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

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Cover: Rae Richards, ‘Rainbow Serpent’.

*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
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September 1992

Dear Subscriber,

I very much regret the late arrival of Kunapipi. I thank you for your patience and I hope the recent issues you have received make you feel that the waiting was worth while. The first issue for 1992 is now with the printers, so you will have it soon, how soon depends on where you live in the world. The second issue for 1992 will be guest edited by Victor Chang who organised the recent ACLALS conference in the West Indies, and will include ‘highlights’ from that conference. You should also receive that issue before the end of 1992. The final issue for 1992, which unfortunately you will not receive until 1993, will be the special issue on post-colonial women’s writing. It will, I believe, be well worth waiting for.

You will note the new subscription rates. I am afraid that increase in production prices and even more in postage plus fluctuations in currencies have made these increases necessary. However, I hope you feel you are getting very good value for your money.

I thank you again for your patience.

Anna Rutherford
In Australia, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have made much less use of the courts in the struggle for recognition of their rights to the land than, for example, the Indians in North America have. There have only been two major landrights cases in Australia; the first one, Milirrpum and others v. Nabalco and the Commonwealth, was brought by the Yolngu of north-eastern Arnhemland in 1969 in protest against the granting by the federal government of a mining lease to Nabalco on their land. The case was decided by the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory in 1971. The second case, Mabo and others v. the State of Queensland was an action initiated in 1982 by the Meriam people from the Torres Strait Islands to prevent an increase in government powers over their land. The case was finally decided in the High Court of Australia in June 1992.

In both cases, the central issue was whether the common law inherited from Britain recognized the existence of indigenous title to the land. It was attempted to prove that this title had survived the acquisition of sovereignty by the British and that, although very different from the individual title of the ordinary landowner among white Australians, the indigenous communal rights to the land were of a kind recognizable by the Australian legal system.

Judge Blackburn in Milirrpum v. Nabalco decided most of the issues involved in the case against the Aborigines. Most importantly, he found that the Australian common law did not and never had recognized any rights to the land as residing in the Aborigines. The decision thus seemed to indicate that litigation had little to offer Aborigines in this area. However, this judgement was reversed when the High Court in the Mabo-case decided that the common law did recognize the existence of ‘communal native title’; in the decision some long-standing legal doctrines were rejected.

This development raises some interesting questions about judicial decision-making, such as what determines the way in which decisions are
made and what is actually the function of the judge. A discussion of these factors in relation to the landrights cases touches on some fundamental aspects of the legal process.

In general, the legal system is designed to maintain certain standards of social interaction; as such it is based on the moral assumptions current in society. In ordinary cases, the judge need not consider this underlying element, but will be able to resolve the issues by applying a body of accepted legal rules, laid down in earlier judgements or statutes. However, in extraordinary cases, where there is no agreement about what the law is, the decision of the case is a much more complicated task. Judges will examine previous decisions to find principles of law which are relevant to the case before them. As pointed out by many legal theorists, they will also be guided by notions of what is fair, just or desirable as they are perceived by the legal profession and the population in general. Ultimately, this means that in 'hard' cases the decision is to a considerable extent determined by the moral principles underlying the legal system.

This applies to the Australian landrights cases; in the context of these cases, however, it is important to call attention to an even more fundamental source of influence on the decision. It is probably obvious that legal as well as moral principles are culturally determined; they are necessarily directed towards the continued existence and development of the culture of which they are expressions. At the most basic level, judges are influenced by the cultural background of the legal system and by their own cultural heritage in general. This is always so, but in the present context it acquires supreme importance. When groups of people such as the Aborigines or the Islanders involuntarily become subject to a legal system other than their own, this by definition involves a confrontation in court as well as elsewhere between two different cultures; on the one hand that of the indigenous people, on the other that of the 'colonizers'. When it is recognized that the legal system itself is a dynamic part of the latter, it becomes clear that a very fundamental cultural bias may easily influence the outcome of the litigation process.

There were signs of this cultural influence in Blackburn's decision of Milirrumpum v. Nabalco. It was, for instance, an important factor in his findings on the Aboriginal land tenure system.

In spite of Blackburn's obvious goodwill and best intentions to grasp the very complicated Aboriginal land system, he was basically incapable of understanding it on its own premises. Without realizing it he was unable to put aside his habitual, culturally defined model for understanding the world. The judge's discussion of the antiquity of Aboriginal links with the land provides an example of this. The Yolngu had to prove that the same clans were connected with the same land as they had been in 1788 when the colony of New South Wales came into existence. It turned out that some clans had died out and Blackburn therefore concluded that the relationship was no longer the same. To the Aborigines, on the other hand, no
change had taken place. Their system of succession, based on the mytholo-
gy of the Dreamtime, in such situations dictates the transfer of land
along indirect descent lines, so the land in question had remained in the
possession of its rightful owners. Blackburn, however, maintained that 'the
issues before the court are such that the mere existence of the possibility
of a historical explanation – if such a possibility exists ... is of considerable
importance'.

By suggesting that 'factual' historical explanations of changes were more
important to the court than mythological ones, he was removing the issue
outside the system within which it existed. In Aboriginal philosophy,
mythology and history cannot be separated, they are simply one. Rather
than accepting the system at face value, Blackburn wanted the individual
elements to be explicable in terms which were acceptable to the common
law.

Another instance of this was the judge's rejection of the plaintiffs' claim
that their notions of ownership could be characterized as proprietary. Al-
though the judge in one of the most notable findings of the decision recog-
nized that the Aboriginal system constituted a 'system of law' (which the
defendants had claimed it did not), he held that Aboriginal relations with
the land did not conform sufficiently to the ideas of land ownership
known to him to be termed a 'proprietary right'. There is little doubt that
a concept of property as a private economic interest exercised considerable
influence on the judge in deciding this issue. This notion of property, far
from being a universal principle, is firmly embedded in the agrarian mode
of subsistence of a group of closely related societies based on what we
today term European or Western culture. In Blackburn's reasoning a Euro-
centric legal framework based on this development left little or no room
for the different concept of ownership held by a hunter-gatherer commu-
nity such as that of the Yolngu.

Other evidence of the marked influence of Blackburn's cultural back-
ground appeared in his treatment of various historical material; as the his-
torian, Henry Reynolds, has pointed out, it showed Blackburn to represent
an Australian historical tradition which consistently has held that in the
past no official attempt was ever made to recognize Aboriginal title to the
land.

Reynolds particularly refers to Blackburn's discussion of government atti-
tudes in connection with the founding of the colony of South Australia in
1836. Blackburn at the most found indications of a 'principle of benevol-
ence' in government actions, whereas Reynolds has argued convincingly
that the colonial office was concerned about the legal rights of the Aborig-
ines.

Another historical event which Blackburn mentioned was 'Batman's
Treaty' from 1835, in which a colonist claimed to have bought some land
from the Aborigines. Blackburn saw the government nullification of the
'treaty' as a sign of official rejection of Aboriginal title to the land, but it
is, in fact, much more reasonable to see it as a confirmation of the principle that British subjects could only acquire land through a grant from the Crown, than as a denial of Aboriginal land rights. It seems to be another indication of the influence of a particular historical tradition which has attempted to strengthen white claims to the land by simplifying government attitudes (especially those current during the 1830s and '40s).

The ultimate cementing of this tradition was Blackburn’s refusal to consider recent historical research, which has thrown new light on the early colonization of Australia. This was particularly relevant in connection with the discussion of the legal categorization of the colony of New South Wales. It has been maintained in the courts of Australia that it was a so-called colony of settlement, legally to be regarded as *terra nullius* (no-man’s land). In the words of the Privy Council in 1889 it was ‘a colony which consisted of a tract of territory practically unoccupied, without settled inhabitants or settled law, at the time when it was peacefully annexed to the British dominions’.

Although historical research has proved beyond doubt what the Aborigines always knew, that the country was not ‘practically unoccupied’, not ‘without settled inhabitants or settled law’, and far from ‘peacefully annexed’, Blackburn felt unable to depart from the decision of the Privy Council; he said ‘the question is not one of fact but of law ... it is beyond the power of this court to decide otherwise than that New South Wales came into the category of a settled or occupied colony’. The judicial acceptance of the doctrine of *terra nullius* which can only be termed a legal fiction, is an example of the Eurocentric foundations of the law. Perhaps better than anything this exposes the difficulties facing Aboriginal litigants in the Australian legal system.

The opholding of the Privy Council decision is also a powerful example of the significance of precedent in the judicial process. Blackburn relied heavily on previous decisions on the main issue, that is, common law recognition of indigenous title. Because there were no decisions on this issue from Australia, he examined judgements in similar cases from other common law countries such as the USA, Canada, and New Zealand as well as Privy Council decisions from Africa and India, stretching from the early 19th century to the present; the many decisions are not easily reconcilable. Some of them have contained what seems like clear recognition of indigenous title as a legal right (e.g. Johnson v. McIntosh and Worcester v. State of Georgia, USA and Regina v. Symonds, New Zealand), whereas others seem just as clearly to reject the same notion (e.g. Tee-Hit-Ton v. the United States, USA, the early stages of Calder v. the Attorney-General, Canada and Wi Parata v. the Bishop of Wellington, New Zealand).

Blackburn’s treatment of these decisions leaves the impression that the cases which have been considered by many scholars to uphold common law recognition of indigenous title, he found unpersuasive or distinguishable from the Australian situation; on the other hand, judgements (some
of them much criticized) unfavourable to the concept, he found persuas­
ive. It is thus possible to discern a certain line in Blackburn’s interpretation
of other judgements. Yet Blackburn indicated several times that he felt
compelled by the precedent to reach the conclusions he did, sometimes
even seeming to regret the result. 9

These two observations seem contradictory; in fact, they reflect two di­
verging views among legal theorists on the nature of the doctrine of pre­
cedent. In traditional jurisprudence it is often maintained that in all cases
turning on a point of law it is possible to discover one or more reasons de­
termining the decision (the ratio decidendi), which are applicable in later
cases according to certain rules. 10 This implies that the discovery and
application of such rations, although possibly demanding on the judge, is
nevertheless a fairly straightforward business. This view is related to the
general tradition, in existence among the English legal profession for
centuries, that the judiciary do not play an active law-making role, but
merely arrive at their decisions through legal reasoning. The law contains
all the principles and rules necessary to determine any case; the job of the
judge is to discover what the law is, not to create it. These ideas were to
a certain extent reflected in Blackburn’s words.

It is a tradition, however, which leaves little room for what the Aus­
tralian professor of law, Julius Stone, calls ‘the leeways of choice’. 11 This
idea is based on a recognition of the fact that judges must constantly make
choices when establishing the rations of previous decisions – exactly how
should the words be understood? In what way were the legal propositions
applied? What was in fact the central element of the decision? and so on.
The process of choice-making also covers the application of precedent to
the case before the judge. Stone emphasizes that the element of choice can­
ot be avoided, it is simply a part of the doctrine of precedent. Thus, in
his judgement Blackburn made a number of choices of interpretation and
distinguishment which produced a particular reading of precedent. Once
it is openly recognized that the judge is not merely mechanically applying
the law, it becomes clear that, to a limited extent, the judge may have a
law-making function. This again makes it important to consider what
determines the way in which he or she makes the choices involved in the
decision.

Some legal theorists, especially the so-called realists in the USA, have
underlined the influence of ideologies and values, or even personal beliefs,
on judicial decisions. There is generally a strong reaction in the legal pro­
fession against such emphasis on subjectivity in decision-making. Julius
Stone, too, while not denying that judges have personal value commit­
ments and that they do and should take extra-legal factors into considera­
tion, seems to consider that these personal views are largely balanced by
‘steadying factors’. Judges will be kept in line by the need and desire to
conform to the standards for judicial behaviour as well as to the proced­
ural rules laid down and accepted by the legal profession. Furthermore,
it is claimed, judges in a democratic society will be influenced by current opinion ensuring that their judgement will be acceptable. This ties up with the point made earlier that, ultimately, judges will base their judgement in difficult cases on the moral and cultural assumptions underlying the legal system. In the final analysis, Blackburn’s decision on precedent was determined by his cultural background to as large an extent as his reasoning on anthropological and historical material. Although Blackburn did not harbour any of the discriminatory attitudes towards Aborigines which have been common in Australia, his judgement in several ways reflected the long tradition of denying Aborigines their rights.

One of the major implications of what has been said so far, however, is that a potential for change is an integral part of the judicial process. As Stone points out, the principle of binding the courts to previous decisions is inherently conservative, yet that same principle also contains elements which enables the common law to develop, through the judge, along with the rest of society. The choices of interpretation facing the judge imply that in many cases alternative, even opposing interpretations of precedent are possible (as, indeed, many legal scholars have claimed in connection with Milirrpum v. Nabalco). Furthermore, it has been argued here that an important element which may influence the judge’s reasoning is a kind of cultural ‘blockage’ which can predetermine the judge’s understanding of the issues. If this is correct, it follows that greater awareness among jurists as well as the general public of such ethnocentrism could radically alter the outcome of similar cases.

That these are not frivolous or utopian ideas is proved by recent developments. The Mabo-case is the latest example of this, but other cases since Milirrpum v. Nabalco have indicated a change of attitude in judicial attitudes.

In Australia, Coe v. the Commonwealth from 1977 was an attempt by the Aboriginal people, represented by Poul Coe, to challenge the sovereignty over Australia of the Commonwealth Government. The claim was that the Aborigines were in sovereign possession of Australia in 1788 and had never ceded this to anyone. For various reasons the case was dismissed, but in the process of reaching this decision, two of the judges of the High Court, Murphy and Jacobs, made some comments which are relevant in the present context. Although they rejected the challenge to the sovereignty of the Commonwealth, they would both allow a discussion of the colonial status of Australia. In particular, Murphy rejected the application of the concept of *terra nullius* to Australia or any other inhabited country.

He also rejected the Privy Council statement from 1889 that Australia was acquired by ‘peaceful annexation’:

> The Aborigines did not give up their lands peacefully; they were removed forcefully from the lands by United Kingdom forces or the European colonists in what amounted to attempted (and in Tasmania almost complete) genocide. The statement
by the Privy Council may be regarded as having been made in ignorance or as a convenient falsehood to justify the taking of the Aborigines' land.13

In this manner, the judge was prepared to allow the influence of recent historical research on his decision on the applicability of earlier judicial statements. This suggested a most important change.

This seems to have been part of a broader development in the common law countries. In Canada, where there have been many more court cases in which Indians and Inuit have tried to obtain recognition and enforcement of their rights, the majority of the Supreme Court of Canada in 1973 found that Indian title to the land did exist as a legal right. The case, Calder v. the Attorney-General, was based on an application by the Nisga Indians of British Columbia for a declaration that their title had never been extinguished. Their application had been rejected in British Columbia by the Supreme Court as well as the Court of Appeal; although the action was dismissed on a technicality by the Supreme Court of Canada, the general recognition of Indian title was a significant statement by the court. One of the judges, Hall, said: 'the Nishgas in fact are and were from time immemorial a distinctive cultural entity with concepts of ownership indigenous to their culture and capable of articulation under the common law.'14

Hall also offered an important comment on the role played by modern research:

The assessment and interpretation of the historical documents and enactments tendered in evidence must be approached in the light of present-day research and knowledge disregarding ancient concepts formulated when understanding of the customs and culture of our original people was rudimentary and incomplete and when they were thought to be wholly without cohesion, laws or culture, in effect a sub-human species.15

By distancing himself from the prejudice of especially some late 19th and early 20th century judicial statements, Hall indicated the importance of awareness of the judge's underlying, perhaps even subconscious, attitudes towards the indigenous population. In Guerin v. the Queen from 1984, the Supreme Court of Canada stated that the Indian title to the land should be understood according to the Indian system (sui generis) rather than be described in terms of the European law of property.16 In this way both decisions made steps towards understanding the indigenous system in its own right.

These and several other cases show that the 1970s saw the growth of a line of judicial thinking which was prepared to allow reconsideration of hitherto unquestioned doctrines if they were contrary to modern 'ideas of justice'. It also encouraged greater awareness of the cultural foundation of such notions as property, in order to avoid an unreasonable demand for conformity by indigenous systems to concepts totally foreign to them. As
will be seen, both aspects of this ‘new judicial attitude’ were present in the decision of the Mabo-case.

An initial victory was gained by the plaintiffs in the High Court in 1988 when it was found by the Court that the Queensland Coast Declaratory Act 1985 enacted by the government in response to the action by the Islanders was inconsistent with the Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act and thus invalid. The Queensland act claimed that all traditional rights to the land were extinguished without right to compensation when the Torres Strait Islands were annexed in the 19th century. The general importance of the High Court finding was pointed out by one of the judges:

... this means that if traditional native title was not extinguished before the Racial Discrimination Act came into force, a State law which seeks to extinguish it will now fail ... because section 10(1) of [that Act] clothes the holders of traditional native title who are of the native ethnic group with the same immunity from legislative interference with their enjoyment of their human right to own and inherit property as it clothes other persons in the community. 17

In other words, indigenous title still existing is protected against arbitrary extinguishment without compensation by the Racial Discrimination Act. Clearly an important finding.

It remained to be decided, however, if Islander title had survived annexation. This essential point was decided in the affirmative by six judges, one judge dissenting, in the High Court in June 1992. The main finding of the court was that ‘the common law of this country recognizes a form of native title which, in the cases where it has not been extinguished, reflects the entitlement of the indigenous inhabitants, in accordance with their laws and customs, to their traditional lands’. 18

This finding represents a dramatic change in Australian legal thinking on indigenous land rights. In reaching their decision, the judges considered some of the judgements from other common law courts dealt with by Blackburn; apart from the dissenting judge, they all interpreted them in a way which supported the recognition by the common law of ‘communal native title’. The High Court thus overruled the conclusions reached by Blackburn.

The attitude underlying this reading of precedent was spelled out in the process of rejecting some well-established legal propositions of Australian law. The reasons for judgement written by Brennan deal with this in detail. The line of argument which he followed in order to recognize the continued existence of indigenous title was that the British Crown had acquired the underlying, ‘radical’ title to the land, but not full possession (‘beneficial ownership’). The Crown’s title was thus not inconsistent with indigenous title, which to the extent that it had not been extinguished by legislation or inconsistent grants to others, continued to exist.

This, however was in opposition to several Australian judgements, which have held that upon acquisistion the Crown gained full ownership of the
land, thus constituting a serious procedural obstacle. To recognize indigenous title meant rejecting these judgements. Brennan saw the problem in the following way:

In discharging its duty to declare the common law of Australia, this Court is not free to adopt rules that accord with contemporary notions of justice and human rights if their adoption would fracture the skeleton of principle which gives the body of our law its shape and internal consistency. The peace and order of Australian society is built on the legal system. It can be modified to bring it into conformity with contemporary notions of justice and human rights, but it cannot be destroyed. It is not possible, a priori, to distinguish between cases that express a skeletal principle and those which do not, but no case can command unquestioning adherence if the rule it expresses seriously offends the value of justice and human rights (especially equality before the law) which are aspirations of the contemporary Australian legal system. If a postulated rule of the common law expressed in earlier cases seriously offends those contemporary values, the question arises whether the rule should be maintained and applied. (pp. 16-17)

Consequently, Brennan proceeded to examine the cases which have established the full ownership of land of the Crown. Brennan is quoted at length because the reasoning of the judge here shows with great clarity the way in which the judicial process allows scope for the development of the law when attitudes in society demand it. The judge is able to find that because precedent (which has not formerly been questioned) is at odds with 'contemporary notions of justice and human rights' it is required that the legal system re-examines that precedent. This reasoning bears out the claim by legal theorists noted earlier that judges are guided by 'principles of what is fair, just or desirable'. It is hardly surprising, given the words the judge uses, that he finds that 'none of the grounds advanced for attributing to the Crown an universal and absolute ownership of colonial land is acceptable' (p. 43). Upholding the precedent and thus finding that one of the 'skeletal principles' of Australian law offends notions of justice and human rights would surely have been an unacceptable finding to have been reached by the highest court of the nation.

Perhaps an even better example of the ability of the court to depart from established legal opinion was the rejection of the doctrine of terra nullius. Brennan reviewed the process by which the concept of no-man's land came to be applied to countries inhabited by hunter-gatherers and other indigenous peoples and recognized that this was based on the belief that indigenous peoples were considered uncivilized and therefore not to be taken into account. He then said: The facts as we know them today do not fit the "absence of law" or "barbarian" theory underpinning the colonial reception of the common law of England. That being so, there is no warrant for applying in these times rules of the common law which were the product of that theory' (p. 27).
Acknowledgement of the importance of the ‘facts as we know them today’ is clearly a repudiation of Blackburn’s conclusion on this issue and an endorsement of the trends noted in the cases of the 1970s mentioned earlier. Having remarked that the whole theory of *terra nullius* was ‘false in fact and unacceptable in our society’, the judge said: ‘Whatever the justification advanced in earlier days for refusing to recognize the rights and interests in land of the indigenous inhabitants of settled colonies, an unjust and discriminatory doctrine of that kind can no longer be accepted’ (p. 30). In this way Brennan rejected a legal fiction which had become unacceptable in society. The words used by Deane and Gaudron were even stronger:

The acts and events by which [the] dispossession [of the Aborigines] in legal theory was carried into practical effect constitute the darkest aspect of the history of this nation. The nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgement of, and retreat from, those past injustices. In these circumstances the Court is under a clear duty to re-examine the two propositions [*terra nullius* and the full ownership of the land by the government] ... that re-examination compels their rejection. (p. 100)

Dawson (the dissenting judge), however, rejected any ability of the judiciary to change the law. Although he recognized that relations between Aborigines and whites have left a stain on Australian history he said:

The policy which lay behind the legal regime was determined politically and however insensitive the politics may now seem to have been, a change in view does not of itself mean a change in the law. It requires the implementation of a new policy to do that and that is a matter for government rather than for the courts. In the meantime it would be wrong to attempt to revise history or to fail to recognize its legal impact, however unpalatable it may now seem. (p. 138)

The judge admitted that the attitude towards the issue has changed (he mentioned ‘the degree of condemnation which is nowadays apt to accompany any account [of the past]’ (p. 138) but denied any obligation on the part of the court to take this into consideration. He clearly questioned the attempt by the other judges to change the direction of the law. Had this attitude been taken by the majority, so that indigenous title had been rejected, Aborigines and Islanders would at the very least have lost complete confidence in the Australian legal system.

