewhere Dr Grainger’s difficult georgic history. *The Sugar-Cane* is indeed ‘without the oceanic rustle, smell, and freshness of real fields’ (60), but Grainger would not have scorned ‘a frowsty fragrance’, a phrase that catches exactly the creative-critical mixture of the georgic. In fact, he would probably have used it himself, adding a footnote reference to John Philips’s observation that: ‘the Pæstan Rose unfolds / Her Bud, more lovely, near the fetid Leek’ (*Cyder*, 1, 254–55).

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Elizabeth Cook

SHE TRAVELLED

Seated in the Uzuchukwu coach, I’m back in Nigeria after thirty-seven years. Each way I look is green — forests saturated by the rain which drenches all each day, then ceases like an engine to be replaced by ... silence? never silence, but by a kind of waiting where the kiss of red-palmed foot on red-clayed ground brings hope, a promise of excitement — to be answered by more rain.

I’m heading east, to where, a few months old, I wobbled my first steps, the lines on my plump pink feet grained the same orange as my friends’. My first love — the handsome Daniel (a man my parents called a boy) returning from the market with a blue and silver paper windmill, spinning from the heart of his bicycle, an ever-brightening bouquet. The joyful certainty that this — my first love-gift — was meant for me.

My hair’s been braided; skull staked out in lines so tight I can’t forget what’s inside and what’s out. These dark corn rows straddled by wide white furrows. My head feels small and naked as a baby bird’s, me as ignorant, peering this way and that, heart filling with the view.

My father’s bones hum in my cheeks and scraped skull. I bring them back to where
he grew into himself. Fledgling
from Cambridge, he chose to learn
his manhood in this red and green.
Meant to shape a country,
he made a stab at Efik and Ibo,
tortured himself over questions of justice,
and relied on his interpreter
while loneliness shaped him.
Achebe, Soyinka, Nwapa
give me the shock of another Nigeria
clamorous and bitter as the lobes of kola
our driver chews to stay alert.

I’m learning; getting an ear
for a different English. I do not walk,
‘I trek it’. The old judge
I’d hoped to visit is away. I’m told ‘he travelled’ —
neat, contained, intransitive, though everyone
seems always on the move.

The rain resumes, the bus drives on.
The Ibo salesman
whose patter’s full of jokes I miss
sells Tiger Balm in little pots.
I fall asleep and wake up at my stop.
The bus halts just for me and I get off.
Women Writing Fiction in India’s Languages over Fifty Years of Independence

English was decreed to be the official language of India from 1835, when the country was under British rule from 1835, — the same year Lord Macaulay’s Resolution declared official funds would be ‘henceforth employed in imparting to the Native population knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of the English language’ (Spear 126–27). While English helped in the advancement of Indian higher education and the intellectual modernisation of a new middle and upper class — the Indian intelligentsia — it marginalised the regional languages of India which, in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, were beginning to break away from the dominance of classical learning imparted through Sanskrit and, later, Arabic and Persian (Zograph; Shackle). These regional languages, which are among the most important elements in the construction of Indian identity in a multilingual and multiracial land where people see themselves as Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, and so on, had to wait until India gained independence in 1947 to receive due attention through official, social, educational and cultural use.

The Eighth Schedule of The Constitution of India (1949) lists the fourteen constitutional languages that were then recognised: Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. Since 1949, the year in which the Constitution was adopted, more languages have been recognised, including Dogri, Maithili, Manipuri, Rajasthani, and Konkani. They are connected with the political aspirations of those living in the specified regions and have become constitutionally recognised with the formation of new states of the Indian Union; for example, Goa, the region in Western India, has Konkani as its official language. Nepali is another new entrant in the list of languages to be recognised by the Sahitya Akademi, India’s Academy of Letters, which was founded in Delhi in 1954. Since then, many of the states have instituted their own Sahitya Akademis for the promotion of their regional languages and literatures. The main thrust for literary translation began with these agencies, and commercial publishing houses are now including translated fiction and poetry in their lists.

Article 343(1) of the Constitution declares Hindi, in the Devanagari script, to be the official language of the Indian Union. The issue of government documents in Hindi demonstrates the pre-eminence of that language, although researchers still use the English version of the documents. Indeed, English still
occupies an ambiguous position in present-day in India, which adds to the
complexity of that country’s linguistic situation. According to the Constitution,
it was supposed that English would continue for official purposes for fifteen
years, from 1950, and then possibly for another similar period. However, it has
lasted much longer, and shows no sign of decline. Whether in education or
employment, or the professions and social intercourse, English retains not merely
a foothold but a continuing important position. Although not included in the
Eighth Schedule’s original list of the fourteen languages recognised for
governmental use in the various states of the Indian Union, English, because of
its international economic importance, continues to be used as the medium of
instruction in higher education — especially in colleges and institutes of
technology — as well as for the new forms of electronic communication in which
India plays a significant role.

In contrast to the dominance of English, the importance of the regional
languages has been enhanced through India’s political democracy. Campaigns,
the political rhetoric of electioneering, and the actual business of legislatures at
the centre and in state capitals, are increasingly conducted in the languages of
the regions. The prominence (both within India and abroad) accorded to Indians
who write in English, however, does not match the actual practice of contemporary
writing in India. The great majority of both men and women writers, use their
own language which could be that of the region in which they were born and
raised, or some other, as a consequence of political upheavals such as Partition
and the division of the country.

Also, there have been shifts from one language to another, such as from
Punjabi to Hindi or from Urdu to Hindi. The bilingualism of so many Indians
makes for a relatively easy transference from one regional language to another
to which it is related linguistically and culturally. The doyenne of Punjabi women
writers, Amrita Pritam, has occasionally shifted from her native Punjabi to Hindi.
However, the shift to English is relatively new, as exemplified by the prominent
media journalist, Mrinal Pande, who made her name as a writer of Hindi short
stories, but now writes in English.

That Pande should turn to English after a dedicated professional career in
Hindi journalism and fiction, is somewhat surprising, particularly as she described
English’s privileged role in India as a ‘dictatorship’. However, her apparent
‘defection’ to English can be understood in light of an essay published in 1991
in which she speaks of the necessity to ‘deconstruct’ the English power base:

while this dogmatic set-up we had inherited from the British Sahibs, cannot be
subverted overnight, it can certainly be deconstructed little by little, if we can only
make power aware of its guilt, and less and less able to believe in itself or its
legitimacy. (1991 x–xi)

Her semi-autobiographical stories, Daughter’s Daughter (1993), might be
understood to be part of this ‘deconstruction’; published in London and written
in English, unlike her stories in Hindi, they were intended to reach an
international English-speaking/reading audience. It appears that English, for
all its cultural baggage, is pragmatically the most appropriate medium by which
Pande might reach the widest audience for her stories of survival by women in a
society in which ‘girls are being destroyed in wombs by new techniques [and]
being tortured and burnt for dowry by older ones’ (1993 9–10).

The alternative would have been to have her stories translated, and this I
believe is the better alternative if the true worth of contemporary Indian writing
is to be appreciated by those concerned with the ‘post-colonial’ literatures and
cultures of post 1947 India. For every writer that is published in English, there
are hundreds more writing in their own languages and being published, initially,
in quality literary journals such as the Bengali, Desh, the Hindi, Hana and the
Malayalam, Matribhoomi. Most of the works are by men but there are increasing
numbers of contributions from women writers. The latter compose verse as well
as fiction, short stories, novellas and even novels (often in serial form).

The reluctance of publishers to consider material in translation is a barrier to
the non-Indian reader’s appreciation of the quality of what is being written today
by women. Subjects such as Comparative Literature, Women’s Studies, and Rural
Development, cannot be comprehensively treated without using works translated
from one of the Indian regional languages into English. The publishing houses
are gradually making the work of the better-known Indian-language authors
available in English translation, though the resulting texts are not always of a
high quality. Unfortunately, at present, more care appears to be taken over
translating European literature into English than is taken over translations from
Indian-language texts into English. There is a need for critical and knowledgeable
awareness of translations from Indian literatures. The monumental work, begun
by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, Women Writing in India, looks to remain the best
anthology for women’s writing in translation. The second volume (1993), which
covers the twentieth century, introduces the literature of some fourteen languages,
and includes writing in translation often omitted in courses on Commonwealth
Indian literature that concentrate on writing produced in English. For example,
the anthology contains the story Neipayasam (‘Rice Pudding’) by Madhavikutty,
the name under which Kamal Das publishes her work in Malayalam, the language
of the southern state of Kerala (393–97). Students of Commonwealth literature,
familiar with Kamala Das’ poetry in English may find this story by her in her
mother tongue of interest.

It is fortunate that there is a growing awareness among those concerned with
Indian writing that the true measure of ‘Indian’ in literature is its multilingualism.
The number of translations of modern works is growing, but not breaking through
the intellectual barriers of the academy, or the commercial barriers set up by the
book trade. Anthologised material provides the initial step. Lakshmi Holmström,
one of the best Tamil-English translators, brought out a collection of some of the
finest stories by Indian women — many translated from the Indian language,
and some translated for the first time — over a decade ago. *The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women* (1990) remains an excellent starting-point for gaining a knowledge of the diversity, both of women's lives and of literary expression. One of those who features in that anthology is the writer and political journalist C.S Lakshmi, who writes in Tamil under the name Ambai, and Holmström's other translations of her short fiction give readers a good entry-point into women's writing in Indian languages. It is to be hoped that Ambai's recent visit and talks in London will stimulate some British interest in the reprint of Holmström's translations, originally brought out in Chennai (Madras), India (Ambai 1992).

Kali for Women, India's first feminist book publishing house, was established in 1984 by two Indian women, Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon, as their promotional material stated, 'to present the variety of contemporary Indian women's creative writing as well as producing academic titles which reflect and contribute towards the debates and issues being addressed by women in India today...'. They published the first translated collection of short stories by Ismat Chughtai (1990), probably the finest practitioner of the genre in Urdu. If its publication in India may have limited its readership, one hopes that her novel, *The Crooked Line* (1995) [*Terhi Lakire*], translated from the Urdu by Tahira Naqvi and included among the eight novels published by Heinemann as part of the Asian Writers Series, may receive the attention it deserves in any course of study of Indian writing as part of Commonwealth Literature.

Even now, when increasing numbers of India women work outside the home, women's lives still revolve around the family; but there has been one important change, mainly as a consequence of the democratic nature of India's post-colonial government. The leaders of India's nationalist movement (a movement that led to independence in 1947), also created the world's largest parliamentary democracy, despite all manner of obstacles in a society divided by caste, class, religion and language. Women participate fully in the democratic process, as voters, as candidates, and as elected representatives. The literature which reflects such a reality requires a closer relationship with ordinary men and women than one might find in educational institutions, in which the medium of instruction is English, and which are generally intended for the privileged or those few fortunate enough to obtain financial assistance. Those who write in India’s regional languages would appear to get closer to this 'grass-roots' world than those restricted to English (though this is not to ignore the achievement of writers such as Mulk Raj Anand who, in the novel *Untouchable*, transcends class barriers, or R.K. Narayan, who overcomes issues of social exclusivity in his short stories). The political climate of contemporary Indian society and awareness of issues larger than gender inequality make the literature written in the regional languages more important for those seeking to go beyond the narrow confines of the English-speaking class in India though that class comprises several million people. The politicisation of Indian life — at both regional and national levels — has produced
some important works, among the most acclaimed of which are by women and written in languages other than English. One cannot possibly claim to have studied the Indian writing of our times and omit names like Qurratulain Hyder, Mahasweta Devi and Mannu Bhandari. Qurratulain Hyder writes in Urdu and, in her own phrase, ‘transcreates’ her Urdu fiction into English. Her magnum opus, River of Fire, written originally as Aag ka Darya, provides a fictional account of Indian history from Buddhist times to the present, ‘full of the clangour of conflict, the deviousness of colonisers, the apathy of maharajahs, and the irrelevance of religion in defining Indianess’ as the book jacket says (1998).

The work of Mahasweta Devi’s has been disseminated by Gayatri Spivak, who translated two of her stories from the original Bengali in her book In Other Worlds. Spivak discusses Devi’s work in her essay, ‘A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman’s Text from the Third World’, and in her later book, Imaginary Maps (1995), she translates three more of Devi’s stories and includes a conversation with Devi. In the context of the political upheavals that have been going on since the late 1960s — uprisings in rural and urban areas, which are often led by Maoists — Mahasweta’s political novels about tribal people rising against the British, or about today’s struggles, depict a reality rarely represented in Indian novels in English. Probably Devi’s most compelling work is a novel translated as Mother of 1084 by Samik Bandyopadhyay. It deals with one day in the life of a middle-class woman who has to identify her youngest son’s corpse in the police morgue, where it has been thrown after a military attack on the son’s urban guerrilla group. She has known nothing of his work, and is now impelled to meet some of those who had been his friends and associates. Coming home, she finds she must get ready for a party her husband is giving for the new police chief and some of his wealthy acquaintances. The representation of the well-to-do middle-classes as ‘corpses with their putrefied lives’, and the mother’s heart-rending cry — a scream of ‘blood, protest, grief’ (1997 127) — is a dark vision of the future. The emotional writing which concludes Mother of 1084 represents a window on that ‘other’ reality far from the cool, personalised private worlds of the men and women usually found in the novels written in English by Indians who rarely get beyond domestic friction and triangular liaisons.

Mannu Bhandari (who seems now to have retired from the world of writing), having produced conventional stories of domestic discord, went on to write one of the most compelling political novels of village politics set in contemporary North Indian. The Great Feast, translated from the Hindi by Richard A. Williams, must rank as one of the most profound analyses of the way in which democratic politics really is enacted in societies where feudal mores and values are rarely distant. The landlords, the professional politicians and the sycophants who constitute the new post-colonial rural scene in Bhandari’s novels are far removed on one level and yet remarkably similar to the characters depicted in Godaan, the great village epic written in Hindi some fifty years before this novel. Written
by Premchand in 1936, and translated from the Hindi as *The Gift of a Cow* in 1968, *Godaan* has recently been issued in a second edition with an introduction by an Indian woman scholar, Vassudha Dalmia (Premchand 2002). Godaan ranks as a landmark text in Indian fiction for its depiction of rural reality: it delves into the politics of rural communities and, in particular, it investigates the hierarchies of class and caste that divide and order life. Bhandari’s novel could be seen as democratic India’s formulation of an independent peasantry still tied to old hierarchies and social distance but having to play the new game of elections and votes. Like Premchand’s novel, it cuts through the preconceptions of traditional Indian values and, specifically, it uncovers the reality of twenty-first-century power politics. Bhandari’s foreword encapsulates, in brief, that political consciousness which distinguishes those parts of the world where class struggle and liberation movements animate women as much as men to raise fiction beyond the entanglements of sex and love:

> It seems to me that it is very important, comfortable and reassuring to observe the interior drama of one’s life, to consider one’s personal distress and inner turmoil. But when one’s house is on fire, confining oneself to one’s inner world and giving expression to only that, appears irrelevant, ridiculous, and to some extent indecent....
>
> (Bhandari 1997)

This brief survey of the kinds of writing women have produced in Indian languages since Independence suggests something of the range and vitality of these literatures, whether their authors are working in the genre of short story or of epic novel, relating the minutiae of domestic life or attending to the broad sweep of historical events. At the same time, it is clear that bi-lingual women writers make aesthetic, political, cultural and pragmatic choices when they decide to work in one language rather than another. Moreover, the reader of women’s literatures in English (whether those works were produced in English, or translated from another Indian language) is made keenly aware that to study Indian women’s writing, one must also appreciate, and even to some extent reconstruct for oneself, the specific cultural and political conditions that lie, not only behind its production, but also its dissemination.

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MEENAKSHI MUKHERJEE

From the Diary of an English Teacher

More than ten years ago, Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford invited me to contribute to their volume *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* (1993). Writing that piece about my childhood turned out to be more fun than anything else I had done earlier and while reading the other accounts in the book I became keenly aware how each of our lives are part of a larger cultural narrative. For the special issue dedicated to Shirley, I wanted to write something in the same mood — rather than another solemn academic paper. I share a warm bond of friendship with Shirley, and while I find her scholarly work impressive, what endears her to me most is the mischievous glint in her eyes as she recounts with verve some amusing anecdote concerning our profession. I wanted to share with her some of my experiences as a fellow English teacher.

**DELHI, JULY 1971**

After the official sounding man had finished interrogating me about my educational history and research area, another person from the row of experts asked me in a deep baritone: ‘But why did you waste three precious years of your life working on a non-subject like this?’ His rich voice could have impressed me if the note of condescension did not put me on the defensive.

This was my first interview for a teaching job in Delhi. The year before I had completed my Ph.D. from the University of Pune. I did not know at that time that this was disqualification enough in a metropolitan university like Delhi where, in order to be taken seriously, you had to have a degree from a foreign university; but to compound my shame I had done my research not on Renaissance Drama or Romantic Poetry, not even on American Transcendentalism, but on a subject with no academic respectability at all — Indian Novels in English. While I was writing my dissertation with naïve enthusiasm and pioneering zeal in the quiet book-lined cubicle of Jaykar library in Pune — its silence only occasionally broken by my animated discussion with fellow researchers — foolishly, I did not pause to think of its potential value in the job market. When my husband’s work required him to move from Pune to Delhi, I decided to resign my lecturer’s post at Fergusson College to come with him, hopeful that with a doctoral degree and an acceptance letter from a publisher in my pocket, I would be able to find a job in one of the sixty-odd colleges of Delhi University. The dismissive tone of the baritone questioner was the first indication that it was not going to be as easy as I had imagined.

I had to think quickly of a reply. It had been a long day for me — waiting since nine in the morning for my turn to be interviewed. At four o’clock in the
evening my exhaustion must have been partly responsible for my ungracious answer. With the arrogance and innocence of youth I said: 'It might not have been a waste of time. Think of all the Indian scholars writing dissertations on Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Yeats for nearly [a] hundred years now. Who remembers their work? May be I have something to say that has not been said before'. I was new in Delhi and did not know any of the academic bigwigs. Had I known that my deep-voiced interlocutor was a renowned Yeats scholar and one of the reigning icons of Delhi University I would not have been so brash. But it was too late. The die was cast.

That was more than three decades ago. Much water would have flown down the Yamuna by now if its currents had not been silted by the refuse of the capital, but the course of English Studies has meandered ahead since then. When I was seeking a job, the canon debate had barely started in the West, and not at all in the three metropolitan universities in India where the course of studies sanctified by Thomas Babington Macaulay had more or less remained unchanged in the English departments. After several rejections I did get a job in a college in Delhi, where I was asked to teach Spenser and Chaucer to the English Honours students. After two years of probationary good conduct when I was allowed to express my preference, I asked to teach fiction. Much to my elation *Joseph Andrews* and *Oliver Twist* were added to my teaching schedule. By then I was resigned to the fact that the work I had put in for my doctoral dissertation would always remain irrelevant to my teaching career.

In the mid-seventies, with much fanfare a major reshuffle took place in the English Honours course of Delhi University, the most radical change being the addition of several Greek classics to the Eng. Lit. canon. Thereafter along with Fielding and Dickens I taught Homer with much enjoyment and gusto, but I occasionally did wonder why I could not teach sections of the *Mahabharata* in English translation side by side, to place the genre called epic in a global context. Once or twice when I voiced this idea in the occasional faculty meeting which brought together teachers from different colleges, my question would either cause indulgent amusement or be ignored completely. Only once did a senior colleague explain to me patiently that our business is to study *English* literature; and that Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Plato are important only to the extent that they are part of the heritage that has shaped literature in Britain. Vyasa does not come into the picture. In any case, translated texts, I was told, cannot be taught in an English course because the texture of language is of prime importance. This stunned me into silence. The texture of Greek language evidently did not change in English translation.

The new syllabus, however, had brought in one unexpected gift: one lone novel by a writer not-dead, not-white (but male nevertheless), and not English, somehow crept into the twentieth-century segment of the three-year course. Reading V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* with my students soon became the high point of the week for me, allowing us to talk about issues that we had
never discussed in our Chaucer or Spenser classes: indentured labour, migration, race, effects of climate and culture on identity. Trinidad was not a familiar country for my Delhi students, and West Indies was a region they had so far associated only with Test cricket. However, close reading of this moving novel opened out a chapter of history that touched our lives, and revealed aspects of geography that connected remote sugar plantations of the distant land to our own colonial past. This was an exciting experience that blurred the boundary between the sanitised classroom and the messy world outside.

In Delhi University a change of syllabus happens once in a quarter-century and by the time the next upheaval happened around 2000, I was no longer teaching there; but as I see the change today from the outside, it seems that the latest process of revising the course of studies has managed to destabilise some of the earlier certainties. For example, the unspoken assumption that the centre of focus is the British Isles gets a serious jolt as the new curriculum catapults straight into the Postcolonial era, bypassing the so called Commonwealth Literature phase. Texts from the margin are now moving fast towards the centre, and not only does the new syllabus have a substantial Indian component, this component includes texts not only written in English but those translated from Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages. The selection committee that presided over my destiny in 1971 could not have dreamt of such a turn of events.

I have often wondered about the factors that led to this transformation. Is it merely a reflection of the global changes that are sweeping English Departments in different continents, or is it an indigenous move — the final surfacing of the discontent that has been brewing in India for decades among English teachers who felt cut off from their environment? Delhi University is only an example — similar changes have been happening in other universities of India, though not exactly simultaneously. For some reasons the four metropolitan universities of Calcutta, Bombay, Madras (Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai) and Delhi have taken much longer to dismantle the colonial course of studies than many of the smaller universities. A change of syllabus does not automatically ensure a different way of studying literature, but at least it raises hopes.

It so happens the Professor with the baritone voice has begun writing fiction now, towards the end of his career. Since he is an Indian citizen and the language of his novels happens to be English, it is inevitable that what he writes will be categorised as Indian Fiction in English — at least by librarians and syllabus makers. I meet him now and then at conferences and seminars, but refrain from asking how he would react today if a student wanted to write a dissertation on his novels.

**Delhi, July 1986**

After a gap of seven years I returned to Delhi in 1986 to join the other university in the city. JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) is relatively new compared to Delhi University and had at that time a reputation of being more
open to new ideas. The graduate program in English, too, was new — its two-year M.A. course only in its second year when I joined. The senior students who had so far reigned supreme in the centre, watched over the new entrants as well as the new teacher with the same amused curiosity and displayed a pronounced desire to check out their credentials before accepting them into the fold.

The literature classes in those days were held in what was known in JNU parlance as the 'Down Campus', the temporary abode of some of the departments and the university administration while the new campus up the hill was being completed. There were several scattered buildings originally meant for various other purposes which met our *ad hoc* needs. My lecture classes used to be held in a large untidy room at the back of a building whose front portion housed a post office. There were incongruous pillars inside the room, the windows were opaque with dust, and broken furniture was dumped in the corners. The corridor overlooked an extinct swimming pool converted into a repository of discarded plastic bags.

It was a long trudge from my spacious office situated in another building with a different ambience. My airy room not only had a private balcony and an attached bath, it was also furnished with a regular dressing table sporting a full-length mirror. Since no one had told me this was initially a hostel for trainees about to join government service, I just assumed that the faculty’s standards of personal grooming must indeed be very high in this institution to require a dressing table in each office — and was secretly and sadly resigned to the fact that I would never amount to much here. However, the real test came not from the mirror but from the classroom strewn with broken furniture. I confronted a large crowd in my course on Indian Writing in English. This was the first time such a course has been offered. Not only did the savvy young guards of the third semester English M.A. opt for the course, joining the twenty-five new students of the first semester, but for some inexplicable reason the students of the linguistics M.A. also decided to register *en masse*. Perhaps they were drawn by the novelty of the course title. This made for a very uneven and unwieldy class; entering the room every time was like stepping into the notoriously chaotic Inter-State Bus Terminus of Delhi.

After the initial chaos settled down to some semblance of order and teaching began, one question arose repeatedly, though in different forms, from the opinion leaders of the class — the old-timers: ‘What is India?’, ‘Who is an Indian?’ Since my course dealt with various Indian authors who wrote in English, they insisted that I define my basic premise before I proceeded. This was 1986 — a little before the discourse on nation and cultural identity had become intellectually trendy in our country. Obviously they were not doing it to show off their state-of-the-art theoretical engagement, but were merely performing their vigilant duty of ensuring that the new teacher did not get off too lightly — certainly not before she clarified the concept of India. Resisting the reductive demand for a capsule
definition, I tried to involve them in a series of discussions on history and territory, plurality and hegemony, imagined communities and fluid identities, the ability of literary texts to construct and interrogate varied notions of the nation, and so on; but at the end of each session we inevitably came back to square one: ‘how do you define India?’ Finally one day Debashish, a self-appointed leader of the senior class, took the matter in hand. ‘Ma’am, since you are obviously unable to define India, will you allow me a time slot when I can do it for the class?’

Next time Debashish came prepared with a well-considered statement which he read out in class with confidence and aplomb. I wish I had kept a copy of it, or at least remembered more of the details. It contained words like karma, moksha, maya, reincarnation, and several other concepts of Hindu philosophy which were seen as determining elements of what he called ‘The Indian Sensibility’. Before I had time to respond to his views, three hands went up in three corners of the room. Now that I recount the event after so many years, it sounds absurdly like the kind of patriotic fillers often shown on the national television channel to emphasise the symmetrical diversity of the subcontinent. The shy and so far diffident freshers who suddenly and spontaneously wanted to counter Debashish’s version of India happened to be — I still remember distinctly — a Syrian Christian from Kottayam in the south, a Mizo girl from Shillong (in the North East) and a Dalit student from the East Godavari district. Articulated differently and with varying degrees of verbal competence, the essence of what each one of them tried to convey amounted to this: ‘Your definition of India excludes me, and I am as much of an Indian as you are’. Suddenly the religious, ethnic and caste diversity of the class became a rich resource for the teaching of my course. This did more to open out the debate than all my previous attempts at collaborative teaching had achieved, and there was a perceptible shift from the initial rigidity of the demand for a totalising definition to the enabling freedom of the dialogic negotiation of ideas.

I often remember this incident as my symbolic initiation to JNU, where one of the pleasures of teaching for me was the range and diversity of the students and the wealth of dissimilar life-experiences that they brought to bear upon their understanding of literature and culture. Today, at the turn of the new century, when an aggressive brand of ‘Hindutva’ threatens to appropriate the idea of India for short-term political gain, the memory of that day in JNU grows more vivid in my mind than ever, sustaining my hope for the future.
DAVID RICHARDS

‘So Where Is Cythera?’ Walcott’s Painted Islands

When Sonali, the Western-educated senior civil servant of Nayantara Sahgal’s novel of the Indian Emergency, Rich Like Us, first sees a reproduction of Antoine Watteau’s Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère, she regards the aristocrats depicted in the painting, ‘dressed up and romping around pretending to be peasants, living in a little dream world’ (204) as fit only for the guillotine, to which history and the French Revolution will inexorably and justifiably condemn them. For her, Watteau’s image is an icon of the European ancien régime, perfectly expressing its mood of arrogant complacency with ‘powdered hair and rouge’, ‘silly fantasies’, and ‘mythical nonsense’ (204). Sonali’s elderly friend, Rose, the ‘Cockney Memsahib’ (33), sees Watteau’s painting rather differently as a ‘wonderland’ of ‘regal satin splendour’ and as a testament to her belief that ‘myths were the most indestructible of all things. They’re what we’re made of’ (204). At the end, the image works its effect on Sonali also; from scoffing at its ‘operatic make-believe’ she comes to regard the landscape as a ‘love[ly] remembrance’ of Rose with ‘its impossible trees, its charmed foliage, its invitation to fantasy’ (254).

The novel repeatedly returns to Watteau’s image of languid ostentation in order to register the potency of ‘other mythical places’. It appears as an unattributed postcard reproduction, the centrepiece of a room ‘full of light and memory’, where its thinly applied colour and delicate glazes act as a ‘poignant’ representation of ‘the dreaming, yearning heart’ in contrast to the vulgar brutalities of state and capital (254). The painting makes its first entrance into the novel accompanied by Rose’s inevitable question: ‘Where is Cythera?’ Not even recourse to Ram’s dictionary provides a definitive answer: ‘Greek island associated with Aphrodite. Southern-most and eastern-most of the Ionian islands, off southern coast of Peloponnesus … Well, anyway it was an island, a real place … but it was unreal too, an island for believers in love’ (74). Zafar Khan’s drunken answer to Rose’s question is accurate, but hardly more revealing: “Nowhere. Everywhere. Like Pakistan,” said Zafar. “It’s in your dreams, the rosebud. Cythera is where you embarked for when you left your native shores”’ (73). Watteau’s painting occupies an important place in the aesthetics and politics of Sahgal’s novel. It is, variously, a representation of decadent European culture, of longing for romance, of a bond between women of different histories and cultures, and, most remarkably given its refined delicacy, it acts as a powerful
Watteau, l'Embarquement pour Cythère or Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère, canvas, 129cm x 194 cm, INV8525 Louvre.
critique of the post-colonial state. But although the passage from Rococo fête galante\(^1\) to the Indian Emergency is a considerable journey, Sahgal is not the only writer to see the capacity of Watteau's 'masterpiece of French masterpieces' to articulate other, post-colonial concerns.\(^2\) Nor is Sahgal unique in sustaining and amplifying the painting's enigmatic subject matter in these new cultural contexts. Cythera remains 'nowhere, everywhere' to the end of the novel, but Rose is not the only one to ask 'where is Cythera?'. For Derek Walcott also, Watteau's painting and the location of its subject matter has been an abiding question in many of his writings.

Bruce King comments on Walcott's play, \textit{In A Fine Castle}, that '[f]or a play that was never published as such ... \textit{In A Fine Castle} occupies a large place in Walcott's career'\(^3\). An excerpt from the play was published under the title 'The Conscience of a Revolutionary' in \textit{Express}, Port-of-Spain, 24 October 1971, and the play was produced, and earned mixed reviews, in Los Angeles in 1972, and by the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1973. Walcott also wrote a film script and scenario for television, (neither of which were commissioned), and \textit{The Last Carnival} (1982), all of which were derived from versions of \textit{In a Fine Castle}. As King has shown, Walcott has worked intermittently on drafts and versions of the play from the early 1960s, producing yet a further draft in 1992 (283–87). The play debates a central theme of Walcott's work: the significance of art in hybrid Caribbean society. The artwork which is the symbol of European imported culture, and which dominated the set of \textit{In a Fine Castle}, was Watteau's \textit{Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère}.

The role the painting plays can be gauged by the central position it occupies in a key passage from his seminal essay, 'The Muse of History' (1974). Walcott declares that 'history ... is becoming absurd'. In the Caribbean, he explains, a statement such as this should not be taken for existentialism:

Adamic, elemental man cannot be existential. His first impulse is not self-indulgence but awe, and existentialism is simply the myth of the noble savage gone baroque. Such philosophies of freedom are born in cities. Existentialism is as much nostalgia as in Rousseau's sophisticated primitivism, as sick as recurrence in French thought as the isle of Cythera, whether it is the tubercular, fevered imagery of Watteau or the same fever turned delirious in Rimbaud and Baudelaire. The poets of the 'New Aegean', of the Isles of the Blest, the Fortunate Isles, of the remote Bermudas, of Prospero's isle, of Crusoe's Juan Fernandez, of Cythera, of all those rocks named like the beads of a chaplet, they know that the old vision of Paradise wrecks here.