As a final indication of the ‘new thinking’ in the judgement, it may be mentioned that all the judges attempted to deal with the nature of indigenous interests in the land in a way which recognized their independent character. Perhaps the most significant statement on this question was made by Toohey. He criticized the demand that indigenous title should conform to notions of private property in order to be recognizable. On the contrary he felt that ‘inquiries into the nature of traditional title are essentially irrelevant’. According to the judge, the common law recognizes
Eddie Mabo and Others vs. the State of Queensland, 1992

indigenous title as soon as its existence has been established by showing a recurrent pattern of physical presence on the land. In Toohey's words: Thus traditional title is rooted in physical presence. That the use of the land was meaningful must be proved but it is to be understood from the point of view of the members of the society (p. 186). The judicial recognition that in this kind of case one must not blindly apply the concepts of the judge's own legal system to another system is of great significance.

Thus it may be concluded that the decision of the Mabo-case reflects a growing awareness in the Australian judiciary of the need for a culturally unbiased approach to the understanding of indigenous principles of landownership. It also reveals an attitude among a majority of the judges to the issues which enabled them to reinterpret and even depart from precedent in order to recognize the existence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander title to the land. It clearly shows that the judges were influenced by the need, increasingly seen by sections of the population, for the Australian nation to come to terms with the impact of colonization on the indigenous peoples of the country. In this respect, the case has demonstrated the ability of the judicial process to create changes in the law in exceptional circumstances. The case has not resolved all the problems facing Aborigines and Islanders trying to recover the land they have lost; however, there is little doubt that the rejection by the High Court of some of the long-lived fictions which have justified the dispossession of these peoples will be of great significance in the future development of relations between the indigenous population and the rest of the Australian population.

NOTES


6. Ibid., p. 257.


9. Ibid., pp. 217, 244, 245, 273, 293.


12. Ibid., pp. 88-89.
15. Ibid., p. 169.
17. Eddie Mabo and another v. the State of Queensland and another, 1988, F.C. 88/062 (High Court of Australia), p. 34. (Later published in *Commonwealth Law Reports*, vol. 166, p. 186.)
18. Eddie Mabo and others v. the State of Queensland, 1992, F.C. 92/014 (later to be published in *Commonwealth Law Reports*), p. 1. All further references to this report are included in the text.

Mark O’Connor

PORT ESSINGTON (NT)*

Nowhere is the sea so entrapped by land,
a smooth basin flooding and draining silently.
Here the tailed, keeled reptile-shape is best.

Kunapipi, that old Snake-Lady,
has swallowed an endless plain,
spews back a third at each low tide.

This lace-coast, froth-land
mixed with sea, sea patterned with land,
tide country, crocodile-totem land,
turns fresh-water floodplain, or salt-marsh
as snows thicken or thin on Antarctica.
An ocean with ripples in place of waves
echoes and gurgles against clay cliffs.
The air is a warm-mousse
kiss, above soft waves friendly to the turtle
and the bark-mat canoe with turned-up sides.
In its shallows the stingray slides easily,
Landing,  
the sandhills are a slither of snake-trails 
stitched with tussocks, among dead-coral oddments 
like mouth-guards or pink plastic gums, 
scraps of sea-corset or abrasive lace.  
The sandcrab’s eight-footed bunch-punch tracks  
swirl like octopus arms around the hole,  
a twirling border of bead-work.  
In a sparse perspicuous place  
the coiled death-adder jumps to view  
and the spinifex pigeon scratches  
its morning flourish on the ground  
- a land to be felt with the toes.  

*) Port Essington in Australia’s Northern Territory is the site of an attempted 19th-century European settlement, destroyed by malaria and cyclone a few years before the city of Darwin was founded.  

MONSOON STORMS  

Thunder through Arnhem Land’s  
worse than eroded lands...  
The gust-front hitting before the rain.  

Flanked by icy outliers of cirrus,  
in the booming belly of the cloud  
the Kunapipi serpent thrashes,  
crackles a forked tongue down  
to favourite caves and valleys.  

‘That Old Lady’, they call her,  
whose roar first let shamans guess  
how a god’s love and anger could coexist.  

Yes, but it’s just electrons talking.  
The storm-cloud’s advancing portico  
sharp as a cut-out with sun above  
is a fluffed, dynamic aerosol, electric ice  
with a high patina’d aura of subtracted shades,  
in reverse-rainbow colours, rare cyane and magenta  
as if oil had mixed with the pastels.
And skating above it,
Australia’s eagle with hoodless eyes
that loves the sun and thunder mixed.

The rain’s barrage moves in, gets our range;
frogs crank up again; drops hiss
on rocks still hot to touch.
We watch the monsoon’s first plumblines drop
and the long weeks begin
of the lightning’s miles-in-a-millisecond.

After the cannons and retreating drums
the shipwrack of a storm staggers
away from the sunset
blazing and howling into the East.

PLAINS AND PYRAMIDS

The plain, a vast lawn of goose-mown grass,
seems an old lake-bed – and is, from three months back.
Its harvest, in spike-rush bulbs, exceeds a wheatfield.

Brindled geese and white herons move on it, placid as sheep.
A distant flock rises and placidly glides
to some new down.

Pelicans cross it on lazy wings, flap, flop, glide,
– taking the beat from their leader.

In Jabiluka Billabong archer-fish glide
at the surface, careless of herons.
Their eye, that can see to shoot a midge,
holds the sky and all of its beaks
lightly in fish-eye crystal.

The floodplain bakes to splitting seedful mud
where the Lightning Man will strike his axe
and the Rainbow Serpent,
blood-scenting dragon, resplendent monsoonal
air-snake that upswims the rising mist,
will swirl hungrily to the fertile smell
of a girl’s first blood at puberty,
swilling the land to mud-brick soup
brimming with all fertility.

The white distant trunks and wet greens
might be English but for the killing heat.
– a wood surrounding a pleasant dale
where knights joust from a line of trees.

Yet the plain has odd dips and gullies
where half a host might hide – the goose camps.
presided by the Lord Jabiru
in red leggings and white plume-badges.

This was the Ice Age field of the Yam People

who drew themselves as pregnant tubers
with plump distorted heads and legs
10,000 years ago, on a high cold plateau.
That same cold-drought begins
afresh each winter, but the monsoon comes.

I think of another floodplain
livened by seasonal floods
where a black race mixed seed and language
with a paler long-nosed one
and built the pyramids.

There too the ibis and hawk were sacred;
and the crocodile answered prayers.
Silence as Expression: Sally Morgan’s *My Place*

In the most important myths and songs, the choice and the arrangement of words were ... circumscribed: the rules were always more strict and less flexible in regard to the most sacred dimension of living, especially in anything to do with the secret-sacred.

...there were unspoken assumptions that children learned to recognise, and to share. Because these are not necessarily spelt out, they can be stumbling blocks for outsiders who try to read meanings into stories without consulting the people who tell them.  

Aboriginal artist Sally Morgan’s very popular 1987 autobiography asks two basic questions: the family-specific, ‘What people are we?’ and the cultural, ‘What did it really mean to be Aboriginal?’ (p. 141). Approximately one-third of Morgan’s book is cast as a quest to determine her proper group, Indian? White? Aboriginal?, and the last two-thirds as a determined struggle to learn for herself and express to the reader her spiritual sense of identity and *Place* as she laboriously fills in the details of her family’s geographic, historical, and psychological wanderings.

*My Place*, one of at least five autobiographies by Aboriginal women since 1978, sold 110,000 copies in the first year of its publication. In *Australian Autobiography, The Personal Quest*, John Colmer identifies six different types of Australian autobiography. While admitting that his categories ‘overlap and merge’, Colmer makes the following distinctions:

1) autobiography as the transmission of humane values for the benefit of the reader and society as a whole
2) autobiography as personal therapy
3) autobiography as personal confession
4) autobiography as refracted social history
5) cultural and intellectual autobiography
6) autobiography as the voice of the neglected or misunderstood outsider

As one might expect, Colmer primarily treats *My Place* as an example of the last category.
This popular work has been widely examined from a variety of critical perspectives. It has been compared to an African-American slave narrative and to a mystery story; seen as part of the post-colonial response, specifically as contributing to the ‘political debate[s] about Aboriginal self-determination’; and as part of the growing body of feminist expressive art. Clearly, Sally Morgan’s rich and provocative story has touched the heart of contemporary critical discourse and has been accepted as an Australian Aboriginal contribution to the growing body of post-colonial expressive art intertextually linked to historical precedents, non-traditional genres such as slave narratives, mystery stories, and autobiographical feminist expression. Indeed, these approaches all seem valid, as far as they go, and are supported and synthesized in Morgan’s own explanation of her inspiration: ‘My first motivation was anger – I get very angry at injustice, and I thought, “Somebody should put this down, people should know about these things.”’ Yet, she and her editors made a conscious decision not to include family photographs in the text, precisely because such pictures would lead to the work being judged as social history rather than ‘as an extension of the Aboriginal story-telling tradition’ (Kunapipi, p. 102).

Therefore, I cannot help but agree with Australian critic Stephen Muecke who is disturbed ‘by how comfortably’ books like My Place have been read. ‘This ease of acceptance,’ Muecke admits, ‘can only make the radical critic uneasy.’ My own discomfort and consequent critical interest in My Place is dual and, finally, paradoxical. At once, I would like the focus of attention on the book to be on the problematic of its transformation of Aboriginal orature into written form, specifically autobiography; but, I also need to contextualize within the traditions of Aboriginal orature and western literary assumptions my own and, I suspect, most readers’ responses to the difficulties Sally Morgan encounters in tracking down her ancestors.

The figure of Daisy, or Nan, Sally’s reluctant-to-speak grandmother is the key to this problem. Within the text, her stubborn silence thwarts the writer’s discovery of her family’s history and the telling of her tale, but, ironically, it is precisely this silence that represents most surely the traditional Aboriginal heritage that Morgan wishes to uncover and convey.

The issue of the transformation of orature into literature is of first importance in the understanding of any written work coming from and purporting to represent a residual-oral culture. Some work has been done on this aspect of My Place, although not as much as that treating the book as social history, political protest, or as an example of feminist voicing. Joan Newman, for example, asks the crucial question:

How is Aboriginal discourse to maintain a separate identity? The more private oral communication which exists as part of Aboriginal family and community life cannot as easily be appropriated by a culture whose forms and language differ. So, in this
way, oral modes can remain authentically one's own. But what results when Aboriginal oral narratives are transcribed? &

Sally Morgan's conscious response to this problem appears to be to incorporate as many features of traditional Aboriginal orature as she can. There is the mystical bird, for instance, which signifies the grandmother's Aboriginal feeling for nature and spirituality, which she can pass on to Sally and her sister, and which also signals her death. This bird appears early in the narrative, linking the older woman with her granddaughter and representing traditional Aboriginal sensibility, although Nan deliberately does not identify it in this way:

This morning, I was waiting for the bird call. Nan called it her special bird, nobody had heard it but her. This morning, I was going to hear it, too. ... Still no bird. I squirmed impatiently. Nan poked her stick in the dirt and said, 'It'll be here soon.' She spoke with certainty. Suddenly, the yard filled with a high trilling sound. My eyes searched the trees. I couldn't see that bird, but his call was there. The music stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Nan smiled at me, 'Did you hear him? Did you hear the bird call?'

'I heard him, Nan,' I whispered in awe.

What a magical moment it had been. (My Place, p. 14)

By the end of the work, when the bird reappears, Nan has revealed her cultural heritage, and her role as teacher and link with the ancestors has become more poignant because of her impending death:

'Nan,' I said slowly as she looked at me, 'about that call, you weren't frightened when you heard it, were you?'

'Ooh, no,' she scoffed, 'it was the Aboriginal bird, Sally. God sent him to tell me I'm going home soon. Home to my own land and my own people. I got a good spot up there, they all waitin' for me.' (p. 357)

As Newman has pointed out, the bird operates at both the level of orature and of literature by serving as an organizing, unifying detail on the literate level and as an element of spirituality, of nature, and as a foreshadowing of impending death in the realm of orature.

It is the structure of My Place, however, that most closely links it to the strategies and meanings of traditional oral storytelling. Its ironic, nonlinear effect is aroused by a narrative expected, since it is an autobiography, to follow a chronological sequence, but which, instead, layers instance upon instance of Sally Morgan's and her family's experience, rather than providing a tidy cause-and-effect, logical progression. Sally's own narrative of her childhood and maturation, the typical stuff of autobiography, becomes backgrounded once she discovers her Aboriginal heritage and begins her search for details about her family's history. As a matter of fact, despite her discussing in frightening detail the disruption of her family life because of her alcoholic and mentally-disturbed, white father,
the first pages of her story seem prosaic compared with those coming later, generated by her efforts to discover an identity she did not know was hers until she was a grown woman. A large part of the ‘mystery’ element of the work rests in her compulsive analysis of clues that have been present all along and her relentless ferreting out of information from her mother and grandmother. Once aroused, this quest becomes obsessive and totally engages the reader’s attention as well. Although Sally Morgan is married at the time of her discovery that she is part-Aboriginal and even has two children, the reader is no more interested in hearing about these family members than Sally is in telling about them. Our attention, like hers, is invested in discovering the variety of truths about her heritage. The story quickly becomes self-referential; *My Place* is largely a story about writing *My Place*. The details of Morgan’s life before this quest seem an essential but flat background for this historical, psychological, and literary pursuit.

In a very real sense, then, the specifics of Sally’s own childhood and adolescence form a pattern not unlike the suprarealism of some Aboriginal paintings. Robin Dizard observes of the book, ‘Not only is sequence different from other autobiographies, but also perspective seems skewed or absent. Foreground events and background appear to have the same treatment’ (p. 11). Rather than their being treated equally, I would argue that the autobiographical details that western readers expect to be highlighted—Morgan’s childhood experiences, for instance—recede in importance, as information about her Aboriginality surfaces. Moreover, the focus shifts from her own life to a dual concentration upon the individual stories of family members and her efforts to discover and record those tales. The result is a flattening effect, with the oral stories of her great-uncle Arthur Corunna, her mother, Gladys, and her grandmother rising in importance to match that of the literate autobiographer’s own life, both as an Australian woman and as a chronicler of that existence.

Morgan, whose vivid painting of her family’s wandering was reproduced for the cover of the first edition of her book and who is a highly-commissioned visual artist in Australia today, was ridiculed in grade school by her western-oriented art teacher:

He held up one of my drawings in front of the class one day, and pointed out everything wrong with it. There was no perspective, I was the only one with no horizon line. My people were flat and floating.... By the end of ten minutes the whole class was laughing and I felt very small. (*My Place*, p. 97)

This humiliation leads Morgan to burn all her drawings, and it is only years later when she visits her grandmother’s birth place and meets an old relative, a local artist, and recognizes the similarity between her way of painting and his that she regains confidence in her own artistry. ‘I couldn’t draw a three-dimensional picture if I tried,’ she confesses: ‘I never felt the
need to put in any horizon lines.... I’ve always liked patterns’ (Kunapipi, p. 104). Her narrative is as patterned in a non-linear way as the painting on its cover. The most significant design linking this nominal autobiography with Aborigine orature, of which sand paintings are a basic narrative element, is its division into four life stories: Sally’s, her great-uncle Arthur’s, her mother Gladys’, and her grandmother Daisy, or Nan’s.

As John Colmer observes, ‘in the art of autobiography there is an integral relationship between design and truth’. The Aboriginal truth of My Place rests in its multi-voiced structure, reproducing the communal nature of traditional orature. Colmer goes on to note that in conventional western autobiographies, ‘the other characters exist mainly in relation to the autobiographer’ (p. 9). My Place, then, in its equal privileging of many voices and stories, rests not in the western tradition alone but, also, in that of Black and Third World writing which, as critic Selwyn Cudjoe notes, ‘is presumed generally to be of service to the group. It is never meant to glorify the exploits of the individual, and the concerns of the collective predominate. One’s personal experiences are assumed to be an authentic expression of the society’.

More specifically, as Stephen Muecke points out, according to traditional Aboriginal custom, ‘narrators are only ever the partial holders of traditions and are required to defer to the others who hold the rest of the sequence if they are available’. Morgan’s book, then, rather than emphasizing her own life story, highlights her search for her family’s experience which she expresses with minimal editing in their own tape-recorded words.

However, this very attempt to reproduce the strategies and motives of traditional orature leads to a paradoxical complication. My subsequent discussion examines the implications of my own, I suspect representative, fury with Daisy’s intransigence and recognizes that my modern expectations must be challenged in order for the genuine Aboriginal nature of this narrative to be revealed. This revelation occurs implicitly not explicitly, possibly unconsciously, even, on Sally Morgan’s part.

Aboriginal critic Christine Morris has complained:

Many writers in Australia have written about the economic and social effects of the written tradition upon the various oral traditions of Australia, but few have addressed the question as to the inappropriateness of replacing the oral tradition with a written one. By this I mean it is fundamentally wrong to assume that the written word is a means of cultural preservation.

The significance of Morris’ criticism is clear if we recognize the demands of orature and of literature, at least in My Place, as in direct conflict with each other. In this autobiography, this cultural battleground is peopled by Daisy Corunna on one side and Sally and, for most of the book, myself as responding western reader, on the other. I have become convinced with John Colmer that ‘in autobiography, it is the reader’s response to the
writer's personal quest that counts'; for, my increasing frustration with and anger at Daisy, echoing Sally's own, finally led me to a moment of revelation about the difference between conventional western autobiography and traditional Aboriginal story telling and even to speculations about clamoring modern assumptions about the reader's undeniable right to all knowledge clashing with Aboriginal decorum, which selects appropriate audiences for certain stories and determines what is to be considered the 'secret-sacred.'

From the moment Sally genuinely suspects her Aboriginal heritage, she relentlessly nags family members to fill in the details. Her great-uncle Arthur quickly and gladly complies: 'I been tryin' to get someone to write it for years' (My Place, p. 213). Her mother Gladys, although 'a hard nut to crack' (My Place, p. 99), slowly agrees. It is Daisy who will not cooperate; 'with my grandmother it was just like a brick wall' (Kunapipi, p. 95).

While Daisy, who has taught Sally to make pictographs of kangaroos and hunters in the sand when she was a child and to listen for the call of the magical bird, eventually reveals some of the details of her life, she refuses to tell everything and goes to her grave with many of her secrets intact. In one of the book's most poignant scenes, after being badgered by Sally for more and more details of her personal experience, Daisy, whose typical response to such demands is flight, finally turns to confront her granddaughter; 'her cheeks were wet. "Don't you understand, yet" she said softly, "there are some things I just can't talk about"' (p. 351). Earlier, she has asserted, 'I got my secrets, I'll take them to the grave. Some things I can't talk about. Not even to you, my granddaughter. They for me to know. They not for you or your mother to know' (p. 349). Sally's quest for Aboriginal identity and public identification as chronicler of her family is so intense, however, she does not accept Daisy's assertion of silence but shouts at her bedroom ceiling, 'I'm not giving up, God. Not in a million years.... and I expect you to help!' (p. 352). Divine intervention has been slow in coming, however: '"I'm not saying nothing. Nothing, do you hear. ... I'm not talking, I'm not talking," [Daisy] muttered as she dropped her rake and put her hands over her ears' (p. 105).

Daisy's refusal to listen to her granddaughter's imprecations and to respond to them has generally been interpreted, even by Sally, as evidence of her continuing fear of white authority and her socially-induced shame of her Aboriginal origins. Certainly, there is justification for this view. After Sally receives an Aboriginal scholarship to the University, her grandmother pleads, 'You won't ever tell them about me, will you, Sally? I don't like strangers knowing our business, especially government people. You never know what they might do' (p. 137). This fear is understandable; Sally comments on having met half-cast Aborigines who were taken away from their non-white mothers as late as the nineteen sixties. As she becomes willing to admit her true heritage, rather than claiming to have
come to Australia on a boat from India, Daisy also begins to respond to news stories about blacks. However, her self-image is, clearly, conflicted:

If the story was sad, she'd put her hand to her mouth and say, ‘See, see what they do to black people.’ On the other hand, if black people were doing well for themselves, she'd complain, ‘Just look at them, showing off. Who do they think they are. They just black like me.’ (pp. 137-8)

For the purposes of contextualizing Morgan’s autobiography within Aboriginal expressive art, however, Nan’s insistence on secrecy, most fruitfully, can be seen as representative of the older tradition that she represents.