(1998b 41–42)

This is, of course, familiar territory for Walcott and his readers. The New World poet is the 'Adamic', historyless inheritor of a fragmented 'culture of references, not of certainties' (1997 239). The Old World, of which Watteau's image is a symptomatic product, is burdened by history and driven 'delirious' by its exotic 'self-indulgent' myths of paradise. After nearly thirty years, the passage still has
the ability to startle, as much, perhaps, for the extravagance of its claims, which are just as ‘baroque’ in their way as the myths Walcott rails against. Walcott would seem to disagree with Sahgal’s Sonali; the Revolution did not put an end to the myth of the voyage to Cythera but, fed by the exotic fantasies of Rousseau, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Nerval, it grew monstrous with new and deadly significance in an age of colonialism. Watteau’s image has no ‘regal satin splendour’; it is the delicate mask of empire, ‘sick’, ‘fevered’, and ‘delirious’.

Having delivered such a damning rebuke to Watteau, Walcott nonetheless returned to the painting ten years later in a short poem in *Midsummer*, ‘Watteau’, where he asks Rose’s question again:

> So where is Cythera? It, too, is far and feverish,  
> it dilates on the horizon of his near-delirium, near  
> and then further, it can break like the spidery rigging  
> of his ribboned barquentines (31)

Here, the poem seems hardly to have advanced from the passage in ‘The Muse of History’ in its critique of Watteau as the arch-mythographer of colonialism’s exotic delirium. Once again, Walcott sees Watteau’s ‘disease’ also infecting Baudelaire with ‘the tropic bug in the Paris fog’. The painting is an image of ‘life repeated spectrally’, a vision of ‘emptiness’. The painting celebrates its culture’s decadent colonial fantasies of escape. However, Walcott’s answer to the question, ‘So where is Cythera?’, also recalls Sahgal’s treatment of the myths of Cythera, which contained both Sonali’s radical critique and her subsequent acknowledgement of the painting’s ‘charmed’ effects. Walcott echoes Zafar Khan’s ‘Nowhere. Everywhere’ in the lines, ‘it is as much nowhere/as these broad-leafed islands’.

Cythera and St. Lucia share at least some of the same imaginary geography, since for Walcott the Antilles, too, are ‘nowhere’, ‘a green nothing’, and, in that sense, they are similar in their ‘historylessness’ (1990 192; 1993 n.p.). The poem executes a thoroughly self-reflexive turn which at the same time as it denounces the delirious myths of paradise, acknowledges the potency of those myths in enunciating the ‘Adamic’ qualities of the Antillean experience. Certainly Walcott and Watteau would seem to share similar themes — islands, sexuality, mythology and pastoral. They both clothe antique narratives in contemporary dress; they both subject ancient texts and contexts to new uses. It is by these processes of reinvention and transformation of ‘mixed metaphors’, alternative cultural worlds are brought into being (Fernandez 1991 12).

Walcott’s argument with Watteau, which continued for over thirty years, prefigures his later more ambitious engagements with Homer, in that he fitfully located Cythera by mapping it onto St. Lucia, just as he will later map the Aegean onto the Caribbean in *Omeros*, or Tiepolo’s landscapes and Martinique in *Tiepolo’s Hound*:
A ceiling from Tiepolo: afternoon light will ripen the sky over Martinique to alchemical gold,
a divided life, drawn by the horizon’s hyphen and no less irresolute as I grow old (97)

For Walcott, colour is its own language and has its own logic: ‘the brushstroke’s rhyme/and page and canvas know one empire only: light’ (58). Colour is ‘faith’, which is ‘like a visible wind’ (83). In this language, different from the language of the postcolonial polemics of ‘The Muse of History’, Watteau’s Cythera is a place like St. Lucia, where ‘the amber spray of trees feather-brushed with the dusk’ produces an ‘unreapable, alchemical harvest’ (1984 31), or like Martinique’s with its ‘alchemical gold’, or where the ‘saffron fire’ of Tiepolo’s ceiling reflects the sky of Pissarro’s island, both the colour of ‘rusted palms’ (2000 42). These hybrid locations, simultaneously ‘everywhere’ and ‘nowhere’, are connected by neither history nor shared culture, but by the capacity of the observing eye of the poetic persona to compel the connection through the language and logic of coloured light. They are also ‘rooms full of light and memory’ (Saghal 254). Walcott’s poetic prospect of painted islands ambiguously encompasses both a critique of the colonial exotic and an insistence that enigmatic ‘paint is all that counts, no guilt, no pardon,/no history, but the sense of narrative time/annihilated in the devotion of the acolyte’ (58). So, returning to the painting through the speculum of Walcott’s Caribbean vision, his poem asks again, where is Cythera?

There is little agreement among critics and historians of painting about the answer to that or any other questions concerning Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère, but on one thing they are unanimous: Watteau’s painting has been regarded as a glorious puzzle ever since he submitted it to the French Académie Royal de Peinture et de Sculpture as part of their membership requirements in 1717. Even its exact title has been a vexed question. The modern Louvre catalogue lists it as Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère, but it has been variously titled L’Embarquement pour Cythère (although another work by Watteau also bears that title) depicting pilgrims leaving for, or alternatively, departing from Cythera; or, simply, a fête galante. The painting refers to the ancient, pre-Hellenic cult of Aphrodite on the island of Cythera where, according to Hesiod, Lucretius and Pausanias, she rose from the sea, and where one of her oldest and most important shrines marks the event (Graves 15). Yet although the painting may depict a classical subject, it is neither classical in execution nor antique in its sensibility, but wholly contemporary Rococo milieu. Peter Wagner places Watteau’s painting at the beginning of a period in painting and engraving that made love and sexuality its paramount subjects (270–71). Watteau contributed significantly to a developing Rococo sensibility which, as in the works of Boucher, Fragonard, Greuze, Baudouin and Gravelot, displayed a willingness to present the erotic in varying degrees of frankness from sentimental titillation to the graphically libertine. The classical allusion in Watteau’s painting to the rites of Aphrodite
subtly underscores and initiates that erotic turn in French Rococo, yet curiously for a painter regarded as one of the founding figures of the moment, it isn’t erotic, or sentimental, or libertine. For Donald Posner, Watteau’s fêtes galantes, ‘while about love, tell no love stories. There are no tragic heroines, no happy endings, no events to galvanise the players. And the players themselves seem ever the same, engaged in the same or similar activities from one picture to another’ (151).

Posner’s observations on the painting’s lacunae echo throughout the critical writings on the painting, which repeatedly emphasise the evasiveness or elusiveness of Watteau’s images. For James Elkins, Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère is a ‘monstrously ambiguous painting’ (234): are these figures coming or going? Staying or leaving? A pilgrimage to where? For what? The picture’s narrative presents us with questions for which no answers are provided, leaving us in a state of uncertainty and unsure our direction. Watteau’s Cythera is, simultaneously, for Elkins, a place, a non-place, and an allegory of place, and these ambiguities are the primary characteristics of his painting. Elkins quotes Count Caylus’s remark in relation to Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère that it is characteristic of Watteau’s paintings which ‘had no object’, they were ‘pure painting’, and present us with a ‘narrative of successive concealment’ which evokes only ‘the feeling of meaning’ (231–39). Hermann Bauer is similarly perplexed by Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère and declares that since ‘nothing is happening’, it ‘needs no commentary: it describes nothing’ (1980; qtd in Roland 1984 192). A more linguistically-determined analysis is offered by Norman Bryson who sees Watteau as ‘inaugurating’ ‘the tradition of the reticent sign’ (115) which ‘infinitely suggests but never directly transmits meaning’ (91–92). The paintings have ‘no signifier to pin them down’ (88), and consequently they ‘are experienced mysteriously, as moods, or atmospheres’ (88), ‘a boundless semantic expansion, a kind of centrifugal rippling of meaning that knows no boundary … a machine for the infinite expansion of the signified’ (84). Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère emerges from his discussion as the koan—‘the question without closure’ (74).

Critics repeatedly depict Watteau’s Cythera as a ‘floating signifier’ drawing classical myth, French eighteenth-century aristocratic society, and landscape painting into a heteroglossia of converging and divergent narratives circling around vacancy. The critics seem to have arrived at a Cythera where anything and everything — the shape of a gesture, the fold of a gown, the colour of leaves — is of consequence, but nothing is of significance.

Watteau’s critics measure the painting against a version of istoria, that is, figurative representations which convey important historical and moral truths (Gent and Llewellyn 1990 3). Watteau’s indeterminate myth of Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère refuses to allegorise these Rococo bodies into an ideologically-laden istoria. Indeed, to Wattueau’s critics, the painting seems an exercise in anti-istoria, in that it denies the possibility of moral authority being invested in
its subject. Elkins, Bauer, Bryson and others analyse the painting as a radical blurring of all boundaries — an activity which requires the viewer to find ‘a way to read his paintings outside ... of genre’ (Elkins 235). Ultimately, the proliferating ambiguities of the image lead Elkins to refuse ‘to read his paintings at all’ (239). When those reading strategies fail to lay a hold on Watteau’s painting and, quite literally fail to locate it, Watteau’s critics appeal to a discourse which places the painting beyond analysis: it becomes a ‘reverie’, ‘nothing’, ‘monstrously ambiguous’. Walcott, however, brings a postcolonial eye to the canvas.

Unlike Bryson, Walcott does not see ‘reverie’ in the painting but ‘fever’ and ‘near-delirium’. ‘Reverie’, while appearing to offer the painting up to an endless but inexpressible realm of sensations, in effect marks an end and a closure; there is, quite simply, nothing more that can be said. Walcott’s ‘delirium’, on the contrary, offers a diagnosis of a febrile condition, which characterises the strategies of composition and opens the painting to an alternative interpretation of its cultural history. To Norman Bryson, ‘Rococo has no horizon, and no vanishing point’ (96), and the eye is forever frustrated in its quest to see further into the subject; but for Walcott, ‘Cythera ... dilates on the horizon’, it enlarges its compass to become ‘the mirror/of what is’ — a spectral repetition of the real (1984 31). To Walcott, Watteau’s Cythera is not the ‘nothing’ that Bauer sees — a brilliant optical illusion which feigns meaning — but ‘emptiness’, ‘the hollow at the heart’ of the myths of paradise. These are not merely casual semantic differences of emphasis — ‘delirium’ for ‘reverie’. ‘Emptiness’ is not ‘nothing’, but something entirely different — post-colonial difference — and to see Watteau’s painting through post-colonial eyes is to see a different image entirely. The painting inaugurates a fantasy of a voyage to ‘otherness’ which will sustain colonial ambition, but it is also ‘paint [which] is all that counts, no guilt, no pardon,/no history’ (58). Walcott insists upon this simultaneous and paradoxical vision which sees the painting as an example of culpable colonial caprice and, simultaneously, as ‘paint’ and therefore innocent of the charge of historical complicity. In my reading of Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère, there are grounds for supporting Walcott’s vision in that the compositional strategies employed in the image lead the viewer into a series of contradictory viewpoints.

Art historians liken the arrangement of the figures in Watteau’s paintings to a dance (Cohen 1994), but Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère is not simply dance-like because of its disposition of bodies: all of the canvas contributes to the rhythm of the scene through an extraordinary compositional strategy. Two great sweeping compositional gestures divide the canvas diagonally. One trajectory brings us to the gambolling putti (cupids), and to the milky, purple and gold colours of the exterior: the other draws us into the earthy, dark-russet hues of the trees and shadows which shroud the right, and to a child of a different kind. Small triangular groupings produce a sense of internal complexity, rhythm and cohesion: the man in red and his companion carry staffs that create a triangle of enclosed
space mirrored in the other two pairs of figures within that group. These triangular arrangements are repeated throughout the image building larger blocks of interlocked painted space. The foreground, the raised bank, each of the two groups of pilgrims, the left-hand mountainscape, the flying putti — all create triangular or wedge-like arrangements and sections which are stacked, balanced or laid beside each other in a complex geometry of forms. The effect of these tesserae of spaces is to direct vision along simultaneously opposed clockwise and anticlockwise lines of sight. The anticlockwise motion projects sight out to the far distance of the painting and to the luminous, 'dilating' landscape. The reverse, clockwise motion in the image, the 'prodigious urging toward twilight' (Walcott 1984 31), channels sight down a series of interior visual tunnels until it pauses on the half-naked child sitting in the shadowy foreground. The painting's rhythm seems to move bodies through space, like a minuet or gavotte, but only to leave them in precisely the place where they started. Watteau's brilliant composition creates the impression that everything is moving, everything has altered, and yet everything remains the same. He has created what Walcott refers to in relation to Seventeenth-Century Dutch genre painting as the 'brilliant lie' of the hallucination of narrative (Walcott 2000 58) while simultaneously the image works to annihilate narrative time.

In my reading, the painting enacts a visual paradox, both in its composition and its subject. The pilgrimage can take different turns, left or right, out or in, light or dark. Watteau places his pilgrims on the threshold between 'light' and 'dark' raptures, between 'reverie' and 'delirium'. These figures are eternally caught, frozen, between these contradictory states, and their 'narrative' has neither a beginning nor an end. They exist, 'divided' and 'irresolute', between a real contemporary milieu to which they belong and a past mythical domain to which they have come. The painting hesitates between these simultaneous worlds of modernity and myth, and it is precisely at these hesitant junctures, these 'intraconceptual'6 moments of fissure from, and exchange between, near and far, mythical and actual, past and present, that Watteau locates Cythera.

Walcott's writings not only create a different way of looking at Watteau, they also share a great deal with those images. Walcott and Watteau possess an interest in visual correspondences, mixed metaphors, and ellipses. They both untie the bonds of metaphor, detaching vehicle from tenor, to create the obscure association, the lost connection, and the shards of 'fragmented memory' (Walcott 1993 n.p.). Walcott's poems, like Watteau's images, are 'outside of genre', in their concatenation of 'Greek' and 'old African babble' (1990 18). Walcott is, like Watteau, a 'monstrous ambiguity', but Walcott is as ambivalent to Watteau's image as the opposed views of the painting expressed by Rosie and Sonali in Sahgal's novel. Their ambivalence reveals a shared postcolonial perspective, arising in very different cultural and historical contexts, on the uncertain legacy of European art. Walcott's postcolonial critique of the painting positions it as an
exemplary type of exoticism which had effects beyond European Rococo in a world of colonial dominions mythologised as ‘islands of the blest’. The Cythera of Watteau’s painting is a flight from history into the delirium of the exotic, but the Antilles, Walcott claims, have no history to flee from. Yet, Walcott’s repeated insistence that the ‘language of painting precedes and pre-empts the particular subject matter it represents’, also asserts art’s claim to an existence free of the blame of history (Harris 296). It is in these paradoxes that Walcott forges his responses, not only to Watteau, but to the art of Tiepolo, Pissarro, Gauguin and the writings of Homer, Joyce, and Dante. In some respects, Walcott’s paradoxical positions are similar to the dilemmas Watteau depicted in Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère; like Watteau’s pilgrims Walcott is ‘divided’ and ‘irresolute’ to the bone.

NOTES
1 Fêtes galantes are images of aristocrats in an outdoor setting which celebrate their cultivated elegance against a natural backdrop. Posner traces the origins of fêtes galantes to manuscript illustrations and chivalric poetry of the late middle ages (especially Roman de la Rose), to the allegorical gardens and islands of love, the myth of Arcadia, and realistic depictions of contemporary Netherlandish and French fashionable society (128).
2 The phrase ‘masterpiece of French masterpieces’ has been attributed to the Goncourts Brothers (182).
3 In showing Watteau’s image on stage, Walcott returned the painting to at least one of its origins since Watteau probably took his subject from his contemporary theatre. ‘Le pelerinage à l’isle de Cythère’ enjoyed something of a minor vogue on the early eighteenth-century Paris stage where, between 1713 and 1716, a pilgrimage to Cythera was shown or mentioned at least five times, but was most likely suggested by a play of 1700 by Dancourt, Les Trois Cousins. See Posner (187) and de Fourcaud cited in Levey (182). See also Watteau’s paintings Gilles, Les Comédiens Français, Les Comédiens Italiens.
4 To add further to the confusion, there are two versions of the painting: his first, the piece submitted to the French Academy in 1717, hangs in the Louvre and is reproduced here; the second, painted in 1718 is in Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin. For a full discussion of the debate on the title of the painting see Levey and Elkins.
5 Karl Toth remarks that ‘at the centre of Rococo culture is woman’ (qtd in Hart 129).
6 I have taken the term ‘intraconceptual’ from Eisenstein (86); but see also Bryson (84) who argues the connection between Watteau’s effect on the viewer and Eisenstein’s ‘third sense’.

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Romesh Gunesekera

SECOND READING

Downwind the hawkmoth drowned,
the pink-skimmed earth
turned to mud.
Under a loose sun, picking rubble,
I saw a butterfly:
one wing iridescent,
the other cracked
from an unexpected fall.

I thought I’d shift the stones, clear a path,
get things sorted fast.
As I reached down, the open wing
blinked against my skin: I felt
the tremor of an illuminated page,
a pulse beneath the lines.
ELLEKE BOEHMER

Off-White: Creolite and Hidden ‘Difference’ under Apartheid

I do not think of myself in those terms [of being white], I daren’t. I don’t let that into my life; you can’t; it’s a trap. (Athol Fugard 4)

SLIDE ONE
The way she bent back the small girl’s thumb, as if smoothing a wayward dog-ear in a favourite book.

They sat in the white tiled foyer of the Community Museum, the Gemeentemuseum, the early winter dark settling into its corners and alcoves. The darker it grew, and the quieter, the more vigorously the girl swung her legs, her polished, Europe-bought Mary Janes. She swung deeper and higher, higher and deeper, feeling the edge of the oak bench on which they were both sitting digging into her skin. She hoped her energetic activity might distract the attention of the elderly lady who pressed so warmly against her side, whose eyes pressed so intently into her own.

She was instructed to call the lady tante, and her face was to some degree familiar. Her mother had left her in her care while she dashed to the Dames — it was a long bus ride back to their pension. The lady was one of her mother’s many women friends who lived unemphatic lives in this quiet city of peace conferences. Even on this particular short stay in the city the small girl had met the lady at several afternoon teas. The genteel cafes in the old town where the teas were consumed were places her mother had once frequented. The lady and her lady friends continued regularly to visit the cafes together these many years her mother had lived abroad, in Africa.

She herself was, the girl had already figured out, the trophy, somehow, of her mother’s time away. She had, she suspected, been the topic of conversation at numbers of the teas. She was after all ‘African-born’, in Afrika geboren, the ladies whispered bemusedly, but with a kind of hard inquisitive edge. She had been born on a torrid midsummer afternoon when the palm trees visible from the hospital window stood rigid — frozen, said her mother — with the tropical heat.

— Ella — said the lady, taking her hand in a papery clasp. — You know, don’t you, you’re named for me?
— Ja-nee. — Yes, no. The girl resorted to the safe noncommittal response that her parents’ language conveniently lent her.

— Yes! — said the lady, strangely triumphant, the energy of her feeling pushing her to capture the girl’s free left hand, too, in her own. — Named for me, but so very foreign —

The lady’s breath was unpleasantly moist, but the girl decided it wasn’t safe to shift away.

Eyes askew, she spied, far down the long foyer, her mother returning. The lady realised time was short.

— African born, — she said right into her ear. — Do you mind? Does it feel strange? Do you worry? —

It was then that, getting hold of the girl’s right thumb, she began to force it into a backbend with the ball of her own pale thumb. The thumb obligingly crooked itself. It was an inverted comma, it was a spandrel. It did not hurt. Experimentally the girl bent back her other thumb, without assistance.

— Always so! — the lady gloated.

She spoke very softly now, as if to elude the mother who stood before them in her out-of-date winter coat and walking shoes.

— You see it in the Indonesian-born also, and the folk from Surinam. All the children of the tropics. It changes them. The limbs grow softer. Bones, they change. The thumbs get limber. The colour, character, outwardly it seems to stay the same. Inwardly ... who knows? —

— Ella, dear, get your coat. — The mother pulled the tante to her feet. It was an abrupt gesture, the girl saw, for a woman as polite as her mum.

* * *

The forced bending of the thumb was a first conscious perception of difference, of difference within whiteness — a perception that this series of fragments will try to gain some imaginative and conceptual purchase upon. It was a perception that was almost impossible, if not preposterous, to articulate during the apartheid years in South Africa, where white was safe, superior and above all uniform (superior in part because so ‘purely’, irrefutably homogeneous — indeed homogenised, like milk). As for a resistant black perspective on the situation — not that many whites took account of this — to make distinctions within ‘Europeanness’ would rightly have been regarded as decadent in the extreme, a morally and politically fraudulent splitting of hairs.

Yet, as was clear for any white whose position was even slightly other (in my case, Dutch by language and background), uniformity was a demanding condition to uphold. It was, it could be said, a nervous condition — at once self-conflicted and repressed, in the extreme.

Whiteness, as critics writing in the wake of Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark have pointed out, is far from being a given, as was long assumed; it is a
Elleke Boehmer

social condition which can — and should — be submitted to critique.\(^1\) Whiteness is not so much a skin colour as a state of mind.\(^2\)

I could not agree more, having lived, year in, year out, that state of mind. From some point in my early childhood, while shuttling between Europe and apartheid South Africa, I became aware that white, though apparently 'right', was a position of acute anxiety. For some — like the pharmacist doling out medicines from two separate counters in his shop — it seemed a worry about racial purity, distinctness, and cultural cohesion. For me, differently, it was a worry about passing; not about purity, that is, but about acting white enough, not seeming 'weird', or what was sometimes called 'continental'. (Continental as distinct from 'European'. European was the name used for whites, all whites, on park benches and in public toilets.)

Whiteness in Africa, whether you were African-born, like me, or African resident and un-English, like my parents, or even, possibly, white and English-speaking and 'native', could not, it seemed, be guaranteed. It was the unmarked state, but it stood out like a sore thumb. Pure whiteness was a perpetual state of siege.

The monolithic uniformity of whiteness could be broken as easily as chalk by one of its central claims, to define and police the limits of the normal.

There was then the acute difficulty of any a-typicality underlying whiteness. 'True' difference of course was radically other to myself.

I remember the day I first read the white Caribbean-born writer Jean Rhys, with what a sense of recognition, of being given a foothold within her own unhappy restlessness. I remember looking up from her pages with an astonished silent 'yes!', acclimatising myself to a writer whose psychic climates, like mine, were upside down, who felt removed from wherever she found herself, nostalgic for her lost yet deeply ill-at-ease childhood in the Caribbean.

The kernel of white unhomeliness, its sorrow, as Rhys knew, is this: creole or migrant whiteness, even when repatriated to Europe, does not magically (re)discover how to belong. Pathologically aware of itself as an identity apart, it remains on edge, on the edge. Foreign-born whiteness — in Africa and in Europe — sits out in the margins, so it feels. Its sense of the normal is 'scrambled' (Nixon 238). It sits flexing its dangerously elastic thumbs, picking at the scabs of its differences. Significantly, therefore, it was only by reaching across a cultural border, to Jean Rhys, that could I find the codes to describe something of myself.

Clarifying the term creole in at least two of its Caribbean significations, Marina Warner neatly captures the ambivalences built into the very term. As she writes in a collection co-edited by Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford: 'The French include whites in the term Creole, and so do the Spanish, but to English ears, 'Creole' sounds foreign, French, or worse, native, but native of another place besides England' (197).\(^3\)

Growing up on the island of Dominica, Jean Rhys explored her own sense of
creoleness to the extent that, as she describes, she prayed to be black, and smashed the face of a white doll she was given (39–42). I did not share this yearning. I lived after all within a firmly grounded settler society. Yet as a child I was distinctly confused about my so-called white (African-born but migrant) identity. Was I white, or almost? Somehow I did not seem as white as my Anglophone friends.

I was delighted the day I noticed that the wrapper for the white Lux soap we used bore a picture of a lump of something not quite white, nearly grey. Was whiteness perhaps equivalent to grey? And would it — please — rub off? I was painfully aware of lacking some of the important markers of whiteness: that is, laying claim to an African nanny; being able to speak proper English or Afrikaans; attending tennis clubs, or gymkhanas, or church, on weekend mornings.

Instead we inhabited a small immigrant enclave. We ate hutspot and speculaas sent over from Nederland (Nederland, Neverland, how close the words seemed). At home we made our own beds, cooked our own food. At school my affinity was with the other immigrant children, ‘so-called whites’: the Portuguese, Greeks, Italians. When I was old enough to read Nadine Gordimer I was puzzled at the foreign ‘Jo’burg’ world she described, which, however, I was told, I was meant to recognise as my own. Was I white like this? Or was I slightly off-white, perhaps slightly beige? I turned to the vagrant, morally dishevelled Russian in Heart of Darkness in his harlequin suit: here was a closer point of identification.

It would help, I often thought, if I had a label to describe my condition, my too-flexible thumbs, the ‘strange’, non-English voice inside my white skin. Apartheid society insisted that everyone assume an explicit racial identity of some sort. What was mine? By then Creole had been adopted by a different constituency from Rhys’s within the Caribbean. Dutch immigrant — didn’t quite work. In Afrikaans-speaking Africa it had a very different meaning. European, as I said, was a much-abused label. I was not quite white enough, but I was not non-white. Was I invisibly marked somehow? The day I learned the word coloured, was when a new perception began to dawn.

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SLIDE TWO

They are driving the sky-blue Valiant down the broad, sunlit street. To the right is the Bata shoe shop, to the left the liquor store, a queue of people snaking out of its entrance door. It is Saturday morning. The traffic lights show red.

Just as the father begins braking a man dashes across the road, right in front of the car. The flat of his hand slaps the slowing bonnet, perhaps intentionally. Over the years the image of him remains so clear it is as if his photo is stuck somewhere in a familiar album. He wears khaki trousers, an unkempt hat, and a light brown blazer that flares behind him as he darts.
— Bloody Coloured! — her father shouts, braking hard.

The eyes of childhood, awake to any oddity, immediately look again. Coloured? Black head, white feet? She imagines something half-and-half, like a Droste chocolate, half dark, half milk. His left side brown, his white side cream? She sees the back of him only, which seems from the glimpse of neck and hands to be perfectly monochrome.

— What’s coloured, Pa?—

Her father chooses never to explain the obvious. Yet he spoke just then in English, so whatever he meant was nothing self-evident.

— It means half-bred. — Her mother obliges, not in English. — Coloured people have different bloods mixed inside them. —

Straightaway the girl has a picture of the man’s insides like an elaborate plumbing system. Different colour liquids run through him, blue and red, yellow and brown, like the illustrations of blood flow in her biology textbook.

But she sits back relieved, more at ease than she has been since that meeting with the aunt in the museum lobby. Coloured. Which means variegated, pied, even dappled. Suddenly she can pinpoint more closely what she is. She’s been given quite by chance a label for the confused feelings she often has, not fitting in. Not English. White but — and not quite European. She thinks protectively of the coffee-stain birth-mark she carries on her lower back. Mixed up, is what she is: basically coloured.

She uses the term privately, to herself, until the day she confirms it on an official form at school almost without thinking twice, so used is she now to it. At the beginning of the year they fill in identity forms, rows and columns of tick boxes. The third or fourth row of boxes is marked ‘Race’. She ticks the place for Coloured. The headteacher calls her father almost immediately at work.

But her father’s furious talking-to explains nothing, other than that Coloured is somehow associated with shame. Never do it again, he shouts in two languages. What a sick, sick joke. Don’t you know they’re society’s step-children? She must never, repeat never again, humiliate her parents like this.

She cries a little, feeling regret, injustice. It is tough to have the label denied her, especially as she had grown so comfortable with it. Using a hand mirror she checks the birthmark, to make sure it’s still there in spite of all, her little mark of piedness — that is, of whiteness.

* * *

In their defiant manifesto, Eloge de la Creolite, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confi ant wrest away from the white créole the term that to them far more closely describes the self-delighting diversity and connectivity of the mixed-heritage Caribbean. Creolite: a mosaic, a braid of histories; a dense crossing of different axes of heterogeneous interrelationship (86). This ‘Creoleness’ invokes, yet disavows, ideologies of blood — its colour however is definitively not white. It
speaks of the visible translation of dominant forms under the pressure of other cultural presences. It celebrates networks of, in particular, diasporic interconnection.

At the same time, even if implicitly, Bernabé et al offer a discursive figure through which to begin to speak of buried, undercurrent (differently white) creole forms — forms which, for all that they are not obviously colour-coded, are also unsteady, at times self-hating. Under this aspect Creolite gives a new awareness to the blurred chromatics of identity I’ve been trying to discern. It offers a mode of articulation to the Creole, certainly, but also to the hidden creole (in this case, racially identified white, culturally marked as other). On one level at least, therefore, I would like to read the Elogé as pointing to that fissure or diversity within the very heart of sameness, inside the ultimate homogeneity, the often missed mark lying within the unmarked term of whiteness. Just as an ultra-violet light can show up hidden scars on skin, apartheid revealed to us precisely this mark. In a society governed on racial lines, perception is structured to perceive difference. Seen as different, I felt different: white, but — . Certainly, I must emphasise, I was not oppressed on account of this difference. The label, the marking, however, was made to stick.

* * *

**Slide Three**

At the end of winter is the annual school play. The girl is a little older, maybe twelve, thirteen. She has been, oh happiness, cast in a prominent role in a one-act farce, the part of a doctor, Dr Patel. Dr Patel plays a po-faced verbal punch bag to the play’s eponymous character, George.

Tweenie, an extrovert redhead in an older class, will play the part of George. Tweenie will spend the entire play lying in a hospital bed centre-stage, doing nothing more than suffering delusions and turning them into jokes, Jack Nicholson-style. The doctor, the Indian lady doctor (the teacher-producer says the words with a noticeable emphasis) pays him regular visits. She comes to hold his hand, shake her head, and repeat ‘in a worried voice’, Unfortunately we are not knowing what is wrong with George.

— You must get the accent right. — she is instructed.
— It’s a British play. They have Indian doctors there, it can’t be changed. The jokes depend on it. Go visit the Indian shops down-town. Get the feel of it. —

But this is not exactly easy. OK, they live in Durban, biggest Indian city in the Southern Hemisphere, but the fact is that she already has an accent, as her friends regularly remind her. She puts tongue-flipping ‘r’s in all the wrong places. How will she fit the frame of a second accent across her own awkward vowels?

As for eavesdropping downtown, well, it’s impossible. It’s Indian territory. Her mother, for one, would ban her from doing so.

Eventually Tweenie bails her out. A born joker, he can do many voices,
including a ripe ‘Coolie’, as he says. He speaks the lines, she mimics him. Before too long the teacher is smiling approval. *We are not knowing what is wrong with George.*

One final ingredient remains to complete the act: costume. You talk real Indian, they say, now you must dress the part, like an Indian doctor. Wear something white — a white sari of course! A public call is made, and the Indian lab assistant’s cousin, or cousin’s friend, phones in. Yes, a white sari can be loaned, no problem. As for the Indian doctor’s skin colour, this goes without saying. The make-up box is already equipped with brown shoe polish. The girl wears it at rehearsals, daubed on to her cheeks in order to get into character. On the night itself she will be fully browned up.

_Browned up, is it, or browned down?_ She’s not sure. No one speaks the instruction.

On dress rehearsal night, at last, the Indian lady brings the sari. She has delayed coming up to this point, everyone has grown anxious. She enters the dressing room carrying a flat cardboard box. She is not introduced, and doesn’t introduce herself. She herself is wearing jeans and a red t-shirt. She sets the box down delicately, as if it carried bone-china, the most fragile pastries. The sari is a ceremonial garment of some sort: extremely long, of the purest white, decorated with tiny, diamanté beads. Each white fold is swaddled in the whitest tissue paper. The sari takes ten minutes to wind on, which the Indian lady does for the girl.

Two things about that night the girl will never forget.

How the woman’s eyes jerked wide-open, as if she’d been struck, when first she saw that her sari was to be worn against browned-down skin. Shoe-polish skin. But she never said a word. Without a word she helped the lady doctor dress, prodding and pushing her to turn, without roughness. She maintained her silence at the end of the show, when again she circled the girl, unwinding the long glimmer of white, and folded it back into its box.