Catherine Berndt has spoken of ‘divisions or levels or dimensions in [the] means of transmitting information ... with the mundane, the ordinary on one hand, and on the other the secret-sacred’. My argument is that Daisy considers her known life every bit as sacred, therefore parts of it secret, as Sally considers her previously unknown life psychologically and politically important and, because of her western schooling, appropriate as the subject of public scrutiny. Even Gladys, her mother, who finally responds fulsomely, with heretofore unknown events in the family history, complains in an interview subsequent to the publication of My Place, ‘I feel sick. I feel my whole life’s paraded before everybody’ (Kunapipi, p. 97).

Like a trickster, Sally taunts Daisy into providing the first information she receives from her:

I started reading her extracts from the stories my Uncle Arthur had given me, but not telling her who it was about, just that it was a man I knew. She thought it was fantastic, and she would laugh and cry, and when I told her it was her own brother’s story, she got very jealous, and then she’d say, ‘Well, I’ve got a better story than that,’ and I’d say, ‘Well, you’re no good because you won’t talk. For all we know you might have a silly story.’ Eventually she came round, and then it became important to her to tell. (Kunapipi, p. 95)

Arthur, too, taking a detached, communal stance toward the story of his own struggles as a young man, goads Daisy into talking by implying she is ignorant, arguably, because she is a woman: ‘It’s history, that’s what it is. We’re talking history. You could be talkin’ it too, but then I s’pose you don’t know what it is’ (My Place, p. 163).

Daisy agrees, at least partially: ‘Could be it’s time to tell. Time to tell what it’s been like in this country’ (p. 439). Once she agrees to speak (necessarily, for Sally’s comprehension, in English, not in the Aboriginal language in which, it is discovered, she is fluent), truth-telling, not fictionalizing, is of first importance: ‘I got to be careful what I say. You can’t put no lies in a book’ (p. 325). But, as she later clearly expresses, there are truths one cannot put in a book, as well.

My first title for this essay was ‘Silence as Expression, or Daisy Corunna goes “pink-eye”’, using the north-west Aboriginal expression, similar to
the more widely-known 'walk about', 'a period of wandering as a nomad, often undertaken by Aborigines who feel the need to leave the place where they are in contact with white society and return for spiritual replenishment to their traditional way of life' (p. 325). Sally's insistence on knowing all, moreover, on telling all to strangers, can be seen as appearing as alien to Daisy Corunna as the white society that has denied and dictated so much of her life.

Ironically, then, despite the multitude of voices structuring this narrative, the true heteroglossia, that is, the clash of voices in Bakhtin's terms, stems from Daisy's silence. Her refusal to reveal everything about her personal life may thwart Sally's and the reader's desire for complete knowledge and frustrate their modern assumptions of their right to know everything, but this silence speaks eloquently of her representation of a culture where the word was powerful and where there was no such genre as the confessional form.

NOTES


2. Sally Morgan, My Place (Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1986), p. 105. All further references are included in the text.


9. 'A Fundamental Question of Identity, An Interview with Sally Morgan', Kunapipi, vol. 10, no. 1-2, 1988, p. 94. All further references are included in the text.


15. In her interview in Kunapipi, cited above, Morgan reveals that her original manuscript was three times the length of the published book. Nevertheless, she insists that the printed stories are virtually word for word with the oral narration, that she
only cut and pasted, throwing out 'stories that kind of went off on tangents' (p. 108). The narratives of the different informants were different in essential ways, however, and had to be handled differently: 'In Mum's case, because she's so articulate, virtually what is written is what she said, word for word. She wrote her own story, and I just put it together. But with my grandmother, sometimes I would ask her a question, and older Aboriginal people will answer you, but not always verbally. ... So I had to decide, do I include this or do I leave it out. ... but I think what I learned when I was writing it was that you don't have to be explicit to say something' (pp. 108-9).


JUSTIN MACGREGOR

Towards a Hybrid Discourse: The Poetry of Mudrooroo

The Song Circle of Jacky and Dalwurra: The Black Bittern are probably Mudrooroo's most successful post-colonial works. In the texts he produces a form and a content that do not subsume or marginalize an/Other; instead he liberates his writing from colonial discourse and generates a hybrid form that accepts and inscribes difference. While there may be some minor slippages in language and form that repeat the marginalization of colonial discourse, both texts produce a hybrid discourse that includes Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, escapes the vortex of the Manichean Allegory and undermines binary classifications. The Song Circle of Jacky and Dalwurra produce a hybrid discourse that combines two distinct archives, the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal, by speaking from the space where European and Aboriginal discourses 'spill into each other'.

The Song Circle of Jacky is probably Mudrooroo's most political text in that it directly addresses contemporary Aboriginal concerns. In the thirty-five poems that comprise the song circle, Mudrooroo deals with the Aboriginal struggle for land reparations, the failure of the Australian government to negotiate fairly over Aboriginal rights, the pain of Aboriginal history, and the continuing oppression of Aboriginals by the majority
society. While the contents of the poems are overtly political, Mudrooroo also expresses his political concerns by producing a poetic discourse and language that are post-colonial.

The Song Circle of Jacky is a slight variation on traditional Aboriginal discourse: instead of producing an oral song circle he is producing a written one. The written poem circle is both a new and an older discourse: the Aboriginal totems are ancient but their inclusion in a written art form makes them new. Mudrooroo is merging Aboriginal oral poetry with non-Aboriginal written poetry so that he can speak to both groups at the same time, so that his poetry can become an example of the successful negotiation that can take place between the two groups. While Mudrooroo is concerned with the ‘cultural oppression [of Aboriginals] in contemporary Australia’, he also wants to discover a means of perpetuating his cultural identity, a means of expressing his Aboriginality. Perhaps by (re)presenting Aboriginal suffering and pain to non-Aboriginals, and by turning this anger into political action, Mudrooroo believes that this oppression can be overcome and finally rejected. While the poetry ‘reveals, probes and shapes the landscapes of dispossession and denial’, it also suggests that this landscape can belong to the past by creating a hybrid art form. However, the continuing oppression, imprisonment and rejection of Aboriginals by the Australian political system suggests that this hope may be in vain.

In the opening of his song circle Mudrooroo exposes the differences between European and Aboriginal conceptions of time. The first poem of the song circle locates Jacky, the Aboriginal figure that Mudrooroo uses as a kind of narrator, for the reader:

Jacky him been sit listening to the wind;
Jacky him been walk listening to the wind;
Jacky him been sit talking to the wind;
Jacky him been walk following the wind.

The tenses of these lines suggest a view of time that differs from that of the non-Aboriginal majority of Australia: tenses are played with and altered so that the relation of the present to the past is unclear. This alteration creates a place for an Aboriginal understanding of time as fluid, and the past as ever-present, within the framework of non-Aboriginal written poetry. As Mudrooroo has noted, ‘[i]n traditional [Aboriginal] society, the past, the remote dreaming past, spilt over into the present and served to shape the future’. In his song circle Mudrooroo’s narrator, Jacky, has the past spill over into the present.

Despite Mudrooroo’s desire to be ‘faithful to his own experience as an Aborigine’ he never forgets that most of his readers will probably be non-Aboriginals. As a result of this situation, Mudrooroo uses the perceived strangeness and difference of Aboriginal culture as a means of engaging the non-Aboriginal reader. In ‘Song One’, Mudrooroo uses this perception
of Aboriginal culture by presenting the Aboriginal from the perspective of a European spectator:

Jacky’s features worn and craggy,
The face of the cliff behind his place,
Worn and fissured with the care of his race  

(Jacky, p. 11)

Some critics may argue that the problem with this description of an Aboriginal is that it can reinforce existing images of the indigene as noble, savage or simply ‘other’ to the European Eye/I: that the naturalistic imagery can also reinscribe stereotypes and subsume an Aboriginal perspective.7

However, Mudrooroo avoids this reinforcement by merging non-Aboriginal images of the Aboriginal with totems that are alien to the majority society. In ‘Song One’, he writes that Jacky was ‘Circumcised into the Rain Dream, born from the Lizard’ and speaks ‘Of the Frog Dream mated with the Dog’ (Jacky, p. 11). While most Aboriginals would be aware of such non-Aboriginal ideas as Heaven, Hell, the Crucifixion of Christ and the like, non-Aboriginals are not equally aware of Aboriginal symbols and referents. By mentioning the Frog Dream, the Rain Dream, the Lizard and the Dog, and by presenting the majority’s image of the Aboriginal, Mudrooroo draws attention to two poles of Australia; he produces a discourse that incorporates both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. When Mudrooroo writes ‘Jacky Jacky, he no fool; Jacky Jacky, he kurdaitcha man!’ (Jacky, p. 13), he is placing the differing perspectives of Jacky produced by these two poles of Australia opposite each other while containing them within the same line of poetry.

In order to include both poles of reference, Mudrooroo (re)presents Aboriginal pain and suffering to attack non-Aboriginal complacency over Aboriginal issues. Consequently, Mudrooroo’s poems detail many instances of Aboriginal oppression: he refers to the ‘wages of flour, sugar and tea, and women bought for a drink’ (Jacky, p. 11) that are a part of Aboriginal history; how the Australian government has only given Aboriginals ‘the right to die’ (Jacky, p. 19); how poverty has created a situation whereby Aboriginals can be found in ‘your jails’, in ‘dark doorway[s]’, at the location of a ‘screaming siren’, sleeping in a ‘grassless’ park, and ‘drinking life away’ (Jacky, pp. 35-6). Even the title of his text, The Song Circle of Jacky, draws attention to the marginalization of Aboriginals: ‘Jacky’ is a derogatory name used by non-Aboriginals to describe Aboriginals.8 These images can be analyzed to reinforce an interpretation of the Aboriginal as an alcoholic criminal or a prostitute who is responsible for his or her own fate; but Mudrooroo assigns blame to the non-Aboriginals who invaded Australia for the Aboriginal condition in the present day. He reminds the non-Aboriginal reader that ‘[w]e never surrendered, or sold to you’ and that Aboriginals are only dependent on ‘welfare cheques’ be-
cause they have never been compensated for the loss of their land (Jacky, p. 22). Only through reparations and the economic equality that these entail can Aboriginals end the cycle of oppression.

To avoid the marginalization of Aboriginals in his poetry Mudrooroo seeks to centre Aboriginal discourse. In ‘Song Twenty Six’, he insists upon the difference of Aboriginals, their values and their own constructions of reality:

This hooked throwing-stock of peninsular land,
Bunjil fashioned it.
With beak and claw he scored the earth,
The waters rose,
To enclose the shape,
For Eaglehawk to see
As he flew high.
Scattering,
To drift down upon the land,
The seedlings of the Bunurong,
To grow from earth as bird from nest. (Jacky, p. 39)

This poem presents and centres an Aboriginal creation myth. The totems of Bunjil, Eaglehawk and Bunurong resist easy classification and interpretation because they are alien to non-Aboriginals. Thus, outside readers, ‘though not unsympathetic ... cannot read the obvious, cannot connect signifier and signified into sign’.9 The poetry allows non-Aboriginals to question why they are unable to connect signifier and signified into sign, why they are marginalized by the poems when Aboriginals are not, why they are now ‘othered’ while reading a song circle that (re)presents Jacky’s point of view. The poetry contains an answer to their question: because Aboriginal signs have been repressed and denied by the majority discourse.

By becoming ‘othered’ in this way, non-Aboriginals can begin to see themselves and their experience through the eyes of the ‘other’ that they have been ignoring and marginalizing, through the eyes of the Jacky they have been oppressing. Mudrooroo looks at the non-Aboriginal construction of the office and sees people sitting in ‘fat salary chairs,/Waiting for their superannuation couches’ (Jacky, p. 42) and, more importantly, he looks at non-Aboriginal Australians and reveals that they do not belong:

Many come from there,
Elsewhere,
Go on being Australian.
Aborigines pass a bottle,
Sort out kinship groupings,
How Jacky fits as a relative;
Whites go on and on,
A people a long way from home. (Jacky, p. 17)
This poem inverts the post-colonial concern with place and displacement. In the poem the Aboriginals become the people who belong, who have a sense of place, while the non-Aboriginals become the people who are actually displaced, who do not belong. Later in the cycle Mudrooroo will go even further in his (re)placement of Aboriginals in Australia. In 'Song Thirty-Four', Mudrooroo is not only detailing many instances of oppression; much more important – particularly in regard to the decolonization of the indigenous mind – is the catharsis which Jacky undergoes. He returns to the source of his culture and thus actually becomes the geography of Australia so that his 'flesh shivers with thousands of tracks and figures and signs' (Jacky, p. 49). In this poem Jacky undergoes a transformation from alienation to a sense of belonging: he is returned to his centre. As Mudrooroo's audience is primarily non-Aboriginal, however, this centring of Aboriginals as the landscape of Australia is not articulated in order to tell Aboriginals that their discourse is superior to that of non-Aboriginals; instead it is an attempt to tell non-Aboriginals that they need to alter their discourse to create a place in their society for the people they have displaced.

The nature of Mudrooroo's hybrid poetic discourse is such that he recognizes how a homogenizing discourse that does not allow for heterogeneity is responsible for many of the problems faced by Aboriginals. Veronica Brady says that

Johnson is playing a game of hide and seek, not just with the enemy without, European culture, but with an enemy within, a self which is part accomplice in its own destruction, part antagonist to it, necessarily involved with a culture in which he finds no place save that of the outsider.10

Indeed, Mudrooroo is aware that many Aboriginals have forsaken their heritage and perpetuated their own destruction: he sees the ones that are part of the Australian government as people who 'sit in Canberra town,/ Drinking whiskey and being neat,/ Air conditioned against the heat' (Jacky, p. 42), because they can no longer stand their own heritage and its environment; he knows that far too many Aboriginal men send their wives 'to modelling schools/ Where they learn how to hide their Koori legs' (Jacky, p. 42), because they want their wives to look like white women; he is aware that many 'passionate young men./Never having passed the manhood tests', sit quietly in their homes (Jacky, p. 42); and that too many parents tell their children to 'Stay out of shadows, try to appear white,/ Don't show the darkness,/ Ever-present as your Aboriginality' (Jacky, p. 38). While Brady believes that Mudrooroo is fighting an enemy within, a self that is partially culpable, I believe that Mudrooroo does not blame Aboriginals for their participation in their own destruction: Mudrooroo is aware that the majority discourse is responsible for these scenes, that this discourse has constructed the Aboriginal self as self-
defeating through devices such as the Manichean Allegory, through binary classifications.

While Mudrooroo’s poetry contains few of the ungrammaticalities that he sees as an integral component of Aboriginal writing,\(^1\) his poems do draw attention to the constructed and fallible nature of language and discourse. Mudrooroo ironically points out: ‘[t]hey call us terrorists, we – the terrified!’ (Jacky, p. 28). The majority discourse uses labels to ‘other’ individuals who do not seek to perpetuate its definition of society; but people who are terrorists to the majority may actually be terrified to themselves, to the minority. Mudrooroo’s poetry shifts the perspective from the non-Aboriginal majority to that of the Aboriginal minority.

In the last few poems of *The Song Circle of Jacky*, Mudrooroo reveals his own belief that an incorporative, multicultural education will allow a hybrid discourse to exist. In ‘Song Thirty’, a young girl asks, ‘[w]hat’s a Naboriginal ... a Nunkanbah ... a Nembaluk ... an Unguru’ (Jacky, p. 43); she also tells her mother that her class heard an Aboriginal speaker who ‘[t]old us Captain Cook was bad,/[O]nly came to steal this land’, that ‘we had spoilt the ground,/ Said that time would condemn us for our crime’ and that because of this she is ‘too scared to cry,/ I don’t want our land to die’ (Jacky, p. 43). Whether the girl is Aboriginal or not is irrelevant; the important thing is that she is learning to question a monolithic and homogenizing discourse and to wonder if there are other interpretations of the world, other discourses that might also exist. The girl’s race does not matter so long as she has an understanding of the different cultures and perspectives that must negotiate to define Australia in the future. To Mudrooroo, this little girl is a reminder that ‘[t]he next generation’, whether Aboriginal or not, ‘is heavy’, that the world can ‘flower this spring’ (Jacky, p. 50) and become, once again, ‘[l]ifegiving earth’ instead of ‘deathgiving dirt’ (Jacky, p. 48). Through negotiation, a hybrid discourse like Mudrooroo’s song circle can come into existence and hopefully allow for heterogeneity and difference. Mudrooroo’s poetry casts Aboriginal discourse in non-traditional written forms in the hopes of making something new, something of both worlds, something hybrid.

One of the most interesting aspects of Mudrooroo’s *Dalwurra: The Black Bittern* is its very existence. Mudrooroo wrote a Bicentennial Gift Poem for Australia entitled ‘Sunlight Spreadeagles Perth in Blackness’ but he could not find a publisher for it in the year of the bicentenary.\(^12\) This particular poem, which is highly critical of various Australian institutions, became representative of the marginalization of Aboriginals. ‘Sunlight’ combines the cultural matrix of the Australian majority into a new structure; the poem takes what is known and recognized in order to look at it through other eyes: the deaths of Margaret Tucker, Robert Walker, John Pat and other Aboriginals are discussed openly;\(^13\) King Willy, the narrator and an Aboriginal universal figure, mocks ‘organized time’ by living in ‘this glad tomorrow today’ of his Dreamtime;\(^14\) Aboriginals are seen as people
‘Imprisoned, jailed, beaten and buggared/Inside for defying the whiteness’; Aboriginals are also seen as ‘Stockman / Fruitpicker / Casual worker / Farm hand / Castoff / Bludger / Fringedweller, / Land owner and land holder: / The ones who never had to arrive’; urban centres are viewed through eyes that ‘cannot say that this city is ugly, or ... that it is unique’ but that can say ‘[i]t is pretty, framed by the blue of sky and river’; and Aboriginals ‘wander disowned and owning’ while their metropolis ‘fills with a crowd lost in a haze of jet lag from Europe’. Hugh Webb believes ‘Sunlight’ uses a method of bricolage that ‘re-locates significant cultural objects into a different position within the semiotic ensemble while seemingly using the same overall repertoire of signs’. I would go further and say that these signs are transliterated from a non-Aboriginal majority discourse into a hybrid discourse.

In the very same year that ‘Sunlight’ was rejected by publishers, Mudrooroo received a grant from the Western Australian Government to write a poem celebrating the bicentenary. Rather than taking the opportunity to publish ‘Sunlight’, Mudrooroo chose to write Dalwurra; and instead of using the poem to condemn Australian society, he took the opportunity to write a song cycle like The Song Circle of Jacky, that attempts to create a new discourse that can include an Aboriginal past and present without subsuming either. In Dalwurra, Mudrooroo’s post-colonial discourse does not challenge centrality as much as it redefines the centre to include the margins, it does not invert the hierarchy of colonizer and colonized as much as it works outside of a hierarchical mode of thinking.

Mudrooroo begins Dalwurra with an introduction that seeks to locate the poem cycle of the black bittern for readers who are unaware of Aboriginal myths and oral traditions. In his introduction, Mudrooroo explains how the song cycle ‘is inspired by the eastern Arnhem Land song genre Manikay’ and that ‘we are not talking about a simple bird, but a Wangarr, or totemic, or Dreaming ancestral being who inter-relates with other Dreaming beings on his journey’. Mudrooroo notes how the poems or songs trace his own journeys through Singapore, India, England and Thailand using the black bittern as a totemic symbol.

Unlike the non-Aboriginal forewords to Aboriginal texts that Mudrooroo finds problematic, Mudrooroo’s introduction serves to ‘other’ non-Aboriginal readers and prepare them for his poems. Mudrooroo completed The Song Circle of Jacky with the suggestion that education can help to free Aboriginals from their marginal subject positions and his introduction is an example of the kind of education that can accomplish this liberation. Providing translations for words or ideas in the body of a text can give the receptor culture the higher status and continue the process of colonialism. It is significant, however, that Mudrooroo provides the definitions and explanations for his poetry before the poem cycle has been read; by providing an explanation of his poems in an introduction, Mudrooroo is attempting to educate non-Aboriginal readers so that they can
gain access to the significance of the poetry, so that they can 'read the obvious' and 'connect signifier and signified into sign'. His introduction is a road map, a guide book into what he believes will be unknown territory for most of his readers.

The black bittern is a non-migratory bird and while it serves as an excellent metaphor for Mudrooroo's 'anguish at leaving his home' (*Dalwurra*, p. 7), it also serves as an excellent metaphor for the non-Aboriginal reader about to enter his text. Non-Aboriginals have rarely left the confines of their own discourse and Mudrooroo is preparing them for entry into a new way of seeing and defining and shaping the world. He does not replace one centre with another, but opens up this centre through education to include the margins, to make it hybrid. In this way Mudrooroo is allowing for the counter-assimilation of non-Aboriginals into Aboriginal culture; his texts are producing a hybrid subject position for readers to occupy.

In order to accomplish this inclusion without giving the receptor culture the higher status, Mudrooroo uses a multiplicity of definitions to approximate Aboriginal signs without fixing them, in English, as one thing or another. In discussing the *Manikay*, Mudrooroo writes that this word 'may be defined as a clan song series alluding to ancestral beings' (*Dalwurra*, p. 7). This definition reveals that *Manikay* may be a clan song series and it also may not be because translations are only approximations. Mudrooroo is approximating what the *Manikay* may be but he leaves the final definition of what it is to be discovered by the actual act of reading his text: with Mudrooroo's introduction as an interpellating road map, the *Manikay* will become whatever the reader decides *Dalwurra*, a *Manikay*, is when s/he arrives at the end of the poem cycle.