And that was the second thing. How she sat it out. Night after night the woman waited in silence in the cold concrete-floored dressing room for her sari to be returned in good order. She sat motionless, arms folded, and must have heard how, out in the hall, an Indian voice was performed to universal white laughter. *We are not knowing what is wrong.*

By the final performance the girl has learned something. How to wind on, and walk in a sari. But there is something else again too. Something about whiteness, she has learned, is far from pure and simple. Something about whiteness with a double accent, in a pure white sari, makes her feel deeply ashamed. Far more ashamed than *Coloured. Not knowing what is wrong.*

Every night after the play the girl resists taking her brown make-up off. She says she wants to stay in character, it hurts to scour her skin — but she knows there is more to it than this. Her mother says she had better learn to launder her
own bed linen as the treacly brown stain on the pillowcase is a devil to remove.

The girl lies in bed staring at the ceiling, keeping her brown cheeks off the pillow. She is now not so young as to be unaware that, had she not been classified white, she would not have been in a position to play an Indian lady doctor, in white sari and brown face, with an accent. She also suspects that, had it not been for her accent, her own obvious difference, she would not have been asked to play the role at all.

* * *

So there came gradually, by infinitesimal degrees, an understanding of the

(Photo: Courtesy of Elleke Boehmer)

super-subtle gradations of ‘colouredness’ — including of whiteness. Of variegation, some of it officially categorised, all of it loudly visible, or vividly audible, within a state-authorised system of racism, where all differences were eventually, in one social situation or another, made to count. Creole: where white creole (normality) is different from black creole. Native: where black native is a tautology in terms, and white native signifies a kind of scandal. Yellow: the colour of illegitimacy and the inbetween.
The day of my refusal eventually arrived: when I learned to say no out loud to the apartheid state. Briefly then I longed for a different skin entirely, for a visible sign of the internal fission-within-whiteness I had long experienced. I wanted not only a label for my perceived condition of difference, but to inhabit the perceived difference itself. I wanted, at last, a marker to relieve me from the strain of play-acting white. Truth to tell, I had for a while believed — had been made to believe — that I possessed this marker. So culture, so voice — so look. Once experienced, of course, the sensation of creoleness, no matter how partial it may seem, never entirely rubs away. My other-than-whiteness, my illicit ‘yellowness’, was my imagined identity — simultaneously hated and nurtured, cradled and denied.

* * *

Slide Four

Sitting high up on the bleachers behind the back field at school the girl and her best-friend watch the boys play rugby. With one eye on the game they are at the same time critically scrutinising vital aspects of their bodies and exchanging beauty tips as they do so: your blemishes, my spots, your hang-nail, our split-ends.

Relaxed as they are, the friend’s remark catches the girl unawares.
— Your skin’s not really white, you know. Not really. Not white like ours. —
— Immediately the girl begins to blush.
— What d’ye mean? —
— You know how your name’s funny. And things are different at your house. How you wear vests and eat raw onions. It’s not like we do, not white really. —
— Suddenly awkward, the girl presses her arm against her friend’s.
— Look. Same. —
— Not. —
— White as you. —
— No way. Different. —
— What colour then? —

The girl can feel the sweat beading her forehead. She remembers her father’s livid talkings-to on this precise question. She feels the ground shifting under her feet. What does her friend know? Playing for effect the friend is considering her choices.
— Yellow, probably, — she finally says — Yellow like Javier. —
— Javier is a white Angolan newly arrived at their school.
— Yellow like Frik and Fanie? — the girl asks, holding her breath. These are two poor white Afrikaans-speaking twins no one plays with.
— No. — says the friend decisively, — Not like them. Frik and Fanie don’t wear shoes, they’re just plain brown. —

The girl looks down at where their skins — upper arms and thighs — lie side by side. To her consternation she sees her friend is right. They plainly don’t
match. Her skin is probably slightly yellower, or sallower. Yes, no.

Later that day alone in her bedroom she checks again. Nowadays such distinctions have begun to matter. She examines her skin against white paper. Definitely yellow. She decides she will from henceforth bath in camomile, eat carrot, catch a sun-tan, anything to shift the tinge. Although nothing comes of these plans in her mind’s eye it is yellow that she stays. At first this is anxiety, later a willed delusion. She will always register surprise when she is called white. Sometimes, to be quite sure, she checks her ID document. This, however, does not mince its words, or numbers:

611114 0004 001 (where the final 1 means white, only white).

NOTES

1 This essay aligns itself with Toni Morrison’s perspective where she writes that her project is to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject (70). Writing as a white, however, my hope is that my repeated questions about the status of whiteness as racial identity will sufficiently call into question the problematic re-privileging of whiteness that this shift of gaze can entail. See also Dyer.

2 See Warwick Anderson, or Ghassan Hage, for example.

3 The 1993 Chew and Rutherford collection Unbecoming Daughters, a pooling of memoirs and testimonies from ‘colonial girls’, was remarkably foresighted in fine tuning a wide range of colonial states of ‘unbelonging’ and outsiderness.

4 By borrowing the term into a different cultural context I acknowledge the precedent set by Francoise Lionnet in transporting the term from the Caribbean into the ‘African Indian Ocean’, specifically into Mauritius and Reunion. Translating a term across cultural or linguistic boundaries is of course itself a creolising move.

WORKS CITED


The power of Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1985) springs from a constant exchange between his sceptical critical intelligence and his belief in the autonomy of his fictional characters. The novel persistently draws attention to its fictiveness. It is divided into seven named parts. Part One, ‘Lightness and Weight’, opens with an ironic self-contained section on Nietzsche’s ‘idea of the eternal return’ (the first of many interpolated ‘essays’ on ‘philosophical’ topics). There is an avoidance throughout of interior monologue. The narrator insistently reminds us *in propria persona* that what we are reading is a fiction: ‘I have been thinking about Tomas for many years’ (6). Tomas, the novel’s central male character, is a Prague surgeon, long divorced and a latter-day Don Juan. He is at once separate from the narrator and the narrator’s creation:

He could no longer quite remember what had prompted his decision.

And once more I see him the way he appeared to me at the very beginning of the novel: standing at the window and staring across the courtyard at the walls opposite.

That is the image from which he was born. As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about. (221)

Here the gap between Kundera’s fiction and his critical writings in *The Art of the Novel* (1988), written between 1983 and 1987, is invisible. It might be more accurate to say that Kundera’s meditations on the nature of the novel grow out of the extremely self-conscious way in which his own novels are written. Tellingly, he describes the essays in *The Art of the Novel* as ‘a practitioner’s confession’ (vii). Creative and critical intelligence go hand in hand. Kundera’s thinking, both in his novels and essays, looks for example and support to his European forebears, Cervantes, Sterne and Diderot — all writers of ‘metafiction’ *avant la lettre*.

Kundera has a fierce conviction that the novel is its own kind of knowing. As he says in *The Art of the Novel*, ‘the novel cannot breach the limits of its own possibilities, and bringing those limits to light is already an immense discovery, an immense triumph of cognition’ (25), and later, ‘the novel is, by definition, the ironic art: its “truth” is concealed, undeclared, undeclarable’ (134). Both these accounts suggest that the sceptical, quizzical and playful rationality of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* will achieve some kind of affirmative, if ironic
and concealed, resolution, as indeed seems to be the case. Yet the novel frames itself within a wider pessimism: ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being’ is ‘an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become’ (221). Its characters are faced with ‘the profound moral perversity of a world … [in which] everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted’ (4).

If the contemporary world has ‘become’ a ‘trap’, as the narrator of The Unbearable Lightness of Being asserts, that must mean the world was not always so. An earlier short story, ‘Symposium’ (1975), makes clear why. There the womanising Dr Havel denies that his own serial affairs can in any way be likened to those of Don Juan, the ‘Great Conqueror’:

‘how can you be a conqueror in a domain where no one refuses you, where everything is possible and everything is permitted? Don Juan’s era has come to an end. Today, Don Juan’s descendant no longer conquers, but only collects. The figure of the Great Collector has taken the place of the Great Conqueror, only the Collector is no longer really Don Juan at all. Don Juan was a tragic figure. He was burdened by his guilt. He sinned gaily and laughed at God. He was a blasphemer and ended up in hell.’ (140–41)

This is not simply nostalgia. Kundera writes as the intellectual inheritor of a European tradition rooted in the Enlightenment; he is an admirer of Mozart, Beethoven, European literatures, and the Western philosophical tradition (Plato to Nietzsche via the Church Fathers). It is Kundera’s deft and witty deployment of this inheritance which informs much of the novel’s intellectual playfulness, but that same inheritance informs a discomfort with twentieth-century deracination. What is missing for the entirely secular Dr Havel is not God and Hell, but any meaningful ethical dimension against which he can measure his acts.

In The Unbearable Lightness of Being there are three Don Juan figures, two of whom, Tomas and Sabina, exemplify the differing forms taken in their lives by ‘lightness’ (‘positive’ — fineness, warmth, being, freedom) and ‘weight’ (‘negative’ — cold, non-being, the burden of responsibility). Which are they to choose? At the start of the novel Tomas and Sabina are a perfect match. Both represent Don Juan as collector (in the twentieth-century, according to Kundera, women are equally able to live as libertines). They are therefore free of the burden of love (a ‘lightness’ which in Communist Czechoslovakia represents a space for private existential freedom).

Sabina is a painter who rejects socialist realism and conventional morality: Tomas is a dedicated surgeon, whose pursuit of women is driven by a desire to discover the nature of the precise individuality of each one. By the novel’s end, Tomas, willingly or unwillingly, has conformed to the Rake Reformed pattern (or, in Sabina’s words, is a Don Juan who has become a Tristan), and is burdened by heaviness through his compassionate (‘co-feeling’) love (19–21) for Tereza, who is tortured by her jealousy of his affairs. The novel, in consequence,
foregrounds questions about sexuality, jealousy, love and personal relationships, and these issues (along with the question of whether or not the novel is misogynistic) have tended to be the foremost concern of critics.

This emphasis is understandable, but can lead to an undue narrowing of the novel’s wider questionings. These come to the fore when its formal structure is examined, even though what is most striking on a first reading of the book is the impression of spontaneous free-flowing playful inventiveness, following up and working out an initiating image or idea. The narrative continually trips the reader up. What seems real is suddenly revealed to be a dream. On occasions we cannot be sure of what is or is not true. There are re-tellings of the same events by different characters, and the chronology continually leaps backwards and forwards. Despite its apparent playfulness and spontaneity, the novel is extremely tightly structured (in that respect it is quite unlike Cervantes, Sterne or Diderot), and its patterning reveals the wider issues involved in the characters’ personal dilemmas. These are precisely the issues leading to the tension between affirmation and doubt which characterise the novel’s conclusion.

Kundera’s own explanation of the novel’s overlapping and interrupted structure is, in important ways, misleading. The Art of the Novel (77–78 ff.) describes the fragmented time structure of The Unbearable Likeness of Being through a musical analogy: the novel’s repetitions are polyphonic, utilising motifs and themes as does a composer. This analogy, however, is more useful as an enabling mechanism for the writer than it is accurate. Here Kundera’s criticism provides a cover for his creative practice.

Reading a novel differs in significant ways from listening to a musical performance. First, reading is a private activity whereas music originates in a communal experience, a response to a specific performance. (In consequence, reading a long novel is a discontinuous activity, while music is bound by the time of its performance.) Second, words are referential, bringing with them ideas and concepts. Third, polyphony depends upon simultaneity, an effect only possible through analogy in a novel. Finally, the reader of a novel is at once the performer (as interpreter) and the audience. More evidently than most novelists, Kundera continually foregrounds the reader’s performative role — he assumes that we are all knowing readers of fiction, and that we create the fiction along with the novelist.

If we do not decide to put the novel aside (it is easy to give up a book, hard to leave a musical performance before the end), the immediate energies of the reader will be taken up, not with listening for the variations, repeats, modulations, and inversions, occurring within a known musical genre, but with following each sentence, distinguishing characters and voices, and keeping hold of, and up with, the narrative. On a first reading, we will note in passing possible patterns, themes, symbols and motifs, but that cannot be our primary concern. It is only at the second (and subsequent) readings of a novel that the formal structure of a novel begins to become clear.
The key principle of the structure of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is repetition. Repetition is also a governing thematic concern announced at the outset of the novel. There Nietzsche’s ‘mad myth’ of the ‘idea of eternal return’ and the ‘German adage’, *Einmal ist keinmal* (‘What happens once might as well not have happened at all’), are set against the ‘one-thing-after-another’ actuality of human experience, where repetition is impossible, to ask whether our day to day experience can have any kind of meaning at all (1–8). The importance of repetition to the novel is apparent in the list of contents: working in order through the title for each part, briefly linking it to the novel’s chronology and parallel narratives demonstrates this.

Part One, ‘Lightness and Weight’, gives the story of Tomas’s erotic life (‘light’), his long-standing relationship with Sabina, and Tereza’s arrival in his life. This covers the years between 1962 and 1969, and the novel includes the Prague Spring of 1968; the subsequent invasion by Russian, whose tanks and soldiers, photographed by Tereza, appear in the Western press; Dubcek’s return; and the brief period Tereza and Tomas spend in exile in Zurich.

Part Two, ‘Soul and Body’, cover the same years and events, but from Tereza’s viewpoint. The resultant repetition of the same events differently perceived (the first night Tomas and Tereza spend together is described on at least three separate occasions) give them a thickness (indeed, weight) caused by re-imagining what had previously seemed the authoritative account. Fiction can in this way create not the ‘myth of eternal return’ but a formal structure which embodies the repetition.

Part Three, ‘Words Misunderstood’, follows Sabina’s life as an exile, first in Geneva (1968 to 1972), then in Paris (1972 to 1975 at least). This section also tells the story of her affair with the married Swiss academic, Franz, which she breaks off abruptly. In 1975 Sabina learns in Paris from Czechoslovakia that Tomas and Tereza have been killed in a road accident while working on a collective farm.

Part Four is, like Part Two, entitled ‘Soul and Body’ and is also told largely from Tereza’s perspective. It is set in Prague between 1969 and 1973, the period during which the Communists re-established a police state in Czechoslovakia (seen here as a concentration camp). Tereza has to work in a bar, is still suffering from Tomas’s philandering, and makes love to an engineer, who may or may not be an agent of the secret police. She also has surreal experiences, which may or may not be dreams.

The next section repeats the title of the very first part, ‘Lightness and Weight’, and, like that, is written from Tomas’s perspective. It covers exactly the same years, 1969 to 1973, which have just been narrated from Tereza’s viewpoint. However, this re-telling additionally gives details of Tomas’s refusal to disavow a newspaper article he had written (using the example of Oedipus who took the blame on himself for a deed done unwittingly) to attack the Communist
apparatchiks, who refuse to admit responsibility for their past. Deprived of his post as a surgeon, he is eventually reduced to working as a window cleaner, a job which enables him to renew his erotic adventures.

Part Six, ‘The Grand March’, might have been called ‘Kitsch’, which Kundera defines as ‘the aesthetic ideal’ of ‘a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist’ (248). This is easiest to understand in terms of Sabina’s experience. What she objected to as a student was the ‘Communist kitsch’ of the May Day ceremony, in which ‘Long live Communism!’ was an ‘idiotic tautology (“Long live life!”) which attracted people indifferent to the theses of Communism to the Communist parade’ (249): hence ‘the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions’ (254). In this view, unthinking American patriotism is as much kitsch as those leftist intellectuals, like Sabina’s Swiss lover, Franz, to support the ‘Great March’ by campaigning against the occupation of Cambodia by Communists (249–51, 261–62). Franz’s punishment is an undignified death at the hands of petty thieves. Sabina is last seen growing old as a painter in the USA, hiding the fact that she is Czech — her alienation is ‘the unbearable lightness of being’.

The final part, ‘Karenin’s Smile’, is set on the collective farm to which Tomas and Tereza escape from Prague. It recounts first, the death of Karenin, the female dog, which was Tomas’s wedding gift to Tereza, and named after the book she was carrying when she first arrived at Tomas’s flat. (Kundera ironically appropriates Tolstoy’s tragic European Russian novel written in the nineteenth-century into a novel written about the diminished possibilities of life under East European Communism). The seventh and last part concludes with the final evening of Tomas and Tereza’s life. As Kundera says in *The Art of the Novel*, because we already know they are dead, the novel’s final part, ‘despite its idyllic quality, is flooded with a melancholy that comes from the knowledge of what is to happen’ (77). This is clearly the case, yet it does insufficient justice to the ambiguities and ironies of the novel’s final section which, more than any other part, is concentrated on the private life of Tomas and Tereza, half-willingly exiled in their own country.

It is clear from this outline that *The Unbearable Likeness of Being* is not only an astonishingly capacious work, but one engaged in a critique of the dominant ideologies of East and West. Very deftly, by quick touches here and there, the novel calls up the full range of Czech history, one dominated by subjection to other nations. This begins with the Hussite wars of the fifteenth century, followed by the Prague uprising of 1618, which led to the Thirty Years’ War and the re-imposition of Habsburg rule. The eventual founding of the Czech republic in 1918, was overthrown by Hitler in 1938, who was replaced by the Communist, President Novotny, ruling the country as a Russian dependency (97, 222–23). The novel comes right up to the Prague Spring of 1968. Mention of Kafka, Janacek and Dvorak, along with Frantisek Hrubin and Jan Prochazka
(12, 97, 229, 133) are reminders of Czech literary and musical achievements. Geographically, the novel’s settings range from Prague and Czech provincial towns and countryside to Geneva, Paris, Cambodia and the USA. Intellectually, the novel assumes the reader’s knowledge of the whole of European and classical history, literature, music and philosophy (a flattering illusion created by wittily encapsulated summaries of the thinking of Erigena, St Jerome, Descartes, Beethoven or Nietzsche). This assumption is coupled with another — that, unlike the reader who understands The Unbearable Lightness of Being, none of this is meaningful to anyone taken up in the ‘Great March’, whether of the Communist or American variety, since both ideologies are driven by their own differing (un-ironic) versions of kitsch. This implicit readership excludes both sides in the Cold War. The novel’s implicit rejection of both dominant ideologies exactly reflects the position taken throughout by The Art of the Novel, which recalls, or reaffirms in a hostile environment, the specifically European tradition of the novel — ironic, humanist, and informed by a knowledge of its own past.

In this context, the inward swerve of the final pages of The Unbearable Lightness of Being turns away from the larger cultural and political issues raised by the rest of the novel to the personal lives of Tomas and Tereza. How should this be read?

Kundera himself suggests that this part of the novel should be seen as an ‘idyll’, though one to be read in a melancholic light. ‘Karenin’s Smile’ can be read in this way: Tomas and Tereza escape to a run-down collective pastoral world (which most people wish to leave for the city), where, because they represent no threat to the larger community, they are free from the attentions of the secret police. Tomas, now with neither opportunity nor ability to engage in erotic adventures, is finally able to live together with Tereza in happiness and mutual love. Their idyll culminates in a final night spent dancing in a small rural hotel before their accidental death the following day in Tomas’s ill-maintained truck. The very last section of the novel’s concluding seventh part supports this upbeat conclusion — ‘Happiness filled the space of sadness’. The Unbearable Lightness of Being concludes with an ending at once light and heavy, recalling the sufferings and ultimate satisfaction and happiness of the late classical myth of Cupid and Psyche, in which Psyche, the soul figured as a butterfly, finally finds eternal happiness with Cupid (Eros as physical love). In Kundera’s novel the lovers’ mutual recognition is to be followed by death, not a transformation into eternal godhead:

Tomas turned the key and switched on the ceiling light. Tereza saw two beds pushed together, one of them flanked by a bedside lamp and table. Up out of the lampshade, startled by the overhead light, flew a large nocturnal butterfly that began circling the room. The strains of the piano and violin rose up weakly from below. (304)

This consolatory ending, in which the mutuality of heterosexual love somehow overcomes and escapes the ‘trap’ of the modern world and the ‘concentration
camp' of Czechoslovakia's police state, is a repetition with a difference of the immediately preceding section. Both begin with exactly the same words: '[Tomas] was sitting at the desk where he usually read his books' (307), and end similarly. This penultimate section provides what could be a surreal alternative ending to the novel.

Tomas, sitting at his desk, shows Tereza an official letter telling him 'to report that day to the airfield of the neighbouring town.' They do so, and board a small empty aeroplane. When it eventually lands they find three hooded men with rifles waiting, one of whom shoots Tomas. Here, the narrative dissolves into one of Tereza's proleptic dreams — the shot Tomas turns into a rabbit, which runs off, is caught by the man with the rifle, and returned to Tereza, who is happy to hold it. She takes the rabbit back to her old childhood home in Prague, where she sits alone in her room:

It had a bed, a table, and a chair. The table had a lamp on it, a lamp that never stopped burning in anticipation of her return, and on the lamp perched a butterfly with two large eyes painted on its widespread wings. Tereza knew she was at her goal. She lay down on the bed and pressed the rabbit to her face. (306)

The conclusion of this section is a close préfiguration of the final scene and final paragraph of the whole novel, and both call the Cupid and Psyche story to mind. However, Tereza’s dream forces her into a revaluation of their idyllic retreat to the country: ‘Now they were in a place that led nowhere’ (310). Worse, ‘Her weakness was aggressive and kept forcing [Tomas] to capitulate until eventually he lost his strength and was transformed into the rabbit in her arms’ (310). (This is a repetition of her much earlier wish in Prague that Tomas was much older, ‘As weak as I am’ (73).) Tereza’s last minute re-reading of their love story threatens to undercut the consolatory fiction of the conclusion. Tomas has been forced to give up his career as a surgeon, a defining force in his life, as well as his erotic life. His life with Tereza on the collective farm is perhaps less an idyll than a radical diminishment: the Cupid and Psyche myth is an illusion.

What this account omits is the death of Karenin, paradoxically the most moving death in the novel. It also brings Tomas and Tereza closer together than at any other point, though Tereza comes to ask ‘whether the love that tied her to Karenin was better than the love between her and Tomas’, because it was ‘a completely selfless love’: ‘Tereza accepted Karenin for what he was; she did not try to make him over in her image’ (297). Karenin, the female dog with the male name, is a hermaphroditic figure, through whom Tomas and Tereza are brought together in their mutual compassion for his/her suffering. Karenin also serves a key example in the debate about the division between body and soul which runs through the novel. Descartes believed animals had no soul, and were therefore automatons, which ‘made man “maître et propriétaire de la nature”’ (288). Cartesian arrogance is intimately linked to the totalitarianism of the ‘Grand March’. The connection is made explicit by the narrator: ‘I love Tereza with the
mortally ill dog resting his head in her lap. I see them one next to the other: both stepping down from the road along which mankind, "the master and proprietor of nature", marches onward' (290).

Stepping outside history, retreating to the personal, may here be the only possible way of escaping the ‘trap’ of the immediate pressures of history and ideology. Although the formal structure of The Unbearable Lightness of Being and its repetitions endorse the ‘heaviness’ of Tomas’s compassionate love for Tereza as opposed to the ‘lightness’ of Sabina’s ‘betrayal’ of parents and country, the novel refuses any secure affirmation of its humanist beliefs. The critical intelligence which informs Kundera’s fiction and his writings on the novel questions itself even as it discovers a fictional resolution.

WORKS CITED
ALEX TICKELL

Terrorism and the Informative Romance:
Two Early South-Asian Novels in English

On a warm evening early in July 1909, a young Indian man dressed informally in a plain suit and a carefully wound light blue turban left his lodgings in Ledbury Road, Bayswater, for the last time. Madan Lal Dhingra, a student at London’s University College, had already been out earlier in the evening at a shooting range on the Tottenham Court Road, where he had practised firing his Colt revolver at a paper target, and had asked for the gun to be cleaned before he left. As he walked quickly towards South Kensington, Dhingra carried the Colt, another automatic revolver, and a dagger hidden in his coat. His destination was the Imperial Institute, where the National Indian Association had organised a concert and reception; one of their ‘At Homes’ held for the purpose of giving Indian students and visitors to London a chance to meet people sympathetic to Britain’s colonial subjects. The invitation had asked guests to wear evening dress or ‘native costume’ and as Dhingra arrived at the meeting he must have realised that his inconspicuous clothes actually made him stand out in the midst of the black tail-coats and brilliant Indian fabrics which made a crowded patchwork in the brightly lit reception room.

Did he arrive at the reception late or did he wait, listening nervously to the concert, conscious of the burden of the two revolvers in his coat pockets? Witnesses later reported that Dhingra had ‘done nothing to arouse suspicion’, and it was not until the reception was nearly over and the students, visiting dignitaries, and civil-servants had started to leave, moving out onto the landing of the reception hall, that Dhingra acted. He pushed his way through the crowd, trying to keep near the Aide to the Secretary of State for India, Sir W.H. Curzon Wyllie. As Wyllie waited on the landing for his wife to collect her wrap from the cloakroom, Dhingra approached him, raised the revolver, and shot him several times at almost point blank range. Seeing the shooting, a Parsi physician standing nearby, Dr Cawas Lalcaca, tried to intervene, but was also shot and slumped to the floor. Dhingra then raised the gun to his own head, but was overpowered by other guests before he could fire, and was arrested by the police who arrived a few minutes later. The suspicion that he intended to become a political martyr was corroborated by a statement explaining his aims (suppressed by the police) that was found in his pocket. At his trial, Dhingra voiced these aims himself:

I maintain that if it is patriotic in an Englishman to fight against the Germans if they were to occupy this country, it is much more justifiable and patriotic in my case to
fight against the English. I hold the English people responsible for the murder of 80 millions of Indian people in the last fifty years, and ... for taking away [millions of pounds] every year from India to this country.... I make this statement, not because I wish to plead for mercy or anything of that kind. I wish that English people should sentence me to death, for in that case the vengeance of my countrymen will be all the more keen. I put forward this statement to show the justice of my cause to the outside world."

Madan Lal Dhingra was quickly convicted and executed in Pentonville prison a few weeks later. His highly-publicised assassination of a British official now barely merits a sentence in the standard histories of the Indian independence struggle. However, at the time, the symbolic impact of a terrorist attack in the metropolitan hub of the Empire, rather than its politically unstable peripheries, was exceptional. The Times correspondent, Valentine Chirol, writing of the assassination, stated: ‘It required nothing less than the shock of a murder perpetrated in the heart of London to open the eyes of those in authority ... to the nature of the revolutionary propaganda ... carried on outside India in sympathy, and often in connivance with the more violent leaders of the anti-British agitation in India itself’ (145). Dhingra’s terrorist act had shown that the development of communications and transport networks between imperial centres and the colonies in the late nineteenth century had also multiplied, and interwoven the ‘contact zones’ (Pratt, Burton) across which radical anti-colonial groups could operate.

In her study of Indian accounts of Britain during this period, Antoinette Burton shows how the steady flow of metropolitan writing about Britain’s colonies was matched by an uneven but insistently countermanding set of texts by South-Asians revealing how ‘England itself was [also] available for consumption, appropriation, and refiguration by its colonial subjects’ (8). For the growing number of students and intellectuals who journeyed to Britain, Paris and other imperial centres after 1900, the process of textual refiguring increasingly took the form of the translation of political biographies, revolutionary works, and historical accounts of nationalist movements such as the Italian Risorgimento. Just two weeks after the Curzon Wyllie assassination, Mohandas Gandhi arrived in London to petition the government about oppressive registration policies in the Transvaal, where he worked as a barrister. Horrified by the killing, he filed an article for Indian Opinion, stating that Dhingra’s defence was ‘inadmissible’, and that he had been motivated by the ‘ill-digested reading of worthless writings’ (302). Drafting what was to become his political masterpiece, Hind Swaraj, on the voyage back to South Africa three months later, Gandhi must have envisaged his work, which drew on a comparably eclectic range of writings, as a timely remedy for directionless cosmopolitans such as Dhingra.

The mobile, often clandestine industry of textual translation and counter-production to which Gandhi refers was not confined to political tracts or historical writings alone. Indeed, I have sketched out this account of an almost forgotten terrorist act, which momentarily dimmed the high noon of British Imperialism,
in order to map out the contexts of two early South-Asian novels in English, both published in London in 1909, which present the sensitive issue of proto-nationalist politics to a metropolitan audience in the aftermath of the Dhingra case. These works are significant because, among other things, they challenge two widely held critical assumptions about the development of the South-Asian novel in English. The first of these is the general agreement that before the 'founding' authors of the 1930s, Indian fiction in English was antiquated and derivative, demonstrating what Tabish Khair calls 'a predictable degree of Eurocentrism or European orientalia and aesthetic slavishness' (47). The second is the assumption that early English fictions written by South-Asians had little political leverage, or that these were works with only a minimal, elite Anglophone readership in the subcontinent.

The novels I discuss in the following pages, S.M. Mitra’s *Hindupore* and Sarath Kumar Ghosh’s *The Prince of Destiny*, attempt none of the Indian-English linguistic experimentation for which authors such as Raja Rao became famous three decades later; but in their middlebrow mixing of romance and political commentary, a generic blend which seems to invoke the same readership that avidly consumed the work of colonial romance authors such as Flora Annie Steel and Maud Diver (Parry), they enshrine a political complexity which is much more than slavish aesthetic imitation. Contemplating the politically ‘incendiary literature’ produced in London before 1910 by radicals such as Vinayak Savarkar, Chirol reveals that dissident writings, such as Savarkar’s revisionist history of the Indian Mutiny, were often published in false covers with titles such as ‘Pickwick Papers’ in order to escape confiscation by the police (149). Answering to the commercial imperatives of a colonial literary market but conveying a more intricate anti-colonial critical mandate, novels such as *Hindupore* and *The Prince of Destiny* are, I think, examples of an analogous, though more conflicted formal camouflaging.

**The Graft of Writing: Mixing Genres in the Informative Romance**

An urban terrorist attack motivated by nationalism, the Curzon Wyllie assassination was, in Anthony Parel’s view, a ‘*modern* political act par excellence’ (xxvii). In a distant historical prefiguring of the attacks by Islamic militants in the United States nearly a century later, one of the defining features of the British response to the events at the Imperial Institute was a sense of a failure of intelligence. In 1907 the British government had set up a committee to investigate the ‘Indian student problem’, and had concluded that migration to London actually strengthened nationalist feelings among visiting students. However, little could be done because the British police were unable to arrest or even identify would-be terrorists. In the view of the British Secretary of State, John Morley, writing to Lord Minto in 1908, the British police were ‘wholly useless in the case of Indian conspirators’ and could not even ‘distinguish Hindu from Mohammedan, or Verma from Varma’ (Lahiri 128). In his monograph *Empire*
and Information, C.A. Bayly argues that in nineteenth-century British India these colonial intelligence failures were nothing new, and suggests that far from signifying Britain’s powerful ‘orientalising’ ideological hold on South-Asian society, the creation of oriental stereotypes actually indicated a ‘weakness or limitation in colonial power and knowledge’ (70-1). These weaknesses precipitated colonial society into periodic ‘information panics’ during which an administrative understanding of the (potentially hostile) objectives of the colonised melted into rumour and fearful supposition.

Resident in London, Sarath Kumar Ghosh and S.M. Mitra were, as regular contributors to British journals and newspapers, already part of the imperial information order. As a political journalist and member of the Royal Asiatic Society, Mitra was particularly keen to align himself with the establishment. In the aftermath of the Curzon Wyllie assassination their media value as ‘native informants’, providing insights into the motivations of Indian nationalists, must have increased significantly. I am not suggesting that they exploited the commercial opportunities afforded by anti-colonial terrorism directly; both authors may have already started writing their novels before the Curzon Wyllie assassination occurred. Rather, I think that their work exemplifies Tanika Sarkar’s injunction that we ‘cannot afford to view the colonial past as an unproblematic retrospect where all power was on one side and all protest on the other’, and recalls her warning that South-Asian writers and intellectuals developing a ‘multi-faceted nationalism’ were often ‘compliant with power and domination even when they critiqued western knowledge and challenged colonial power’ (1870).