Mudrooroo also uses several English translations of one Aboriginal word in order to expose how translations only approximate the actual sign. In his introduction a *wangarr* is defined as a 'totemic or Dreaming ancestral being' (*Dalwurra*, p. 7; emphasis mine). By using more than one word to define an Aboriginal concept, Mudrooroo is exposing how translations, and all other uses of language, are constructed and thus inexact because of the nature of the referent; as long as the cultural and societal interpellations that have constructed words and given them their meaning are unknown, then the definition will remain incorrect. Mudrooroo's introduction generates an approximation of an Aboriginal word so that the reader can then gain access to some specific examples of this word in *Dalwurra*; this approximation will allow the non-Aboriginal reader to adjust and construct the sign gradually. Eventually, through poem cycles like *Dalwurra*, the idea of a *Manikay* will be understood by non-Aboriginal society and a definition of the word 'Manikay' will enter a hybridized majority discourse.

While Mudrooroo provides some translations of Aboriginal concepts and words in his introduction, he occasionally leaves some of them untranslated. Mudrooroo refers to some Aboriginal totems or ideas without ex-
plaining what they are: he says that the coffin refers to 'the Djambidj song cycle' (Dalwurra, p. 7); that the Singaporean Dragon can be equated 'with the Waugyal of Nyoongah mythology' (Dalwurra, p. 7); and that Dalwurra 'mistakes the Paddy Bird for a Jiribu' (Dalwurra, p. 8). By leaving some words untranslated or unexplained, Mudrooroo hints at the vast body of Aboriginal mythology and culture that cannot be contained by one text, by one song cycle; Mudrooroo leaves some of his culture unsaid and, in so doing, suggests that a true understanding of the sign cannot occur without cross-cultural education to enable and produce a hybrid, cross-cultural discourse.

As a result of this goal, Mudrooroo's song cycle is not an example of traditional Aboriginal culture. While Penny Van Toorn is right in suggesting that Mudrooroo is undertaking a counter-assimilation,23 I do not believe that the counter-assimilation is of non-Aboriginals into Aboriginal society through an Aboriginal reading position; in other words, Mudrooroo is not creating a position for non-Aboriginals in a traditional oral Aboriginal society as much as he is producing a new discourse that combines Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives and referents. His counter-assimilation is into a hybridized, post-colonial discourse. John Ryan may see the song cycle as 'a powerful statement of ... the validity and richness of the writer's own Aboriginal heritage',24 but I would argue that the departures that inevitably result in the transcription from an oral to a written culture mean that traditional Aboriginal culture can never be realized in a written format.25 Thus an Aboriginal reading position is itself not a part of traditional Aboriginal society; instead it is a part of a hybridized discourse in which an Aboriginal perspective is included alongside that of non-Aboriginals.

This departure from traditional Aboriginal oral expression has resulted in some criticism being directed at Mudrooroo. In Writing From the Fringe, he notes that Aboriginals criticise poetry that does not have the 'rich rhythms of traditional Aboriginal society' and that Dalwurra, 'based on traditional song texts has been criticised by Aborigines precisely because of this'.26 While this song cycle is definitely a declension from traditional song texts, it still produces a space for Aboriginal culture in Australia. As Diana Brydon has noted '[a]ll living cultures are constantly in flux and open to influences from elsewhere'27 and Mudrooroo is generating a new Aboriginal mode of expression:

This poem cycle shows how Aboriginal song cycles may form the basis of inspiration for poems in English, though there is a vast difference between traditional Manikay and such modern inspirations...What I have tried to show is that they may form the inspiration for modern poetry, or song.(Dalwurra, pp.9-10)

_Dalwurra_ is something old recast as something new; it is Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; it is genuinely Australian because it includes, combines
and allows for the various elements of that society to express themselves without reproducing the marginalization of colonial discourse; it is post-colonial.

The changes that the Manikay and traditional Aboriginal culture are undergoing are reflected by the changes that affect Dalwurra during his journey. Before the black bittern leaves Australia, he is ‘[w]andering his beaches and creeks;/ Restless, sitting and gazing’ and ‘he rises;/ Flying westward into the sun where the clouds huddle;/ Accede and recede as he flies away from his home’ (Dalwurra, p. 13). When the black bittern returns, his perceptions have been altered: he is still ‘Wandering the beaches and creeks’ but now he is ‘searching’ (Dalwurra, p. 65) and they are no longer ‘his’ beaches; Dalwurra is no longer solitary, instead he is ‘As one of a flock’ (Dalwurra, p. 65); and now he does not gaze elsewhere or rise to fly westward; rather he ‘rises to settle amidst the spinifex grass,/ To settle among the bushes and rocks of his home’ (Dalwurra, p. 65).

Dalwurra’s journeys through the cultures of India, England, and parts of Asia have altered his perceptions of his own culture; in a similar manner, contact with non-Aboriginals has altered Aboriginal culture so that it is no longer what it was. Mudrooroo finishes his final poem by having Dalwurra ‘stamp out the log-coffin of sweet honey’ (Dalwurra, p. 65) and here the coffin is a sign ‘redolent not only of death’, as it is for most non-Aboriginals, but also a sign ‘of rebirth and initiation’ (Dalwurra, p. 7).

Dalwurra has moved from an old discourse to a new one, and the song cycle that tells of his journey and initiation is one whose form is an example of that new discourse.

The poem cycle that Mudrooroo produces escapes the vortex of the Manichean Allegory by examining Aboriginal culture in relation to several alien cultures. Throughout the cycle, Dalwurra is exposed to many different cultures: Singapore with its ‘unnatural rock’, ‘computer caverns’, and the ‘acid sputum of [its] silicosis time’ (Dalwurra, pp. 15, 16, 23); the Himalayas and its dragon, ‘Karpo Druk./ Its head eating the land’, who has been ‘[p]ainted by mad lamas’ (Dalwurra, pp. 27, 29); India and its gods who give him the ‘task’ of guiding the river Rungeet (Dalwurra, p. 31); Calcutta with its people ‘everywhere’ who are seen as ‘vast flocking birds of different species’ (Dalwurra, pp. 39, 8); Scotland and a farmer who believes that ‘[l]and answers all’ (Dalwurra, p. 47); West Indians who are filled with ‘revenging thoughts’ because of the ‘white Pacific crimes’ (Dalwurra, p. 52); and Thailand, where Kinnara ‘laugh[s]’ at him and taunts Dalwurra with cries of ‘sabi, sabi’ (Dalwurra, p. 63). As Kateryna Arthur has noted, the result of these encounters ‘is a dispersed and a scattered view of many places and many histories often incongruously yolked together’.28 It is true that the various cultures Mudrooroo refers to have arisen from different times and places to form different cultural matrixes. The specific components of these matrixes are all unique and different so any comparison between them would appear to be incongruous. I would
argue, however, that these places and histories are 'yolked' together congruously because all cultures are in flux, ceaselessly adapting, and, more importantly, constantly exposed to other cultures that may spill into them. This exposure and the adaption it entails unites cultures by placing them in the same global context. Mudrooroo is viewing his Aboriginal culture not from the one perspective of the Imperial Eye/I but through one culture after another in order to free his culture from binary classification, to place it in a multicultural context. While his other texts have usually been constructed in opposition to the Imperial Eye/I, Dalwurra is constructed within a global context. This global context allows for heterogeneity and hybridity by attempting to escape the Manichean Allegory and its black/white, me/you binaries. Binary oppositions have been the primary means of representing difference and justifying its subordination. Mudrooroo places many different global cultures in his poem in order to conceive of difference outside of a binary oppositional framework.

All of the cultures in Dalwurra add up to produce a 'multicultural meta-myth which shows all cultures to be relative and subject to change'. As Dalwurra leaves his home, he looks on himself and sees that he is displaced:

Far from home and faltering,
My struggles cause panic -
Thunder to pound my heart,
As lightning I fall far from home,
Terrified from the constant changing
Of the rain pouring down,
Pouring me down into the city. (Dalwurra, p. 14)

This poem expresses the pain of displacement and migration for a creature that is non-migratory. Like Dalwurra, cultures are constantly 'changing' and moving far 'from home' as they adapt to a world that is fluid and multiple. People can, like Dalwurra, learn to migrate and accept difference or else their terror will pour 'them down'. Cultures can recognize that they are relative and constructed; only then will they be able to adopt a hybrid discourse and to include difference in all its forms.

The only apparent problem with Dalwurra occurs after the poem cycle itself is finished when Mudrooroo includes an essay by the non-Aboriginal scholar Veronica Brady. While her essay is undeniably supportive and sees his song cycle as being 'in full possession of its Aboriginal inheritance, so that there is no need to insist on it', I cannot help wondering why Mudrooroo felt a need to 'insist' on his work's validity by including this essay. Just as Mary Durack's foreword to Wild Cat Falling could be interpreted as saying that 'now they can write like us', so can Brady's essay be interpreted as saying 'this is good poetry'. While Mudrooroo's introduction was a lesson for non-Aboriginals, Brady's essay seems to undermine that lesson by interpreting and justifying his text as 'an important
moment in the understanding of Aboriginal culture'. Though I do not want to compare the racist language of Durack's essay with Brady's, or their very different approaches, it seems that both essays can be interpreted as having the same message for non-Aboriginals: this text is different but it is still acceptable and should still be accepted. In other words, Brady's after/word has the final word on the text and its reception. Mudrooroo is not the final voice of his own text, instead he seemingly defers judgement to another critic, one who is non-Aboriginal.

However, while this may be a valid criticism of the inclusion of Brady's essay as an afterword, it is also possible to see this inclusion as an affirmation of Mudrooroo's poetic discourse. Mudrooroo has attempted to create a place for a discourse that allows the inclusion of both Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. In a similar fashion Brady's essay is an example of this new discourse: through an awareness of Mudrooroo's Aboriginal totems, Brady is able to offer a valid criticism and interpretation of his text. It is the possibility and need for negotiation, for cross-cultural communication that has been stressed by Mudrooroo's poetry. As long as critics, regardless of race or cultural position, are willing to allow novelistic or poetic discourses to combine and include different referents and different forms, then our essays can become just as hybrid as the texts we are discussing. Mudrooroo does not have the last word because such monolithic, closed conclusions are part of the imperial discourse that he is rejecting. His poetic discourse is not a monologue that speaks with colonial authority, instead it is a post-colonial dialogue that he participates in with Brady and any other reader of his text.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 230.
4. Mudrooroo, The Song Circle of Jacky and Selected Poems (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1986.), p. 10. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
9. Mudrooroo, Writing From the Fringe, p. 189.
15. Ibid., p. 53.
16. Ibid., p. 54.
17. Ibid., p. 57.
18. Ibid., p. 44.
20. Mudrooroo, *Dalwura: The Black Bittern*, Veronica Brady and Susan Miller, eds. (Nedlands, WA: The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, 1988), p. 7. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
21. Mudrooroo, *Writing From the Fringe*, p. 34.
31. Mudrooroo, *Writing From the Fringe*, p. 34.
Syd Harrex

DAVID UNAIPON: NARROONDARIE’S WIVES

I  The Casuarina Song

Boonah Narroondarie the Sacred Man
of the Narrinyini tribes turned to birds
all those who failed to heed his call. His last
earth home was two bald hills, fringed by mallee
and honeysuckle and our Lakes Albert
and Alexandrina stocked with fat fish:
sweet Thookerrie forbidden to women.
One day Narroondarie going to fish
was stopped by the sad song of a sighing
She Oak tree, and found the source of these pleas
and lamentations was two maidens jailed
in the trunk of a Grass Tree to save men
bound for the Spirit Land from their clutches.
The Sacred Man of pity set them free.

II  The Fall

He was snared, as sacred heroes are, by
siren vows, and as they stepped from the Grass
Tree, by these maidens’ Punerrie of beauty.
They became his wives in his mia mia.
And so he counselled them in Spirit Law,
warned against forbidden fish and the dire
consequence of transgression – Death! But first
chance they got, netting in the lake, they hid
the fish, made a fatal fire, and the catch
tasted delicious. ‘Men are so clever,’
they said, ‘making laws to deprive us.’ – Now,
Narroondarie, miles distant, heard the bream
fat sizzling, smelt the treachery. ‘They must
be punished,’ he said, ‘these frivolous wives.’
III  Flight

Narroondarie's love for his wayward pair of wives, the two sisters, was deep as any sea but he knew the tragedy they tied him to; their appointed executioner. In vain he wept, prayed for their forgiveness, but they had fled and he must track them down; follow their camp-fires' ashes, shells, mullet bones, their journey to the west coast, the Bluff where they would placate Khowwallie, Blue Crane, the keeper of the thin land bridge and cross to Kangaroo Island, the Spirit Land, and be free of punishment forever. But Narroondarie, endowed by the Great Father's will, had other plans to deliver.

IV  Rhunjullang: 'Two Sisters'

From Cape Willoughby you see two pillars stuck in the ocean at Backstairs entrance; ghost granite in mist, whale smooth in the sun. Myth and chart sea-marks, they warn trespassers... All Great Spirit, the Nhyanhund, had sent sacred instructions woven out of air. Narroondarie reconnoitered, and chanted the West Wind's tempest, and the South Wind's flood, and the North Wind's annihilations. And his wives, the two sisters, confused mid-way across the evanescent bridge, were drowned. 'Command their bodies be turned into stone so all women are warned through the ages.' Matthew Flinders named these rocks the Pages.
WHY?

This of all questions, the persistent toddler's,
the ancient pursuit of the modern mind
that summons less knowledge than it infers,
the bewildered cry of the maimed and blind,
the death rattle stuck in the feeble throat
when the maker fails to return the call,
the clicking of catechisms learned by rote:
this is the perennial why of all.
A word too hard for word, number, or sign
to render redundant, explain away,
a voice too admissable to decline,
a mark to start and end every day.
I shrug my heart, retaliate with hot
and cold passion and say to Why: 'why not?'

SURVIVING DARKNESS
(for Vincent & Ruth Megaw)

This afternoon in your leaf-splashed garden,
while sub-dividing clouds thrust warmth, lift light,
your guests may wonder why in life and art
best effects may be miniature, slight
insights, and what we code as familiar
is intact with mystery. Suppose an eye's
(insect-lensed), an animal's nostril knowing;
the aerial range of van Gogh painting...
if theory's your bent, that is. There's also
wrinkling planks and nails, the tar and saw,
planes of shape in sawdust sunsets, the late
of language. Spun in the sun's achievements,
nature does the rest, surviving darkness,
until its ancient arms hold, rescue, all.
A WINDOW VIEW
(for Anna Rutherford)

This window view of the estuary, where seabirds fossic and investigate the victuals of the mud, is history. There, as they embrace, tides eviscerate each other ... leaching foam like bubbled blood. And who remembers a first trysting here as we stuck to each other sud to sud, declaring we shall never disappear? How wrong that twisted trust, how right the wrong; so forever more am I a scientist of primeval places like the Coorong whenever littorals are lost in mist. When all the energy of love's despair forms in the frantic kiss of fire with air.
H.H. Richardson's 'Two Hanged Women'.
Our Own True Selves and Compulsory Heterosexuality

Henry Handel Richardson's satiric story cycle 'Growing Pains: Sketches of Girlhood', traces the emotional and sexual growth of a composite protagonist, from early childhood in 'The Bathe' to marriageable age in 'Two Hanged Women'. Jeannette Foster's opinion that the stories are integrated and constitute an etiology for a homosexual woman is unarguable. However, Foster's view that they represent a 'trial flight towards a novel centred on a woman' is a less productive insight, and her brief description takes no account of Richardson's satirical purpose, or the fiction's perspective of value. The stories, which dramatise the pressures on girls and women towards heterosexual conformity, parody conventional representations of heterosexual romance, while writing against contemporary sexual theory. Richardson's developmental cycle, published between 1929-1934, is innovative in form as well as in the degree to which it values its sex variant protagonists. Female sex variance is viewed not from a biological but from a socially critical perspective very much in advance of other contemporary literature on the theme in English.

Most commentators on 'Two Hanged Women' have applied the term 'deviant' to the protagonists, confirming the very kind of exclusion and bigoted labelling against which Richardson was writing. 'Two Hanged Women' concerns a decision which no young woman ought to make by recourse to convention: whether and whom to marry. It is also a specific attack on Radclyffe Hall's position on female homosexuality in her 1928 novel, The Well of Loneliness.

No one could have lived in London in 1928 and 1929 and been unaware of the Well furore: the reviews, the censorship, the two trials followed by the U.S. case, the enlistment of most major literary figures against its banning. Debate entered the literary journals, and newspapers were full of it. Because of its banning The Well became, says Blanche Wiesen Cook, 'the archetype of all things lesbian'.

CAROL FRANKLIN
Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, also published in 1928 (as was *Orlando*, a tribute to her lover Vita Sackville-West), has oblique references to *The Well*. Woolf's famous point about the unwritten lives of women, and especially women's friendships, appears too: 'So much has been left out, unattempted ... almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men' (p. 82). External pressures on women writers ('a legacy of our sexual barbarity' (p. 88)), she said, would make it difficult for them to treat variant sex as a subject. Woolf's rational attitude towards bringing 'buried things to light', making 'one wonder what need there had been to bury them' (p. 92), is shared by Richardson, who had read *A Room Of One's Own* (she sent a copy to Mary Kemor in 1931).

*The Well of Loneliness* had, unfortunately, revived the 'third sex' theory to explain homosexuality. On her final page Hall's lesbian hero, Stephen, raises a maudlin cry to God to acknowledge her, and to heterosexuals for tolerance on the grounds of 'congenital freakishness'. To make matters worse, Hall added the old stereotype of masculine traits in the victim protagonist, and mysterious influences while in the womb, without in any way questioning a basic heterosexist division of the sexes in the culture. Richardson's stories subvert Hall's histrionics and the congenital freak theory, which, Lillian Faderman said, 'had such a devastating effect on female same-sex love':

> It reinforced the notion that some women would not marry not because the institution was often unjust ... that they loved other women not because such love was natural – but instead because they were born into the wrong body. ... Many a woman must have decided to tolerate even the worst heterosexual inequities rather than to view herself [as a freak].

The book remained the lesbian novel in people's perceptions for four decades.

Social and literary context is almost as important as the text itself in 'Two Hanged Women', a story of reversals of expectations that ask to be read back into the culture. The story is ultimately about truth to oneself, whatever that truth may turn out to be. But it is just as clearly about the forces ranged against people of a different sexual inclination from the usual sanctioned, even enforced by society, what the lesbian poet and critic Adrienne Rich calls the institution of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Rich considers that a lesbian girl is induced to see her sexual destiny as being inevitable heterosexuality against her own instincts because of 'the ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry...' (p. 19). The choice of heterosexuality 'may not be a "preference" at all but something that has to be imposed, managed, organized, propagated, and maintained by force' (p. 23).

Adrienne Rich believes that many commentators and theorists neglect economic and 'other material realities that help to create psychological
Richardson’s story illustrates the process whereby material reality creates in the unnamed younger girl protagonist a psychological situation driving her toward ‘compulsory heterosexuality’.

‘Two Hanged Women’ examines the effect on lesbian love of unequal pressure on women to marry. The younger girl’s bravado and her self-destroyed argument for marriage: her burying her face in Betty’s lap: ‘deeper into warmth and darkness’ (p. 140) – a physical embrace sought and maintained by her against the hurt coolness of her friend (viewed in contrast to her physical repugnance for Fred, whom she otherwise likes and admires), is inescapably suggestive and significant.

There is no authorial ‘special pleading’ nor peculiar self-loathing in the protagonists of ‘Two Hanged Women’ such as that which caused such anger and revulsion in contemporary readers of The Well of Loneliness. Richardson shows her lesbian protagonists as normal but benighted, opposed and derided by others.

The text opens with an incident that reverses ‘natural’ expectations: one moonless night a boy and his girlfriend discover that their secluded trysting place is already occupied. So to ‘frighten off’ these ‘intruders’ they engage in loud ‘love-making’ (p. 134) – only to discover when they are successful that the two dark figures, whom they had assumed to be lovers like themselves, are women.

A clever verbal trick loaded with literary and cultural significance, and put into the mouth of the normative male lover, Pincher, embodies the sexual theme: ‘Well I’m damned! If it wasn’t just two hanged women!’ (p. 134) The usage invites the reversal: ‘Well I’m hanged if it wasn’t two damned women’, two femmes damnées, two Sapphists, two lesbians.

It is significant that the author gives the role of labelling to the male character. This mental disclosure combines with the physical disclosure, the emergence of the women from the shadows just prior to Pincher’s outburst giving us a couple exposed, a judgment expressed, a surprise revelation by a male onlooker which prepares us culturally and socially as readers for the predicament that is to follow. (The author ironically also has Pincher ‘damning’ himself.)

The term femme damnée has something of a literary and artistic history, including in English fiction. Baudelaire’s is the best-known literary name associated with the use of the term, resultant upon the notoriety of his volume Les fleurs du mal. One of these poems was ‘Femmes damnées’ (subtitled ‘Delphine et Hippolite’.)

In Richardson’s story the elder girl Betty, with defiant scorn, confronts the younger one’s wavering under pressure towards marriage, thus: ‘Marry your Fred, and you’ll never need to [see me] again’ (p. 139). (In ‘Femmes damnées’ Delphine says almost the same to Hippolite, who is fearful and reluctant in their love.) To Betty’s challenge the younger one responds at first with hopeful talk of weddings and social acceptance,
until (in a skilfully handled passage of monologue), having been let run
her narrative course by her silent older friend, she gradually finds herself
undercutting her own assertions of ‘normality’, and completely contradict­ing
her own defiant opening statements. Her thoughts lead her to specu­
late confidently on each step towards the desired social approval via mar­
rriage, until: ‘And when he came back at night, he’d ... I’d ... I mean I’d −’
(ellipses in original, p. 139). At this point she becomes distressed and
agitated, for she cannot bear his nearness, his touch, even his looking at
her: ‘I feel I shall have to scream ...’ She describes her own reaction to his
attempt to kiss her (‘I could have died with the horror of it’) and her re­
vulsion at his physical traits (‘His breath ... his breath ... and his mouth −
like fruit pulp – and the black hairs on his wrists ...’ (ellipses in original,
p. 139)). To *her* the man’s physicality is gross, yet in non-sexual ways she
likes this man and the reader is given no reason to suppose that hetero­
sexual women would share her reaction. At the end of the story she clings
with fervour to the embrace of Betty, her face buried in her lap.

Baudelaire dwells on the horrors of what he considered would be ulti­
mate perdition for his lesbian couple. Richardson lets her unnamed charac­
ter reveal her sexual distaste for the male, and abjuring the usual stereoty­ing of such a girl as a helpless *victim* of an older woman, ends her
story on a note of helpless *appeal* from this younger girl to the older Betty.
Betty herself, reversing the stereotype, remains silent, watchful and brood­
ing.

The introductory scene wherein licensed heterosexual lovers discover the
usurpation of their ‘rightful’ place by a same-sex couple is a structural
device which prefigures the problematical situation of the younger girl,
unnamed, and not yet twenty-five. Her intimate bond with the older Betty
includes physical warmth and comfort. Heart and mind are in conflict, her
true instincts are confused by powerful socially imposed strictures, fo­
cused chiefly through her mother.

During their argument the younger gives as reasons for marrying Fred
social pressure and social acceptance (as opposed to ridicule) of them as
a couple; pressure from, and the desire to please her mother; also a per­
sonal liking for Fred. But the deciding factor is that she sees marriage as
freedom from both conflict and her mother. This is the point at which she
reveals her sexual aversion to Fred, thus startlingly undermining her own
arguments. Like the protagonist of an earlier story she is repelled ‘even in
thought’.

As is usual in Richardson’s fiction the sub-text of emotional value is con­
veyed through touch. During the girl’s account of how she is determined
to have all the ‘normal’ things, ‘a proper wedding like other girls’ (p. 139),
her voice falters, she breaks down, her affected bravado failing her at the
point of recall of heterosexual touch: physical intimacy in marriage.

The story is set apart from the rounds of daily life: beside the sea at
flood tide at the dark of the moon.11 There are graduated sets of symbollc
sites: one sanctioned for heterosexual couples (Pincher and Baby, and Fred and herself); the other to which the same-sex couple is relegated. The first (usurped) heterosexual site, a seat in the sexually suggestive ‘velvety shade’ (p. 134) of the overhanging sea wall, from which the women are driven by the couple, represents the farthest degree to which the heterosexual couple need go for courting privacy. The homosexual pair are driven out first from the sea wall then to the breakwater, both places representing the community’s defences against elemental nature. Their relative distance from public acceptability is thus metaphorically established from the beginning.

All the lovers’ sites are dark. As the younger girl relates, for heterosexuals there is a public level of courtship darkness, licensed by society: the back seats at the pictures where Fred takes her. The homosexual couple is driven ‘out on to the breakwater’ at two removes from the every-day by Pincher’s derision. The remoteness is not a factor of privacy, but of pariah status, exclusion: ‘On this remote seat, with their backs turned on lovers, lights, the town, the two girls sat and gazed wordlessly at the dark sea, over which great Jupiter was flinging a thin gold line’ (p. 135).

The heterosexual couple throws words at these women, they themselves must remain ‘wordless’. The reader has the sense of their being increasingly isolated, driven to the edge, outcast and at risk. Here they are not just turning their backs on the literal ‘lovers’, ‘lights’ and ‘town’, but on the daylight world of received opinion. It is here that the younger woman confesses how she hates being laughed at. Marriage to Fred would buy social acceptance: ‘And other people, when they see us, look ... well I don’t quite know how to say it, but they look sort of pleased; and they make room for us and let us into the dark corner seats at the pictures, just as if we’d a right to them.’ (ellipsis in original, p. 137)

The ‘wispy’ moon has already set. The female moon principle is represented by its dark phase, linked with women outside the social pale. The sea, also female, is at flood-tide like a peaceful animal: ‘slothfully lapping the shingle’ (p. 134). The natural setting suggests the configurations of social power. The sea is still, but over it ‘great Jupiter is flinging a thin gold line.’ Ascendancy is contested between the dark of the moon and Jupiter: the chief of the male gods, associated with public morality, oaths, and the most solemn form of marriage – (confarreatio) a state ceremony, transferring the control of a woman from the father to the husband; the bond of union of the community, but in essence a male business. The thin gold line is reminiscent of the wedding ring, and of a chain of control.

The motif of the tide is very important in the story. The younger girl complains of having no peace, of suffering an ‘eternal dragging two ways’ (p. 139): mother and marriage one way, Betty the other. Jupiter is linked threateningly to the sea, the ‘stealthy’ sea that ebbs and flows, and which is due next to turn on the ebb tide may have the inevitability of society
and 'Mother' (who has been characterized as 'sly' by Betty), in separating
the lesbian couple.

Since one major outraged criticism of The Well of Loneliness was that it
showed 'a normal young girl who became a helpless subject of perverted
influence' from an 'invert', it is worth noting that it is the younger girl, not
Betty, who initiates and maintains physical contact. The text will not
sustain the hackneyed convention of an 'evil' older lesbian 'seducing an
innocent girl' against her will. It does invoke the reigning stereotype
lesbian couple: dark, tall older girl, fair, shorter younger girl; but by
making the younger girl initiate action Richardson reverses conventional
expectations.

The emotional and sexual story is told symbolically through characters'
hands which permit us to evaluate each situation. The two women are
linked hand in hand as they walk. Ridicule has made the younger girl
decide to go home: 'Mother will be angry' (p. 135). At this the older Betty
tries to withdraw her own hand. Her friend anticipates her intention and
holds her fast, gradually working her own hand more closely into Betty's.
However, when Betty sarcastically points out that the girl's mother doesn't
mind how late she stays out with Fred, the girl does relinquish Betty's
hand. She pushes it aside, and it lies 'palm upwards, the fingers still
curved from her hold, looking like a thing with a separate life of its own;
but a life that was ebbing' (emphasis added, p. 135). The power of the
mother is also conveyed by hands. According to Betty she has a 'strangle­
hold' on the younger woman (p. 138). As we have noted the text uses
Fred's hands (the 'black hairs on his wrists' (p. 14)) to convey the younger
girl's sexual disgust.

Given this sub-text, the implications of naming the heterosexual male
'Pincher' are self-evident. His name and that of his partner, 'Baby',
constitute a savage authorial evaluation by which the 'normal' couple of
licensed lovers consists of an immature female, and a crude, sexually
hurtful male. Their behaviour reinforces the picture: a vulgar display of
'loud, smacking kisses, amatory pinches and ticklings' to, in their words,
'frighten off' the women. The boy's 'damned' and 'hanged' speech, whose
terms connote retribution, violence and suffering, is followed by punitive
military language: 'Retreating before a salvo of derisive laughter' (emphasis
added, p. 134), representing 'normal' attitudes to same-sex love.

The sea figures in the first and the last of the eight stories of 'Growing
Pains'. In 'The Bathe' 'the alarming ferocious surf had withdrawn' (p. 71),
leaving behind it 'large pools, some shallow and safe, others deep, hiding
strange things'. These sea images correspond to psychic events in the child
who discovers that there is more than one face to the feminine sea, the sea
as mother. It was by the sea that she saw Eros travestied, lost the lap of the
mother and saw what it meant, in gender terms, to become a woman, 'a
mother'. In 'Two Hanged Women' the sea again embodies human states
or attitudes. The sea is kept back from the esplanade by a 'sea-wall', and
the same-sex lovers who do not follow society's preferred pattern are hedged about by restriction and driven by society's ridicule to the breakwater, further out, and nearer to risk and buffeting.

However, when the young women go out on the breakwater the sea is no threat to them: 'There was no sound but the lapping, sucking, sighing of the ripples at the edge' (p. 136). This is a sensuous, even sensual, animal evocation. Behind them is heard the 'screech of an owl in the tall trees on the hillside' (p. 136) (perhaps a reference to Athene, with whom the owl is associated in mythology and who is variously associated with home and hearth, the family bond, a symbol of the community itself, but allied to male power in this role). The metaphoric link is made between the sea and their relationship. But the sea is also linked to the mother, as later in her agonized one-sided argument, the younger girl declares:

If I only think what it would be like to be fixed up and settled, and able to live in peace without this eternal dragging two ways ... just as if I was being torn in half. And see Mother smiling and happy again, like she used to be. Between the two of you I'm nothing but a punch-ball. (emphasis added, p. 139)

The buried tidal metaphor highlights the fact that it is not Betty and Fred, male and female, competing for the younger girl – but two women, the mother and Betty, who represent two possible ways of being. Both try to claim the girl; Betty does not use enticement or forceful pressure, the mother (and society) does. Sustained persuasion, arguments and inducements are clearly shown to come from the heterosexual side. This is dramatized vitally and very effectively by the girl's monologue during which Betty neither argues nor intervenes by pleading, and the girl betrays her own declared position, exposing the social inducements, and her mother's moral blackmail. The mother tries to claim the girl for marriage, following her own, and conformist society's expectations: claiming her for 'culture', failing to account for difference. Earlier Betty had declared that her friend should follow her own inclinations, her 'nature', but in voicing her congenital theory (p. 138 – this crucial aspect is discussed later) Betty fails to locate the real problem, she is being simplistic and irrational in her jealousy and hurt. It is, ironically, the younger girl who unintentionally locates the problem herself.

Their predicament seems insoluble to them – and locked in a time and a place, both culturally inimical, it probably is. The reader may wonder why one cannot just as easily 'be settled' with the person of one's inclinations without such fuss. The story ends on a note that might suggest 'nature', a 'stealthily heaving sea', is not to be so easily denied. 'Stealthy' recalls Betty's more pejorative description of the socially conformist mother as 'sly' (p. 138). If lesbian sexual preference has had to be kept secret, the elaborate means used to deny or control it have also often been underhand.
This last scene is visually significant, being a traditional representation, a mother-and-child tableau: Betty holds the younger girl in her arms, to her breast in silent comforting, her chin resting on hair ‘silky and downy as an infant’s’ (p. 141). It dramatises a notion common among modern feminists, an alternative model for ‘mothering’, nurturance: (lesbian) women mothering each other – since their natural mothers give no protection for their ‘true selves’, but deliver them up to a hostile world. This scene of shared tenderness, however beleaguered, compares favourably with the courting scene of the vulgar, derisive and punitive heterosexual ‘control’ couple, Pincher and Baby, whose interactions leave something of tenderness to be desired. If the latter is a paradigm for heterosexual couplings, Betty and her friend do not suffer by comparison.

Several, perhaps coincidental, textual echoes exist between ‘Growing Pains’ and The Well of Loneliness. The final scene contrasts with a similar one in the novel. ‘Mary slipped a small, cool hand into Stephen’s and they walked on towards the edge of the headland. For a long time they gazed out over the sea’.14 Stephen, the male-identifying lesbian protagonist, puts an arm around Mary, saying: ‘Are you tired, you little child?’, which in keeping with her general behaviour as the ‘male’ is more paternalistic than nurturant (p. 311).

The last scene of this last story in ‘Growing Pains’ reverses the situation in the first story. The tide was out in ‘The Bathe’, it is in in ‘Two Hanged Women’; it was a bright sunny day in ‘The Bathe’, it is a dark moonless night in ‘Two Hanged Women’. Closing the circle, ‘Two Hanged Women’ restores the girl to the lost lap of the ‘mother’ (lost in ‘The Bathe’ where Eros was travestied and the meaning of ‘mother’ was exposed as problematic) – restores comfort love, and confirms lesbian erotic love.

Food (sex) symbolism reinforces the idea of the younger girl’s homosexual nature, or difference: her revulsion from Fred’s kiss: ‘his mouth–like fruit pulp’ – she ‘could have died with the horror of it’ (p. 140), also her social pride at having a suitor: ‘One they’d [other girls] eat their hats to get, too!’ (p. 136) An earlier typescript had the less effective: ‘they’d give their best silk stockings to get too’, where dress conveys socialisation, but lacks sexual implications, Richardson’s deliberate substitution of a cliché improves the text, Wittily undercuts the character, and alienates the reader from the subject (marriage) at hand: Fred is as unappetizing to this girl as a hat, viewed literally as food, is. The frustrated girl is ‘fed up to the neck’ (p. 139). Throughout ‘Growing Pains’ examples abound where the protagonist cannot eat, or chokes, in sexual situations.

The younger girl’s testimony makes it clear that the problem for same-sex relationships is neither congenital defect nor arrested sexual development, but social pressure. Derision, being laughed at, prevents the girl from attaining equanimity in her relationship with Betty. The chance of peace from her mother, of achieving acceptance: ‘such a warm cosy comfy feeling’ (p. 137); and status through being with a male: ‘like other girls’
(p. 136) propel her towards conformity. Fred’s objective value – he dances well, he doesn’t drink – is never more than that, never personalised, she expresses no emotional feeling for him. Especially seductive for her is the wedding pageantry, the social inducement to have a ‘proper wedding like other girls, with a veil and bridesmaids and bushels of flowers. And I’ll live in a house of my own, where I can do as I like, and be left in peace...’ (p. 130).

Two of three earlier signed typescripts in the National Library have a stronger version of the cultural source of the romantic view of marriage as an ending, ‘happily ever after’ claimed by the younger girl. The text reads: ‘and have a proper wedding like the girls in the pictures’ (emphasis added). Richardson’s final text maintains the wedding pageantry reference, for this is ‘normal’; but for ‘girls in the pictures’ she substitutes ‘other girls’ which stresses the ordinary, average quality or ‘normality’ of marriage. An emphasis on ‘glamour’ would be a textual distraction, rather than a reinforcement of ideas. Richardson’s textual changes variously work to point up the meaning with subtlety, wit or greater sting. They are not seemingly pointless, as some of her early critics claimed.

The parodic treatment of rudimentary congenital theory in Betty’s reference to the ‘same blood in two sets of veins’ appears to be a deliberate engagement with Radclyffe Hall’s novel. Betty’s speech, assigning a cause for her friend’s wavering in her emotional allegiance against her and towards men, is on the surface of it silly; yet it is no sillier than the theories often proposed as causes of sexual preference, and is obviously designed to recall them mockingly to the reader. Hall espoused the Krafft-Ebing version of the congenital freak theory. As ‘causes’ of her heroine’s ‘tragic’ condition Hall irrationally claims the father’s wish for a male heir and the pregnant mother’s desire for a male baby. Here is Betty’s speech from Two Hanged Women’ blaming the mother of her friend, not, ironically, for the friend’s preference for women, but for her recent involvement with a male, her suitor Fred: ‘Oh! mothers aren’t fair – I mean it’s not fair of nature to weigh us down with them and yet expect us to be our own true selves. The handicap’s too great. All those months, when the same blood’s running through two sets of veins – there’s no getting away from that, ever after.’ (emphasis added, p. 138)

Dorothy Green claims ‘Richardson must have considerably revised this passage for the collected stories: it is much stronger than that of the typescript in the National Library collection, where there is no reference to the “same blood running through two sets of veins”’. This isn’t true. There are three typescripts of ‘Two Hanged Women’ one begins at NL MSS 133/5/61 and is signed; it contains the passage in full. A second, also signed, begins at NL MSS 133/5/66. The passage here has two lines missing. These are: ‘All those months when the same blood’s running through two sets of veins – there’s no getting away from that, ever after. Take yours.’ (The passage is on NL MSS 133/5/70.) However, these two lines
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exactly fill two lines of typescript happening also to begin at a capital letter and end at a stop, but interrupting the flow of ‘Take yours. As I say, does she need to open her mouth?’ (p. 138). This is clearly an error by the typist copying from the first typescript, and not immediately picked up by Richardson, for the typescript of the whole book restores the missing slab of text (‘Two Hanged Women’ begins at 210, the passage is on 214). Whatever may be implied in Green’s comment, the passage was in two of three signed typescripts as well as the final collection, and is indeed the parodic cornerstone of the story.

This part of Betty’s speech, as a theory of why her friend should be influenced strongly by her mother, and why she should now consider becoming involved with a man, is an ironic reversal of Hall’s theory about why a woman loves a woman, i.e. is an ‘invert’, Richardson uses it to ‘show’ why a woman might marry a man, i.e. be ‘normal’, heterosexual. It is deliberately quite nonsensical in the same way that Radclyffe Hall’s was. Literally everybody, male and female, of whatever sexual preference, is subject to the same biological experience in the womb to the extent of having ‘two sets of veins’ and the same blood supply linking mother and child, and obviously not everyone alive feels the same sort of compulsion and guilt felt by Betty’s friend. The claim is illogical in the very simplest way, and could not be the specific cause of any particular thing other than an inherited disorder.

But if the girl’s mother is disposed towards sexual ties with men then the girl has not inherited her ‘disorder’ from her. In this part of Betty’s speech her theory is clearly not a valid one, but a caricature of Radclyffe Hall. It is in fact a reductio ad absurdum of specious and irrational sexual theories. Even in accounting for their own sex-variance, the text implies, women are inadequately knowledgeable, subject to wild speculation and pseudo-science. Yet the very silliness in claiming that a so-called normal propensity (to please her mother, to respond to men’s courtship) is influenced for in the womb calls the reader’s critical attention to it in a way that is not threatening. Out of this emerge both the implicit comparison with The Well of Loneliness and an invitation to the reader to search for what the mother’s actual role in her daughter’s choice of sexual partner might be.

Richardson’s first audience would have thought of the superficially more plausible, yet equally silly causative sequence claimed for Stephen’s sexual preference in The Well. Readers who may never have read The Well will still have their attention directed to the mother issue, and from other details in the story be able to form a more rational judgment which still implicates the ‘mother’, but by nurture, social attitudes of mothers, not by a particular mother, mysteriously engendering a particular nature in her offspring.

For the operative phrase in Betty’s speech, the one that allows us to pose the real question, is the phrase ‘our own true selves’. What is each girl’s
‘true self’? How does the girl (and the reader) discover it? And once ‘discovered’, how is its validity in this literary artifact tested? The answer to the last question is by Richardson’s habitual test – by touch. For both girls take their physical contact with each other naturally, intimately: their hand contact, the younger one burrowing her face deep into Betty’s lap – Betty holding her friend to her breast (and this is the same girl who can not bear Fred to be even near her, could scream in fact at his very look).

So what is the role of the mother in sexual preference? No mysterious link of blood emerges, but massive pressure from mother and society combined to follow conventional patterns of life, while ridicule damages trust in same-sex physical instinct and comradeship. ‘Two Hanged Women’ shows homosexual preference in these women to be a physical response: it is ‘natural’. Wavering is due to societal pressure: it is ‘cultural’.

If the reader ceases to look on the two women as ‘real’ people, and to read them conceptually as elements of literary structure, they become two incomplete parts of an emerging idea. Betty is bitterly aware of the ‘maternal’: the complex cultural forces against them, yet espouses (faute de mieux?) an irrational and emotional theory to explain her friend’s problems. The younger girl is acutely aware of these forces also, but only as very persuasive reasons for conforming. She does not analyse them as things to resist because they imprison. Ridicule is a powerfully persuasive incentive for one’s rationalization of an unsatisfactory position. Most importantly, the younger girl in the story serves as the ‘control’ character (for sexual repugnance for the male, experienced as innate), because she is otherwise so ‘normative’: attractive, dutiful, and so on. Both girls represent partial understanding; they are both casting about, literally and figuratively, in the dark. As usual, it is the reader who must recreate the whole picture, and recognize the great visual serenity of the last scene of mutual physical comfort.

NOTES

1. A group of eight stories, first published under this title in *The End of a Childhood* (London: Heinemann, 1934). All page references are to this edition and are included in the text.

2. *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956; rpt. Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975), p. 303. In Foster’s account of sixty lines there is no evidence that she recognized Richardson’s satirical project of ‘writing against’ the prevailing view of sex variance in women. Foster’s book aims more at descriptive listing of sex variant literatures from many languages, and is not concerned with sex variance per se.

3. The extent of this irrational hostility is now very well documented in numerous journal articles and in Lillian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men*. Authors such as D.H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis and Clemence Dane, for example, saw sex variance as foolish, sick, and potentially evil, and punished their fictional variant characters by death. Leader-writers were not tolerant either. The *New Statesmen* leader...
for 24 Nov. 1928 declared 'people who desire tolerance for pathological abnormalities certainly should not write about them'.


9. Six poems in the original edition of 1857 were suppressed. In the edition of 1861 Baudelaire instead of re-inserting the poems in the order of the original manuscript retained the format that had resulted from the bowdlerization of his 1857 edition, and thus drew attention to the six by grouping them together under the title: Pieces condamnées. Number four of these is 'Lesbos' and number five is 'Femmes damnées'.


11. Since Richardson's one superstition was to take obeisance to the new moon seriously, perhaps a reference to Hecate's rule is intended here.