The informative brief of Mitra’s work is signalled in its full title: Hindupore: A Peep Behind the Indian Unrest. In the novel’s preface the ‘distinguished Indian Expert’, George Birdwood, emphasises this specular function, stating that Hindupore ‘reveals many of the deepmost [sic] things of India hidden from Englishmen, even those who may have passed away half their lives in that country’. Outlining the dual appeal of the novel he states: ‘Apart from the attractions Hindupore may have for the reader of romances it [also] has a political value in this momentary crisis of affairs in India’ (viii). Ghosh’s The Prince of Destiny, features a similar gloss, the publisher’s preface assuring us that this ‘many-sided romance … is a presentment of India by an Indian’ and ‘draws a picture of Indian life from the inside’ (v). Both novels would have been read by an elite class of educated, English-speaking Indians in Britain, the Indian subcontinent, and other parts of the empire. However, their preface statements (and the pictures of the authors in South-Asian dress which appear on the flyleaves) anticipate a sceptical non-Indian readership, and play on their authenticity as works which reveal ‘the Indian view of the causes of the present unrest, and Britain’s unseen peril in India’ (v).

While these novels were sold to British readers as representative of ‘the Indian view’, the way they framed this view was rather more complex. Early Indian-
English novelists worked at the confluence of several literary traditions, and their choice of genre, especially their common interest in history and the romance form, was far from coincidental. As Priya Joshi remarks:

Towards the end of the century, when Indian novelists started writing in English, they were following several generations of highly successful novelists in regional [Indian] languages with whom they were in dialogue, much as they remained in a one-sided monologue with British writers stretching as far back as Defoe through Reynolds, Crawford, and Corelli. From this three-way conversation and the complex circuits of exchange, transaction, translation and consumption, an English novel emerged in India. (137-38)

This is clearly the case with a writer such as Sarath Kumar Ghosh, whose novel reproduces some of the most important features of contemporary Bengali literature — a distinctive, highly political interest in the techniques of historical fiction, and the cultural-nationalist incorporation of Hindu mythology. Both authors’ use of the romance mode, which concentrates on heroic quests or struggles, idealises character and ‘act[s] out through stylised figures the radical impulses of human experience’ (Beer 9), is also telling since, as already noted, it represented a stock ‘orientalising’ response to India in colonial fiction, but could also be readily adapted to articulate the dreams and frustrations of the colonised.

The ‘circuits of exchange and transaction’ which Joshi notes in the early novel in English are strikingly evident in the narrative bifurcation of Ghosh’s and Mitra’s novels, as they promise the escapist pleasures of the romance while also revealing hidden political truths. Indeed, in Hindupore the seams which hold together these different textual components are all too visible: in his preface Mitra clearly indicates that his novel, which follows the adventures of an aristocratic Irish MP, Lord Tara, as he visits India and falls in love with the beautiful princess Kamala, is, at the same time, a fictional reworking of a series of articles on ‘Indian Unrest’ which he published in the journal Nineteenth Century. With chapter-headings such as ‘An English Missionary’, ‘The Hindu in Anglo-Indian Politics’ and ‘Hindu-Japanese Affinity’, the romance elements of Hindupore are clearly subordinate to its didactic intent, and Mitra’s preacherly tone often makes for stilted dialogue.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, Ghosh’s The Prince of Destiny — technically a more sophisticated work than Mitra’s — anticipates much later South-Asian fiction (64) in its cross-cultural thematics and its Rushdiesque use of mythic resonance (throughout the text Ghosh hints that his protagonist, Prince Barath, is a redemptive political incarnation of Krishna). Employing more recognisable formal elements from the romance mode, Ghosh’s novel tells the story of the coming of age of Prince Barath, as he inherits the state of Barathpur and tries to reconcile his love for England with his loyalty to his own homeland. As well as mirroring aspects of the Conradian ‘romance of integrity’ (Stevens 24), a cross-cultural love-interest in The Prince of Destiny brings us back to the
work of colonial ‘romancers’ such as Steel and Diver, whose proscriptions against ‘inter-racial’ relationships are subtly subverted in the presentation of romantic affinities between Europeans and Indians in both novels. These partnerships are one of the most unexpected aspects of Ghosh’s and Mitra’s writings, and can be linked to a broader, tactical interest in the presentation of critical collaboration and (sometimes highly ambiguous) friendship between coloniser and colonised, which I shall now examine now in more detail.

**MOTIFS OF CRITICAL COLLABORATION**

*The Prince of Destiny* and *Hindupore* both mediate the politics of the freedom struggle before it became a coherent mass-movement, and unlike the later novels of the 1930s, offer little sense of a national political alternative to British rule. Of the two, Ghosh comes closest to envisaging a free India, but only within the feudal dispensation of one of India’s princely states, and in both novels anti-colonial resistance is envisaged as either a pan-Hindu *sanyassi* brotherhood (a gesture, perhaps, to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Bangali classic *Anandamath*), or as the province of secretive terrorist cadres such as Ghosh’s sensationally-named ‘House of the Serpent Gem’. The conflicts which are thus played out in these works are evidently, overtly counter-hegemonic. By implying that colonial interpretations of the Indian situation are misguided, both authors claim an epistemological advantage, a point of leverage in the structure of the colonial information order. This can be used either to intimate the dire consequences of imperial hubris, epitomised in dangerously unpredictable events such as terrorist bombings and assassinations, or, alternatively, to call for a greater (more sympathetic) understanding between coloniser and colonised.

Idealised cross-cultural friendships that feature in both *The Prince of Destiny* and *Hindupore* provide a basis for several of the didactic passages about India and Indian political views. In the latter novel Mitra’s protagonist, Lord Tara, stays with Raja Ram Singh during his visit to India, and urges his fellow colonials to ‘more friendly and intimate intercourse’ with Indians since ‘India and Anglo-India are two nations without sympathy for each other, and yet they have so many interests in common’ (278). Embodying an interesting instance of racial ‘passing’, Tara, who has become sun-tanned, is told ‘you are growing like us’ by an Indian acquaintance, to which he replies archly, ‘I certainly am well-tanned by your Indian sun. I like it’ (165). On the other hand, *The Prince of Destiny*, with its *bildungsroman* structure, incorporates idealised cross-cultural understandings into a surrogate parental relationship. Present at Prince Barath’s birth, an army colonel named Wingate who is ‘not like other men’ in his sympathy for India, offers to be Barath’s ‘guide and guardian’ during his education in Britain. Later in the novel, Barath stays with the elderly Wingate during vacations from Cambridge, and (rehearsing Friedrich Max Müller’s work on comparative mythology) discusses mythical and metaphysical similarities between Christianity and Hinduism with him.
However, as I have hinted, these idealised friendships, and the cultural comparisons they foster, also sanction voices that are highly critical of colonial rule. This tonal shift occurs in *Hindupore* when Raja Ram Singh describes the covert racism of the colonial authorities to Tara, and is even more apparent in Ghosh’s slightly threatening narrative asides: ‘So far I have tried to expound the case for the British government against its accusers … lest in the future course of this book an accuser should arise against whose charges I could find no defence’ (145). During a friendly meeting between Barath and his political Resident Lord Melnor in *The Prince of Destiny*, an ‘accuser’ duly appears when Barath’s minister berates Melnor, saying ‘You boast about your wonderful rule in India, too blind to see that you are kept here by our docility … the marvel is not your wonderful capacity for ruling, but your extraordinary capacity for blundering’ (466). As Yu Sheng-Yen suggests, the ‘debunking of colonial ideological superiority’ in these novels forms a striking counterpart to the almost clairvoyant intelligence gathering of contemporary colonial fictions such as Kipling’s *Kim*.

Indeed, in Mitra’s novel the panoptical reach of Kipling’s ‘Great Game’ is replaced by a fearful, ignorant blindness, as when Lord Tara’s friend Harvey admits that the colonial civil service is ‘absolutely in the dark ... we cannot see the subtle but sure processes of pan-Hinduism under our very noses’ (221).

The trans-national plot developments of novels such as *The Prince of Destiny*, point to other interesting instances of collaboration. In 1906, while lodging in a boarding-house in Highgate, Ghosh became friends with the poet Francis Thompson, who was staying in a room opposite his; this casual boarding-house acquaintance is transformed in *The Prince of Destiny* into a deep unspoken sympathy between Barath and Francis Thompson. In Ghosh’s novel the unexpected ‘postmodern’ technique of citing a ‘real’ cultural figure promotes an unusual image of literary collaboration, when Barath and Thompson jointly translate Kâlidâsa’s classic Sanskrit play *Abhijñānā kaçuntalam* (*The Recognition of Ākuntalā*).

Barath saw visions. An accurate yet truly poetic translation of ‘Sakuntala’ into English was worth the whole British army in India. [It] contained the essence of domestic ideals in India and was cherished alike by prince and peasant: was known by heart by the man in the street, and in the hamlet was recited by the village bard to the toilers in the field.

‘Francis, complete this work I beg of you’, Barath cried in dawning hope. ‘Let the British public read it, and thus understand our most cherished ideals’, [the translation] will serve to remove a mountain of misconception between Great Britain and India’.

(295–96)

For later postcolonial authors the process of translation would be used to evoke the subjective-transformations of migration, but in *The Prince of Destiny* the shared work of translation anticipates intimate communication, and an ethical Levinasian recognition of Otherness — a mutually enriching meeting across
cultures which Elleke Boehmer also finds in contemporary trans-nationalist collaborations (Boehmer 176). As Barath and Thompson work together, they enter a transcendent state: ‘The midnight hour passed unheeded. The clock of the neighbouring church struck the successive hours ... the two minds worked like one’ (298). Even so, this image of cross-cultural teamwork points up, once again, the ambiguous political positioning of these informative romances, as they respond to a colonial audience at the zenith of British imperial rule. By indicating that a collaborative translation of Ûakuntalâ will encourage a comprehension of India’s ‘most cherished’ (Hindu) ideals, Ghosh calls, implicitly, for cross-cultural reconciliation, but in stating that the translation will be ‘worth the whole British Army in India’, he also maintains a sharp sense of the ideological value of translation as a component of imperial rule. At the same time, the phrase admits another reading, implying the possibility of substitution as well as equivalence. In short, the value of translation in The Prince of Destiny, as a metonym for the relationship between coloniser and colonised, slips between a power-sharing tolerant imperialism and a utopian politics somewhere beyond the colonial present.

The resistance strategies of the informative romance I have sketched here, are flexible and hard to define, tending, in Yu’s view, to co-opt a colonial readership as the necessary precursor of any attempt to voice political concerns (209). Certainly the techniques of formal disguise and the motifs of critical collaboration touched on in this essay indicate a struggle for political agency, and point up the difficulties of establishing an authoritative voice (or even a secure sense of a sympathetic reception) at this early growth period of South-Asian fiction in English. Nevertheless, in their attention to the discursive effects of terrorist acts such as the Curzon Wyllie assassination, these novels also give us a sense of the spectrum of concessionary and counter-hegemonic writings which operated in conjunction with more militant anti-colonial nationalism. Perhaps more than their successors (who wrote ‘back’ to a national homeland) Ghosh and Mitra reveal in their writing the cultural negotiations of what Amitav Ghosh calls ‘that curious circumstance of social dislocation and emotional turmoil ... the turbulent limbo of the Asian or African student in [colonial] Europe’ (24), which incubated so many of the great national liberation movements of the last century.

NOTES

1 The Curzon Wyllie assassination was reported widely in the press, and all the details of the case described here have been taken from articles in the Times from 3, 6, and 12 of July, 1909. Madan Lal Dhirgra’s statement before the court was reported in the Times, 12 July, p. 4. Dhirgra was connected with Shayamji Krishnavarma’s nationalist group at ‘India House’ in Highgate, and was hailed as a political martyr in Krishnavarma’s revolutionary monthly pamphlet, The Indian Sociologist. For a good critical overview of terrorism and the national movement see Peter Heehs.
Yu Sheng-Yen also makes the observation that, paradoxically, Mitra’s *Hindupore* borrows its plot-structure from a short-story by Kipling entitled ‘The Enlightenment of Pagett MP’. In Kipling’s story, Pagett’s liberal views about Indian Home Rule are challenged during his visit to India by his friend Orde, a practical, hard-bitten I.C.S. officer, who states ‘There are no politics, in a manner of speaking, in India. It’s all work’ (337).

The ambiguities of Ghosh’s image of collaborative translation are complicated by the fact that the real-life Francis Thompson often expressed staunchly pro-imperialist sentiments.

For his account of an ethical attention to an other which remains irreducible to the self, see Emmanuel Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*.

**WORKS CITED**


STUART MURRAY

Tim Winton’s ‘New Tribalism’: 
Cloudstreet and Community

In Gallipoli, Peter Weir’s 1981 examination of nationalist sentiment and myth, the central protagonists, Archie Hamilton (Mark Lee) and Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson), are both members of the Western Australian Light Horse, a cavalry regiment and part of the 1st Australian Imperial Force that takes part in the conflict at Gallipoli in April 1915. Archie’s death at the end of the narrative — charging into the Turkish guns — and Frank’s ultimate survival conclude the film’s often self-indulgent meditation on the nature of the national imaginary. In seeing Archie’s death as tragedy, and Frank’s survival in terms of a materialist nationalism and the guilt of the fall from an imperial innocence, Gallipoli underlines a number of national orthodoxies even as it seeks to hold others up for scrutiny. Australia, the film asserts, is still best understood in terms of its expression as an arena of male bonding and competition, a space where the interrelationship between the individual and the environment is pivotal in outlining identity, and where the key virtues of Anglo-Celtic pioneer capability and knowledge continue to help define community. The naivety of the imperial relationship may ultimately be seen to be over, but as Archie and Frank race across the athletics tracks of Western Australia as youths, or through the sand to the Pyramids at the Army’s Egyptian training camp, the idea of the national community in this piece of early 1980s culture still has much in common with the late nineteenth-century cultural nationalism of the ‘Coming Man’ and the Bulletin (White 63-84; Turner 25–53 and 107–27).

In Tim Winton’s 1991 novel Cloudstreet, a narrative spanning 20 years of mid twentieth-century Australian life, Lester Lamb, the patriarch of one of the two families that dominate the narrative, is revealed also to have fought with the Light Horse at Gallipoli. In one of the novel’s many scenes at the Lamb kitchen table in the house on Cloud Street, Lester is drawn into conversation with his wife, Oriel, and son, Quick, about the part the family played in the First World War. Quick asks Oriel:

The one who went to war. The half brother you were waitin for. Did he come back?
No.
Died of wounds in Palestine. The Holy Land. Shot by a Turkish airman at a well. He was a signalman. He was waterin horses. He was always good with horses.
Did you know him Dad? You were there.
I was only at Anzac, said Lester.
He was a genius with horses, said Oriel

Horses were geniuses with me, said Lester. That’s why I was in the Light Horse. They were always lighter after they bucked me off.

You were a hero, said Quick.

Lester pumped the old harmonica to break the quiet, and because he knows, well as Oriel knows, that it’s just not true. (72)

It is Quick’s youth that prompts his easy conflation of his father’s presence at Gallipoli with the conception of him as a hero. At this point in the narrative (the conversation takes place in the mid 1940s) Quick has no reason to question the dominance of the cultural nationalism secured by the elevation of the Returned Soldier to the position of unassailable icon following the end of the First World War; but, as Winton’s narrative makes clear, Lester Lamb’s status as a Gallipoli veteran confirms little that is of value. In contrast to the mythic constructions of Weir’s film, the world of Cloudstreet — working-class Perth suburbs, railway tracks, rivers and estuaries — rather presents personal and communal identity caught in limbo and open to renegotiation. The standard markers of Australian nationalist orthodoxy as agonised over in Gallipoli are replaced in the novel by the necessities of understanding the nature of the everyday and the mundane, by the fraught nature of fate and faith, and by an acceptance of versions of family and humanity that refigure an idea of community. The conception of Australia as a space of masculine capability, articulated within a laconic vernacular, becomes not a conclusion in Winton’s text, but rather a point of departure.

The consolidation of the myths produced by Gallipoli suffused much of Australian public culture in the decades following the end of the First World War, producing models of masculinity, community and nationhood that became inscribed as cultural norms. It is these very norms that Winton’s notion of the potential ‘new tribalism’ of Australian community seeks to disrupt, especially by way of Cloudstreet’s representation of family. To some degree, the novel continues the concerns of Winton’s previous novels: An Open Swimmer (1982), Shallows (1984), That Eye, the Sky (1986), and In the Winter Dark (1988). Like the earlier texts, the narrative is dominated by the presence of water. For Winton, the rivers and coast of Western Australia around Perth are both evocative of place, and markers of vision and rebirth conveying central tenets of Christian faith. Cloudstreet is framed by Fish Lamb’s ‘second drowning’, a rush to embrace the river that contains ‘all the wonders inside ... all the great and the glorious’ (2), and mirrors an earlier scene in which Fish is accidentally dragged underwater by a net while the Lamb family is out fishing. For Fish, water conveys a truth: ‘and then my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everywhere. Me’ (424). For Winton this kind of conjunction of knowledge and self and place is the revelation the fiction works towards. As he said in a 1991 interview, at the time of Cloudstreet’s publication: ‘if I know where I am, I usually know who I am. I write about small
places; about people in small situations. If I can get a grip on the geography, I can get a grip on the people’ (Willbanks 190).

In a similar vein, Cloudstreet, like Winton’s previous fiction, contains central characters confused by the difficulties of the everyday world and often unable to articulate their position in relation to family or community (Matthews 84). Jerra, in An Open Swimmer, is plagued with repressed guilt about sexual depravity. Cleve Cookson, in Shallows, comes to the small Western Australian coastal town of Angelus as a failure. Initially saved by his love for his new wife Queenie, he nevertheless senses the end of his happiness, a process he seems unable to avoid:

He loved this woman. There was nothing left that meant more to him. The only happy days in his life had been spent with her. Their love had brought him life, colour, hope; and now he was almost able to stand back and see himself flirting with loss. It astounded him, but he did nothing to arrest it’ (23).

In That Eye, the Sky, the schoolboy Ort struggles with the mysteries of the mundane until he recognises that it is only some form of the visionary that will explain the routines of the commonplace. In Cloudstreet, within the complexities and demands of communal and familial belonging, the faith of the Lamb family is set against the stress placed on luck by the novel’s other central family, the Pickles, with whom the Lambs share the Cloud Street house. If Oriel and Lester Lamb are allowed to believe, even briefly, that Fish is saved from drowning during his accident by miraculous divine intervention, such faith is initially juxtaposed in the novel by Sam Pickles’ stress on the ‘shifty shadow’ of God. At the very start of the narrative, Sam, ignoring the tell-tale signs to ‘stay there right till the shadow’s fallen across whoever’s lucky or unlucky enough’ (9), loses the fingers of his right hand in an accident aboard a barge at the guano mine where he works. For both the Lambs and the Pickles, articulating why such almost casual disasters can take place seems an impossibility early in the novel. With the reassurances of faith and the random nature of luck seemingly equal potential categories of explanation, neither can be relied upon, and all the characters seem caught in a pessimistic stasis. As Sam lies in hospital, visited by his wife Dolly and daughter Rose, the scene defies sentiment and meaning: ‘The woman and the daughter do not speak. The crippled man does not stir. The breeze comes in the window and stops the scene turning into a painting’ (16).

Similarly, Quick Lamb extends the characterisation of Jerra, Cleve and Ort in his battles with the often restrictive pressures of an orthodox masculinity that leave him frequently incapable of expression. Tortured over the feeling that he was responsible for Fish’s accident, Quick ‘picks up sadness like he’s got a radar for it’ (89), and constructs a bedroom wall of sorrow, a ‘gallery of the miserable’ (61), plastered with newspaper pictures of refugees and prisoners of war. For Quick, emotional articulacy lies buried beneath the consequences of his own adolescence and the Lambs’ various family hostilities and traumas, and the wider cultural pressures that, as seen in Weir’s Gallipoli, value the male as laconic
joker. His reaction is to leave school and the house on Cloud Street, and to go bush. He becomes a kangaroo culler, and in so doing enacts the kind of masculine capability that, within the orthodox cultural nationalism that dominated much twentieth-century Australian thought, projects an image of personal physical aptitude and efficiency, and an idea of community predicated on the extension of such pioneering settler traits. As with Jerra's fishing and bushman skills in *An Open Swimmer*, Quick's abilities are considerable, but in 'learning not to think much at these times, only to listen' (197), he is becoming less, rather than more, articulate in the ways of living in the world. Struck in the chest by a kangaroo he has failed to kill properly, Quick has a vision as he lies wounded. He sees Fish rowing across the wheat field towards him in a clearly suggestive substitution of the element in which Quick feels most at home, water, for the notion of place he has come to in his work (200). Quick heals, but on a subsequent culling expedition sees a vision of himself, 'a man running raw and shirtless in the night ... tough with fear' (204), coming towards him. Stunned by what he has seen, and unable to explain it in any rational terms, Quick flees.

Within such an episode lies a crucial element of the novel's delineation of community. The pressures that dominate Quick's narrative are clearly personal, but Winton inflects them with the traces of a number of recognisable cultural traits so that the actions of character are endlessly involved in a revision of key conceptions of orthodox personal or communal behaviour. In effect, Quick's failure as a bushman points to the poverty of the assumption that meaningful identity is necessarily informed by an engagement with the land and settler values. Initially, Quick misses the signs that inform him of this. His vision of Fish, and that of his own fearful self, is followed by his picking up an aboriginal figure when out driving. The man, who has an 'inexhaustible' supply of wine and bread, is an angelic figure who recurs throughout the narrative. He directs Quick back to the house on Cloud Street in another obvious sign of appropriate return, but 'laughing fearfully' Quick can only again flee from his home. His next immediate stop though, with family members for whom he works for a short time, is only another sign of the paucity of possible ways of living:

Earl and May lived in a truckshed by the road out of town. They had been married twenty years now and had no children. They were farmers as well as truckies, and they were rough as guts. Earl could feel no pain and he could not imagine it in others. The depression had made him hard; war had beaten him flat and work had scoured all the fun from him. He was hard beyond belief, beyond admiration. On a Sunday night Quick saw him apply a blowtorch to the belly of a fallen cow before going back inside to pedal the old pianola for May. The land has done this to them, Quick thought; this could have been us. (211)

The ways in which this passage suggests personal values can be eroded by inappropriate living structures is typical of the method by which *Cloudstreet* revises an idea of community. Sam’s loss of his fingers so early in the novel is
another example, in that it immediately removes him from his most obvious context, that of the working-class realm of the masculine. Dolly immediately notes that the injury is to Sam’s ‘bloody working hand’ (15). Sam can continue drinking and gambling, those other key activities of the laconic working-class male, but his injury necessarily changes the ways in which he interacts with such a canonically defined realm of the male subject. He is, as it were, forcibly cut off from one of the spaces the culture assumes he should inhabit, and made to face the costs of this. In a 1997 interview, Winton claimed that he writes ‘from an orthodox female point of view’ (Guy 129), in opposition to what he sees as a mainstream tradition in Australian writing. In Cloudstreet, the result is that while many male characters, such as Quick and Sam, can feel their estrangement from their emotional lives and the spheres of activity that might contain them, it is the female characters that act upon the consequences of such realisations. Quick’s world is transformed by his relationship with Rose Pickles, and it is the birth of their son, and the creation of a new family from the two familial communities within the Cloud Street house, that function as key markers of positive change in the novel.

More generally, the house itself is full of personal stories; histories embedded in the walls that converse with the Lambs and the Pickles. Early on in the novel, we learn that the house was formerly owned by a widow who established it as a mission house for young aboriginal girls: ‘She aimed to make ladies of them so they could set a standard for the rest of their sorry race’ (36). Following the death of one of the girls, the widow forces all the others to view the body before she herself dies from a heart attack while playing the piano a few weeks later: ‘She cried out in surprise, in outrage and her nose hit middle C hard enough to darken the room with sound.... There was middle C in that library until rigor mortis set in.... The house was boarded up, and it held its breath’ (36). Such subtle inflections of history characterise the text. For the Lambs and Pickles, although they do not realise it, the house is a palimpsest of the nation even as it is the domestic space that contains individual struggles. The note from the piano rings throughout the house in an echo of the barbarity of racial prejudice, and the ghosts that inhabit the rooms are only finally exorcised when Rose gives birth in the library where the widow died. In labour, Rose presses her head to the wall ‘where a vicious old white woman looks down aghast at what’s pinning her knees’ (382), and following the birth ‘The room goes quiet. The spirits on the wall are fading, fading, finally being forced on their way to oblivion, free of the house, freeing the house, leaving a warm, clean, sweet space among the living, among the good and hopeful’ (384). For Winton, the birth of Harry is momentous as a marker of a new community. After living away from the house in their own family home, Rose and Quick agree that they feel the need to return. Rose is explicit about the nature of this space:
I like the crowds and the noise. And, well, I guess I like the idea, it’s like getting another childhood, another go at things. Think of it: I’m in this old house with the boy next door and his baby, and I’m not miserable and starving or frightened. I’m right in the middle. It’s like a village, I don’t know. I have these feelings. I can never explain these feelings...

But it’s two families. It’s a bloody tribe, a new tribe. (418-19)

Though Rose cannot articulate it, the ‘new tribalism’ of the Cloud Street house is, by implication, a reformed national space as well, a gesture towards a world that is more supportive and just. For Winton, this is clearly a point about settlement. His acknowledgement that he had to learn that Australia contained ‘many ways and many wisdoms’ establishes a viewpoint that extends beyond European notions of the nation: ‘What were aboriginals doing out there for 40,000 years walking about, feeling like they belonged to the land, and belonged to their stories and to their dreams? How can we say that God was absent?’ (Butstone 19).

For her part, Oriel wrestles with the difficulties of being in the world in ways that many of the other characters are simply incapable of, and which are crucial to Winton’s ideas of a settled sense of self and place. It is Oriel, for example, who is the novel’s exemplar of the Christian work ethic that also underpins the security of belief in the national, a conjunction vital to the text’s portrayal of a culturally orthodox mid twentieth-century Australian life. Oriel is the dominant force behind the Lambs’ shop, to the extent that all of Cloud Street ‘would be full of ... the reverberations of Oriel’s instructions’ (58). Equally Oriel’s matriarchal power maps the family on to the nation:

The Anzacs were what the Lambs believed in, the glorious memories of manhood and courage. The nation, that’s what kept the Lambs going. They were patriots like no others. The thought of World Communism put fear in their hearts. Oriel had dreams about Joe Stalin — she knew what he was about. They weren’t political, Lester and Oriel, but they were proud and they offered themselves to the nation. (144)

Yet the novel makes it clear that this conception of a working-class national community, seemingly secure in its version of history and politics, is ultimately insufficient in allowing its characters to embrace a meaningful sense of home. In a key exchange in the middle of the novel, set during the Second World War, Oriel articulates a lack of belonging that is both familial and cultural. Because of Fish’s rejection of her following his accident, Oriel now doubts other allegiances:

Since Fish.... I’ve been losing the war. I’ve lost me bearins.

Lester makes his teeth meet at all points around his jaw. Talk like this makes him nervous. Something’s going to happen, to be taken from him, to be shone in his face. It’s like walking down a rocky path at night, not knowing where it’ll lead, when it’ll drop from beneath your feet, what it’ll cost to come back.

You believe in the Nation, though. You’re the flaming backbone of the Anzac Club.
Ah, it’s helping the boys, I know, but I read the newspaper, Lester. They’re telling us lies. They’ll send boys off to fight any war now. They don’t care what it’s for.

But, but the good of the country —

Oriel put a blunt finger to her temple: This is the country, and it’s confused. It doesn’t know what to believe in either. You can’t replace your mind country with a nation, Lest. I tried.

Lester almost gasps. It’s one thing for him to say it, but for her to admit such a thing, it’s terrifying.

You believe in hard work, love.

Not for its own sake, I don’t. We weren’t born to work. Look at them next door.

There’s always the family, says Lester.

Families aren’t things you believe in, they’re things you work with. (231–32)

The personal trauma that causes Oriel’s revision of her system of belief is Fish’s accident. Reading the event as a sign of the absence of God, she spends the bulk of the remainder of the novel trying to negate the fact that she is a believer; but, like Quick and Lester, she is tied to the specifics of place, a relationship both geographical and spiritual: ‘her life had always come back to the river’ (176). Through Oriel, Winton is explicit in suggesting that the spiritual power of the everyday must be retrieved from the codifications inherent in orthodox formations of Church and State. The final act of the novel, Oriel taking down the tent in which she has been sleeping in the garden and returning to the house with Dolly Pickles, is one of acceptance in front of a ‘small congregation’ (425), and it is crucial that this takes place immediately after Fish’s return to the river. For Oriel, the power of family and community can only be found following a release. This is not a simple conclusion whereby a clear, straightforward sense of the divine is revealed — Winton’s fiction is notable for its ambiguous endings (Guy 131); rather Oriel’s recognition is an instinctive apprehension of the value of day-to-day struggles. As Winton has said of his characters in Cloudstreet: ‘They are not the kind of people who define what they are sensing’ (Butstone 21).

Crucial to the power and depth of the novel is the nature of actual or potential apprehension for many characters. Quick’s visions in the bush are complemented by many examples of the surreal and visionary: the aboriginal angel saves Oriel from the neighbourhood serial killer (367); a Pentecostal pig talks in tongues (129); Earl and May drive Quick back to the city while he lies ‘lit up like a sixty watt globe’ (219); Fish and Quick row a boat Lester has bought, and Quick finds the ‘sky, packed with stars, rests just above his head, and when Quick looks down the river is full of sky as well. There’s stars and swirl and space down there and it’s not water anymore — it doesn’t even feel wet’ (114). Andrew Taylor has read these scenes as being evidence of Winton’s prose displaying a ‘move beyond narrative, and indeed beyond the condition of language’ (329). Certainly this fits with Winton’s own descriptions of his characters and their lack of ‘definition’, and the ‘unique difficulty’ he finds in writing of spiritual
issues in a widely anti-religious society where orthodox religious categories of expression might be resisted (Butstone 20). Yet, even as such moments of vision do point to a reconfiguration of Christian faith, they also function more widely as a celebration of the mundane and ordinary. *Cloudstreet* rejoices in the rhythms of work and the sights and sounds of the everyday. Fish may be a 'seer' conceived of in terms of the possibilities of rebirth, but he is also an object of filial love and the catalyst for the definition of family responsibility. The pig may possibly reveal the divine, but it is equally a potential meal. If Winton’s fiction approaches transcendence, it does so with roots firmly established in the detail of lived experience.

In his novels following *Cloudstreet*, *The Riders* (1994) and *Dirt Music* (2001), Winton offers a return to a more problematic sense of community. Both Fred Scully and Luther Fox, the central protagonists of each text respectively, are highly mobile individuals, dislocated from settled spaces, and driven on quests for meaning that are anything but straightforward. In this they mirror the concerns of the characters of Winton’s novels of the 1980s (Matthews 84), and those of Quick for much of *Cloudstreet*; but ultimately *Cloudstreet* edges towards an idea of community that is full, if not secure. As Winton has said of what Quick learns in the novel: ‘it is not about in and out, you and me, or us and them. It’s just about us and here. We spend a lifetime learning distinctions that do not exist, defining ourselves against other people and other worlds of existence. But at the end of the day, human life is whole’ (Butstone 21). The novel’s delineation of wholeness not only brings together characters in a location whereby the family becomes tribal, but it underscores the constructions inherent within Australia’s cultural nationalist project. Allowing individuals to achieve the state of ‘being’ that Fish attains, or even to recognise it as a possibility, Winton writes of a sense of place that possesses a resonance that goes beyond the simple geographies of family, house, street or river.

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Is it those plumed clouds the lethargic tourists are gawping at?
Those low-hanging clouds looking as though they might be bursting with news —
Hanging smoke from the fallout of some smart atrocity
Which has laid waste to wide districts of our ancient city,
Or a proclaimed enemy at the gate, our snubbed guns trained at the sky?
Let's whisper in their well-groomed ears, as these tourists stand in wild surmise,
Rather that we read such high signs alliteratively,
Within the intimate, loving life-stories from the varied dead.
These marvellous visitations recur in our everyday,
*Syllabled singly and sweetly in words of melodious meaning.*
Our names for them create through hyphens most imaginative worlds:
For some they are cloud-castles, for others rain-racks or sky-scuds.
Others still make their own names for them, since, for many good years now,
Our young have been well taught to read such signs richly, as they are.
The plot of Mukul Kesavan’s novel, *Looking Through Glass* (1995), almost presents itself as spectacle. Observation of its central mechanism grants us the kind of elation warranted by the sight of an elephant levitating. The unnamed narrator and photographer protagonist, speaking from the present of the end of the twentieth century, describes his current double mission: to scatter his grandmother’s ashes ceremoniously in the waters of the Ganges and to take commissioned photographs of certain architectural features of the ancient buildings of Lucknow, an assignment that would require the use of his brand new, very powerful telephoto lens. Nearing Lucknow towards the end of the long rail journey from Delhi and with the train delayed on a bridge high above a river, he is tempted to use his new ‘magic eye’ (9). Off the train, standing on a vertiginous girder, he trains his lens on otherwise impossibly small figures washing clothes on the riverbank and then, far below him, spots, in the water, ‘a man in a white kurta much like mine … looking up at the train through a little telescope. Man-with-a-lens — here was the picture I had been looking for’ (10). But when — after, as the narrator puts it, ‘we stared at each other through layers of ground glass and I felt a quick affection for this unidentical twin’ (10) — he tries to click the camera button, in and at that instant, he unbalances and, preceded through the whoosh of air by his heavy lens, hurtles downward into the green river. When he awakes, abed and cared for by a family that includes the same young man with the telescope, he discovers that he has not only fallen through space, but has fallen through time to August 1942.

This narrative conceit is maintained throughout the novel, and is put to work in every way. At the thematic level, it enables an eye already familiar with the history of post-Independence India to look, with that hindsight knowledge, at key moments in 1942 and the few years thereafter, during the movement towards Independence. Most crucially, it enables an eye already trained in the ‘official’ Indian history of the nationalist struggle to witness some of the traumatic events that led to the Partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. The collision of times that is always present in historical fiction, even if usually in a covert manner, is dramatised by personal involvement and urgency. Incidents that when reviewed from the ‘present’ had an assigned timbre, order and import, now from the ‘past’ seem curiously disjointed and, often, surreal. Indeed, several of the events viewed (from the ‘present’) as having led heroically towards Independence, such as
incidents in the Quit India campaign of 1942, now appear almost inconsequential. They certainly seem contingent upon the subjective desires, even whims, of figures whose true motivations will not be recalled and whose very names will not be remembered. Because of the narrator’s intense immersion — in fact, participation — in some of these events, the reader is invited to question their significance in a profound and empathetic way. Most notable, given the narrator’s initial word portrait of himself in the ‘present’ as a secularised, somewhat materialist Hindu, the fact that his past-ward plunge is almost literally into a Moslem (though, importantly, Congress) family who introduce him to 1940s India from their perspective, means that the narrative disrupts any received mainstream (Hindu) history. The personal underlines the political: later the narrator even has himself circumcised according to Islamic custom.

At the level of the plot, the reader remains expectant throughout the book of a return to the present, of getting ‘back to the future’ — something that must happen if the first-person narration is not to become an impossibly regressive story, like an M.C. Escher stairway that will not allow the eye to get to the top of the stairs without also simultaneously, returning to the bottom. Moreover, as the reader might anticipate of a master conjuror’s trick, that return is delayed until, and perhaps beyond, another photographic moment on the very last page of the book. At the level of motif, photography (with all its paraphernalia of lenses, cameras and so on) punctuates the text. In the Banaras sequence of the novel, for example, during the farcical scenes leading up to the narrator’s rescue of a young woman from her would-be rapist, he is gulled into operating an old view camera to get still shots of the woman and her seducer/assailant in the sexual positions advocated in the *Kama Sutra*, and the actual narrative becomes one of camera frames within window frames, all to point up the connection between focussing clearly and acting correctly (151–58). In Delhi, working as a waiter at the Cecil Hotel, the narrator serves dinner to the great Jinnah, future leader of Pakistan. ‘When I [came] with the soup’, he tells us, ‘I dropped a fork to peer at his shoes under the table — in the photographs I had seen of him he was always shod in two-coloured brogues. So was he this time’ (175).

The novel so circulates the discourse of photography that it permeates the text, if sometimes only in the form of aphorisms, such as ‘In the sepia of hindsight, all losers look the same’ (336). Photography animates the text until the final page. There, the protagonist, setting his delayed action timer, is able to run in front of the camera and get an exposure of himself, however blurred, taken in 1947, that he can describe in the narrative ‘present’ of the book. It is this photograph — ‘that turning blur’ (375) — that registers his presence in the earlier time, in history: specifically, the moment his adoptive family of Moslem characters arrives back at their own home, not in Pakistan, but emphatically in India. It reminds the reader that, since the invention of the medium, photographs have in general been taken as evidence and index of human presence. Indeed, the novel’s central plot mechanism marshals all the accumulated heritage of
photographic discourse to the effect that the medium grants access to 'reality'.

It is also literally observable that the book's prose descriptions — ostensibly quite apart from any connection to photography — give a very thorough word picture of the visuality of India in the 1940s. The reader sees aspects of everyday life at the time — crowded railway stations, men huddled in cafés, women sewing and washing clothes, and a host of other things. We see the interior of old Moslem houses in Lucknow, the environs of the Kashmiri Gate in Delhi, the colonial sites of Simla, the Old Fort on the outskirts of Delhi, and numerous other vital landmarks, as they were back then. There is a banal sense in which the reader might expect this of a book produced by a practising historian, someone who teaches the subject in a major Delhi university; but on consideration of possible sources for this intense immersion in the visual properties of pre-Independence India, it seems more likely that they are not written documents but, photographs.

India has been much photographed, both during the Raj and since; indeed, it has an extraordinarily rich photographic history that embraces singular native achievements as well as memorable images by visiting travellers. Christopher Pinney has described the pervasiveness of photography in modern Indian society and some of the ways in which its practices were and are specifically inflected by Indian culture. The 'look' of India just prior to Independence certainly was and is available in such photographic collections as The Face of Mother India, compiled in 1935 by the American journalist Katherine Mayo. This huge book of images is accompanied by a commentary that is notable for the fact that it is both anti-colonialist and sympathetic to a Moslem position not far from that of the Moslem Congressmen whose perspective we assimilate in Looking Through Glass. Mayo, in turn, assembled her collection by sifting the offerings of Indian newspapers, various photographic agencies and archives, and the files of private individuals. She took a disproportionate number of her selections from the highly accomplished British photographer and travel writer, Emil Otto Hoppé, (see Hoppé 1934 67–136). Looking Through Glass, however, is more than a mere rendering of this photographic data: I suggest that it represents, cumulatively, a truly photographic way of seeing.

**Mirror with a Memory**

Kesavan's extraordinarily rich novel hinges on a plot device that is highly singular. At the same time, in a partly subliminal manner, the novel's representation of photography is reminiscent of a number of familiar and semi-familiar tropes, some of them dating from nineteenth-century photographic discourse. The most obvious of these is the claim that the photograph has a unique relationship to material reality, one that is somehow closer than that achievable by any other means of representation. In 1839, photographic pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot claimed that when he showed some friends the results of his experiment in photographing a piece of intricate lace their response was
that ‘they were not to be so easily deceived’; it was, they said, ‘no picture, but the piece of lace itself’ (Talbot 39). In such early photographic discourse the claim for a unique kind — or, at least, degree — of veracity and verisimilitude is attributed to the technological and autotelic nature of the medium: Louis Daguerre merely emphasised the ‘chemical and physical process’ at its base (Daguerre 13), whilst Talbot went so far as to say that the camera pictures of his own home amounted to the first instance of a house making a drawing of itself! (Talbot 46).

It is apparent that these inventors of photography saw the medium as obviating the need for selection and copying by the human eye and the human hand at the direction, of the human brain. Thus it was that Talbot wrote of his calotype process as ‘the pencil of nature’ — words he also used for the title of the first book to contain photographic reproductions (published in 1843) — as if its images came into being spontaneously and directly, without human intervention. A close examination of, for example, Talbot’s early 1840s image of a humble haystack — a subject that, because of its very ordinariness, would scarcely have held any attraction for a painter of the time — reveals an extraordinary reproduction of detail and texture. The eye is drawn to the shadow created by the ladder propped up against the stack, as it mark’s the sun’s stilled passage. Similar to the effect of looking through a magnifying glass, it is as though we see every separate hay-stalk. No painter or etcher would, or could, render every stalk. The photograph seems to overflow with ‘stuff’; it is so full of the matter it depicts.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Harvard medic, novelist and wit, not only wrote The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table (1858) and many other once-popular books, but invented an inexpensive stereo-viewer so that products of the medium could easily be enjoyed by large numbers of people in the comfort of their own homes, and in 1859 he contributed significantly to the discourse of photography by publishing an essay on the daguerreotype process. In this essay, he described the daguerreotype — a form for most of its duration dedicated almost exclusively to portraiture — as ‘a mirror with a memory’ (Holmes 74). The daguerreotype is materially mirror-like: when you turn it under light the captured image on its bright, silver-plated copper surface moves in and out of negative and you may also catch your own face reflected in it. ‘Looking glass’ is, or was, of course, a common synonym for ‘mirror’, as was plain ‘glass’, and these terms, too, had a career in photographic discourse, especially in, but also beyond, the glass-plate era. Often since considered the first ‘conscious’ artist of the medium, Julia Margaret Cameron (who was born in Calcutta, and whose colonial administrator husband Charles Hay Cameron played a ‘progressive’ role in Indian education) titled her 1874 fragmentary reminiscences of her earliest photographs Annals of My Glass House (180-87). In 1904, photographer Abraham Bogardus, recalling the daguerreotype effect, wrote, ‘The plate is a looking-glass, and when you sit in front of it your shadow sticks to the plate’ (Bogardus, qtd in Trachtenberg 1991 26).

This aspect of the mirror as a metaphor for the photograph that was probably
Looking through Glass

most apparent in Holmes' own day, and that has retained much currency since, is the apparent exactness, the visible veracity, of its likeness. Interestingly, quite recently, as if in a direct line of descent from such Victorian-era claims, Roland Barthes (at least in his early writings on the medium) was equally insistent on the photograph's effect of exact duplication. He claimed that, in contradistinction to a drawing or painting, the photograph is 'a message without a code', an 'analogon' of reality (Barthes 523). In such formulations, the photograph is, or embodies, as it were, a double of its subject matter. It is significant then that in Kesavan's novel, when the narrator focuses on his 'twin' through his telephoto lens he registers that, though they are 'unidentical', they wear similar clothes, and it comes as no real surprise that later in the novel, when this 'twin', Masroor, disappears, the narrator assumes a surrogate filial and fraternal role in Masroor's family. In fact, so close is this identification between the two figures that an incidental pleasure of the plot, subsequent to Masroor's disappearance, is the reader's (unrequited) desire that Masroor might have fallen through time in the opposite 'direction', as it were, into the present.

The doubling of the self in a mirror or photograph is employed by a number of nineteenth-century fictions. Alan Trachtenberg notes the particularly telling title, 'The Inconstant Daguerreotype', of an anonymously authored short story published in the popular American journal Harper's Monthly (Trachtenberg 1991 26). Sometimes such fiction carries the attendant point that, Dorian Gray-like, change or meaning is registered in the looking glass or image rather than in the original. This is related to the notion, perhaps most nicely put by the photographer protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables (1851), that the daguerreotype, instead of capturing 'the merest surface ... actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, could he detect it' (qtd in Trachtenberg 1991 24).

For Kesavan's novel, the most obvious analogue, if one manifestly surreal, is Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There (1871), the second of Lewis Carroll's Alice books. Here Alice enters her 'adventures' in another dimension — 'the Looking-Glass House' — through the drawing-room mirror of her own home. At the same time, the view into that 'house' is described in terms that would have been highly familiar to a photographer of that era, for it constitutes the reversed representation visible through the viewfinder of a large plate camera, the reversed image that would be captured on exposure of the plate: 'First, there's the room you can see through the glass — that's just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way.... The books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way' (129). Under his own name, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, Carroll was an accomplished photographer who must have experienced this vantage many times as he focused his portrait subjects — including the 'original' of Alice, taken in a variety of rooms — with the lens of his camera. This reversed vantage is also the kind of view that Kesavan's narrator, looking from under a black cloth, would have seen
when he tried to frame his sex scenes using the old view camera supplied to him in Banaras. Interestingly, Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* also contains an askance parallel to Kesavan’s central device. In the episode on the train, ‘the Guard’ obsessively looks at Alice — ‘first through a telescope, then through a microscope, and then through an opera-glass’ — before declaring ‘You’re travelling the wrong way’ (149). As the American poet Horace Gregory observed, Alice’s ‘adventures are told as though they came from the inside of a dream’ (Gregory vi), and, at least at first, this must be Kesavan’s reader’s assumption when the narrator of *Looking Through Glass*, after the fall into the river, tells of his next conscious moment: ‘I woke to the sound of someone choking. It was me. Breathing wasn’t automatic anymore; I had to be awake to think it through’ (11). Of course, even if the fall through time is a dream, as the narrative unfolds in ever greater detail and complexity there is also so much ‘reality’ in it that, like the stalks of hay in Talbot’s exposure, it cannot be just a dream.

**THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS**

Holmes’ defining phrase for the photograph, ‘mirror with a memory’, is truly graphic. As well as the mnemonic nature of its alliteration, it appears at first to be an oxymoron: on the one hand, we tend to associate mirrors with the fleeting glance — unless we are excessively vain and spend hours looking into the mirror — whereas the mention of ‘memory’ brings to mind the apparently limitless past with its reservoir of experiences. Of course, memory, too, may be transient and elusive, but much of the power of Holmes’ definition lies, precisely, in its capture of the conjunction of the fleeting and the fixed. Another paradoxical aspect of Holmes’ formulation is that we usually think of the mirror as reflective by nature: it acts automatically, ‘mechanically’, as it were. By contrast, ‘memory’, if not unique to *homo sapiens*, is a profoundly human phenomenon and an aspect of consciousness. In other words, Holmes’ formulation does not solely valorise the oft-vaunted objectivity of the mechanical in the way that received opinion on early photographic commentary often assumes. In fact, Holmes permits a tension with subjectivity. This allowance for consciousness recurs in the writings of certain later contributors to the discourse. Most telling from my viewpoint is the American writer James Agee.

Let me quote some passages about photography from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), the book which deployed Agee’s sinuous and sometimes baroque prose alongside Walker Evans’ spare photographs to describe and evoke the lives of poor white Alabama sharecroppers during the Great Depression. In the book’s ‘Preamble’, Agee calls for an art that would not be ‘art’ or, even, representation at all: ideally, for him ‘all of consciousness’ would be ‘shifted from the imagined, the reviseïve, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is’ (Agee and Evans 11). Towards the end of the book he praises the camera for being ‘incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth’ (234). So it is not surprising that another key passage in *Let Us Now Praise Famous*
Looking through Glass

Men privileges ‘objectivity’: ‘If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement’ (13, emphasis added). ‘It would be photographs’ — presumably photographs like Evans’ renditions of the interior of a sharecropper’s home, in which it seems that the aperture has been opened to just the degree necessary to capture every notch in the wooden walls, the exact sheen of enamelled bowls, and the like. Indeed, in the original edition of their joint work, the Evans photographs constituted Book One while Agee’s prose was consigned to Book Two.

The very syntax of Agee’s sentence — ‘It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton’ — creates the sense of an equivalence between photographs and the actual materiality of the world, as if the photographs somehow also carry in their chemistry an emanation of the world itself. The material presence of photographs (most obviously the heft of the mirror-like daguerreotype, but similar things could be said about later forms of the medium) bears out Agee’s parallel awareness of the material object-hood, so to speak, of photographs, and the fact that they have substance in the same way that ‘plates of food’ have substance. Yet despite this seeming absolute stress on external reality, Agee leaves an interstitial space for subjectivity, made apparent in another key passage from Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: ‘[T]he camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weapon-less consciousness, the central instrument of our time’ (11). One way of reading this claim is that Agee, like Holmes before him, intuits that the camera is itself an instrument of consciousness. Indeed, if ‘unassisted consciousness’ is ‘weapon-less’, I am tempted to see the camera as consciousness armed, or even re-armed.

As remarked earlier, when Holmes’ near contemporary, Hawthorne, had his protagonist credit the camera with the ability to discern the otherwise inaccessible ‘secret character’, he was granting it greater awareness or consciousness than the eye. This sense of the camera as armed consciousness was rendered in a fascinating way by James F. Ryder at the turn of the twentieth century. In Voigtlander and I (1902), Ryder literally personified his camera: ‘the box was the body, the lens was the soul, with an “all-seeing eye”, and the gift of carrying the image to the plate’ (Rudisill 76). Posing similar question marks over agency and consciousness as Annie Leibowitz’ famous portrait of photographer Richard Avedon, Ryder attributed intelligence to his camera: ‘What he told me was as gospel.... He saw the world without prejudices.... He could read and prove character in a man’s face at sight. To his eye a rogue was a rogue’, and so on (Ryder, qtd in Rudisill 76).

If the camera has traditionally been credited with such power, it is perhaps not surprising that in Kesavan’s novel it could also be granted a special purchase on Time. For perhaps obvious reasons, photography has always had a uniquely contingent relationship to time; part of its assumed ‘realism’ has been the sense
that each image is achieved at a specific moment in actual time, that this moment of birth is significant in a way that is not true — or, at least, not true in anything like the same manner — as that of a painting, however 'realistic' the painting. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to realise that the significance is not due wholly, or even mainly, to the inherent importance of the moment in which the picture was made. That moment may be important in itself — such as the stroke of midnight at which India became independent — but I would rather emphasise the moment endowed with significance by the photograph. This is what the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson had in mind in his celebrated title phrase of 1952: 'the decisive moment'. Certainly Cartier-Bresson spoke of 'the significance of the event' (that is, subject matter), but he mainly recognised and hallowed the 'precise organisation of forms within the image that give that event its proper expression' (Cartier-Bresson 51).

Holmes saw the daguerreotype as an entity with a memory — as itself a means of bridging the 'distance' between differently located moments. Kesavan's novel goes a full stage further: it grants the camera power over time. The camera, with its telephoto lens, simultaneously becomes, in a manner both stark and complex, a time machine: a mechanism to transport consciousness into a different time zone. Note that while the transportation is involuntary, as automatic as early commentators on the medium believed it to be, what gets transported is consciousness. This is not so much an imaginative ploy, such as those often offered by the science fiction works with which some reviewers have confused Looking Through Glass, as a revelation. St Paul famously wrote of the difference between seeing 'through a glass, darkly', and seeing the truth, 'face to face'. The deployment of the discourses of photography in Kesavan's novel permits a more paradoxical revelation: we witness whatever truths we see by, precisely, looking through glass.

NOTES
1 There were many Moslem supporters of Indian independence who both supported the Congress Party and had no initial desire for a specifically Moslem state. On the novel's representation of the complexities of competing Indian and Pakistani histories, see Khair 2000a and 2000b.
2 See Gutman.
3 Recent critics, such as Douglas Nickel (2002) have seen Carroll's photographic work as a form of 'dreaming' parallel to his activity as a writer, a notion strongly supported by Carroll's own amusing 1855 essay 'Photography Extraordinary'.

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SIR ORFEO AND MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE AS CREATIVE RE-READING

Amitav Ghosh, medievalist and post-colonial novelist, in his Arthur Ravenscroft Memorial Lecture (Leeds, 1997), recounts his experience as a writer in autobiographical and literary terms. Beginning with the memory of his grandfather’s bookcase and its contents, Ghosh considers the nature of the space the novel-writer occupies with respect to a form at once ‘vigorously international’ and locally specific (7), and concludes that a process of alienation must take place if one is to write about one’s own experience: ‘to locate oneself (through prose) one must begin with an act of dislocation’ (13). Ghosh’s reflection on ‘dislocation’ offers a point of contact and continuity between the postcolonial and the medieval, as literatures and as critical disciplines, for, as this paper aims to demonstrate, the author of the early fourteenth-century romance, Sir Orfeo, also engages in disjunction, dislocating the forms of romance in order to refamiliarise the reader with the genre as literary experience, and to valorise its own poetry.

Postcolonial and medieval alike pay particular attention to the nature of the reading process. In its subject matter and form, Sir Orfeo invites both critical interpretation, and scrutiny of that interpretation. If, as A.C. Spearing suggests, the story of Orpheus has no ‘fixed’ meaning, but rather, ‘the power to generate meanings’ (1987 78), its retelling in the Middle English version uncannily reflects on the processes of interpretation. Its author rewrites the role of art in society that other forms of the Orpheus legend implicitly envisage. In Sir Orfeo, the classical tale of individual poetic aspiration and (ultimately) of alienation, a narrative medieval authors eagerly glossed in moral and literary terms (Rider), becomes a tale of poetic and social integration. The author’s innovative re-reading of the myth, however, involves both violence, in evidence at those very points of critical re-reading, and a ‘textual violence’ in the disjunctive displacement of the motifs and tropes of the courtly world. I want to consider how both violence and trope relate to the imaginative processes of literary creativity and interpretation, and to suggest that Chaucer, in his figuring of at least one damaged female figure (in The House of Fame), and in his own adaptation of arguably Orfeo-derived motifs (in The Franklin’s Tale), acknowledges the earlier poem’s structures and concerns in his own vernacular creativity. Sir Orfeo, with its simultaneous evocation and troubling of binaries, its consideration of the location and nature of power, and its interest in the creative potential of ‘in-between’
spaces, registers a self-consciousness in the production of vernacular poetry, and employs a methodology that resounds beyond a localised medieval critical/creative poetic.

Unusually, but not alone among medieval writers (Dronke), the poet’s story of Orfeo and Heurodis provides a happy ending for the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the classical version of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus goes to the underworld to rescue his untimely-dead wife, and wins her back by the power of his music, only to lose her again when he breaks the injunction not to turn back to gaze upon her until they reach the upper world (64–71). Eurydice lost, Orpheus falls into a decline, and his fate is to be torn apart by Thracian women in a Bacchanaliam frenzy (120–27). In the Middle English poem, Orfeo is a king who relinquishes his regal authority at the loss of his queen, but eventually regains both wife and kingdom in a celebration of the redemptive power of music and of love, that also marks the ‘joy of recovery’ (Riddy 15). However, this optimistic retelling features violent episodes; the classical Eurydice’s death from a snake-bite is reworked as an abduction by the King of the Otherworld, proleptically recounted by a distressed Heurodis who explains that she has had a graphic vision of her impending fate. Armed resistance on the part of her husband proves futile, Heurodis is torn from the royal orchard, and Orfeo falls into despair. Wandering destitute and distraught in the wilderness for many years, Orfeo by chance sees the Faery troupe, and finally glimpses Heurodis among them. The couple exchange glances, but do not speak. He follows the company into a parallel Otherworld, but access to the Faery King’s castle is through an alien, liminal space, a gruesome gallery of individuals who appear suspended between death and life, at the point at which they were snatched from their own world, and who, the poem tells us, are ‘thought dead, and yet are not’ (l. 390). It is among this company that Orfeo again recognises his queen. Like his classical counterpart, Orfeo plays his harp so sweetly that the King offers him anything he wishes, but when the latter initially refuses the gift of Heurodis on the grounds that they are ill-matched, the musician has to remind him that it is not courteous to go back on one’s word. Returning to his own land, Orfeo disguises himself in order to test the loyalty of his faithful steward, before revealing his identity and reclaiming his throne.

This poem bases its art on antithesis, as its prologue anticipates when it celebrates the range of the Breton lays’ narrative subjects, from war and sorrow to joy and happiness, from treason and lewdness to the Faery world and love (ll. 4–12). In a self-reflexive alignment of narrator and hero, the narratorial voice takes on the role of a minstrel, addressing the audience as ‘lordinges’: ‘Ichil [I shall] you telle Sir Orfewe’ (l. 24). Heurodis (as well as her husband) is a storyteller too: ‘Ichil the telle al hou it is’ (l. 132) she promises Orfeo, after she has recovered from her frenzied response to her dreadful ordeal in the orchard. The violation of Heurodis is, however, complexly relayed. Donna Crawford notes how romances’
happy endings are often at the cost of wounded bodies, but she sees gender as especially relevant in *Sir Orfeo*, where 'the social order of the ending ... has its genesis in an act of violence inflicted on a woman' (49). Violence is important here, not only socially, but in terms of critical choices, and of poetics. Certainly, Heurodis’ loss is necessary to restoration, just as the fantasy image of a dismembered Orfeo torn into little pieces by lions (l. 538) that the protagonist himself relays at the end of the romance is necessary to the proving of the steward’s loyalty. Heurodis and Orfeo both ‘rehearse’ their dismembering, the one as proleptic external threat, the other as controlled fantasy. The romance’s representation of violence in ‘diptych’ formation assures us of the redemptive effects of poetry. The rhetorically-trained mind, as Mary Carruthers shows in her books on medieval memory techniques, would have conceived of violence as pedagogically necessary to the process of remembering, whether the violence was part of the student’s learning experience, or whether it was designed as a memory-aid (1990 134, 137; 1998 101–02, 143–44). But more is at stake here than the story’s striking memorability. The violence endemic to medieval mnemonics is not solely directed against women, although Marjorie Woods has demonstrated how narratives of sexual violence (and, interestingly, the composing of laments by female victims) were part of mainstream rhetorical training for boys. Gender and violence are crucial to the presentation of Heurodis and, furthermore, to the poem’s exposition of romance poetics.

Critics traditionally interpret Heurodis as functioning ‘differently’ from the other characters. Jeff Rider, for example, distinguishes between those versions of the Orpheus myth he calls ‘allegorical’ and those that constitute a ‘remythification’ of the story: by the former he means those that ‘translate’ the story to carry a particular meaning — Orpheus as ‘reason’ and Eurydice as ‘sensuality’ in the medieval *Ovid Moralisé* (Friedman 124–26) would be an instance of this — while he reads *Sir Orfeo* as exemplifying a reading that recognises myth’s essential power by keeping in play its potential for various meanings. Yet even within this reading of the romance, Heurodis is the ‘matter’ upon which Orfeo works his magic: Rider argues that the Faery King’s abduction of Heurodis is ‘the representation of the allegorisation, the capture and reduction, of myth, which is eventually liberated and brought back to full life through the artist’s efforts’ (366). For Spearing, Heurodis, and her madness subtly figure the nature and reach of a romance genre complemented by the male artist/reader: ‘man follows woman into the realm of female fantasy, woman follows man back into that of male order, and the mutual love that binds them ensures that both complete themselves by doing so’ (2000 271).

Heurodis figures primarily, one might argue, as part of a sophisticated narrative poetic, of which the principal dynamic is a play with the categories of familiar and alien (including the category of ‘oppositional’ gender), for familiar things are alienated in this romance, and the alien made familiar, in ways that, rather
than apportion agency completely to Orfeo, or place Orfeo and his wife in opposition, convey the mystery of romance event, or aventure. A range of contradictory associations cluster around the representation of Heurodis the storyteller, who quickly disappears from the text as a speaking presence, and who seems to operate as a site for the working-through of competing narratives, narratives of modern and medieval critical interpretation as well as those terms on which the poem tells her story. When Heurodis wakes raving from her sleep, her mad behaviour — tearing her clothes and scratching her face — anticipates the Faery King’s threat that he will dismember her should she resist abduction. For Susan Crane, in destroying her beauty like this, before having recourse to speech, Heurodis acknowledges that her identity is located primarily in the surface appearance of her body, and her self-mutilation further signals her inability to act effectively because she colludes with this construction of her identity (74–76). In a critical climate responsive to theorising the male gaze, one might also interpret Orfeo’s negative description of Heurodis’ traumatised appearance, which contrasts her pale and scarred flesh with her former beauty (ll. 105–10), as itself an example of masculine rhetorical mastery unsettlingly similar to the Faery King’s threats.

There are, however, to be more intricately woven concerns at work here. The poet describes Heurodis as superlatively beautiful (ll. 53–54). In the Faery company of her vision, she meets her uncanny likeness: she has never before, she says, seen such beautiful creatures (ll. 147–48). In this context, pace Crane, her attempts at disfigurement seem rather to recall the heroic acts of self-mutilation that historical documents record of religious women’s pre-emptive defence against sexual assault (Schulenburg 29–72). Felicity Riddy has also charted the debt owed by Orfeo’s description of Heurodis to lyric evocations of the body of the tortured Christ (9–10). This usage extends and destabilises the associations this rhetoric of pathos carries. The redeployment of language recognisable from other contexts is of a piece with instances of repetition in the poem that posit an uncanny similarity between the Faery realm as Heurodis describes it — the King has shown her a vision of ‘castels & tours,/Riuers, forestes, frith [woodland] with flours’ (ll. 159–60) — and the land Orfeo leaves behind him as the narrator describes it, with its: ‘castels & tours,/Riuers, forest, frith with flours’ (ll. 245–46). The text suggests, and yet does not fully articulate, the exact nature of the similarities and differences between these two worlds.

There is disjunction too in the repetition of detail concerning Orfeo’s attempted defence of his wife when the Faery King returns to the orchard to claim her: Orfeo tries to meet his anticipated assault with ‘wele [fully] ten hundred knightes’ (l. 183), but the queen is spirited away without violence: ‘Men wist neuer wher sche was bicom’ (l. 194). In the wilderness, a host of ‘ten hundred’ knights (l. 291) is part of the vision of courtly and chivalric activity that the grief-stricken Orfeo encounters, including an army ready for battle, that never fights (l. 2898–
Heurodis has heralded her departure in a poetry commemorative of loss: ‘now we mot delen ato [separate]/Do thi best, for y mot go’ (ll. 125–26). Orfeo’s self-imposed lonely exile re-enacts the terms of his wife’s departure (ll. 221–26), as he takes up her register of lament. Heurodis’ poetry of loss silences, or rather, seems to render inoperable, any other expression of Orfeo’s art; elements of the tale repeat, and fragment. The characters stand in imbricated, rather than oppositional, relation.

In terms of the diptych structure mentioned above, Heurodis and Orfeo together function as part of a statement about poetry, or rather, an attempt to register different functions of poetry, and the interdependence of those functions. Heurodis belongs to a complex negotiation of poetry as loss and retrieval, and, in her own silencing she images not only what constitutes poetic telling, but what is left out of the process of articulation. The strange gallery of the ‘not dead’ that Orfeo encounters as he enters the Otherworld castle (ll. 387–409) features characters in labour, decapitated, badly wounded, choking on food, drowning — scenes of horror to which Heurodis, pictured lying beneath a tree, recognisable to Orfeo (strangely), from what she is wearing (l. 408), does not seem to belong, though she is one of the ‘taken’. Seth Lerer has suggested this catalogue is part of a poetic mastery: ‘The narrator imposes a rhetorical plan on an experience so horrible that words indeed might fail ... his lines offer an assertion of an overarching literary order’ (107). There is perhaps a dreadful comfort in this claim, but the scene of the ‘non-dead’ also brings together, poetically and in suspension, central themes of loss and restoration in which poetry is itself implicated, and it signals the potential, in terms of literary art and human loss, of these untold (and, in the context of the poem, unredeemed) stories.