12. For contemporary critical responses see Brittain's Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?.


15. NLA MS 133/5 contains typescripts of 'Two Hanged Women', one of which begins 133/5/61 (the phrase is on /65). It is also found in a second typescript at NLA MS 133/5 beginning at 66.


17. This typescript begins at NLA MSS 133/6/3.

18. In a proof copy of The End of a Childhood – stamped on the cover 'First Proofs (once read only)' – the text of the younger girl's speech read: 'Without it having to be all my mother's fault' (emphasis added), which is particularised to the character's own mother. Richardson corrected this to read: '... all Mother's fault' (emphasis added), which conveys a more general and inclusive, abstract idea, a cultural force. Proof copy of The End of a Childhood, 'First Proofs'.
1. ITchy PARK

It was a triangle of sloping ground with a dozen starved trees;
We called it Itchy Park. There was a pole
with iron chains and the ring you held to whirl
like a chair-o-plane. There was the splintery seat we'd use
to jump from or get up into the brittle branches – these
never led anywhere much. It was a scraggy dull
landmark but it was on our way to school.
It had bindi-eye and every other needle grass.

Driving up Denmark Hill, a visitor, what
would you notice of Itchy Park? You'd speed uphill
without a glance. I think I would as well
except that the swinging pole has gone – heat
from a submerged anger complicates the loss.
Despite our denials, we are trapped by ownership,
whose other name we guess.

2. ADELAIDE

You saw us from your car, hand-in-hand
striding through parkland to the tent at Writers’ Week
a middle-aged Jack and Jill, mismatched but enjoying it.
You told us later that the image was almost
a bucket of flowers, a pail of champagne
and we remembered that day as a picnic
you joined us in.

The striped marquees
the crowds under the planetrees and the yelp
of plastic cups underfoot – Adelaide was always festival
with streets slapping bright banners above our heads
and ‘event’ part of ‘environment’.
I stayed later, beyond the Festival and the park without canvas, empty of pedestrians or groups talking or listening became that space you had known beneath our rubbing and revelling. It was the well that Jack and Jill had come to the quiet place, not a hill (wells in this world are dug only in valleys or declivities. The hill was elsewhere). The park, truly, was filled with flowers in the time of flowers, and with champagne in its season.

MOUTH FEATHERS

Once shy, twice bitten, ten times bitten. The old sayings twist in the mouth like a dry feather shoved in making you spit. 'Only joking!' they said in the playground, 'Can't you take a joke?' That's what they said.

I take this odd feather. It has floated in from outside. Nothing could be more ordinary: like a playground of kids, teasing. Nothing could be more strange.

I hold it up in finger and thumb. It is a science of intricate connections, a nib inviting the words, though we have forgotten nibs and there are no more knuckles blotched with ink. It is one strong channel thrusting its point down till we think of darts, arrows, the skin pierced and a sort of necessary ritual that has something to do with taste. Or it is the last dream, feathers as wings and flight into the ventilation points of the stars or at least an eagle's glide. Why did we lose on the genetic graph towards flight?

He who hesitates is pinned to the ground forever. Even in orbiting satellites we hold a little cup
of our weighted atmosphere like the kid
gripping six marbles in his pants' pocket, knowing
they are his only security against the Big Boys
and the feather torture.
He who hesitates is not lost to a lot of fantasies
and one tiny boon of fate: he who hesitates
can have the power to look, look again, to review
and consider strategies for next time.
Daedalus hesitates before affixing wax to the wings,
Christ hesitates before the final commitment.
Ten times bitten and always shy
the doves of this world have outpopulated
those endangered eagles. An eagle's feather
is the quill, and the doves' soft down
fills the pillow on which I lie.

JOACHIM RAFF, A HOMAGE

You do remember – it's in the older encyclopaedias –
that the Pastoral Symphony, for most of the Nineteenth
Century
meant Raff, not Beethoven? It's not on CD
and was never on LP. The generation of 78s of course
were weighed down by sheer logistics of volume
and space on a record shelf: a 1930s Wagner opera
might take 26 discs, each heavier
than two entire RINGS on CD.
In this context, Joachim Raff should be
one of the new exploitables, a fine case for recycling.
After all, Vivaldi is a new product of the LP era
not the Eighteenth Century knitting-machine culture.
Just as Wagner, indeed, came to life, we acknowledge,
in late 1950s stereo when effects were news
and the right singers still available.
The result's history, as well as Wagner's ideal: profit
not loss.
Joachim Raff, what is wrong with you? 
I’ve heard your available discography 
it’s not extensive but it’s pretty good 
and has more variety than Vivaldi 
and perhaps as much massive skittishness as Mendelssohn 
when he became official. Have we been sold 
a pup? No, I’m not knocking Beethoven, 
Walt Disney introduced him to me, I am a convert. 
But somewhere, still, is the awkward doubt: 
now I’ve learned to tap to Vivaldi must I 
refuse to listen to the successful competitors of 
Beethoven? 
Why can’t I make the choice? Why not the Pastoral 
Symphony 
by Raff? Close your eyes, wash out preconceptions, 
then sit back as if there were any number of choices, 
still.

Carla A. Schwartz

CHAOS

Janey wonders how the world 
decided on orderliness; 
she sleeps on an island, 
in a sea of strewn 
books/papers/clothing. 
The other rooms in her flat 
are filled with slowly decaying fruit 
and clothes hanging to dry. 
Her order is no one else’s. 
How can people keep such orderly homes? 
How can they find anything if it’s put away?
THEY CALL IT THE FORESHORE

In Newcastle,
Like every other
dying city,
development
has shifted commerce,
like a magnet, iron filings;

Introducing the foreshore:
a few pubs and restaurants,
a view of the port
and steelworks;
Top it off
with a large steel penis,
its foreskin
flapping in the seashore scum.
Call it the foreshore-
take the living heart
from a city,
paint it pink and green

1973 HOLDEN KINGSWOOD FOR SALE

My name is Kangaroo Dream.
I'm looking for an owner.
A caring, sensitive
one would be nice
but I'll take Anyone.
I'm great for a family;
kids love me.
Let me make your
road dreams
a reality.

Don't make me sit
by the roadside like some slut;
I have dignity.
Buy me.
ON THE RADIO

there's an interview with the mother
of a young bloke
killed by the I.R.A.
in The Netherlands
by mistake
    they were deeply sorry
and she is breaking down
and I am coming up
to this green light
and I can't
get in the middle lane
    in front
    someone is turning right
    but I'm not
    I'm going to get stuck
    behind them

and there's this wog
in a battered white
Nissan van
won't let me in
and I'm waving my arms
and cursing
    bloody wogs
but I accelerate
through a gap
and I catch
the amber
    and
    I wish they knew how I feel
she says.
THIS IS NOT THE ONE

you see
    head down
jabbing and hooking
weaving
and dancing
his way down Pitt
like Joe Louis
    the one who somebody said
    nearly fought
    for a Commonwealth Title
    once

and
    this is not the one
    with the contorted face
you hear
mouthing obscenities
so incoherently
and mysteriously
to random appalled faces
along George

and
    this is not the one
    whose bare
    swollen
    purple feet
    are so rivetting
outside the Lebanese take-away
on Kent
the one who is always in the same place
and looks like Tom Waits
in Ironweed
    somehow
    he always has
a steaming-fresh cappuccino
    and a long butt hanging from his lip

and
    this is not the Asian one
    Korean?
    Vietnamese?
who haunts Broadway
with his beatific smile
and his magnum of champagne.

No
this one
confronts strangers
with an awful vacant shrug
on the upper
end of Castlereagh
this one's arms dangle
loosely
as he opens his hands
    palms front
    thumbs sticking out
and continually
pulls his head down
between his shoulders
and just shrugs
as if those whose paths he blocks
    momentarily
each ask him
some terrible searching question
    like
    is there a God?
    why are we here?
    do you believe in destiny?
    what about the theory of chaos?
or some other question
    repeatedly
but they only frown
    in reality
they step aside
or look at him incomprehensibly
or simply smile
and hurry on
and there are no questions
    ultimately
there is only the man
in the thin tee-shirt
denying his way along Castlereagh Street
in the brisk wind.
THURSDAYS

when the people have been paid
he plays the flute
near the base
of the escalator
at Hurstville station
where the herd
of commuters emerge

sheep from a stock-shute

most barge
past him
most ignore
or simply do not hear
or abjure
the sweet surge
and flow of notes
he executes
so perfectly
even
to a good ear

and the urger
at the cut-price
sell-out
closing-down-sale
sooper-dooper
battler’s-bargain
store
bawls into
the microphone
it has a built-in
cockney accent
always
the same flat vowels

about your last chance
to buy
the tops and sweats
not at last year’s price
but the year before’s

eight bucks
he says
but you know he’s thinking
in quids
and you bend deliberately
place a dollar
in the flautist's hat
and
playing on he bows
oh gracefully

Thursdays.
'Leave me alone,' Ravin said and rushed out of the house. He did not know where he was going nor what he could do to calm down. He found himself at the Beira Lake, he stopped, and sat down at the water’s edge. He could not think coherently. He sat staring at the water, at the distorted reflections of light in it.

His mind flashed to the scene that had just taken place in his house. He despised his mother. 'Please try to understand,' she had pleaded with him, her eyes raised to Ills, sorrowfully. 'I am very lonely and I am still a young woman. You are out with your all evening, and sometimes I must talk and laugh with someone. I did not mean to get involved in a love affair. It is not that I have forgotten your father, it’s just that I can’t bear this loneliness anymore.'

He flushed angrily. He felt ashamed that his mother could speak in this manner. A young woman, she had said. How could she make such lame excuses? Why couldn’t his mother be more like Sudu Nanda? Sudu Nanda was a widow too. But how pious she was, unfailingly dressed in white, so wholeheartedly involved in temple activities and meditations. He wished impetuously that he was old enough to be independent of his mother, and of that parasite who lurked in the house that had been his father’s. And just four years since his death too.

He was very cold and very lonely. There was a great emptiness in him, a void, as if his mother too, like his father, had died suddenly. He shook his head in denial. But she had always been there – whenever he had turned to her. Like when he had sobbed at her breast, missing his father after the funeral and she had held him tightly and stroked his hair, until he moved away comforted. Like the pride in her eyes when he had brought home his examination results. But he supposed now that he had never really been enough. He felt cheated. Betrayed. She did not belong any more to him. If only his father was alive, he wished passionately – if only. But no, he needed no one. At seventeen years one was no longer a child but an adult. He would get used to this change too, just as he had got used to living without his father. He would go abroad, he thought. His mother would be free of him then, he would be in the way anyway when she got married. And Nihal would not wish to be burdened with a stepson. It became darker, there was a chill in the air, lights trembled in
the water. He did not want to go home. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. Homes got broken up anyway, he thought, when children grew up, they moved away someday.

She stood by the window waiting. How many nights had she waited thus, until her son came home? How many sleepless nights had she spent thinking of him, worrying about him, wondering all the time if she was bringing him up right, planning his future with so much care? Trying to be both mother and father to him? And now she knew that she had failed. She felt defeated. What love had she, that was greater than the love she nurtured for her son? But now there was Nihal. She wished she could be angry with her son. Anger would be easier to endure than this hurt she felt, this feeling that something infinitely precious to her, had been destroyed.

Was it really her child who had looked at her with so much hatred smouldering in his eyes, who had spoken to her with such scorn? ‘All my friends are laughing at me, why did you not tell me? Why did you let me find out from them?’

Would it have been easier, she wondered miserably, if she had explained to him? Still, Nihal had not as yet discussed marriage. So what was there to tell him? She knew it would come to that, of course. And then this problem would have had to be faced anyway. Susil, she sighed, why were you taken away from us, you kept us all so safe, so happy together. But she must find her son, she could not stop worrying, he was so young. Where had he gone? She felt helpless. Perhaps if Nihal himself could speak to him and explain...

Nihal placed an awkward hand on the boy’s shoulder. He saw the tears in the confused eyes. The wet cheeks. He sat down next to him and cleared his throat. What am I doing here, he asked himself wryly, what have I to say to this boy, who accuses his mother of destroying his illusions?

‘I have come to take you home,’ he said. ‘Your mother is very worried about you, she asked me to look for you.’

‘Just leave me alone, will you, I can look after myself.’

Ravin’s voice rose boyishly, hysterically, he made as though to stand up but found it required too much effort and remained angrily silent.

There was a suffering about the youthful face that smote Nihal. We have wronged him, he thought.

‘Listen Ravin,’ he said, ‘you are behaving like a child. I am sorry for all this, we never meant to hurt you, your mother and I. Someday you will understand, someday your mother will explain it all to you.’
But what other explanation was necessary? Something snapped in Ravin. Desolately he watched as his childhood passed away before him. He heard cars rushing past behind them – all going somewhere. People walked by, carrying flowers to offer at the island shrine in the lake.

She could, at least, have told me,’ he sobbed.

He is so confused, Nihal thought, he understands nothing. What difference could it have made had he known earlier?

She wanted to tell you many times, Ravin, it was I who persuaded her not to. Because, actually there was nothing to tell. Perhaps if we were planning to marry, if there was some future in this... affair, then she would have told you.’ He realized that his words rang hollow. He felt burdened with an unnecessary problem. He owed nothing to this boy. What need was there then – for explanations or excuses? She had walked into this with her eyes open, he had not forced himself on her. He felt irritated, slightly bored even.

‘You mean, you have no intention of marrying my mother?’ Ravin whispered.

‘But she told me... I understood...’

His voice trailed away. He stared at Nihal in disbelief. But she actually believed that he would marry her. How would she take it? There had been such hidden hope in her eyes as she had said to him – ‘Surely there is room in this house for you and for Nihal’ that he had felt excluded. And now she would be heartbroken. He was filled suddenly with an overwhelming pity for his mother. I must go to her, he thought.

‘Does she know that you will not marry her?’ he asked Nihal, feeling adult suddenly, and very mature.

‘I don’t know whether she knows, we never discussed it really.’

In that instant Nihal knew that it was over. She was demanding now from their relationship, more than he was able to give to it. She was making too much of an interlude, his thoughts continued, of an unguarded moment. He shrugged. It had been for him, from the beginning, only an escape from boredom, really. It was she who had believed in love.

‘So, go home to your mother.’ Nihal stood up. ‘She needs you. You have always come first with her. She needed me just for a while, really. It is you – you are her life. Don’t judge her too harshly. She is not only your mother, she is also a woman. Say goodbye to her for me.’

He wished now, only to escape from this too serious responsibility. He must get away, he was thinking, before he got involved too deeply to pull away. He wanted to be alone, to plan his tomorrows. He had never been anything but an independent man.

Ravin walked with him to the car.

‘Nihal,’ he said defensively. ‘I am sure my mother would never have married you, even if you had wanted to. You could never measure up to what my father was.’

Well, thought Nihal, amused, let him keep his dreams.
'Yes,' he said kindly, 'Yes I know. So try to forgive her and go home - it is very late.'

He drove away. Ravin stood watching the vanishing car. He did not know if it was a deep relief that was growing in him, or sorrow or understanding. His face set into lines of resignation and the beginnings of maturity. He felt an immeasurable sadness for his mother. He hoped she would not be too grief-stricken. He began to walk, slowly at first and then faster and faster towards his house.
Of all the relatives I acquired when I got married, Revati was the very worst.

When I first met her, I too had read of sati, dowry deaths and child widows. I would shudder as I put down the book or newspaper. I pictured an innocent girl brutally held down, her head shaved clean and her bangles broken.

I also imagined a sequel to what I read. The child grew into a beautiful woman, very much like the heroine in a film I once saw. In the film, the heroine-widow is loved by a modern young man who finds her goodness and her quiet, selfless beauty irresistible. Because of the strength of his convictions, he resists his family's protests.

Maybe they can't all find husbands, I thought. But they could then devote their lives to the family, to the people around them. Ascetic and saintly, they could bring love to the unloved, compassion to the sick.

The possibilities were endless, till I met Revati. She gazed at me in my bridal finery, her face filling with a wistfulness, hideously unashamed and undisguised. She could not keep her hand away from my sari of Benarsi silk.

It's soft, soft, just like baby skin, she moaned. Her hand, which had never shown an inclination to touch a baby, stroked the sari again and again.

I was embarrassed at first. Later I found that no one in my new family noticed that I avoided her. They sometimes humoured her, as long as it put them to no great trouble. The rest of the time she was merely tolerated, as if she was an undesirable but orphaned child.

Revati was married when she was ten. Within a year, her husband died. For years she did not know that she was a child widow.

The family rallied round Revati's parents. Her father, grief turning him liberal, agreed to have a tutor come home. There was, of course, no question of sending her to the village school.

Later, when she was old enough, she was sent to Madras for a degree. A distant relative found her a job in a small town, in a school with a hostel for the teachers. So the family made up, in some sense, for her marriage. She was independent, she deposited her own earnings in a bank account, and she had more than enough for her old age.
Fifty years later, the family's memory of her tragedy was somewhat blunted. They had seen in their midst love marriages, modern arranged marriages like mine, with the couple meeting and going out unescorted, and a nephew who had settled in America and married a blonde.

As Revati grew old, the family, even those who had lived through the details of her story, felt a kind of disbelief when she arrived at their doorstep with monotonous regularity, sweaty and hungry.

She was an unpleasant reminder of a world gone by. A child widow was a thing of the past, a page from a history textbook that should be safely contained between cardboard covers. Not what she was, as large as life, walking, talking, eating large mouthfuls of our food.

Perhaps it would have been easier, we all thought, if Revati had been different somehow. Beautiful maybe, or even just more attractive, or loving. Or if she had been a good cook or helpful with the children.

But she was short, squat, with a scaly, swarthy skin, coarse grey hair, and shamelessly aggressive buck teeth. Her midriff hung out between sari and choli, two distinct, folded bulges of flab.

Her long sessions in the bathrooms, oblivious of the restless queue outside and the water problem, were part of the punishment we were put through when she visited.

What Revati did in the bathroom was a subject of endless and humorous speculation in the family. She would sit around like the rest of us, gos­siping. Then, when she was sure no one would notice, she would make a swift and sly getaway. We would only realise she was gone when we heard the old stone door of the bathroom shut. In a few minutes we would hear her splashing loudly, as if she was enjoying her bath out of spite.

The other problem was food. She ate enough for two men, unaffected by details such as how much she was leaving in the dishes for the rest of us.

Eat, she would advise me in that hoarse, dry voice so unlike a woman's. She shovelled another handful of sticky rice into her open mouth. Then she paused for a sip of water, which she gargled round and round in her mouth before swallowing it in a loud and sudden gulp.

Eat, so that you're strong. So the ghosts don't get you, she said. Having given me this valuable tip in a matter-of-fact tone, she emptied the glass of water onto her right hand and washed it on her plate. The dry red chillies she had not eaten floated around like corpses in the murky water.

I have never seen anyone eat like Revati. Usually we women wait till the children have eaten, then the men, before we sit down to eat what is left over.

But Revati, in spite of being completely grey, never noticed any of these feminine niceties. She would sit with the children, and stuff the food, great big balls of it all mixed up, into her mouth.

She would open her mouth horribly wide, but even then some of the food would miss its mark and fly sideways. At the end of the meal, she
always asked for a glass of warm milk and a banana. She poured the milk on a plate, peeled the banana and squeezed it between her fingers, so that the pulp oozed out onto the milk. Then she would stir the mess lovingly, and bending forward, slurp it off her hand.

Nobody said it in so many words, but clearly, something had to be done about Revati. It was ten years since she had retired from her teaching career. She now lived alone, at least for a small part of the year. The rest of the time she visited her brothers and sisters for long stretches, her bulky frame in the wrong place at the wrong time, always in the way.

Swiftly, without much discussion, the family acted. A poor cousin (a very distant one) was sent for. He was a strong, muscular young man but a little weak in the head. He was perfectly harmless, a rather sweet, docile big baby. He went to live with Revati, as companion and bodyguard.

For more than a year, Revati did not visit us. Then without warning they arrived one hot, sultry morning, grimy with dust.

Revati had grown even fatter and she spoke and moved slowly, like a soft, swollen balloon filled with stale air. Otherwise she was just the same: she still ate too much, sighed greedily when she saw our new saris, and bathed for hours on end.

The idiot seemed devoted to her. He followed her about like a dog follows its mistress. He was the only one among us who listened patiently to her endless monologue on what she called the gas problem.

There are three kinds of burps, she would lecture to him, heaving herself into my father-in-law’s favourite chair. Her body filled up every inch of it.

You have the deep, satisfying burp that races up all the way from your stomach. You almost have nothing to do with it. It comes up on its own, as loud and relieving as a good fart.

The idiot nodded sagely, a solemn look on his smooth shaven face.

Then you have the impotent ones, harmless little bubbles of gas. But you have to force them out from the throat.

The worst, let me warn you, is the burning sort. It comes straight from the heart. It swells and swells inside so that you can’t eat. The pain spreads wildly so that you can hardly breathe. Finally, when you are ready to put an end to it all, you burp, but it is sharp and it stings, leaving a sour liquid in your mouth.

A few weeks into Revati’s visit, her gas problem became so acute that it seemed to touch her brain a little. She began to see things — what exactly she saw it was not clear because she refused to describe it. But from her sweaty, trembling upper lip, and her fear of being alone, we decided it was some imaginary ghost or demon.

We’ve let her live too long with that idiot, said my mother-in-law, shaking her head. But she said nothing to her sister when she had the idiot sprinkle water mixed with purifying turmeric everywhere she walked.
One afternoon, when the entire household was asleep, I found Revati and the idiot alone in a room upstairs.