Heurodis’ positioning and location within the poem is reminiscent of Chaucer’s treatment of Dido in his poem the House of Fame, for she is another lamenting woman proleptically describing her fate — in Dido’s case, her ruin at the hands of Fame — and at whose expense, arguably, the poet/narrator gains an entry into his rhetorical world. To return to Marjorie Woods’ investigations of laments as rhetorical exercises for schoolboys: one could argue that both Dido and Heurodis are casualties of a poetic process that has, ultimately, the assertion of the poet’s own authority as its goal. In another context, Gail Berkeley Sherman has argued that ‘the fiction of the feminine is necessary for the project of Chaucerian poetics, a poetics that affirms and denies the powerlessness of language’ (137). The gender of the speaking subject is important to Chaucer-as-narrator and to Orfeo-narrator alike. Just as Heurodis struggles to interpret what it means to meet her likeness, so Dido struggles to distinguish sincerity from its rhetorical similitude (Miller 105). Each poem features a woman’s lament as an act of self-authorisation; no other version of the Orpheus tale has Eurydice speak like this, and the House of Fame narrator disingenuously assures us that Dido’s
lament is unique to the dream he had, and depends on no other ‘auctour’, or authoritative source (l. 314). Desolation follows lament. Orfeo retreats to the wilderness, and Chaucer’s narrator, exhausted of poetic resourcefulness in the face of the determinism that seals Dido’s poetic reputation (and to which he has, of course, contributed), finds himself in a desert place, in need of some further, external, intervention to ‘re-start’ his poem.

Yet Chaucer troubles the reading of Dido as a hapless woman inevitably victim to a masculinist poetics by, for example, uniting Dido and the narrator in their concerns over moral discrimination and poetic truth (Miller 105). This same troubling of categories, or rather, the signalling of a necessary interrelation between poetic forms and purposes, is at stake in Sir Orfeo, in that Heurodis is not fully a passive subject (and not the sole ‘lamenting’ voice), but plays a role in the poem’s consideration of surface detail and connectivity. Heurodis’ representation is also bound up with the way the text conveys the mystery of romance event, aventure, and the question of agency. This essay has already touched on some of the images (such as the armed knights) that confront Orfeo in his exile: the vision of the Faery King draws in its wake the sight of hunters who do not kill, and other re-enactments of courtly process (such as knights and ladies dancing), which also stand ‘outside’ narrative (ll. 283–302). These strange alienations come to an end when the dream-like enters time, and Orfeo’s perspective and the romance vision coincide. Orfeo sees sixty ladies hunting with falcons; the falcons kill their prey, and this entry into time is the trigger to Orfeo’s memory: ‘Parfay! … ich was y-won swiche werk to se’ [I used to see such pastime] (ll. 315–17).

This perception of courtly activity in time leads to another. Among the company, Orfeo meets Heurodis again, and their mutual gaze initiates the next stage, Orfeo’s reckless pursuit of the otherworldly group: ‘Yem [eagerly] he biheld hir, & sche him eke [also]/Ac noither [neither] to other a word no speke’ (ll. 323–34). Thi is also a point of recall for Heurodis, who cries silently at his changed state (ll. 326–27). The classical Orpheus, looking back to the underworld and, inevitably, to his receding wife, is guilty of a transgressive gaze, one Maurice Blanchot analyses in terms of art, inspiration, and the need for the artist both to desire and to transcend desire: ‘He loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and he loses himself too, but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus scattered, are necessary to the song’ (101). In Sir Orfeo, the mutual gaze is redemptive, and rather than an image of the transcendence of male heterosexual desire as one’s entry into poetry, the poem seems rather to want to find space for complementarity, to make Heurodis a ‘subject’ as well as Orfeo: when she cries with pity at his miserable condition, Orfeo’s response joins complaint with action; his despairing speech, “Alas! … “ (ll. 331–42), ends with his determination to follow his wife.

It has been suggested that while Chaucer may draw locally on the repository of romance topoi for his effects, the Middle English romances do not particularly
colour his poetic (Pearsall 74–76). Yet Heurodis arguably informs *The House of Fame*, and Chaucer specifically borrows from *Sir Orfeo* in *The Franklin’s Tale.* In that poem, the young squire Aurelius, madly in love with the already married Dorigen, enlists the aid of a magician to help him accomplish the impossible task that Dorigen has set him by way of gentle refusal, but which he has interpreted as the condition of her love. In the comfort of is library, ‘ther as his bookes be’ (l. 1207), the magician projects for Aurelius images of that young squire’s own romance desire — inchoate and allusive forms that give concrete expression to the cultural context for his feelings, and include the vision of a savage deer hunt, falconers at their work, and knights jousting (ll. 1184–1208). Only with the final image do these visions resolve themselves into a scene corresponding to the wished-for resolution of Aurelius’ own narrative: that is, he sees himself, together with Dorigen: ‘Tho saugh he ... his lady on a daunce,/On which hymself he daunced’ (ll. 1200–01). The magician quotes the hallucinatory visions of *Sir Orfeo*’s wilderness, and at the same time literalises love’s violent metaphors, in the tableau of the carnage of the deer-hunt, ‘hertes ... with arwes blede of bittre woundes’ (ll. 1191–94). Such quotation recognises *Sir Orfeo* as literary currency, at the same time as it adapts that poem’s images, with the same end of projecting a vision of an alienated, yet desiring, self. In the portrayal of Dorigen (who shares with Heurodis a register of lament), Chaucer takes to an extreme the romance silencing of the heroine evident in *Sir Orfeo*. At the conclusion of *The Franklin’s Tale*, Dorigen’s volition and agency disappear from view, and her disregarded autonomy is the precondition of an ending that reclaims and confirms the bonds of ‘courteous’ behaviour, *gentillesse*, that obtain between men. *Sir Orfeo* in general may be said to inform Chaucer’s vision of the problematics of romance closure, but in Chaucer’s library-scene, the quotation of its imagery in a bookish environment also establishes the earlier text as a repository of romance motif, and more. Chaucer explicitly reads this early poem, itself constituted from a critical rereading of a classical myth, within a creative form-giving, vernacular literary dynamic.

This emphasis on bookishness returns one to the dominant image of Amitav Ghosh’s lecture. Like the author of *Sir Orfeo*, Ghosh writes of the necessity to the creative process of alienation, disjunction, and loss, a necessity Chaucer also endorses as part of his own romance economy. Ghosh lovingly recreates the material actuality of his grandfather’s bookcase, but the book collection is also metaphorical of the tradition to which, and out of which, the writer works: ‘It is the very vastness and cosmopolitanism of the fictional bookcase that requires novelists to locate themselves in relation to it, and demands of their work that it should set up signposts to establish their location’ (13). Postcolonial writer and medieval poet draw on the same metaphoric field to articulate the intertextual dimension of their work, to consider how the author constructs, negotiates, and ‘writes to’, tradition.
NOTES
1 From the Auchinleck manuscript, MS National Library of Scotland, Advocates' 19.2.1, edited by A. C. Bliss (1966). Middle English characters have been modernised.
2 Elaine Tuttle Hansen considers further the relation between narrator and Dido (98–107).

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FACE-WORK and Going to the End of the Line with Frank Davey's Writing

FACE-WORK

For me, make-up is vital.
Every day I spend hours preparing, touching up, repairing
you can do such different things with sunset blue over moss green
with sweet surprise over scarlet hurricane.
it's my armour/amu/armor but no mere ornament
It’s not just SLAP, but the semiotics of the face
the science of signs
the art of signs, significations, that old distinction between
significance and meaning that we rarely talk about today,
it’s so much part of our social training

Of course for some, semiotics is still that basic experience of realising that no sign has a fixed meaning. Others like assigning meaning or getting into the old rhetorical pleasure of invention: finding many meanings.
But then there’s also that point where terror takes over, where semiotics becomes a recognition that signs are often largely determined, what Laclau and Mouffe called hegemony, but what I still call ideology — similar but not identical concepts, concerned with the set of rhetorical practices that delineate the representations, the faces, we can put on.
A resolution of that fear, for many semioticians, comes from distance — being the observer — but we all know the observer affects the experiment. Others challenge the constitution of representations, test their elasticity, their drift, their contradictions.
This is the field of discourse studies: culture gender ethnicity class — only class doesn’t get much of a look in these days.

Frank Davey is a self-confessed semiotician; if discourse studies hadn’t been invented, he’d have done it anyway. It’s a class weapon.

That shift from the basic realisation of the distinction between significance and meaning, to the sophisticated work, the contestation of the constitution of representations allowed to subjects — that worrying about Face-Work — is a narrative told by his work as it develops from the early '60s to now.
Reading through Bridge Force (1965) to Popular Narratives (1991) there’s a physical sensation of recognition and dislocation: not quite nausea but perhaps travel sickness, from the reiterative flow of particular narratives. For example, time and again there’s a young man who saves a young woman — and then an element is added. Time and again there’s a young man who saves a young woman, and is betrayed — and then an element is added. Time and again there’s a young man who saves a young woman and is betrayed, yet recovers. With each reiteration the representation taken up by the speaking voice is differently contextualised as the basic narrative does a lot of social and political work.

At the same time, Frank Davey invests each iteration with more self-consciousness about semiotics than the previous. It’s a narrative of consciousness-raising, more acute on some elements than others. bp Nichol, editing The Arches (1980), says the work before 1970 is ‘obsessed with craft ... but without a full grasp of the implications of the philosophy he was moving toward’ (8), and that Davey was himself embarrassed by some of the writing, re-writing it as ‘found’ text in later work. To be frank, much of the early work is self-conscious in the extreme. As he says in ‘A Letter’ from Weeds (1970), the writing is a blend, 30% boysong and 70% Dacron (The Arches 32). This is not surprising: self-consciousness is learned over time and is specific to socio-historic context.

The familiarity of these young men is startling
the familiarity of the young women is frightening

it’s not about growing up alongside Frank Davey in 50s and 60s Canada
the signal difference between his high school and mine being that in his, opportunities for boys to meet girls were severely hindered, as he tells us in ‘In Love with Cindy Jones’ (1991 21–22), by a gender separation that was also class-based — only the people (ie girls) who are going to become secretaries can take typing, the others do French — whereas in my high school anyone going on to further education had to do both French and Typing. This confused our class aspirations — the smartest girl in the school became a Bell Canada operator — but it also made for some surprising lawyers.

nor between a small-town semi-rural school and a school in a large heavy industry immigrant city

no, it’s not just the cultural parallels between British Columbia and Ontario but the larger representations of class and gender and invisible race that layer my parents’ world over mine, their parents’ over their’s those working-class fathers trying to define their manliness by protecting their fragile Kenwood-mixer wives

a class confusion: masculinity as the capacity to own a woman
masculinity as the capacity to own
Listen to ‘Memory’ (1965): where the ‘young man’ records the ‘boy’s talk’ about this ‘girl’ to whom he responds valiantly. ‘There was the word lonely/and the urge to hold her’ (54), and the assertiveness of ‘Now I have known her for six months/and have married her’ — one of the few ‘I’s in the book. It is a marriage he fuses with commodities in ‘Totems’ (1965): ‘Chippendale, Heppelwhite/French Provincial …’ reproductions, that have people eating TV dinners off ‘Louis Catorse tables’ — totems that remind him of ‘dead warriors’ ‘battles feasts …’, and over which he pictures her ‘electrically shaven limbs/draped across/the knobs and knots/of tortured wood’ — from which he will save her.

The stereotypes of romantic masculinity play out in this and other early works alongside a detached voice at times bemused, at others patronising, and in Weeds and Arcana (1973), increasingly trapped. Throughout there’s a financial apprehension, concern, about money: not knowing what is ‘enough’ as ‘he’ thinks about the bourgeois and the ‘harping middle class’. It is as if the reproduction furniture, the wife, are recognised signs of having enough but once you have them they don’t release you from apprehension, they confirm it.

Economic apprehension is like desire. It results from constructed representations that are never satisfied because they posit an impossible plenitude or fullness, a plenitude that drives ambition and depletes fossil-fuel resources. A plenitude that drives class fear and violence for class difference is both the sign and the instigation of the construction of financial apprehension.

I remember my father, the theatre director—an old-fashioned autocratic director raising his class by directing his betters on the boards controlling his sense of masculinity, of sexuality, through the self-created authority of stage representation

I was a child of the theatre, my first part in the chorus of The Mikado gloring in the chance to step sideways into anyone’s shoes, take on any life melting into the erotic sensuality of the making-up, the only time I remember anyone touching my skin

as I was transformed from person to person ignorant of any representation, having only the power of another face

I was a child of the theatre, my first part in the chorus of The Mikado gloring in the chance to step sideways into anyone’s shoes, take on any life melting into the erotic sensuality of the making-up, the only time I remember anyone touching my skin

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Time and again so many of the young women in Davey's early work are to be ignorant of representation. They are objects for consumption but objects concerned with consumption. His work consistently offers the current clichés. In the '60s: woman as vulnerable, victim, moon, body, object, commodity (he could have written Cixous' script with added 'class'). In the '70s: woman as whore, defined by 'The uterus/'largest muscle of the body''', and as Mary suppliant and sacrificial (writing the Irigaray of the time). We can read these now as so excruciatingly obvious: example: 'I/treasured you as if/you were a scabbard of spun gold' (1972a xxiii): example: 'Breasts encrusted with jewels,/a clitoris of gold: our/Guinevere, cloistered/with her Avon/lady’ (xxxi).

Their obviousness is a critique, but there is no critique.

I'm the right age to be invited to remember the performative waver/waiver that is the mark of the movement across the ideology-subject axis: is it a representation or an identity? I recognise not only the crudeness of the clichés but their actuality — playing at destroying the enemy, with the dry mock, the heartless sarcasm, and more

women don’t merely hover, they can be intensely violent
as we try to avoid the alternative representations of the ideal Guinevere/
Mary in King of Swords ‘preparing meals, bearing children? Healing...
servants ... Feeding them ...’ (xxxviii)
as we try to stop telling the stories out parents told us

We can now read them as critique of unselfconscious cliché but it's also unthinkingly misogynist. Writers leave not only a trace but a signature on a line drawn beneath a particular set to culture and society. What is appalling, and what comes from answering that invitation to the waver/waiver, is that the ways the women play into the cliché or representation, constitute it as well.

How do I feel about a man defining femininity for me in this way? That's an odd one: I read all Davey's work seriously in the mid-'80s, so I felt the changes, found a context for the signature. But if I'd read them as they came out, I'd have felt angry and frustrated. Davey himself has constructed this knowing reader into his icon of Margaret Atwood with whips and leather: woman as dominatrix, a perfect partner for the young men he constructs, but why Atwood? Yet it has to be said that the writing gradually uncovers the social and cultural gender and class oppressions of Canada (and many other western states), largely by elaborating the constitutions of masculinity that move with them hand in hand.

Time and again all men are heroes. Heroes are people who stick to the representations of life, who conquer or transcend their inadequacies. If you stick to the representations of women on offer then a difference between women will usually appear as
failure, to be conquered and fought (for/over). The ‘young men’ in King of Swords self-consciously elaborate on the characteristics of gang-violence (v), rape (ix), destruction, self/egotistical genocide, from an ur-text of English culture, the Arthurian legends — ‘incest, fratricide/a barren wife./a bastard king’ (iii).

But this hero is required to kill too many, ‘so I quit — would not/fight duels for you, invade kitchens,/playrooms, not screw/all your housewife girlfriends’ (xxix). Arthur becomes the modern Borghia, poisoning the Great Lakes with the industrial pollution of capitalist ambition; he becomes the armies in Belfast, Bangladesh, Saigon, set against Joseph of Arimathea, the grail put to right use: fertility: ‘my new love’s belly — a cornucopia’ (xxxvii).

The Christian topos of sacrifice, also in Weeds, is not only the egotistical gesture of someone-who-saves, but also the brutal cutting away of embodiment, the physical effect of representation, representations that you learn you cannot accept. But this is not only brutal but brutalising: the problem with revolutions. The political consciousness that engages still needs violence to justify itself, and explicitly layers heroism, masculinity, commerce and financial success.

At the age of 47 my father was deprived of his theatre by a promotional deal and subsequently went bankrupt, and all his apprehension turned inward. He became the Circus Master, the Cabaret MC — something perhaps embedded in his mind from the 30s and all that amoral authority — spinning out of control,

shrinking the borders of his world to make it fit his shoulders minute by minute aware of the one move off the path that shifts the practice of regulated violence, so brutalising, into terror the practiced amoral into the immoral, into consciousness as the rest of us found ourselves caught in someone else’s dream

how many men’s dreams have netted me?

Perhaps because of this, although I’ve never felt the need to be a hero, for a while in the 60s I wanted to be a clown and travelled across Canada to join a circus in Victoria, probably the same time as Davey was living there.

For a clown of course make-up becomes the sign of disjunction, of severance between the person and the subject, the individual and the representation. There’s no inkling of what the individual might be, because this sign is peculiarly empty of significance, it’s the sign of desire, the sign of apprehension, before they signify.

all those sad clowns that make you laugh by slipping on the banana skin for you

or happy ones that make you sad and you’re not quite sure why
Maybe it was the clowning, but after that spell I became a make-up artist for professional theatres, something I do to this day: watching, vicariously enjoying the side-stepping, the sensual enjoyment — I got a proposal of marriage from a man in the Kingston Penitentiary while I was doing his face for a performance of ‘Guys and Dolls’—he hadn’t been touched by a woman for years he skipped over the border to the US after the performance released but also becoming aware of the cynicism, the manipulation, the reduction of these faces the elimination of their FACE-WORK

Many of Davey’s 70s’ works are explorations of male violence, entrepreneurial and romantic heroism which he pursues into Capitalistic Affection (1982), and onto the wider cultural canvas of comic books. Why wider? — because most people read them at one stage or another. They are a cultural common denominator of many capitalist nation states. Here Davey presents the ‘young man’ as a ‘boy’ within a quietly self-conscious critique of the seductions of war, romance, violence. In these fantasies the women still get-to-be-saved and the men still manage heroically to transcend inadequacies: example: ‘Her best moves/were the smuggled gun, the muffin surprise’. It’s sexist but also endearing, there’s the trap. The gun hidden in the muffin mix — get a distance on the sexuality. And there’s the still implicit homosociality: ‘I loved the last reel, when Randolph & I/embraced her against the Mullholland Drive sunset’ (39).

BUT the waver between critique and cliché is openly announced in Poem 1 with the opportunistic/satiric merging of ‘Oppenheimer looked for a sunhat/in the shops of Los Alamos. He/typed requisitions for the Auschwitz furnaces./I watched Tarzan/throw back his head ...’ (11).

Throughout the book the writer gives us reader-feedback — from editorial reports, letters from friends, what reviewers have said, and reader response — and it becomes clear why. Few of them understand the subtlety of the waver he has introduced into the voice. Al Purdy laments the fact that ‘There is no single moment of ... any very strong emotion in the book’ (59). They worry about ‘obscurity’, ‘silliness’, triviality, frigidity. No one notices Davey’s shift which the comic books effect for him, a shift implicit in his crude anti-Americanism stance of The Clallam, to wider global capitalism.

Miriam Waddington complains that he doesn’t understand women. Clearly a new perspective on Davey’s work was needed: how could they misinterpret Buck Rogers invading a ‘native settlement’ that ‘contains only women’, asking what do these women do? do they have knives? snakes? or ‘maybe/she’s a nice Canadian girl, maybe/she only wants to take his hands and
show him/their new day-care centre — Buck/has trouble with this one, we have trouble too/writing it down, it’s easier to think of snakes and knives’ (82–83).

What anchors the work is that elastic movement, pushing at the membranes of representation. It’s a finely balanced book, narrativising the subject into representations that fit, seducing us into identification yet engaging us in the constitution of that sense of fit, reminding us of its process, its elasticity. But there’s another problem, possibly recognised by the readers, that there’s nowhere else, nothing else on offer. Almost: it becomes heroic to resist heroism. The boy can fantasise about it, but the man can only document contradictions.

This is all very well for fantasies of masculinity, but when Davey returns to the young men who save the young women in *Edward & Patricia* (1983), there’s no elasticity, no sense of contradiction, just a bleak determinism.

The back of *Edward & Patricia* shows a smiling author with the subtitle ‘wry, ribald, bawdy, poignant...’. It’s also mocking, cruelly banal, honest to the point of meticulous brutality, and terrified. The writing gathers together many earlier narrative signs and casts them into a suburban nightmare of sexual failings. Or is it a failing if you can only get it off with your wife in her parents’ house? Certainly it’s a sign of something, which the book explores: masculinity and femininity caught in representation; Edward placing Patricia’s china dogs in sexually suggestive positions on her mantelpiece.

The network of topics called upon and reinforced here, along with Davey’s own comments in a critique of autobiographical devices in Daphne Marlatt’s *Taken*, sets forward ethical issues and gives them weight. Despite saying that he moved from poems of personal crisis to textual interest around 1970, Davey acknowledges that personal crisis frequently does impel the writer. Hence he publishes eight books between 1970-3 (he tells us after a list of crises).

Edward and Patricia superimposes elements of earlier works with elements from other narratives of his father and mother —
- the bp Nichol picket-fence of geneology
- the I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I going back a long way
- making a line

where is the end of the line?

No man is a hero yet the promise of romantic heroism leads to violence. So Edward hits Patricia, ‘like in the movies he thought, slap her to her senses he thought. He slapped’ (13). Women are caught in the shadow of that promise unless they take it on for themselves. It’s a shadow that is a negative of someone else’s representation that our body fills. A visor for a visor. Eventually the pressure to embody pushes our features into a place of recognition, of repetition.
What he chooses in *Popular Narratives* (1991) are larger discursive structures or positions that depend on lineality in a different way: example: ‘In Love with Cindy Jones’, which tells a series of narratives about one event through ‘Text of Recreation’, ‘Psychological Text’, ‘Historical Text’, ‘Critical Text’, ‘Phallocentric Discourse’, ‘The Gift Economy’, ‘Discursive Context’ etc. Or, example: ‘Postcard Translations’ with their semiotic dispersal of meaning. Or, example: ‘How and Why John loves Mary: Thirty Seven Variations on Half of a Theme by Margaret Atwood’, where the cumulative mass of variation is both numbing and obsessive. The reader reads the voice watching the drift in significance as the writing moves through repeated elements, or the contradictions of the stable sign as he takes apart the ‘headline’.

So: it would be relatively easy to speak of Davey’s reiteration with variation around issues of masculinity, violence and capital, from the unselfconscious voice of Bridge Force, the tortured awakening into the consciousness of myth: the romantic turned cultural studies critic: the semiotician/theorist — as reflected by the critical journal Open Letter which he has edited for many years. But it can’t explain *Cultural Mischief* (1996) and doesn’t get close to *How Linda Died* (2002).

We could heroise Davey for his tough critique of masculinity/femininity based on his own unflinching ignorance in the early work; could condemn his portrayal of women as writing the script for Cixous, Irigarary et al; could praise his recuperation of women as ‘victims-of-men’, writing another script for another set of feminists. It’s far more difficult for masculinity, there are far fewer clear lines.

We could welcome Davey’s gritty portrayal of capitalist greed, usually the United States’, of class apprehension parallel to desire, and the shift to global capitalism; could condemn his reification of commodities (but that might be a joke), or even praise his foregrounding of the reification of commodities, something that women are particularly good at.

We could commend the painful honesty of Davey’s critique of violence as inherent both to masculinity and to class greed. YET, even if we got sophisticated about this, all this Face-Work wouldn’t help with recognising the end of the line.

**Going for the end of the line**

Living with Davey’s writing, taking the time to read, I’m reading for what?

not for earth-shaking claims, not for heroic acts

although every so often you find a starched comment, like the wafers in a vanilla ice-cream that tease the taste-buds with that first nibble

then recede to cardboard

That’s not why I read Frank Davey.
That's just the metatheory, the travel sickness of recognition and dislocation
I read to change
I'm going to learn you
I'm going to read you
and people don't change without changing breath, breathing
where the line pauses, turns or ends
where the word erupts parts company
prepares/for engagement
negotiation
vulnerability
freefall
I'm reading for an insistent rhythm, that changes but is there consistently, sistering
something you pick up in your body memory
a rhythm that makes an impact on your own prosody
on how you come to the end of the line
the sentence
the feeling of time

All through *Weeds* there's an invitation not only into Christian myth, but into
the line, the question of what the line will release, if it will release. The line
has power but not over anyone, especially not over anyone who only reads for
the other invitation. You have to learn to work with it. In *Weeds* there are a lot
of good beginnings. By *Arcana* (1973), a serial poem abandoned March 16th
1970, six days after his first child is born, Davey is examining the line as a
rhythm of habit where the 'sounds cling to one': example, 'The second girl I
loved was built of simile', of 'someone like me' (73). Habit is 'not to live/but to
be lived. Inhabited', and where habit is inhabiting, we find heroism and
idealism. Yet you can't just put the past away. The spring forwards (for words)
is habit but also breath, sound, structure: so how do you have 'a line for the end
of this?' (76) (heroism) he asks.

a line for the end
the end of the line
an end of the line, lien, ligne
microenvironments of family, of friends
layering the parents' lives over our own is also different
breaks the rhythm
Through all the writing there are eruptions of childhood:
the hoodedness of that world
the inexplicability of parents
the monstrous grotesquerie of the adult

how do you end that line?
Lines made up of the stress and distress of rhythm and breakings
for if rhythm joins, conjoins, brings/holds together
  how the breath/breast/chest beats
  how the mouth works
breakings can sever/cut/stop/smash/halt/give time off/recuperate/change
irrecoverable: a sofa gone too far
gone to seed
irrevocable: you cannot call it back
irrevocable
irrevocable
irrevocable
irreverent
running current of the sotto voce
that you hear in the poems of childhood, the microenvironments of War Poems (1979).

There is continued violence in some of these microenvironments. But there is also a shift into a daily life that is not violent, nor commodified. ‘The Window’ (1979) is a still life, a study in the life of a boy’s father. While the boy observes at the window, the father is in the garden, the mother and grandmother in the kitchen. The boy looks out at that male life outside. His life is focused around the mother and grandmother, yet his eyes are focused on the father. The boy doesn’t know what’s on the other side of the window, why his father spends time in the garden rather than with him, even on weekends. You get the picture, and then the narrative.

The lineation of his father departing for work breaks down and isolates the actions, not in a regulated way but more a repeated movement with variation that infiltrates the breath with participles and the oddly shaped noun ‘landing’ (that wavers into the participial), marking out the balances and shifts in the prosody, punctuated by directional phrases: example:

I listen to him leave for work
going down the inside stairs
walking across the concrete floor
[speeding up with]
opening,
then slamming the outside door
[closure in the expanding phrase] walking up those stairs
beneath my window. (91)

There is a stillness and minute awareness. The child is visualising/auralising the movement into a sense of the father with an aim (going out) and of himself as closed, the relationship closed—but also secure: it’s a freedom from not a freedom to.

When he turns to his mother and grandmother the repeated sounds mark out a recognisable pattern, habitual, self-referential: example:
When I get up I have breakfast with my mother and my grandmother & then lunch with my mother and my grandmother & on Sundays my grandmother takes me across the village to Sunday school.

On Sunday afternoon & on Saturdays they talk together in the kitchen & I kneel at the window watching my father who is kneeling in his garden.

The balanced clauses, phrases and nouns that open this verse indicate that the life of his mother and grandmother is something he knows, even if he doesn’t understand or fully participate in its light insistent chatter of ‘t’s. This in contrast to the words around his father, tethered by ‘ther’ to the others, yet so still, so silent, so alone, as the boy searches for an identification pattern and kneels by the window just as his father kneels in the garden, both of them participial, ‘watching’ and ‘kneeling’.

He is of course setting up gender distinctions of chatter/silence, kitchen/garden, community/isolation. But also offering a singular moment of choice: which way will this child move? will he break the isolation? or remain in the kitchen? It is a moment of moral weight that is part of the situated environment. We don’t know what happens/will happen, although we do know from ‘The Arches’ (1979) that when that boy retreats from the graveyard the family is tending, his father comes to him ‘whistling and humming’ (102).

In Cultural Mischief Davey translates the hoodedness of the child with its particular eruptions into an adult world of the local layered with global tension. The dead are so particular & when the writer re-members, in the elegy ‘Dead in Canada’ ‘Greg’s old particulars [which] lay all about ... not a list, [but] strewn about like a pile of old shoes’ (55), he not only erases the heroic elegiac voice but textures the body of the dead. He says ‘Death leaves a room with unfilled volume’ that has a particularity quite different from the embodied negatives promised by representation.

That was, for me at first, where the line ended. But then Davey wrote How Linda Died and death became not only iterable but irritable, and then iridescent. The reader alongside the writer weaving a fabric around the content, a fabric riddled with holes. You watch someone doing what they have to do, every day, but each time it’s a rehearsal not a repetition. The displacement of the lyric or elegiac ‘I’ asks for a different kind of reading ‘I’. The text ‘I’ made when reading picks up the difference in the detail and it’s ridiculous but compelling the way the same things constantly surprise me with difference.
The words texture a prosody that depends on the width of the line
hangs on the horizontal
hovering over the potential
   energy of white space
   an invitation to breath/breathe
an invitation to the living and the dying
And a lot of this book is about how ‘Linda’ lived for the awkward lines
the lines that don’t fit
that ask us to go with them to the end
and if we go with them
   we find that it isn’t an ending after all
   that the end of the line is neither place nor time

BUT Linda does die and in the present tense of the book on June 9th 2002 at about 11.30pm. And the ‘I’ who rehearsed the possibilities of life every day for her, is now rehearsing for one less person. The reader feels this because reading the iterable engages with a continuous stream of small tasks that are here suddenly reduced and changed. The body memories of those tasks articulated in the breath and rhythm of reading with the writing, stay with the muscles and embed into the biochemistry. So even if the line doesn’t end, it changes.

And perhaps they always do: But I haven’t read the one about the dogs.

NOTES
₁ Face-Work was first given as a performance lecture at the conference ‘Revisions of Canadian Literature’, Leeds 1999. This text is an edited version of that lecture.

WORKS CITED
—– 1972a, King of Swords, Talonbooks, Vancouver.
—– 1972b, Griffon, Massauga Editions, Toronto.
—– 1984, Edward and Patricia, Coach House Press, Toronto.
On receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, V.S. Naipaul responded by paying tribute to England, ‘(his) home’, and India, ‘the home of (his) ancestors’ (The Guardian 2001). Oddly enough, Trinidad does not merit a mention in Naipaul’s tribute — though he was born and grew up in Trinidad, and though it is the home of his most admired early work such as The Mystic Masseur (1957), Miguel Street (1959) and A House for Mr Biswas (1961). Or perhaps it is not so odd, considering Naipaul has written, ‘I knew Trinidad to be unimportant, uncreative, cynical’, with ‘an indifference to virtue as well as vice’ (1962 43, 58). Yet this is especially poignant, considering that in the same essay, Naipaul notes; ‘Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands’ (1962 73).

Naipaul has travelled quite a distance from his origins. He has also moved away from the penetrating, humorous, rooted world of his early work. His earlier novels and stories indicated to an entire generation of non-Western writers a way to use the English language while dealing with non-English material; and more importantly, a way to view themselves as post-colonials. The Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, for instance, describes ‘the magic of reading Naipaul’ in his teens: it meant a

sudden awareness of the anomalousness of my own place in the world ... he [Naipaul] was writing of matters that no one else thought worth noticing; he had found words to excavate new dimensions of experience.... It was Naipaul who first made it possible for me to think of myself as a writer, working in English.... I read him with that intimate, appalled attention which one reserves for one’s most skilful interlocutors.