Oh, press my legs, press my head, she moaned. He squeezed her ankle and she burped, a tentative bird-like cheep. He massaged her legs and I heard a long, hissing burp. He pressed down hard on her thighs and kneaded her flabby midriff like dough. She made a huge, full throated noise – a belching sound that went on and on.

It was all innocent, of course. She was an old woman, at least seventy. He was only an imbecile. But I still thought I should let my mother-in-law know.

Again, there was some muted discussion, conducted, at least among the women, in discreet whispers and corners. How were we to make Revati understand?

Finally, the idiot was sent away with a hundred rupee note in his pocket and some vague promises of a regular job. Revati seemed to take it surprisingly well. Everyone humoured her whims for a while, and she basked in the glow of her newfound attention.

Some days later, I woke with a start in the middle of the night. I felt a dry, soft, wrinkled hulk of flesh near me, and then I heard a scream. In the same instant, my husband and I jumped up to switch on the light. Revati lay on our bed, her eyes rolling about wildly. Her huge body jerked as if she was in the throes of a fit.

There, he’s there. He’s laughing at me, she screamed.

Doors opened and closed, and the others crowded into the room, staring. No one asked her what she saw. Then my mother-in-law, looking old and haggard, came in and shooed them all away.

Go, go and sleep, this is women’s business. I’ll see to it, she said, with such weariness that they filed out, one after the other, like shamefaced children.

I could not leave the room. My eyes were riveted by Revati, now no longer in a wild convulsion but whimpering softly.

I went to her, in a daze of terror, shock and self-loathing. I sat by her side, my hand on her hot, throbbing forehead. Together, through the night, my mother-in-law and I sat on either side of Revati, stroking the trembling body back to stillness, enticing her wandering mind back to us.
A Female Houdini: Popular Culture in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle

JOHN THIEME

There are whole
magazines with not much in them
but the word love, you can
rub it all over your body and you
can cook with it too.'

(Margaret Atwood, 'Variations on the Word Love'

Popular discourses are ubiquitous in the writing of Margaret Atwood. Her novels, poetry and critical writing constantly foreground ways in which notions of gender identity, and of cultural identity more generally, have been shaped by media and other popular representations. References to Hollywood and television rub shoulders with allusions to magazines, fairy tale, popular song and a host of other forms responsible for women's socialization and female mythologies: these include the Persephone and Triple Goddess myths, popular religious discourse, advertising language and iconography and the stereotypical norms inculcated in girls by such institutions as Brownies and Home Economics classes.

In her fiction Atwood's all-pervasive references to popular culture suggest the constrictions placed on self-expression (particularly but not exclusively where women are concerned). The narrator/protagonist in Surfacing (1972) is a commercial artist obliged to produce what she considers to be false representations of local culture for a volume of Quebec Folk Tales and this work is contrasted with the region's Native rock-paintings which, unlike her illustrations, are presented as organic. In The Edible Woman (1969) Atwood describes the predicament of a heroine who gives up food when she sees herself as being metaphorically eaten up by the pressure to conform to the consumer society's norms of femininity, and a not dissimilar pattern of temporary withdrawal from eating is explored in the latter stages of Surfacing. In Lady Oracle (1976) this pattern is inverted in the heroine Joan Foster's account of her early life, with a quasi-bulimic syndrome replacing a quasi-anorexic one as Joan rebels against societal norms of female thinness. In The Handmaid's Tale (1986) Atwood's presentation of her futuristic dystopia of Gilead offers a picture of thought-control mechanisms which, as is the case with much science-
fiction fantasy, can be read as an allegorical extension of present-day actualities, with particular reference to popular patriarchal religious discourse. In each of these novels the woman protagonist rebels and achieves at least a limited form of autonomy and self-definition, though none of the texts is glibly optimistic about changing the status quo. At the same time the novels themselves upend received versions of literary and popular cultural forms – such as the Gothic Romance, the comic Novel of Manners, the detective-story and the science-fiction fantasy. In this discussion, in addition to illustrating the range of Atwood’s references to popular cultural forms in *Lady Oracle* and the ways in which they shape identity, I hope to show how the reworking of the first of these modes (Gothic Romance) and to some extent the second (the comic Novel of Manners), while initially seeming to demonstrate how popular discourses stereotype and restrict, ultimately does the opposite. Stereotypical conceptions of both culture and gender are transformed by her parodic use of form; popular genres are employed in a manner that has the effect of carnivalesque subversion.

Names confer identities and Joan Foster finds her identity determined by a popular cultural discourse from the outset – she is named after the Hollywood film star Joan Crawford. The only problem with this is that ‘Joan Crawford’ proves, like virtually every other signifier in *Lady Oracle* to be ambivalent:

... my mother named me after Joan Crawford. This is one of the things that always puzzled me about her. Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played – beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men – or because she wanted me to be successful? Joan Crawford worked hard, she had willpower, she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother. (p. 38)

Joan also considers the possibility that her mother may have given her this name to prevent her having a name of her own, but comes to realize that Joan Crawford ‘didn’t have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille Le Sueur which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat’ (p. 38). So very early on in life Joan becomes aware that roles – particularly women’s roles – are conferred not innate and that identity can be ambivalent and multiple. This realization prefigures much of the subsequent action of the text, in which she lives out a schizophrenic existence occupying a variety of available female roles.

Hollywood is a major formative influence on the young Joan. Her Aunt Lou takes her to see a variety of movies from the late ‘forties and early ‘fifties in which the dominant theme seems to be a woman’s stoical or heroic struggle against adverse odds: Joan watches June Allyson enduring her husband’s death in *The Glenn Miller Story*; Judy Garland trying to cope with an alcoholic James Mason in *A Star is Born*; and Eleanor Parker play-
ing a crippled opera singer in *Interrupted Melody* (p. 79). Her favourite among films on this theme is, however, a British production, *The Red Shoes* (p. 79). Watching this, she projects herself into Moira Shearer's rendition of the part of a suffering ballet dancer. Ballet and opera both come to function as popular rather than 'high art' discourses in the text, since they are frequently filtered through the medium of cinema and since Joan, like Alice Munro's Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*, sees them as offering an opportunity for grand passion and a romantic transformation of humdrum existence. This emerges most obviously in her Cinderella or Ugly Duckling-like self-projection, while a very fat eight-year-old, into the title-role of the Walt Disney film *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at the Met* (p. 5), and also in a reference to another Disney vision of transcendent fatness, Dumbo the Flying Elephant (p. 216). So two mythologies, those of stoical or heroic struggle against suffering and romantic transformation, characterize the films that affect Joan, but the former is initially more important in shaping her psyche and when she buys a dime-store goldfish she names it 'Susan Hayward', because she has just seen *With a Song in My Heart*, in which Susan Hayward 'made a comeback from a wheelchair' (p. 78). Her mother, who has resisted the idea of her having a pet, prophesies that the goldfish will die and she wants to give it a fighting chance, but it dies anyway, seemingly because Joan (engaging in self-projection once again?) overfeeds it.

The popularity of the Hollywood musical leads her mother to send Joan to dancing classes and here she learns some home truths about conventional responses to the female figure when, while all her peers are cast as butterflies, she is forced because of her fatness to play the part of a mothball in a dance entitled the Butterfly Frolic at the dancing school's annual spring recital. Images of flight, suggestive of some kind of transcendence of everyday reality, permeate the novel and here the effect is a kind of reversal of the 'magic transformations' which Joan craves from an early age. She comes to understand that popular conventions of representing women reflect social attitudes:

If Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not Othello strangled her? Why is it that the girls Nazis torture on the covers of the sleazier men's magazines are always good-looking? The effect would be quite different if they were overweight. The men would find it hilarious instead of immoral or sexually titillating. However, plump unattractive women are just as likely to be tortured as thin ones. More so, in fact. (p. 48)

This latter observation is borne out when she is tied up and blindfolded in a Toronto ravine by the girls with whom she walks to Brownies, only to be rescued by a mysterious man carrying a bunch of daffodils, who may or may not be the same man who exposed himself to the girls the week before. Her mother has instilled a Manichean view of men into Joan
she tells her there are only 'good' men and 'bad' men – and so she is left puzzled by this apparent cross-over figure who appears to be morally double.

Atwood’s critical book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) offers an interesting framework for considering such a passage, and for looking at gender relations in *Lady Oracle* more generally. Atwood gives an account of what she calls ‘the Rapunzel Syndrome’:

... the Rapunzel Syndrome ... seems to be a pattern – not just a Canadian pattern – for ‘realistic’ novels about ‘normal’ women. In the Rapunzel Syndrome there are four elements: Rapunzel, the main character; the wicked witch who has imprisoned her, usually her mother or her husband, sometimes her father or grandfather; the tower she’s imprisoned in – the attitudes of society, symbolized usually by her house and children which society says she must not abandon; and the Rescuer, a handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape. In the original Rapunzel story the Rescuer is a solution and the wicked witch is vanquished; in the Rapunzel Syndrome the Rescuer is not much help.... The Rescuer’s facelessness and lack of substance as a character is usually a clue to his status as a fantasy-escape figure; Rapunzel is in fact stuck in the tower, and the best thing she can do is learn how to cope with it?

Joan’s rescuer from the ravine is insubstantial to a point where even his identity is unclear – is he the daffodil man or not? – and his dual identity proves to be a pattern which is replicated in her adult life. Every man with whom she becomes involved – the Polish Count Paul (named after St. Paul, p. 151), her husband Arthur (whose name can possibly be seen as containing an ironic romantic reference to the mythical British king) and the counter-culture artist the Royal Porcupine (whose name is pure self-invention, an amalgam of an animal which he offers an alternative Canadian national symbol in place of the beaver and an idiosyncratic royalism) – each of these appears first to be a Rescuer, but subsequently takes over the role of witch or jailer that her mother has played in her girlhood. Eventually Joan comes to the realization that all the men in her life have split identities: her father has killed people in the war, but has subsequently been regarded as a life-saver in his job as an anaesthetist; Paul has also been ‘Mavis Quilp’, the writer of escapist Nurse Novels, another popular form; the Royal Porcupine surrenders his exotic Byronic identity and reveals himself as ordinary Chuck Brewer who wants to be Joan’s husband not a ‘fantasy-escape figure’ for her, which leaves her asking despairingly ‘Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?’ (pp. 271-2). So the daffodil man is a paradigm for all the men that follow, and Rapunzel will remain firmly ‘stuck in the tower’ as long as she awaits a knight on a white charger to rescue her. Joan remains in this situation for most of the novel because she has internalized the values of the Rapunzel Syndrome from the various popular discourses that shape her upbringing.
Several of these have to do with escapism. Her outings to the movies with Aunt Lou give way to Sunday evening visits to the Jordan Chapel, a Spiritualist meeting-place which very obviously offers an escapist discourse equivalent to that of the dream factory. There she encounters a typically Canadian response to the romantic side of Victorian culture when the ‘visiting’ medium Mr. Stewart quotes Arthur Hugh Clough’s ‘Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth’ (p. 106) – elsewhere ‘The Lady of Shalott’ occupies a similar function, while Joan is described by a journalist as looking like a lush Rossetti portrait’ (p. 9) when she becomes a successful Gothic authoress. Escapism is also central to a number of other popular discourses that appear in the text: the fotoromanzi that she and Arthur read while in Italy, Paul’s Nurse novels, women’s magazines, some of the side-shows she works among when employed at the Canadian National Exhibition, the décor of the Royal York hotel in Toronto, described as ‘a bogus fairy-land of nineteenth-century delights’ (p. 135), and the satirical vignette with which it is linked, the lid of the Laura Secord chocolate box. Most important of all in this context, however, is Joan’s own writing, the Costume Gothics that she comes to write under the influence of Paul and the inner ‘Lady Oracle’ poetry that she comes to write after an experiment with Automatic Writing techniques first suggested to her at the Jordan Chapel.

Her Costume Gothics are typical of most of the escapist discourses with which she becomes involved. They offer wish-fulfilment fantasies and hence occupy a similar role in ordinary (and not so ordinary?) women’s lives to that played by the Rescuer figure in the Rapunzel Syndrome and, as Paul tells her when he first introduces her to them, they represent ‘an escape for the writer as well as the reader’ (p. 155). So, initially at least, Joan’s writing them seems to involve a form of self-evasion. Produced for Columbine Books’ (p. 156), a playful fictionalization of the name of Harlequin Books (the North American equivalent of Britain’s Mills and Boon), they are formula-fiction written in the romantic novelette genre that derives from the novel of sentimental courtship that had its origins in Richardson’s Pamela. Examination of the intertextual elements in a passage like Joan’s breathless account of the plot of the latter stages of her ‘Gothic’ Escape from Love helps to illustrate the formulaic elements that go into the making of her writing in this genre:

Samantha Deane was kidnapped precipitously from her bedroom in the house of the kindly guppy man; threatened with rape at the hands of the notorious Earl of Darcy, the hero’s disreputable uncle; rescued by the hero; snatched again by the agents of the lush-bodied evil-minded Countess of Piedmont, the jealous semi-Italian beauty who had once been the hero’s mistress. Poor Samantha flew back and forth across London like a beanbag, ending up finally in the hero’s arms, while his wife, the feeble-minded Lady Letitia, died of yellow fever, the Countess, now quite demented, plunged to her death off a battlement during a thunderstorm and the Earl was financially ruined by the Pacific Bubble. (p. 176)
The basic damsel-in-distress situation derives from the Gothic novel's use of the persecuted heroine as a pivotal point and, earlier still, from Richardson, whose Pamela and Clarissa are both 'threatened with rape'; the name of the villain of the piece is, of course, taken from Pride and Prejudice, though the complexity of the character's eponym in Jane Austen's novel is not admitted into the Gothic's sub-literary reworking, where stereotypes proliferate; the 'feeble-minded' first wife of the hero, who stands as an impediment in the way of his union with the heroine, and the foreign Countess who jumps off the battlements at the end both appear to have their origins in the character of Bertha, the 'mad' first wife in Jane Eyre. When the novel comes out its jacket depicts Samantha with 'her hair rippling like seaweed against an enormous cloud; Castle DeVere turreted with menace in the background' (p. 176): the architecture of the Gothic house, another staple of the form from Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto onwards, is redolent of Charlotte Brontë's Thornfield Hall and Daphne Du Maurier's Manderley, and, again typically, is invested with gender attributes.

The conventions of the Costume Gothic may seem to offer illusory hopes of deliverance for modern-day Rapunzels, obscuring the reality of their being 'stuck in the tower'. Yet the Gothic has, at the same time, always been a form that has offered the possibility of an alternative feminist discourse. Both in its concentration on the figure of the marginalized outsider — for example the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein — and, more importantly, in its employment of fantasy, it has tended to offer resistance to the norms of patriarchal society and of social-realist discourse. And Gothic functions, along with the various other escapist forms already outlined, in just this way in Lady Oracle. Writing Gothics affords Joan the opportunity of a secret life away from her husband Arthur, who is presented as a product of the repressive, Calvinist aspects of Maritime culture. Writing an ironic reworking of the Gothic mode ultimately provides Atwood, as in Surfacing, with a means of subverting received gender stereotypes. So the Gothic can offer a form of imaginative release even when actual escape is not possible, though Joan, who likens herself to Houdini in the closing pages of the novel (p. 335), comes to be an untypical Rapunzel in that she repeatedly effects actual physical escapes. But obviously escapist fantasy has a negative side too, since it encourages unattainable fantasies.

In Lady Oracle the ambiguity surrounding Gothic — as a negative purveyor of unattainable fantasies and as a positive alternative to restrictive unitary identities — relates directly to the text's all-pervasive references to popular culture. Joan finds herself, as a not untypical woman it would seem, forced to live through a variety of roles: her fat-girl persona is supplanted by a thin-girl identity when she diets to gain the legacy left her in her Aunt Lou's will if she loses a hundred pounds and she subsequently finds herself concealing her former obesity from Arthur and
others; her Costume Gothics are also kept secret from Arthur and written under the pseudonym of her Aunt Lou’s name; most strikingly of all she eventually ‘kills’ herself by faking her drowning in Lake Ontario to escape from the complications of her life that are threatening to engulf her. Again and again she is forced to re-invent herself, to a point where fiction-making becomes as much a part of her day-to-day existence as of her writing. Just as she comes to realize that all the men in her life have had more than one identity, she is forced to recognize that she herself is multiple and this, like the Gothic transformations of her fiction, proves to be an ambiguous situation. In a negative sense it renders her schizophrenic – and one may attribute such schizophrenia to the multiple roles demanded of women in consumer society – but on the other hand such schizophrenia offers the possibility of a radical re-invention of personality, making the subject a site for positive magical transformation – and there are numerous references to such a process in the text – as opposed to the purely illusory romantic escapism more normally seen as being encouraged by romantic fiction, along with Hollywood cinema, the Jordan Chapel and all the other popular escapist discourses represented in Lady Oracle.

Years after her first visits to the Jordan Chapel, Joan meets Leda Sprott, the leader of the group of Spiritualists she encountered there, again. This occurs when Arthur refuses to be married in a church because he disapproves of religion or in city hall because he disapproves of the government and so they are forced to seek out an alternative form of marriage ceremony. When they eventually arrive at the venue of the ‘interdenominational’ (p. 189) reverend they have located through the popular medium of the Yellow Pages, this person, ‘E.P. Revele’, proves to be none other than Leda Sprott. Joan, frightened that her own hidden identity as a former fat girl will be revealed, contemplates the possible reasons for Leda Sprott’s metamorphosis: ‘I thought, men who changed their names were likely to be con-men, criminals, undercover agents or magicians, whereas women who changed their names were probably just married’ (p. 204). In fact Leda Sprott/E.P. Revele approximates much more closely to the male paradigm that Joan has constructed – she has changed her name to escape debts – and she confesses to Joan that she is something of a charlatan. She may be viewed as part con-woman, part-magician; her picaroon manipulations of people’s fantasies make her a shaman-like figure, a creator whose trickster strategies have the effect of breaking down barriers between areas of experience that normally appear discrete – most obviously that between life and ‘the Other Side’, but also through her androgynous identity (Joan thinks ‘E.P. Revele’ is going to be a man until they meet her) collapsing traditional notions of gender roles.

Incidental though this may appear to be, it proves to be of crucial importance since Joan herself, through her multiplicity of roles and her work as an unintentionally subversive woman writer comes to be a similar creative trickster, a Houdini who offers genuine possibilities of escape for
the female subject. This is most clear in the reworkings Gothic undergoes at her hands in the latter stages of the text. Under the influence of Leda Sprott/E.P. Revele who has told her she has a ‘gift’, she turns to Automatic Writing, setting up a candle in front of a mirror, reminiscent of the mirror in front of which her mother, subscribing to another popular female discourse, has performed elaborate make-up rituals while Joan was a girl. Mirrors have a prominent place in several of Atwood’s novels, and mirror-reflections are usually suggestive of the individual subject’s sense of separate identity. Here as Joan sceptically constructs a scenario for Automatic Writing, thinking it will provide a nice touch for her current Costume Gothic, she suddenly finds herself an Alice going into the Lacanian looking-glass, back from the Symbolic Order into a pre-cultural phase of existence, an experience similar to the journey back to prehistory undertaken by the narrator/protagonist in the latter stages of Surfacing, where the cultural slate seems to be wiped clean. The writing she produces during this and other subsequent Automatic Writing sessions, her ‘Lady Oracle’ poetry, is received by critics and the media as a feminist attack on the dominant pattern of gender relations in contemporary society. Joan repudiates such a view, but nevertheless recognizes that this writing is an inversion of the formulas she deploys in her Costume Gothics. She refers to it as:

...a lot like one of my standard Costume Gothics, but a Gothic gone wrong. It was upside-down somehow. There were the sufferings, the hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of the hero, the flights, the looming death, the sense of being imprisoned, but there was no happy ending, no true love. (p. 234)

So, in this writing that emanates from her subconscious, she subverts the conventions of the Gothic form in which she has been working and produces a discourse that radically questions its gender constructions.

This anticipates a similar metamorphosis in Stalked By Love, the Costume Gothic she is writing in the Italian present of the novel, in the closing pages of Lady Oracle. Joan suddenly finds a similar involuntary force controlling this writing as she slips from using Charlotte, the typical persecuted maiden protagonist that she employs in all her Gothics, as the narrative consciousness to writing from the point of view of Felicia, the lascivious first wife of the Rochester-like hero Redmond. The perceptive reader may have spotted an element of self-projection in Joan’s construction of Felicia much earlier, since both have long red hair, but now it becomes clear that she is beginning to justify a character who normally has the sole function of providing an obstacle to the marriage of the aristocratic hero and the socially inferior heroine. Joan breaks off the narrative, telling herself ‘It was all wrong’ (p. 321). However, when she subsequently returns to write the final episode of Stalked By Love that is included in the text, Felicia has firmly been instated as the protagonist.
is a reversal as total as the rewriting that the dominant patterns of *Jane Eyre* undergo in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Felicia now goes into the maze attached to the Gothic house, which the servants have been warning Charlotte about throughout the narrative. Entry into the maze promises a resolution of all the romantic complications in the ‘central plot’ (p. 341), and when Felicia penetrates this labyrinth she is confronted by a vision of all the former wives of Redmond, now reconstructed as more of a Bluebeard figure than a Rochester. The usual ending of the Gothic undergoes a radical metamorphosis as Felicia is welcomed into this sorority of victimized wives. Again the pattern is that of ‘a Gothic gone wrong’. At the same time a number of other distinctions are broken down as the former wives are represented in terms of Joan’s earlier identities and Redmond is suddenly referred to as Arthur. The thin dividing-line that has separated fact from fiction throughout the novel – Joan has repeatedly fictionalized her identity – now disappears entirely and although Felicia/Joan is left struggling with Redmond/Arthur as the final scene of the Gothic breaks off, there is a strong sense that she is able to draw positive sustenance from her multiplicity of roles and is no longer avoiding the realities of her existence through self-evasion. With the distinction between what has hitherto been regarded as fact and fiction in the novel collapsed, the extent to which *Lady Oracle* itself is reworking the conventions of Gothic Romance becomes abundantly clear and the ending of the whole novel frustrates the conventions by failing to provide the closure, or happy ending, expected in the Gothic form.