(online)

The Indian critic Alok Rai speaks for many post-colonial readers and writers when he recalls the early Naipaul who discovered ‘the post-colonial as a subject for artistic reflection’: ‘At first, he was a truth-teller for our generation. We felt emboldened by what he said. We could look at ourselves squarely, and not remain cowed down by nationalist bullying’ (Chaudhury online). Naipaul’s early novels did not shy away from either the oddities or the painful contradictions of such societies — and people — struggling to create a coherent, viable narrative of their new lives, often in a hit or miss fashion. He understood the confusion of the postcolonial, and wrote about it in meticulous detail.

However, Naipaul did not stay long with his ‘natural’ audience. His later ‘novels’, and particularly his considerable body of non-fiction, took his acute eye, and his undoubted mastery over the graceful sentence and the telling detail,
elsewhere. This ‘elsewhere’ is a bleak, unhappy place. Darkness rules. If there is light, it only exposes wounds. Mutinies abound (mutinies, revolts, insurgencies; not dissent or movement or struggle). In short, there is chaos; no spark, no ember of hope. Where are these chaotic ‘half-made’ societies Naipaul travels in with so much writerly pain and fear? All of them, without exception, are in non-Western countries. Many of them are yet to recover from their hefty colonial legacies; many are in the midst of grappling with either chauvinist or opportunist rulers, appropriate successors to their colonial masters. Whether in the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent or Africa, the ‘heritage’ of contemporary society is the collective memory of slavery, indentured labour, displacement of many sorts; of thoroughgoing plunder of resources, including labour; of the creation of a new ruling class in the coloniser’s image, so that ‘independent’ countries could continue to be divided and ruled; and most of all, of a sense of dispossession — a sense of not knowing oneself.

Naipaul places himself outside these struggling, developing worlds. Indeed, he is impatient with postcolonial attempts to understand how the present has grown out of the past. Instead, he dissects them with his (now legendary) fastidiousness, and his diagnosis is as uncompromising as it is strongly worded. Of Trinidad: ‘a society which denied itself heroes ... a place where the stories were never stories of success but of failure’ (1962 43–44). Of India: ‘a decaying civilisation, where the only hope lies in further, swift decay’ (1976 191). Of Africa: ‘Africa has no future’. This last in response to an interview question from Elizabeth Hardwick, ‘What is the future in Africa?’. So: uncreative, hero-less Trinidad. Wounded India. Dark, future-less Africa. And, almost inevitably, ‘calamitous’ Islam; ‘(the) abolition of the self demanded by Muslims was worse than the similar colonial abolition of identity. It is much, much worse in fact’ (Gibbons).

These caricatured societies, so dirty, so anarchic, so full of people lost as soon as they step out of their societies into one ‘with more complex criteria’ (Naipaul 1962 21), do serve one purpose. These areas of darkness serve as a perennial foil to the refined, cultivated European ethos. In an earlier time, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) which went on to become a modern classic, firmly established this tradition of postulating ‘the other world’, a world antithetical to the European one. Chinua Achebe defines Conrad’s view of Africa as ‘the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality’ (1989 3). In this antithetical heart of darkness that Conrad creates, Africans inhabit ‘an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet’. It is a place where the representatives of Europe, ‘wanderers on a prehistoric earth,’ struggle down a bend to suddenly encounter the other — dark, prehistoric men and women. ‘They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours — the thought of your
remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly’ (Conrad 1902 105-106). Achebe comments tersely:

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: ‘What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours ... Ugly’ ... The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad. (1989 6,11).

Conrad’s vision is complex enough to accommodate self-awareness about creating a paradigm necessary for the imperialist enterprise. His imaginative representation of the West’s encounter with the other world is coloured, to put it crudely, by conscience; but a twentieth- or twenty-first-century heir to Conrad’s legacy, a brown heir, seems an especially cruel anachronism. Just as Conrad’s European travellers ‘glide like phantoms’ in Africa, ‘cut off from the comprehension of (their) surroundings’ (Conrad 1902 105), Naipaul too glides like a nervous, unhappy phantom across the prehistoric world from the Congo to Bombay, all generally places where ‘the moist heat saps energy and will’ (Ezekiel 1965 74). In the West Indies of 1960, Naipaul discovers that ‘the history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies’ (1962 29). In the Congo of 1965, Naipaul is accosted by ‘native people camping in the ruins of civilisation’ (Achebe 1989 29). In Naipaul’s Africa, the bush creeps back as he stands there.

India is equally threatening. It reduces him to facelessness in the crowd. Indeed part of his discomfort is that everyone in the crowd looks like him, in which case how is he to be distinctive from them? (Conrad echoes from the past: ‘What thrilled you was the thought of their humanity — like yours’) Though the individuals Naipaul meets and writes about so sharply may or may not be the ‘types’ they stand for, Naipaul has judgments to hand out to every spectrum of Indian society. The clerk: in India ‘the clerk will not bring you a glass of water even if you faint’ (Ezekiel 1965 77). The inferior colonial: speaks English and may even appreciate art, but hangs a Jamini Roy beside a Picasso. The population at large: full of ‘smugness ... imperviousness to criticism, refusal to see ... double-talk and double-think’ (Ezekiel 1965 73). Whether it is India’s perverse tendency not to ‘need’ pavements or the ‘background of swarming Bombay slum’, it is clear there is nothing left in India of the dream-world Naipaul had constructed as ‘the home of his ancestors’. In modern India, ‘Shiva has ceased to dance’ (Ezekiel 1965 90).

What Naipaul apparently finds lacking in India is a pure, well-lit place. Both purity and homogeneity are, thank goodness, in reasonably short supply in India, despite the efforts of our own puritans; but by the time he wrote *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), Naipaul had found some redeeming signs of change. Earlier, in *A Wounded Civilization* (1976), Naipaul had written, ‘An enquiry
about India — even an inquiry about the Emergency — has quickly to go beyond the political. It has to be an inquiry about Indian attitudes; it has to be an inquiry about the civilisation itself, as it is’ (1976 ix–x). The verdict on this ‘civilisation beyond the political’: ‘No civilisation was so little equipped to cope with the outside world; no country was so easily raided and plundered, and learned so little from its disasters’ (1976 viii). Later, travelling in India to write *A Million Mutinies*, Naipaul is able to see that

what (he) hadn’t understood in 1962, or had taken too much for granted, was the extent to which the country had been remade; and even the extent to which India had been restored to itself, after its own equivalent of the Dark Ages — after the Muslim invasions and the detailed, repeated vandalising of the North, the shifting empires, the wars, the eighteenth-century anarchy (Naipaul 1990 517).

The million mutinies are ‘part of India’s growth, part of its restoration’ (518). Shiva, it seems, has almost begun to dance again: the country is ‘full of the signs of growth’, all the signs of ‘the Indian, and more specifically, Hindu awakening’ (161). Where India’s hope lies, where it must go (so Shiva can dance uninterrupted), is a place where Hindu civilisation can be restored.

India did travel to such a place on December 6, 1992. The fifteenth-century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya — a monument part of every Indian’s heritage — had become, over the years, a ‘disputed structure’ because Hindu fanatics claimed it was built on the birthplace of the god Rama. This claim, in a country where every nook and corner offers a palimpsest of traditions, became symbolic of ‘Hindutva’: India should be for Hindus (preferably the upper castes). The rest — Muslims, Christians, anyone else at all — can at best be second-class citizens. To many Indians, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by a ‘Hindu’ mob is a tragic milestone — a point at which Indian turned on Indian officially, India on India. What happened in Ayodhya that day, and what has happened in other parts of the country since — the state-sponsored killing of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 for instance, what can only be described as a pogrom — have not seemed like any sort of civilisation to most of us; but, in a November 15, 1999 interview with *Outlook*, Naipaul saw the destruction of the Babri Masjid as part of a ‘mighty creative process’. He saw it as a welcome sign that ‘Hindu pride’ was at last reasserting itself. In an interview with *The Times of India*, July 18, 1993, Naipaul informs us about the Mughal builder of the Babri Masjid: ‘Babar, you must understand, had contempt for the country he had conquered. And his building of that mosque was an act of contempt for the country. It was meant as an insult to an ancient idea, the idea of Ram which was two to three thousand years old’. Of the same mob who have gone on from bringing down the mosque to killing Muslims, burning Churches, and for comic relief, trashing shops that sell Valentine cards, this is what Naipaul has to say, in a further interview with *The Times of India* on December 5, 1993: ‘[Hindu militancy] is a creative force and
will be so'. Not surprisingly, all these profundities are centre-stage on every Hindutva-laced mouth and publication and website.

It is logical then — and it should not have embarrassed and pained so many of Naipaul’s admirers — that in 2001, after the terrorists struck in New York and Washington, Naipaul should describe Islam (and not terrorists of any or no religious persuasion), as ‘calamitous’ and comparable with colonialism. He does not, of course, say a word about ‘civilisations’ that have systematically piled up weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps these are less calamitous than the scary footage on CNN of bearded foreigners shouting on the streets of foreign (half-made?) places.

The Nobel Prize citation praises Naipaul for ‘having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories’. Naipaul, with his talent and eminence, is perceived by reputation-making critics and prize-givers as the writer of ‘suppressed histories’. As far as we know, Naipaul has made no such claim; but surely he cannot be unaware that with each book, he has received confirmation that he is practically a semi-official guide to the societies he finds so repulsively brutal or strangely empty? American critic Elizabeth Hardwick writes of *A Bend in the River* (1979), ‘Naipaul’s work is a creative reflection upon a devastating lack of historical preparation, upon the anguish of whole countries and peoples unable to cope’ (1979). Joseph Lelyveld, in his review of *A Million Mutinies* in *The New York Times Book Review*, writes: ‘The most notable commitment of intelligence that post-colonial India has evoked…. He [Naipaul] is indispensable for anyone who wants seriously to come to grips with the experience of India’. Geoffrey Wheatcroft sums it up: ‘decolonisation over the past 40 years has been a tragic failure in many lands … the first step away from the wreckage, and toward true liberation, is to abandon evasion and denial. Naipaul is a good place to start’ (Wheatcroft 2002)

In short, Naipaul is considered an expert, not only on the craft of writing, but on India, on Islam, on Africa, on the Hindu way of life, on whole countries and peoples, their dilemmas and ‘suppressed histories’. Writers and readers, as well as regular non-writing, non-reading people in the places Naipaul writes of, may struggle to move beyond easy dichotomies — black and white, Hindu and Muslim, Western and non-Western — but Naipaul, with his formidable talent and scorn, and his formidable reputation as interpreter for the power-centres, pushes all such exercises back to square one.

There have, of course, been other voices that have responded to Naipaul’s worldview: the one that bursts into full-blown glory in his statements on civilisations, is fellow Caribbean Ivan Van Sertima who writes, ‘His brilliancy of wit I do not deny but, in my opinion, he has been overrated by English critics whose sensibilities he insidiously flatters by his stock-in-trade: self-contempt’ (Achebe 1989 82). Caribbean poet Derek Walcott qualified his praise of Naipaul
as ‘our finest writer of an English sentence’ with the comment that his prose is
‘scarred by scrofula and a repulsion towards Negroses’. Derek Walcott, incidentally,
also parodied Naipaul in a poem as ‘V.S. Nightfall’ (Jaggi 2001). Edward Said
is just as cutting in his contrast of how Naipaul’s work is viewed in different
parts of the world. While the West regards Naipaul as ‘a master novelist and an
important witness to the disintegration and hypocrisy of the third world ... in
the post-colonial world, he’s a marked man as a purveyor of stereotypes and
disgust for the world that produced him’ (Jaggi 2001). Closer to home, Nissim
Ezekiel wrote a fine essay that should be attached as an afterword to Naipaul’s
books on India. In ‘Naipaul’s India and Mine’, Ezekiel writes: ‘[Criticism] must
attack, even denounce, but it must not deny human beings their humanity.... In
An Area of Darkness Mr Naipaul comes dangerously close to doing that’ (Ezekiel
1965 89).

Why pull out these quotations now, like so much evidence of ‘the other side’?
Why be so churlish when a writer — who everyone agrees can write brilliantly
— has been awarded a prize for literature? One: Naipaul was given the Nobel in
2001 of all years. He was given the Nobel in the midst of hawkish cacophony on
the ‘clash of civilisations’ and growing prejudice against Muslims, indeed anyone
of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’. Naipaul was given the Nobel soon after his
reaction to the September 11 tragedy, in which he commented, in myth-affirming
terms, on Islam’s calamitous effect on civilisation. Two: there is a theme that
recurs in the reaction to Naipaul’s Nobel, a theme that needs a closer look. Some
admirers of Naipaul have acknowledged that he has made embarrassing,
unpleasant, contentious, wrong-headed — and even ignorant — statements on a
range of subjects from Africa to Islam. They have acknowledged that his writing
has made liberals in both Western and non-Western countries ‘deeply uneasy’,
but the conclusion — the recurring theme — is that writers must be judged by
their ‘writing alone.’

How exactly this is to be done is not clear. Is one, for instance, to read the
sentence ‘Generosity — the admiration of equal for equal — was therefore
unknown; it was a quality I knew only from books and found only in England’
(Naipaul 1962 44), and admire the neat definition of generosity, the well-placed
dashes and semicolon, without paying attention to what the sentence says? Without
taking note of the negative vision, the sense of elegant prose enclosed in breakable
glass? An artificial separation of what the writer says (that a country, his country
of origin, does not have the concept of generosity in its dictionary of human
experience), and how he says it, only serves to sanitise the writing and make it
toothless. It is difficult to believe that this is what the writer himself intends.

It would make better sense to acknowledge that the writer intends criticism,
and hopefully delivers criticism via good sentences. It is best to admit that this
criticism, whether expressed through fiction or non-fiction, is part of the business
of a writer. No one wants an official writer, except perhaps the group that is
using him as a mouthpiece. No one wants a timorous writer either, constantly worrying about being in fashion, or being politically correct, or in demand in the marketplace. No one would be absurd enough to insist that a writer’s politics should ooze out of every written word, or scream the rhetorical or banal. It is a different thing altogether to ask for writers to transcend politics as so much petty baggage. To believe that good writing overrides bad politics to create Literature is just as romantic as viewing the writer as a precocious child with a knack. Both beliefs want to keep literature and politics safely apart. The implication is But what does literature have to do with it? In which case, Naipaul’s politics can be dismissed (indulgently) as ‘famously bad-tempered’ especially since famous bad tempers make good media copy, in which case, Arundhati Roy can be called to attention by any of the ‘real’ intellectuals equipped to take on politics. They can suggest she go back to writing novels — small things — rather than meddle with big things like bombs and dams and globalisation.

A writer’s vision, or worldview — safe classroom words for a writer’s politics — is inseparable from the writing. A writer offers the reader (and his/herself) a second grip on the reality being written about. ‘I do not write for Indians,’ Naipaul has said, ‘who in any case do not read. My work is only possible in a liberal, civilised Western country. It is not possible in primitive societies’ (Hardwick 1979). Many of us who live in what Naipaul calls the bush continue to think, read, write, question, despite the various imminent collapses around us. Though Naipaul has unkindly cast aspersions on our intellectual life, we can at least recall a few simple axioms about the writer’s work, and its relationship with the contemporary world, when debating Naipaul’s Nobel and the politics of rewarding literature.

NOTES
1 An earlier version of this essay was published in Frontline, November 2001.
2 In an Indian literary festival in Neemrana, Rajasthan (February 2002), Naipaul cut off novelist Nayantara Sahgal mid-speech, complaining of ‘banality’. She was talking of the postcolonial baggage we carry. It took all of us present a few minutes to realise that Naipaul was not just being rude. His real objection was that she had not gone back far enough in identifying the colonisers of India. ‘When did colonialism begin?’ Naipaul asked — the implication being that it began with ‘the Muslims’.
3 See the official website of The Nobel Foundation, www.nobel.se/nobel/nobel-foundation.
4 Wheatcroft also says in the same essay: ‘If you had read nothing written since September 11 and only Naipaul’s books, you would surely be the wiser’ (2002).
5 The Indian writer Amit Chaudhuri, for example, writes: ‘The awarding of this year’s prize becomes an unlikely occasion on which to confirm what is an increasingly endangered and debated point of view: that a writer must be judged and assessed by his writing alone — and writing is Naipaul’s great subject, as it is his great achievement’ (2001).
WORKS CITED
ALISTAIR STEAD

On Not Having the Last Word: Back to Henry Green

‘The end of my life,’ Charley said, thinking aloud. ‘That’s what it is. I’m finished,’ dramatizing it.

(Henry Green 1946 89)

Henry Green did not finish his second novel, *Mood*, nor, for very different reasons, did he finish the memoirs of his fire-fighting experience in London during the Blitz. On the collapse of his last project, an attempt to return to and complete his ‘interim’ autobiography, *Pack My Bag* (1940), he produced for *The Spectator* in 1963 what in effect were his last words as a writer ([1992 284–85). ‘For Jenny with Affection from Henry Green’ was a kind of apology for being unable to write novels any more and, more obliquely (since it was to Jenny Rees that he had been dictating his autobiography), for leaving unfinished business. This is the death of the author, although the retired businessman, Henry Yorke, lived on for another sad decade. He could not, finally, articulate his traumatic experience in the Blitz, for like many of his tormented protagonists, from *Blindness* (1926) to *Back* (1946), he found it impossible to tell the whole painful story. In the fiction he had by many devices to ‘tell it slant’, as Emily Dickinson put it, which also meant to sustain ambiguity to the end, *in the end*.

Here, I return to some unfinished business of my own work on Green (Stead), to address last words again. Dying words tend to constitute another kind of unfinished business, susceptible to divergent interpretations. Are Gogol’s last words,¹ for instance, those quoted in *Blindness* (see below) or those, on his prescribed Biblical epitaph, quoted by Jonathan Green: ‘And I shall laugh a bitter laugh’ (113), to which the sardonic subtitle to Part 1 of *Blindness*, ‘Laugh’, may allude?² When, at John Lehmann’s suggestion, Green adopted the supposed last words of the philosopher F.H. Bradley for the title of his autobiography, he self-dramatically evoked the prospect of his own imminent death in the Second World War. Yet the quoted words license another reading: the last words of a man who looked like ‘a highly civilised explorer’ (Wollheim 14) may represent a point of (excited) departure into the unknown rather than resignation to the preordained. As in Paul Muldoon’s witty listing of the dying words of the notable in ‘Famous First Words’ (39–40), they may seem to inaugurate an immortality of repetition and re-interpretation. The novel’s closure, its last word, may resound just as memorably and ambiguously as the exit lines of either the famous dead or
novel characters. The idea that, as Karl Guthke says, last words might betray the real self in a ‘final, self-validating articulation of consciousness in extremis’ (4), is implicitly questioned by Green’s modernist preference for enigmatic utterance, subtextual revelation, and anticlimactic or double denouements.

I want to examine last words in two contexts to do with unfinished business. First, I compare the allusive practices in the early and late novels, *Blindness* and *Back*, which are involved in internovel dialogue. In *Back*, Green doubles back on the *Blindness* portrait of the aspiring public school boy to explore in another traumatised, now older, now middle-class protagonist, his struggle to establish a new identity, via a mistaking of another’s identity. Then, I consider the relation of critical to creative practice. According to Roland Barthes, ‘the critic, like the writer, never has the last word’ (xi); here, the dialogical interplay of writer and reader opens up rather than closes down the text. Quotation and allusion presuppose critical choices and are subject to critical processes of selection and editing to contribute to the new work. The explicitness of a quotation usually enables the reader to recognise more immediately a source and its function in the text, whereas allusion, making a more submerged or partial reference, serves to quicken the reader’s imagination, conjuring up without stating what is unspoken or even unspeakable.

As a first novel, *Blindness* is both teasingly self-referential (like Joyce’s) and ostentatiously literary (like Lawrence’s). The protagonist John Haye sees himself as a ‘budding author’, so his reading and the use he makes of it matter. He is dialogically contrasted with other (lesser) readers and would-be writers, quoters and alluders (chiefly his stepmother, his ‘girlfriend’ Joan, Joan’s father, and two schoolfriends). Yet critics have considered *Blindness* exceptional in having a writer-hero. John Russell finds Green ‘the most unquoting, unallusive of writers. There are no literary references, no literary personages in his books’ (1964 435); but others (from Giorgio Melchiori to Treglown) counter this view, and Green does indeed dramatise readers and reading in most of his fiction, from Mr Craigan, working-class lover of Dickens in *Living* (1929), to upper-class Richard Roe in *Caught* (1943).

*Blindness* self-consciously enacts Green’s theoretical shift away from self-reflexively literary writing (Russell 1964 444). Thus, as his diary shows, John is, like young Henry, a voracious and eclectic reader, but his accidental blinding puts paid to reading for himself and throws him back on memory, imagination, and a compensating heightening of his other senses. Although the middle-aged Green claimed, ‘I forget everything I read at once including my own stuff’ (1992 243), in *Pack My Bag* (1940) the writer-critic recalls influences, re-reading and quoting his early work. Moreover, where a fictional protagonist is most readily identifiable with Green, as in the wartime story ‘The Lull’, ‘Henry’ easily recognises a quotation from Verlaine (1992 108). Although this constantly experimental writer does not usually re-read his novels, it is clear that he
remembers them, repeating them with a difference which combines intuition with craft.

Both *Blindness* and *Back* pivot on acts of reading by their protagonists, the embryonic writer John, who will lose his sight, and the repatriated soldier Charley Summers, who has lost a leg. These acts have a direct bearing on ‘last words’ and are at the heart of that ‘gathering web of insinuations’ (1989 88) which, as Green theorises, provokes the reader to active creation of meaning. Both major acts are doubly critical: judgement is passed at some crux in experience and will be examined in turn.

In *Blindness*, John’s diary breaks off (interrupted by the catastrophe of his blinding) as he has just set down his ecstatic praise of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (33–34), a culmination of his record of maturing critical and creative responses. What follows is coloured by the Russian literature he has cited or allusively drawn on, but the book’s climax is a vision-bearing Dostoevskyan epileptic fit, its explosive form rhyming with the diarist’s opening and closing enthusiasms, for Carlyle’s ‘explosive style’ and for Dostoevsky’s refashioning of conclusions. The inner pattern of harking back to beginnings inside the diary corresponds to the larger strategy of revisionary self-quotation in the novel as a whole. Much the same happens in *Back* (and other major fiction by Green), where novelist, character and reader share remembering. As Green told Harvey Breit in 1950, ‘I have to make my opening statement and for the remaining seven-eighths of the novel revolve around it’ (75). If ‘The opening chapter is where you have to learn to read the book’, then openings may well be critically creative and, in Green, one may only understand endings, last words, in terms of recollected beginnings. As Green felt compelled to return to the beginning again and again, so the co-creative reader may feel the need to re-read as the book constantly quotes or alludes to itself.

Critics like Russell and Mengham have recognised the thematic and structural import of allusion to *Crime and Punishment*, but not the range of Green’s reference to Russian writing. Thus Russell (1960 Ch.3) traces the main movement from the intellectual self-absorption of the hero through to his yielding to authentic impulses of sympathy and self-awareness, while Mengham, more provocatively, examines the ‘hysterical guilt’ common to both texts (2–12). Yet *Blindness* parodies *Crime and Punishment*, simultaneously in homage and mockery, acting as both critique and new creation. It does not completely invert the near-tragic exposure of a haunted criminal consciousness working towards possible regeneration. The literally blinded John, like the morally blind Raskolnikov, does fall ill, subject to sick thoughts and visions but, no megalomaniac murderer, he is merely an upper-class youth — self-regarding, pretentious and aloof — who looks for solace, if not redemption, from the slatternly country girl Joan rather than from a saintly whore. Endeavouring to repeat the Dostoevskyan gesture of replacing the ‘last word’ of the landowner writer with the ‘new word’ of the
social class identified with the modern city (the downtrodden prostitute making one with the exiled intellectual), John fails to cross class boundaries, leaving Joan behind and heading as a would-be modern novelist for London — an urban space more conducive to modern writing.5

The novel is transposed from major into minor key, converting potential tragedy into unheroic, seemingly trivial comedy, but not untroubled comedy. John’s climactic seizure would seem to confirm his Dostoevskyan status as a visionary (Blindness 33). The fit does not, however, segue into a Dostoevskyan guilty depression, pace Mengham (12), nor does the excited emergence of the tyro novelist constitute Weatherhead’s ‘uncritically conclusive’ ending (20). That the novel ‘comes to a halt with a shock of revealed truth’ (Mengham 11) is subtly contested by a nascent Greenian play on last words and his early doubling of denouements. First, as John in his seizure experiences a rising sensation, he utters (slightly modified) Gogol’s dying words: ‘A ladder, bring a ladder’ (253). John, who had in his diary quoted admiringly, unconsciously empathetically, from Gogol’s unfinished Dead Souls (Part II), now unconsciously identifies with the novelist himself, abandoning fiction for his religious mission, deliriously seeking a symbolic ladder to ascend from the profane to the sacred sphere. John’s reading has not been generally recollected. Gogol’s words return, forcefully, but with their significance secularised and inverted. That ending is a near miss. Recovering, John enjoys a kind of resurrection, like the Lazarus of the Gospel according to St. John which, in a scene that impresses him (33), Sonia reads so inspiringly to a reviving Raskolnikov (Dostoevsky iv), but a resurrection both tentatively erotic and aesthetic.

A coda follows: John’s rather gushing letter to an ex-schoolfriend is merely a promissory note that he will succeed in writing now that he has given up the country estate for a flat in London. The allusion in it to Sonia’s almost frightening happiness in Siberia on the verge of what John had read as ‘freedom, reconciliation, love’ (34). This last sentence of John’s, ‘Why am I so happy today?’, problematises any correspondingly ideal happy ending for himself, and seems to echo, too, similar vulnerable expressions of doom-shadowed self-conscious hopefulness shared by Olga, Irina and Andrey in Act One of Three Sisters, all dispossessed by Act Four (Tchekhov 5, 28).

The last word, signing off the letter and the novel, is John’s name. Here the text quotes itself, revisiting the resonant name with irony: first, Joan’s mother’s indecorous ‘last words’ [sic] were ‘John’, the name of the postman with whom she has committed adultery (104), as though we are meant to see some curious parallel with the namesake hero, who, thwarted in his desire for Joan, may sublimate erotic release in becoming a man of letters. Then, his stepmother’s repeated calling out of his name in her alarm at his possible last moments is seemingly answered by the newly confident signature of one who is nevertheless still dependent on her care. But the paraph may also allude to the note of
unfinished, unfinishable business, with which St. John concludes that Gospel in which he has narrated the raising of Lazarus: ‘And there are also many things which Jesus did, the which, if they would be written everyone, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written’ (John 21:25). In its insinuation that he who has not yet written within this narrative what he has projected might be the author of the book we read, it repeats something of the similarly disconcertingly modernist strategy of Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

Turning now to Back in order to examine the way judgement in that fiction is also passed at a crux in experience, we find that the remarkable subject of the principal act of reading which is a turning point for Charley Summers, the disabled hero of Back, is an extract from the translated memoirs of an eighteenth-century French aristocrat called Souvenirs de la Marquise de Créquy (93–104).° Quoting from translations in both novels may afford a strong hint that the act of reading involves a creative opportunity as well as the risk of misreading. Both protagonists ‘misread’ the women: John whimsically translates Joan into ‘June’; Charley hysterically translates Nancy into ‘Rose’. The choice of the Souvenirs for Charley’s foreign reading matter may underline the point, for the quoted text is obscure, and the reader may not know that Green himself translated the original, or that it is possibly a forgery (Mengham 171–72).

In spite of the inversions and perversions of them in the intertextual play of Blindness, the distinguished Russian writers function as a species of authority, a supportive modern tradition. In Back, the literary source is minor, and lacks traditional authority, even authenticity. Yet Green’s creatively edited translation deviously focuses attention on its transposition to the new context: the contemporary instance of mistaken identity (and its pathetic outcome). James Phillips, the husband of Charley’s dead love, Rose, finds the translation in a literary magazine to which either Rose or James’s sister has subscribed. Neither James nor Charley are ‘literary’, but James becomes temporarily, parodically, surrogate author in recognising some application of the translated story to Charley’s situation and in inciting the character (and the reader) to find meaning in what is quoted. James even uses quotation, from the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent in The Book of Common Prayer, to make his point: ‘Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest’ (91). It is noteworthy that ironic references in Back, in general contrast with Blindness, often spring from unmarked quotation, like the allusion which implicitly compares Charley’s forgetting of Rose to Peter’s denial of Christ (13, 151) or from ‘popular’ sources (‘the dear departed’; for better or worse, richer or poorer’; Grimms’ fairy tales, Briar Rose and Snow White and Rose Red).

Charley as man-child reminds us of John, being ‘queer’ in disability, slowness, baffled desire and sense of disorientation; but he lacks the adolescent’s precocious erudition or artistic ambition. Indeed, returned to his office job in a manufacturing
firm still traumatised by his almost unspeakable experience as a prisoner of war, he sets out to forget the immediate past but finds he cannot forget his Rose, who is so well remembered that she seems to him to be still alive in the person of Nancy. As urgent in quest of meaning as a Dostoevskyan hero caught between reality and dream, he appears to be an obsessive reader, but not of fiction, or even something similar, like the Souvenirs. Where, for example, in Blindness John embarrassingly bombards Joan with quotations from seventeenth-century lyric poetry mentioning roses (180), in Back, Charley is overwhelmed by bizarre accidental reminders of Rose’s name:

He fled Rose, yet every place he went she rose up before him; in florists’ windows; in a second-hand bookseller’s with a set of Rhoda Broughton, where, as he was staring for her reflection in the window, his eyes read a title, ‘Cometh up as a flower’ which twisted his guts; also in a seed merchant’s front that displayed a watering can, to the spout of which was fixed an attachment, labelled ‘Carter’s patent Rose’. (56)

This microcosmic paragraph begins and ends with Rose, but also modulates from romantic elegy into the bathetic quotidian, just as everything in the text reverts to the introductory scene of Charley returning to find her burial place in a rose-wreathed country graveyard where he is identified as a reader of monumental last words. The names of both unknown and familiar women, Sophie and Rose, are cut into tombstones (and the identificatory card on Nancy’s door will sport the same Gothic lettering as appears on Rose’s grave, encouraging Charley to confuse the living Nancy with his dead love). That Rose and Nancy are to play a part in Charley’s neurotic fiction-making, his confusion of the real and the fantastic, is initially signalled by his reading of ‘Sophie’, uncanny proleptic quotation, which only a retrospective reading will identify with one of the names of the heroine of the Souvenirs, but a reading ostensibly beyond Charley. The ambiguous address to Nancy, ‘I wrote you’ (53), confirms him as a kind of re-writer who reads his own paranoid fancy into most of the texts he encounters: for example, a poster outside a church allows him to see in ‘Grant, O Lord’ the detested name of Rose’s father Gerald (58).

As Blindness parodies Dostoevsky, the whole story of Back parodies that of Souvenirs. This memoir functions as a mise-en-abîme — with a critical difference. The chronologically earlier account of a woman who falls in love successively with two men (Count de Gisors and M. de Guys), half-brothers who are the doubles of each other, is reversed in the modern novel when it is a man (Charley) who falls in love with two women (Rose and Nancy), who are half-sisters and strongly resemble each other.

The Souvenirs end with Madame de Créquy’s comment on Sophie Septimanie’s unforgettable ‘last moments, when, with both lovers gone, she seemed, as in her turn she lay dying before my eyes to fuse the memory of these two men into one, into one true lover’ (104). Sophie utters no last words but her dying moments are translated, as if articulated, into that final romanticised image
of convergence. Green’s own translation deviates from the French to create something less abstract, more erotic, and more rhetorically pointed toward a fabulous identification: ‘into one, into one true lover’. After the romance comes, the by now familiar pattern, the bathetic yet mysterious conclusion to this crucial section, the laconic exclamation of the sceptical Charley when he has ‘read right through to the end’ (‘Ridiculous story’) and his enjoyment of unexpectedly good sleep (104). If we compare this finale with the close of the novel, attention does not seem to be focused on his dying moments. On the contrary, it is the last moments of Gerald Grant, as reflected in the animal cries of his distressed wife, Amy, which play a significant role in moving Charley towards the possibility of recovery. The last moments of the reader’s encounter with him at first stress initiation: ‘he went to her room for the first time in what was to be a happy married life’ [emphasis added]. But then the conventional fairy-tale discourse of the narrator’s reassuring prophecy is crucially supplanted, characteristically contradicted, by a lyrically sensuous description of the approach to carnal union. It is only an approach, and the ideal union of Sophie’s imagination, fusing two lovers into one, seems to be mocked by Charley’s apparent mistake in naming. Charley’s last words in the novel are notoriously ambiguous: ‘“Rose,” he called out, not knowing that he did so, “Rose”’ (208). The iteration of ‘Rose’, quoting an earlier ingemination (179), may suggest that, still under Rose’s spell, he has regressed to his illusion that Nancy is Rose. Is this the sign of a blind persistence that would indeed fuse two loved ones morbidly into one? If Charley gets a good night’s sleep for the first time after reading the Souvenirs, then his unconscious ‘inward digestion’ of the romanticism of the parable is matched by his calling out of Rose’s name, ‘not knowing that he did so’. Or is this the last of Rose whose death has now become real to him so that he can truly, cathartically mourn and cry out loud, twice, the dead love’s name, like the recovered amnesiac Amy Grant calling out her dad husband’s name, ‘Gerald. Gerald’ (185), as, on this Christmas day, Charley is to be reborn (he ‘bawled like a child’) and not to die?

The penultimate shift to pragmatic Nancy’s corresponding monosyllabic iteration (““There”, Nancy said, “There””) and to her consciousness (‘She knew’ ...) might suggest that Rose, and all that her proper name has meant in the way of frustrated and confused desire, fails to have the last word. That has, perhaps, been written and read when Charley, even more clearly a parody of a writer, has attempted to tell the story his own fantastic way. Like the ‘ridiculed’ Sophie, the Rose whom he has denied becomes ‘just a tale’ (151). He re-reads the five letters from her which he has saved and, in order to prove by a handwriting test that Nancy is Rose, cuts them up to compose, in collage, a single specimen. This editing of the letters mimics the hidden practice of the author, Green, in his translation and transposition of part of the Souvenirs. Charley, however, finds that his critical practice has resulted not in a new creation but in a destruction of the letters as only tangible souvenirs of Rose. In the last of the quoted letters the
manifestly feckless and manipulative tale-teller Rose has left out her name: ‘Your ——’ (121). That aposiopesis may be read as deceased Rose’s ‘revelatory’ last word, a careless dash emblematic of her withholding of the truth, notably about the paternity of her child Ridley, and a blank screen onto which her lover may project his compensatory imaginings. In his fabricated letter, he preserves her usual signature, now an empty signifier in a mystified message. His good night’s sleep for the first time after this betrayal repeats the apparently therapeutic consequence of his reading of the Souvenirs and anticipates the first time of lovemaking with Nancy announced but not quite enacted on the last page. All this leaves Charley and other readers ‘right through to the end’, critically-creatively, to sort things out for themselves, attuned to Nancy’s low-key note of resignation (‘It was no more or less, really, than she had expected.’): last words which leave open the extent and cost of the unfinished business of loving.

NOTES
1 Most writers on Gogol repeat but misquote the memoir of his doctor given in A.T. Tarasenkov’s Last Days of N.V. Gogol (1856): Lestnitsu, poskoreye, davai lestnitsu in Russian, literally translated as: ‘A ladder, faster, bring a ladder’.
2 Curiously, neither version of Gogol’s last words appears in Guthke, the most thoughtful study of the ultima verba.
5 To Dostoevsky, the literature of Tolstoy and Turgenev, as ‘the apogee of the landowner’s word’ was ‘the very last. The new word that is to replace the landowner’s has not yet been heard’ (Dostoevsky’s Letter to N.N. Strakov, 18/30 May, 1871, Frank and Goldstein 361)
6 The extract is quoted as ‘From the Souvenirs of Madame de Créquy (1710–1800) to her infant grandson Tancrede Raoul de Créquy, Prince de Montlaur’. Just as the Russian literature in Blindness is the product of a prior reading (by Constance Garnett), so this French text is mediated by Green’s translation.
7 ‘Je n’oublierai jamais ses derniers moments, où le souvenir de ces deux aimables frères était confondu dans un meme sentiment de fidelité si n naive et si tender’ (Souvenirs 1865, III, 25)
8 Charley, too, will leave this tale untold: ‘That would be telling’, he teases Nancy (203). Not even having the last word, he merely gestures to his putative son to keep complicit silence (207).

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JOHN McLEOD

‘Reflections on the Thames, Westminster’

Beside my desk is a framed print of John Atkinson Grimshaw’s painting *Reflections on the Thames, Westminster* (1880). I bought it three years ago at the Leeds City Art Gallery, where the painting is on display, and hung it underneath the skylight so that it might catch as much light as possible. Like his painting *Whitby Harbour by Moonlight* (1867) it is a night-time scene, with a dark landscape faintly illuminated by pin-pricks of light. From the vantage of the Embankment we look out over the Thames, with the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Bridge in the distance. The scene is dimly lit by the moon which sheds a thin, peaceful glow reflected in the water. Light is also cast from the face of Big Ben, the lights of the Embankment, and the lamps on the bridge in the distance. To the right of the painting, on the Embankment, some figures are depicted walking. One, a woman, has stopped. She leans against the Embankment wall and gazes across the river to the faint light before her. Her face is turned away: we cannot read her expression or determine her age. We look over her shoulder at the Thames, the House, the moon, the faint light, the shadows. A dog stands impatiently beside her, watching the walkers instead. The woman’s journey — who knows where she is from, or is going? — has been arrested by the scene, and we share her motionlessness and her gaze. Distinguishing her from the passers-by, her pause enables one to see the beauty of Victorian London at a moment of remarkable stillness. Suspended are the bustle, the crowds, the hurry, the dangers of the city: instead, in the company of a stranger, we see a London becalmed, the view almost a refuge from the industriousness of the Empire’s heart.

I cannot look with neutrality at Westminster. My birth certificate is efficient with the facts. My surname is McLeod; my place of birth is given as Westminster. Yet each name hides other stories. My surname was not always McLeod; and I do not know exactly where, or to whom, in Westminster I was born. It is not the original certificate, which was destroyed once I had been adopted a few weeks after my birth by my parents. A new certificate was issued which bears their — my — family name. There is an old surname which I know, and of which I still have evidence; it appears on a feeding-card which my Mum kept for me. She used it when she lovingly explained to me as a very small child the circumstances of my birth. My birth certificate, then, frames the evidence of two journeys with these two names ‘McLeod’ and ‘Westminster’. The first is that of my parents, Catholic Glaswegians who migrated to Canada in the late 1950s, and lived in
Toronto, before moving to England a few years later and settling eventually in Manchester, in 1970, where I was subsequently raised. The second is much more difficult to plot. It involves a young Irish Catholic woman and an anonymous Scottish man who came together in Autumn 1968, the consequence of which was my birth less than a year later. Of their story there remains very little. I know of the abandoned surname and a request on the woman’s part that I be raised a Catholic (which my parents fulfilled and I subsequently rejected). This story, if it can be called a story as such, is conjured for me in the name ‘Westminster’. Something else is tucked away in that name, its shape adumbrating a silence or a darkness like that of Westminster Bridge in Grimshaw’s painting, the outline of which encloses a dark passage across the water. I am reminded of this silence, this darkness, each time I reflect upon Grimshaw’s painting.

Post-colonial writing is full of stories of newcomers to London, and many make reference to young, bewildered women struggling to cope with bearing or bringing up children in a hostile, anonymous city. In Janet Frame’s *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962), Zoe Bryce finishes her shift at the Palace Cinema by clearing up the evening’s litter and checking ‘in the lavatories for newborn babies in carrier-bags’ (176). Doris Lessing’s documentary account of London, *In Pursuit of the English* (1960) features a distraught young working-class mother who is terrified of her abusive husband. She hurls herself down a stairwell in order to miscarry the child which she knows they cannot afford to raise. One of the least-discussed moments in Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) concerns the lusty Sir Galahad, whose arrival in London from Trinidad produces ‘a Galahad junior in Ladbroke Grove and all them English people stopping in the road and admiring the baby curly hair when the mother pushing it in the pram as she go shopping for rations’ (35). Galahad never sees him again, nor cares less.

Buchi Emecheta’s *In The Ditch* (1972) makes plentiful reference to the comings-and-goings of the English, Irish, Caribbeans and Africans in the humdrum environment of 1960s Kentish Town, united by a shared experience of poverty. The book abounds with reference to children created out of the sexual encounters between such Londoners, and concludes with the news that an English friend of Adah (the narrator) is expecting her third child and is to be married to the father, an African. The friend, Whoopie, is delighted, but Adah conceals her fears: ‘She knew her people. The man was probably just lonely, like Whoopie, but to seriously consider marriage with a girl [already] with two children was out of the question. How could she tell Whoopie that she would get hurt? What help could she give?’ (131). It is, of course, perhaps unfair that Adah should so quickly judge one of ‘her people’ through her own informing experience; yet the impression is given that, as in Selvon’s Ladbroke Grove, Kentish Town may well be about to receive another child who is not absolutely wanted and for whom abandonment by at least one parent will seal their future. Indeed, in Emecheta’s next novel, *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), we learn that Nigerian
parents in postwar London farm out their children to white foster-mothers because of the difficulties and meagre circumstances of their lives. By the end of this novel, Adah’s unsavoury husband, Francis, happily declares in open court that he wants his five children ‘sent for adoption’ (185) as they are forever getting in the way of his philandering and require that he takes seriously his responsibilities as a father. He burns their birth certificates in order to make it difficult for his wife to prove his paternity.

What happened to children like these, born in one country to an absent parent or parents who have often migrated from another, sometimes left in toilets or reluctantly given up in British courts? Where do we — I — find their stories? Who, or what, made them illegitimate? In answering these questions I inevitably think as a post-colonial critic, reading the construction of illegitimacy in terms of post-war British social and political constructions of national identity and citizenship; but as I have slowly discovered over several years, that is not the only way I respond to these texts, as the two examples I give below perhaps demonstrate.

One of the most moving and important narratives of abandonment and adoption in post-colonial writing is given in Caryl Phillips’s novel, *Crossing the River* (1993). In the section titled ‘Somewhere in England’, the reader is given access to the thoughts of Joyce, a working-class English woman living in an unnamed northern town, stuck in an unhappy and violent marriage. During the Second World War she develops a relationship with Travis, a black American soldier stationed in the town, and becomes pregnant. The pregnancy is her second; her first, conceived out of wedlock, was terminated in 1937. Travis and Joyce are married on New Year’s Day, 1945. The child, Greer, is born a few months later, just before Britain celebrates military victory in Europe. Joyce records the celebrations of May 9th 1945, the streets decked with bunting and full of jubilant villagers. ‘Some of them even spoke to me and smiled at Greer’, she recalls. ‘Just before midnight, I took him inside, out of the evening chill’ (220). Greer’s birth could symbolise the dawning of a new era freed from the tyranny, prejudices and pain of the past. Its optimism is hinted in the smiles Greer provokes at the street-party. Yet Travis is killed in action; and Greer is taken from Joyce by a ‘lady with the blue coat and maroon scarf’ (223) who demands that, as a GI baby of ‘mixed’ race, Greer must be given up to the care of the County Council. ‘If you’re lucky’, she says to Joyce, ‘it might be legally adopted into a well-to-do family’ (223).

The conversion of the child from ‘Greer’ to ‘it’ underlines the wrench of separation, and anticipates the post-war ascendancy of race as a signifier of (il)legitimacy in national citizenship, as well as the persistence of class inequality and prejudice. The unanticipated encounter between a white working-class English woman and a black American man thrown together by the vicissitudes of war ‘somewhere’ must not, it seems, be allowed to interrupt the legitimacy of
the white community ‘in England’. Greer is more than a lost child; he signifies a lost opportunity for post-war England split by the divisions of race and class. Like the other African-descended characters in the novel he has arrived on the other side ‘loved’ (237), yet that love is first rendered dangerous by state officialdom and then force-sacrificed for the greater good. ‘Let’s be sensible’, says the lady in the blue coat, and Joyce unhappily complies. Greer’s new-found illegitimacy is the price he must pay for the production of that ‘sense’ which upholds the legitimacy of race and nation.

Eighteen years later, in 1963, Greer comes again into Joyce’s life; but it is not a return. He is no longer a baby, and ‘he would never call [Joyce] mother’ (223). They are separated by silences, yet bonded by love. Joyce asks him to leave before her new husband, Alan, and her children arrive home; but the narrative does not conclude with his departure; rather, Phillips positions Greer’s unexpected visit, which Joyce vividly recalls, as the climax of the narrative:

He stepped by me, dipping a shoulder as he did so in order that we didn’t have to touch. I closed in the door but for a moment I didn’t turn around. I was ashamed. I wasn’t ready. Standing there in a plain dress, with my lank hair, and my bare legs, and my slippers looking like the left-over scraps from someone’s fluffy rug. Forty-five years old, and I knew I looked awful, but there wasn’t any time to fret over appearances. Not now. I took a deep breath and turned to face him. I almost said make yourself at home, but I didn’t. At least I avoided that. Sit down. Please, sit down. (232-33)

When I read these electrifying sentences I find the scene most forceful in the way it pinpoints the novel’s general challenge to received notions of home. How could Nash ever make himself at home? Where is his home? Not at his birthmother’s house which is as strange to him as any other, and in which he cannot stay. Not in the US, where he has not been raised. Not comfortably in England, the country which has declared him illegitimate and a problem. Greer’s ambiguous location is, perhaps, captured in the term ‘somewhere’ in the chapter’s heading, ‘Somewhere in England’. Is this a vague, ill-defined yet utopian and necessary space where the prejudices of yesterday and exclusionary logic of home no longer matter? Or, less hopefully, is this term a signpost for a certain kind of cultural or identificatory limbo, where Greer and others like him remain isolated, abandoned and adrift, desperately searching for a place in the world which has, to all intents and purposes, rejected his legitimacy and denied him the intimacy of touch? For me, to read these sentences brings further responses and rewards. The sensitivity with which the ‘reunion’ is narrated raises my pulse, and Phillips judiciously leaves us at the very moment of which many adoptees dream: the encounter with the lost ‘mother’. It is not, of course, a return — these characters are strangers to each other — but a moment full of possibility, of acknowledgement of hidden pasts, of new beginnings. It admits a love which has been ‘delegitimated’, but not destroyed.
It is certainly not a failing on Phillips's part that we never hear Greer's version of events in *Crossing the River*. Greer's story remains a mystery: Joyce knows nothing about his upbringing and his voice is never heard. Yet, in drawing our attention to Greer's predicament, Phillips reveals the shape of a silence, one which is of a part with many other silences of the novel — of the transported slaves held in James Hamilton's ship, of the wife of the Edward Williams, Amelia, who has taken her own life. The itineraries of silencing which have kept these stories untold, hidden in the shadows of history, require recognition. It is the exposure of the process of their illegitimation which makes the novel so powerful, to this reader at least. Greer cannot be heard; but he exists 'somewhere'. Like the love he has experienced and been denied, he will not simply disappear.

Whereas Phillips's 'Somewhere in England' is set in the north of England, David Dabydeen's *The Intended* (1992) is set in London. In this novel, Dabydeen takes us closer to the realm of experience of an abandoned child, although the character in question, Joseph, remains displaced from the reader, refracted through the narrator's fascinated view which at times struggles to bear witness to the world as Joseph sees it. Joseph is described as a black Rastafarian aged 'seventeen or thereabouts' (87) — he has no way of being sure. The narrator encounters him in a children's home and they become friends, working together at the Battersea Fun Fair one summer. Abandoned as a baby by his father on the death of his mother, Joseph has been through a number of institutions, including a Bethnal Green borstal and 'welfare hostels all over London' (81). Although he is illiterate, he is an accomplished guitarist; his sole aim in life is 'to give love to people' (88). Forgotten by his father, chewed up by welfare institutions and declared a criminal by the police, his illegitimacy coupled with his race makes Joseph appear as the antithesis of social and national propriety. He lives in the ruins of London; for a spell, in 'an abandoned house in a Balham back-street, in a row of derelict buildings' (88). Yet to rent Elspeth Huxley's famous phrase, 'back streets' admit 'new worlds'. Joseph comes to embody an alternative knowledge, nurtured in the ruins of the city, which challenges the legitimacy of the conventional and pushes at the limits of the narrator's epistemological frame. As well as a musician, Joseph becomes a film-maker using a home-video camera, and is also temporarily — marvellously — a literary critic despite being unable to read. In one scene the narrator recites a passage from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) which he regards as evidence of the book's exploration of suffering and redemption. But Joseph disagrees with the narrator's reading:

‘No, it ain’t, is about colours. You been saying is a novel 'bout the fall of man, but is really 'bout a dream. Beneath the surface is the dream. The white light of England and the Thames is the white sun over the Congo that can’t mix with the green of the bush and the black skin of the people. All the colours struggling to curve against each other like a rainbow, but instead white light want to blot out the black and the green and reduce the world to one blinding colour.’ (98)
The ‘white light’ of the Thames and England challenges the ‘rainbow’ vision of Joseph — whose name, of course, is paralleled by Conrad’s. The young Londoner is revealed as both critic and creator; not just Conrad’s novel but Dabydeen’s post-war London are bathed in white light — the white light of the authority of the nation and the institutions of the old Empire’s heart of which Joseph is a victim. The narrator is suitably ‘spellbound’ (98) by Joseph’s reading of Conrad, and the insight of Joseph’s vision is further endorsed by the films he goes on to make (before the police, arbiters of the law, take his camera). They are of a part with his music and criticism, born from the same dissident cultural reading of England made possible in London by those abandoned to the very state which has declared and endorsed their illegitimacy. ‘I can’t read nor write’, says Joseph, ‘but I can see’ (107). *The Intended* takes us close to the wisdom of Joseph’s sight. The novel cannot articulate Joseph’s visions with accuracy, but it can describe their shape and presence, and project the city and its knowledges in a different light.

When I look to my past in London, I can see only dim shapes, shadows of stories, ghosts behind the names on that certificate. The light is thin, as in Grimshaw’s painting, and as with the painting, I have to look closely and take what definition I can from the scene. Some things are clear, however. Mine is not a tragic story of loss. Far from it. A curiosity is not a trauma. I grew up in a loving family without secrets and lies. I would change nothing. When I think about my early life I encounter a sense of anonymity, but do not feel an absence. Nor are the circumstances of my life at all co-incident with the literary examples I have drawn above. A white child in a white family raised few eyebrows in 1970s Manchester. Unlike Joseph, I never knew a children’s home. And, unlike Joseph, I can read and write. One of the lucky ones, indeed. In reading, teaching and writing about post-colonial narratives of London I am given a way of thinking about my circumstances, a critical context for the conditions of my creation, a sense that my story is distantly related to those of other Londoners at a particular period of London’s history. I am in the company of strangers, but that does not matter. ‘There is no return’ (237), writes Caryl Phillips. The woman on the Embankment in Grimshaw’s painting will forever be turned away from me, but I look over her shoulder just the same, and in gazing across the Thames I share her space, if not a knowledge of her face. Similarly, through reading many of these texts London becomes — temporarily, imaginatively — a place for me. It loses its anonymity. When I look at it from a distance, through the words of others, there is a little more illumination, a touch more light. Although hardly intended, these writers gift me the city of my birth.

‘Texts travel’, Shirley Chew once told me. She meant, I think, that they have agency far beyond the horizon of their immediate contexts and concerns. My experience of researching the contexts and literature of post-colonial London has underlined this lesson on many occasions. My critical explorations have
brought me *imaginatively* closer to the circumstances of my creation. They have
given me stories which, although they do not enfold or explain my particular
situation, nonetheless give me a space in which I can think upon my creation.

A couple of years ago, not long after I had bought my print of *Reflections on
the Thames, Westminster*, I was talking with Shirley Chew in my office. She
looked at the painting. 'That is very beautiful,' she said. I began to explain to
her the painting’s significance. My explanation was not a good one because I
had not given it before. It was full of broken sentences, awkwardnesses,
hesitations. But I had started. Eventually I stopped talking. We looked together
at the painting.

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Born in China, brought up and educated in Singapore as well as England and widely travelled, Shirley Chew lives the concept of moving between worlds with great understatement and a certain stylish panache.

When I first met Shirley I was dazzled as much by the fact that not only did she bring a lively intellect to to bear on her chosen discipline of English literature, but also by the fact that she was an accomplished pianist and if she had elected, could have been a professional. Her sister Jennifer, as it so happens, is a leading concert pianist in Singapore. This is perhaps not an unusual combination of skills but both her former smart Leeds flat and her current home reveal a spirit that is aesthetically finely tuned. She collects art with a very discriminating eye and has some of the jolliest china I have ever seen. She also takes a sensuous delight in preparing and serving food, ranging from specialist Chinese to Middle Eastern to Western dishes, accompanied by her grumblingly good-natured conversation.

I was also struck by the almost mystical dedication she brought to bear on the process of teaching. To her the communication and sharing of knowledge, the process of meaning making, was a profoundly serious business, almost a sacrament. One day she emerged from a lecture feeling that the dynamics had not quite worked, and I was surprised by the degree to which it had lowered her spirits. She clearly saw it as a privilege squandered. Unsurprisingly she had done no such thing, as confirmed by a student I bumped into later who had been at the lecture. However, Shirley’s capacity for being critical of herself, and indeed of others if she feels their work is not quite up to muster, can be quite daunting. (Note: Shirley is also at her brusquest when she is at her kindest.)

Our lengthy friendship has been punctuated by years of not being in close contact, but somehow we were always able to pick up from where we had left off. We were never professional colleagues but there were many shared passions centred around the arts, design, people and food. Perhaps it was precisely the lack of a shared profession that allowed a freer and less orthodox flow of ideas between us. Entwined with all this were the minutely detailed narratives of family: since her own family is very important to Shirley, she has a deep interest in the families of her friends. Neither the scaffolding of the everyday, nor the reassuring rhythms of the mundane ever bore her. Yet almost imperceptibly, however casually discussed, the trivial and the humdrum would begin to be reconfigured by her to inform some penetrating and analytical insight about a wider discourse relating, for instance, to diasporas or culture.
One day in the middle of a violent snowstorm, she valiantly brought the late D.J. Enright across from Leeds to Cartwright Hall, Bradford. I had curated an exhibition on death and the afterlife called ‘Worlds Beyond’, and Dennis, of course, was perfectly qualified to frame the exhibition within the unique perspectives that had produced The Oxford Book of Death. Although cold and hungry — the snow-storm had had predictable effects on the traffic and they had crawled from Leeds to Bradford without time for any lunch — Dennis gave one of his delightfully hilarious commentaries on approaches to death, interspersed with readings from his book. We then retreated to a nearby hotel called, totally without irony, ‘The Colonial’, for afternoon tea followed by a hairy journey back to Leeds, stopping off to sample some Irish malt at my house. Shirley, who had been initially flustered by the atrocious weather and traffic, soon began to mellow as the evening progressed and Dennis’s naughty schoolboy giggle increased in frequency. Naturally sociable, she thrives in an atmosphere of conviviality and the cut and thrust of an exchange of quicksilver thought.

There are some people who carry a sense of excitement about them — their world somehow seems richer and more charged with energy than the rest of ours. Shirley is one of those. Association with Shirley and her suite of colourful friends makes others feel part of this stimulating buzz. She is unpossessive of her friends, however exalted some of them may be, and always open to new friendships. It is this capacity for friendship, freely given and embracing not just the individual but friends and family as well that imbues the projects with which she is involved with so much depth and distinctive character. For instance, after Arthur Ravenscroft’s premature death, Shirley was the architect of the highly successful annual commemorative lecture series at the University of Leeds. She managed within very modest budgets to attract an impressive panoply of international writers from Nayantara Sahgal, Ben Okri and Amitav Ghosh, to Caryl Phillips and Girish Karnad. Although the lecture series is a collaborative effort that involves other colleagues, Shirley’s personality has been central to ensuring a continuing profile and sustained interest in the series for what is now well over ten years. This is testimony not only to an impressive network of contacts but also the respect she commands within her field. Above all, the fact that the lecture is always attended by at least one member of Arthur’s family demonstrates how Shirley’s knack for personalising all her undertakings keeps people engaged and involved.

This is also reflected in the way in which Shirley processes knowledge, if one can describe so subtle an activity in so pedestrian a manner. Through meticulous research, discovery, reflection and distillation, the process takes into its sweep the social and the personal as well as the more formal academic routes of knowledge acquisition. Each serendipitous discovery or unexpected connection is swooped upon with girlish delight. How can this excitement and enthusiasm be anything but infectious — to her friends, her colleagues and, most importantly, her students? I have lost count of the number of times Shirley has happened
upon on an image in an exhibition I have curated, or struck up a chance conversation with someone (strangers not excluded) and these encounters have suddenly illuminated her own work progress in unexpected and fascinating ways.

Although our friendship goes back to the early '80s, it was only in 2001 that we actually collaborated professionally. I was organising a conference on 'Creative Cultures' on behalf of Yorkshire Arts as part of the Year of the Artist programme in partnership with the University of Leeds. Shirley was in the midst of putting together a journal she had founded, *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, and we both agreed that the conference would be a wonderfully appropriate platform from which to launch the very first edition. Indeed, the conference enjoyed a life after the event as it were by the fact that a number of the keynote papers presented were included in the journal.

It was a complex conference both in organisational and intellectual terms. It was a forum for critical debate as well as for the celebration of an impressive array of artistic and academic talent. It set out to explore what sort of impact an increasingly-difficult-to-define concept of cultural identity has had on artists and the manner in which they interpret contemporary issues. It was also an unusual conference because it combined examples of live practice (many based on field work and primary research in order to stretch the boundaries of artistic practice, funded through bursaries by Yorkshire Arts) with opportunities for artists and academics alike to reflect on the nature of cross-cultural influences on creativity world-wide.

As I deliberated with Shirley on the structure of the conference, suggesting what were possibly over-complicated models, she said with her usual incisiveness, 'Let's keep it simple. Start with the plenary paper followed by an equally strong second paper with a question and answer session. Let's have a themed lunch followed by workshop presentations by artists in the afternoon based on the research and development work they have been doing culminating in a gala dinner based around an evening event'. The structure worked like a dream and the conference was a great success. For instance we had Jean 'Binta' Breeze give an electrifying demonstration of her thesis 'that Jamaican is the only language validated through oral contemporary culture' followed by Wole Soyinka in dialogue with Martin Banham and Jude Kelly about Soyinka's then new play *King Baabu*, a fierce critique of tyranny and the milieu that allows it to be perpetuated. Lunch was followed by dancer and choreographer David Hamilton and arts administrator Marcia Hutchinson expanding on the fieldwork they had undertaken in Jamaica on Jamaican dance forms and idiosyncratic pantomime traditions. In the evening, extracts of *King Baabu* were workshopped at the West Yorkshire Playhouse for the very first time.

There is a poetic symmetry to the fact that Shirley should seamlessly move from being Professor of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Leeds to an even closer engagement with *Moving Worlds* which already promises to be a pioneering journal. Her introduction to the very first
issue in 2001 made it clear that new ground was being broken:

*Moving Worlds* is a forum for creative work as well as criticism, literary as well as visual texts, writing in scholarly as well as more personal modes, in English and translations into English. It is open to experimentation, and represents work of different kinds and from different cultural traditions. It reappraises acknowledged achievements and promotes fresh talent. Its central concern — the transcultural — is the movement of cultures across national boundaries, and the productive transformations resulting from these crisscrossings. Its outreach is regional, national and international, that is, towards the diversity and richness of global/local communities. (1)

The two issues of *Moving Worlds* brought out in the last two years have already attracted contributions from renowned writers like Wole Soyinka, Randolph Stow and Caryl Phillips as well as a clutch of seminal essays to mark V.S. Naipaul’s seventieth birthday. Yet Shirley has no hesitation, in the same volumes, in taking risks and including the work of unknown but promising talent. Always imaginatively commissioned and meticulously edited, the journal issues are of an exceptional standard. However, it is her willingness to mix known with lesser-known voices that give these publications their edge and freshness.

The fact that *Moving Worlds* is not confined to literature means there is not only a mix of voices but also a range of art forms explored with verve and intelligence. The covers are always beautifully illustrated and while the images considerably add to the production costs, they make them distinctive and visually and intellectually intriguing. It is a source of considerable pleasure that the three most recent journals she has edited (as guest editor of *Kunapipi* and the two issues of *Moving Worlds*) have been illustrated with images from projects with which I have been closely involved. The cover of the most recent issue of *Moving Worlds* for instance has Shahzia Sikander’s ‘Riding the Written’. Shirley first saw this image nearly nine years ago at an exhibition at Cartwright Hall called *An Intelligent Rebellion: Women Artists of Pakistan*. She had been struck by the haunting power of the miniature and had actually tried to acquire the work for herself but Bradford Art Galleries and Museums had beaten her to it. Clearly, the image had been filed away in some register of the imagination and when she was putting the journal together, she knew precisely what she wanted to see on the cover.

It is important to point out that Shirley has always been extremely receptive to creative local and regional encounters, as reflected in the contributions to *Moving Worlds*, long before universities recognised the importance of such an engagement. In the final analysis, Shirley pulls off both risk and experiment with such flair, because of the clarity of thinking and the intellectual rigour she brings to any project.

WORKS CITED
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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JOHN BARNARD taught at Leeds from 1965, was Professor of English Literature from 1978 to 2001, and ran the Institute of Bibliography and Textual Criticism from 1981. He has published on Restoration literature and drama, Keats and the Romantics, textual criticism, early modern book history, and edited books on or by Etherege, Congreve, Pope and Keats.

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ELIZABETH COOK taught in the School of English, University of Leeds, 1979–1984: she is now a free-lance writer and critic. She is editor of the Oxford University Press John Keats and her fiction Achilles was published in 2001.

D.J. ENRIGHT was born in 1920 in Warwickshire, England, and read English at Cambridge University. He taught English literature in universities in Egypt, Japan, West Berlin and Thailand, and was Professor of English at the University of Singapore. His published work includes Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor (1969), The Way of the Cat (1992) and Collected Poems 1948-1998 (1998). He has also translated into English many works of Japanese, French and German literature. He was awarded the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1981 and made a Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature in 1998. D.J. Enright died on 31 December 2002. His tribute to Shirley Chew collected in this volume of Kunapipi was one of his last works.

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ALISTAIR STEAD was until recently Senior Fellow in the School of English, University of Leeds, where he taught English and American literature. He has co-edited (with W.J. McCormack) *James Joyce and Modern Literature* (1982), (with Ann Massa) *Forked Tongues? Comparing Twentieth-Century British and American Literature* (1994) and (with Shirley Chew) *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics* (1999). He is co-editor of the *James Joyce Broadsheet* and has published essays on Henry Green, James Joyce, Muriel Spark, Janette Turner Hospital and Allan Hollinghurst.

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ESSAYS

POETRY
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COVER
‘Warrau Star Wheel I’, Aubrey Williams, 1987

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