On an earlier occasion Joan has referred to the Bluebeard legend in a passage in which she typically presents herself as something of a fool: ‘In a fairy tale I would be one of the two stupid sisters who open the forbidden door and are shocked by the murdered wives, not the third, clever one who keeps to the essentials, presence of mind, foresight, the telling of watertight lies’ (p. 152). At the end the Felicia/Joan figure looks likely to be more like the ‘clever’ third sister, but the use of the ‘fool-heroine’ pattern throughout much of the novel is another subversive strategy.

Comedy is frequently seen to support the social order. In a typical Novel of Manners or dramatic romantic comedy, the final removal of the barriers that have prevented the lovers’ coming together tends not only to suggest that a benevolent comic providence is presiding, but also to reinforce the social order. Ever since *The Edible Woman*, a novel which Atwood has referred to as an ‘anti-comedy’ because of its frustration of the pattern in which boy and girl finally come together, all her comic fiction has tended to undermine such notions of comedy. In *Lady Oracle* the persistent use of parody, the inversion of the conventions of romantic escapist discourses and the interpolation of popular modes into the literary text all make the novel a carnivalesque comedy in the Bakhtinian sense. Bakhtin argues that carnivalization of form takes place when the popular forms of the marketplace and oral culture invade the domain of literature and this is exactly
what is happening in *Lady Oracle*. So, while initially the vast repertory of popular forms that are on display in the novel may seem to stultify women’s creativity and individuality, ultimately they come to function as part of a textual strategy that subverts the very notion of fixity, as a kind of correlative to the role-playing in which Joan engages. The emphasis on multiplicity makes for a notion of the subject as fragmentary and fluid and this contains liberating potential. Rapunzel becomes a chameleon able to escape from her tower without the intercession of the Rescuer figure, since she has become a Houdini herself.

NOTES

2. See particularly *Surfacing* (1972).
4. *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1977), pp. 48-55 and p. 210 (Joan is untypical in this respect since she does not take home economics). Subsequent references to *Lady Oracle* are to this edition and are cited in the text.
5. Towards the end of the novel Joan considers the alternative possibility that she may have been named after Joan of Arc (p. 337).
8. Possibly Atwood having a certain amount of fun with herself as the author of the ‘Gothic’ *Surfacing*.
10. See particularly, pp. 19 and 214.
Subversion or Sub/Version: The Judith Myth in the Apocrypha and in Van Herk’s Novel

From the Middle Ages to the present, the story of Judith of the Apocrypha has fascinated the artistic community. The Book of Judith tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s general, Holofernes, who lays siege to the Hebrew city of Bethulia, but who is defeated by Judith, whose charms he could not resist. While he lies in a drunken stupor, Judith decapitates him, returns to Bethulia to display his head, and thereby encourages her people to counterattack. Nebuchadnezzar’s army is dispersed, and subsequently, Judith becomes a matriarch of Bethulia.

The Book of Judith is the precursor to a multitude of literary, iconographical, musical and cinematographic works which address political, psychoanalytical, anthropological and feminist concerns already latent in the original text. Yet the Judith myth itself, rather than a unique work of art in the Apocrypha, is a full-blown mythological cycle wherein the apocryphal book is but one version. The Judith complex is all at once related to such biblical figures as Jael and Sisera, as well as to Delilah, Ruth, Susannah and Salome, and to such classical figures as Lucretia, Circe, Medusa, Artemis and the Amazon women.

In post-Apocrypha versions, in both art and literature, a few allusions remind us of this classical heritage – allusions, for example, to the ancient goddess of the hunt in Artemesia Gentileschi’s painting Judith Slaying Holofernes, or the juxtaposition with Lucretia in Cranach’s diptych (which Leiris analysed by comparing Judith to Medusa). For the most part, however, artistic and literary treatments of the myth focus entirely on the Apocrypha version and are part of the biblical continuum; artists and writers commonly rely on the apocryphal story and reuse it, either explicitly or implicitly, in their works.

Until the early twentieth century, iconographers and writers focused on the Judith myth without major modifications to the primary text. From the Middle Ages to Giraudoux’s play, all versions have been variations on the original theme in so far as they place their characters in the original biblical and mythological context, thereby adhering to the Judeo-Christian tradition of the story. It would be simplistic to say, however, that the later...
versions of Judith are nothing more than a repetition of the primary myth. Kofman states quite à propos, 'Il y a autant de Judith possibles qu’il y a pour les hommes de possibilités de vivre l’Oedipe.' Nevertheless, as long as the Judith figure remains within the Judeo-Christian tradition – a patriarchal tradition – the extra-mythic possibilities of the narrative are limited. Judith may well be portrayed as a heroic, good or saintly figure, as in many of the very early versions; a tragic figure, as in Hebbel’s play; a character of comic proportions, as in Nestory’s parody of Hebbel’s play, or Kayser’s Die jüdische Witwe (where Judith becomes a kind of nymphomaniac surrounded by impotent old men); or she may even be Giraudoux’s temptress who has in turn become tempted and seduced by Holfernes’ vision of a physical paradise on earth. Whatever her makeup, she remains what Mary Daly, in her book Gyn/Ecology calls an ‘anomie’ – what Simone de Beauvoir calls the Other in her Deuxième sexe. De Beauvoir explains the paradigmatic structure of this ever-recurring representation of Judith when she writes,

Dalila et Judith, Aspasie et Lucrèce, Pandore et Athéné, la femme est à la fois Eve et la Vierge Marie. Elle est une idole, une servante, la source de la vie, une puissance des ténèbres; elle est le silence élémentaire de la vérité, elle est artifice, bavardage et mensonge; elle est la proie de l’homme, elle est sa perte, elle est tout ce qu’il n’est pas et qu’il veut avoir, sa négation et sa raison d’être.

Despite the obvious potential for feminist commentary through the Judith story, however, few women artists and writers have recreated this myth. Beyond the work of Aritha van Herk – the subject of this study – only the Baroque painters Gentileschi, Galizia and Sirani, and the early twentieth-century playwright Menschick come to mind. But have any of these women succeeded in subverting the original text in such a way that a totally new image of the Judith figure emerges? – a Judith which breaks away from the constraints of the patriarchal, mythic figure and becomes a feminist model of the new woman. Or is the primary myth always a trap from which women writers and artists have tried in vain to escape? Is the subversion of a mythic text its eventual destruction, or does the subversion ultimately become only another sub-version of the myth? In an attempt to answer these questions, I shall compare the seemingly opposed figures of Judith of the Apocrypha and Aritha van Herk’s modern counterpart.

The Judith figure of the primary text is, as contrasting analyses reveal, of an eminently ambiguous nature which justifies de Beauvoir’s general dictum on myth: ‘Il est toujours difficile de décrire un mythe; il ne se laisse pas saisir ni cerner, il hante les consciences sans jamais être posé en face d’elles comme un objet figé.’ In this sense, the Judith figure is indeed not an ‘objet figé’; she is not merely sinner or saint, but a more complex character. For some she is a coquettish, sensuous, duplicitous murderess who does not merit a place in the Bible, while for others her
deception is an essential feature in the making of a hero. For some she is the castrating female who usurps man's role, while for others she is an exceptionally virtuous woman.

Yet for others the story of Judith is a striking example of feminism: she is the 'archetype of feminist revolt against a history made by men'; she is the 'female warrior of tradition' – a Joan of Arc figure – 'independent of male authority'. Paradoxically, however, most authors who accentuate the feminism inherent in the story also allude to the essential weakness of the female hero because she is only an instrument chosen by God in the fight against evil power. Judith, as an archetype of feminism, appears to be a fantasy, according to Coote's evaluation: 'The story need have nothing to do with reality. In fact, it is often patriarchal societies, where male and female roles are sharply distinguished and women have a passive role, that in fantasy produce myths of a female savior.' In other words, the Judith myth is a world turned upside down. But whereas the reversal of hierarchies is absolute here, it is also absolutely illusory. In fact, the fantasy only stresses the reality of patriarchy.

Whatever the illusory or fantastic nature of Judith, she nevertheless is Israel; her ambiguous nature is also the nature of her nation. As a symbol of the Hebrew nation, she reflects its particular status among the various Old Testament nations who submitted without resistance to Nebuchadnezzar's armies. She symbolizes Israel's exceptional status as a people chosen by God. Metaphorically speaking, Israel might be likened to a 'recurrent' virgin – Bethulia ('batulatu' translated as the biblical maiden, the daughter of Israel or the virgin) – who had, at various times in her history, been violated, whose blood had been polluted, but who had risen from weakness to strength, from defeat to victory, and had recovered her purity. Under Holofernes' siege this 'maiden' is again powerless and weak. But with God's help, Bethulia – the 'biblical maiden' – rises again to glory and recovers her strength, as she had in times past.

Israel's reversals – its progression from powerlessness to power – is reflected in the very name 'Bethulia'. The city of maidenhood can also be translated to mean 'the Home of the Phallus'. It goes without saying that the ultimate referent and source of power is God, the absent and omnipresent patriarch. It may well be that, as Daly argues, 'patriarchy is the religion of reversals' in so far as the presence of God manifests itself in His absence, and that 'the infinite absence of divinity in the patriarchal God is the ultimate scarcity – rarefied to the point of Zero'. But it is equally evident that this absent and invisible God is a haunting presence, appearing in the form of patriarchy, in the profane realm of social hierarchies which relegate women to the lowest level in society.

As a woman, the Jewish heroine initially belongs to the lowest of the low, for the prime raison d'être of the Jewish woman was to be married and to bear children: for her, barrenness was one of the greatest calamities. Judith of the Apocrypha is childless and a widow; her
as a childless widow places her at the same level with the stranger and the orphan.\textsuperscript{24} In fact Judith belongs to the group of the ‘lowly’, the ‘oppressed’, the ‘weak’, the forlorn and those ‘without hope’ whom she includes in her prayer to God. As well, she is an outcast, exiled from society. Whereas Hebrew society dwells in the ‘House of Israel’, Judith by contrast does not dwell in the house, but, metaphorically speaking, in a nomad’s domicile, a tent on top of the roof of her house. She is, in Victor Turner’s terminology, ‘betwixt and between’ two states:\textsuperscript{25} her childlessness and sterility place her between womanhood and virginity, and her widowhood places her between the living and the dead. The source of her ambiguity, which critics have repeatedly commented upon, lies in her being at once barren and a widow. As a woman in patriarchal society, she is liminal to men, but as a widow and ‘virgin’ she is particularly ‘strange, incomprehensible, an inhuman paradox’,\textsuperscript{26} and has to be removed from society in order to neutralize the danger which may emanate from such ambiguity.\textsuperscript{27} In other words, the community ostracizes her as a potentially powerful and dangerous force by marginalizing her. She is what Mayer calls an existential outsider\textsuperscript{28} because of her sex and disposition, and she lives in volitional isolation because she accepts the role bestowed upon her. Judith’s reversal of status, as with all such reversals, takes place under privileged conditions, in extraordinary circumstances. Because she is ambiguous, Judith is a threat to order in an orderly society. Because she is ambiguous, she is a saviour of order in a society threatened with disorder. She brings chaos to the other world (Holofernes’ camp) in order to restore order in her world. In other words, chaos and destruction create a world turned upside down in which the exception becomes the rule, in which, as Roger Caillois observed, acts formerly prohibited carry glory and prestige, and in which tricks and lies are appreciated.\textsuperscript{29} Reversal does not take place so much in Judith’s world, as in the pagan world to which the norms of Jewish society do not extend. Judith carries out her deed in the name of God, but the Jewish God reincarnate in the patriarchal structure of her society is absent in the pagan universe which she enters. Cut off from the rules of this world and not submitting to the norms of the other world – she does not share its customs – Judith is in a cultural no-man’s-land, a nowhere, so to speak. But “‘nowhere” is’, in Colie’s words, ‘cosmically and geographically an impossibilium. Utopia is the place which is not. ... What “happens” in utopias is made up of elements opposite to the societies in which their authors had to live, looking-glass reflections on the defective real world.’\textsuperscript{30} If utopia is nowhere, it is also, as Bartkowski argues, ‘anywhere but here and now’. It is ‘what could be, might be, even what some say ought to be’.\textsuperscript{31} Judith’s reversal from powerlessness over men to absolute power over Holofernes, from passivity to activity, from submissiveness to absolute freedom from restraint, is thus a fantasy of the powerless against the limits set by the rules of patriarchy. It is in Mieke Bal’s words ‘the
liberation of an always limited imagination'. Limitless as a fantasy, the fantastic act is confined to a space outside patriarchal reality. But since the reality of patriarchy is all-embracing, it is also patriarchy which determines the limits and the value of this fantasy. Within the framework of biblical inversions – Edmund Leach refers to them as ‘dialectical inversions’ – Judith plays a particular role. She is Eve and Mary, temptress and saint, both good and evil. She is the ‘dreaded anomy’, ‘the object of male terror’, the seductive woman who is not what she appears to be and who spins a web of deception around her opponent to charm and destroy him.

In other words, when woman leaves her habitual place designed for her by the customs and laws of society – when she reverses positions – she becomes the Other to that society. She is literally out of place. Not only does Judith usurp and eliminate man’s power by using his power – his sword – but in this ambiguous state, she is seen as the double gendered, the phallic woman who takes away man’s potency and administers death by decapitating an incapacitated, emasculated Holofernes. The ‘realization’ of this fantasy takes place hidden away in the darkness of night, in the realm of dreams or nightmares where structure and order give way to chaos and disorder.

This transgression of boundaries, this triumph of disorder, are enemy forces against the structure of patriarchy. Significantly, upon her return, Judith’s first utterance is the affirmation of her sexual innocence; in other words, the confirmation of purity of her body and, by implication, of her soul, uncontaminated by temptations of otherness and difference. Yet in the aftermath of her deed, she temporarily becomes the leader of her people, a ‘judge’ or army general who plans the strategy and gives the orders for the rout of Nebuchadnezzar’s hordes. After the enemy is vanquished, she assembles the women of Bethulia in a kind of victory parade, while the men of the community trail behind. Surrounded by her Hebrew sisters, she sings a song in which she taunts the men as ‘the sons of the Titans’ and ‘tall giants’ who nevertheless were too weak to defeat the enemy.

At this point, Judith has attained the power to create a matriarchal society (whose matriarch she would have been); she speaks of herself as the mother of her people – Israel as her infants, her children, her oppressed and weak people. Through these symbolic and ritual acts, Judith displays her power, her transgression of the boundaries of patriarchy. After her show of force, however, she resubmits herself to the patriarchal system. In the temple in Jerusalem, she re-avows her allegiance to the patriarchal God, and gives up her war booty – the vessels and bed chamber of Holofernes – in a kind of ritual of disempowerment.

Judith, the woman on top, out of place, nowhere, who reflects the defects of patriarchal hierarchies, returns to her place to submit to the established social system. To remove the ambiguity of her state of virgin-widowhood
and to return to a place within her society, Judith ultimately renders herself harmless. She returns to her estate and, in this restricted domain, becomes the ruler over her household. Symbolically she becomes a figurehead, a matriarchal persona without real political power, though 'honoured throughout her time in the whole country'. According to the patriarchal system of values, she attains the ultimate status for a woman in a theocratic society where matriarchy remains a fantasy and where the Phallus continues to reign supreme.

As I stated earlier, the depiction of Judith by women writers and artists is rare. Artemesia Gentileschi’s Judith paintings contrast with depictions by other artists, as Garrard points out:

The character she has created — neither beautiful, nor virginal, nor seductive — is nothing less than a reintegrated female hero, no longer dichotomized into saint or sinner, Mary or Eve, ‘good’ or ‘evil’. She is rather a life-like individual ... who, through her deed, has acquired the power that we associate with the heroic consciousness.35

The contemporary writer, Aritha van Herk, goes a step further. In her novel Judith she expands on the link between Judith and Artemis (already made by Gentileschi) by adding a third mythological figure, Circe. Van Herk creates a rather unusual synthesis in which the Greek goddess of the hunt and Homer's sorceress merge with the biblical heroine.

That van Herk’s infusion of Greek mythology into this biblical text is subversive to patriarchy is, perhaps, questionable. But van Herk’s other contribution to the Judith cycle brings more directly into question the subversion of mythology. The new aspect which van Herk brings to Judith is that she trivializes her; she brings Judith down to earth. Rather than a mythic figure, van Herk’s Judith is a commonplace character — a pig farmer’s daughter. By ‘trivialized’ I do not mean to deprecate van Herk’s novel; rather I am using the word in the sense which Daly gives it — trivialization as a counterstatement to patriarchal values of ‘worth’.36

Set in an agricultural community in Alberta, where the principal character, Judith, raises pigs, van Herk’s novel is far removed from the original myth. However, on a symbolic level, van Herk’s novel retains most of the elements of the original tale. Thus the original characters reappear, transformed into commonplace personae. God, the principal player, becomes Judith’s father, Jim; Mannasseh, Judith’s weak husband who dies during the barley harvest, becomes the weak and clumsy boyfriend, Norman, who in the course of van Herk’s narrative fades out of Judith’s life. In the Apocrypha, Judith has a female servant and helper who accompanies her to Holofernes’ tent and whom Judith sets free after Holofernes’ death. In van Herk’s fiction, Judith’s mother plays a similar role: servant to both her father and daughter, she is later replaced by the mother-substitute and friend, Mina – the servant set free to become a companion. Holofernes of the Apocrypha becomes Judith’s boss and city lover, as well as the symbol...
of male dominance and power. And Achior, the renegade in Holofernes’ camp (who eventually changes sides and converts to Judaism), becomes Judith’s domesticated lover, again named Jim, who converts to her world view.

As a childless widow the apocryphal Judith is physically exiled from her community. The Canadian Judith is symbolically exiled. She lives in psychological isolation in a patriarchal society where she feels outcast from both the dominant male society and from her female companions. She too does not have a place in the ‘house’ – in van Herk’s narrative the pig barn symbolizes the house where her father is the master. Judith is a passive onlooker who lives distanced from the female community symbolized by the sows; she is an object among objects, and all objects are the common property of her father, the patriarch.

But van Herk’s story is not simply a modern-day retelling of the ancient tale. For example, the biblical Judith, in the name of God, sets out to free her city from Nebuchadnezzar’s hordes. She returns to her community and resubmits to the patriarchal values of her society. For Van Herk’s heroine, however, Nebuchadnezzar’s hordes are everywhere, they are everyman. Consequently, the modern Judith sets out to achieve freedom from everyman. She does not act in the name of God; rather she sets out to destroy her God – an overwhelming father-figure and the symbol of a male-dominated society in which all men she encounters are but an extension of this father-image. The modern Holofernes, her city lover, is consequently one among many enemies. Thus, although Holofernes’ camp is the city, his power is everywhere; he represents the patriarchal value system which van Herk’s Judith, unlike her biblical counterpart, escapes.

Van Herk’s Judith passes through three stages: childhood, where she is fixated on the father-figure; youthful rebellion against the male God, whom she, at first, internalizes; and finally, her progressive liberation from him. Her Bethulia is the Alberta countryside of her childhood; the city to which she escapes is her place of youthful rebellion; and her countryside pig farm, to which she returns from the city, becomes her new Bethulia – essentially a matriarchal utopia. In more general terms, the three stages are the evolutionary path which a woman must choose in order to transcend her exile or alienation, in order to be in complete harmony with herself and with the world.

Van Herk’s novel deals with Freudian concerns as a metaphorical extension to the religion of monotheism, but the novel also deals with feminist concerns which go beyond Freudian interpretation. In Freudian terms, van Herk shows a Judith-figure whose bond with her pig-farming father, Jim, is of an eminently incestuous nature. He is the little girl’s protector, whose ‘hand swallowed hers completely and who in the twilight ... loomed colossal beside her’ (p. 12); he is her jailer ‘holding her like that, captive’ (p. 13); he is her master whose demands she silently carries out (p. 75); he is ‘her all-knowing father with a cure for everything’ (p. 124); he is the almost-
lover, whose little girl she is, who hugs ‘her body tight and close to his chest, her bones almost crushed in his arms’ (p. 160), ‘holding her against him so tightly, as if he would pour all his thick, hard life into her’ (p. 162).

Judith’s father is ever-present, even after his death, so that she is incapable of blocking ‘out the shape of her father’s face, stern in death as it had never been in life’ (p. 149). He controls her life beyond his own life: ‘It was some other person directing,’ she says, ‘and I was just carrying out orders’ (p. 98). His presence is manifest in his absence, and his absence is a phantasmagoric presence, an alienating nothingness in his daughter’s life. The relationship between the daughter of Israel and her God was glorified in the Apocrypha. Van Herk’s novel, on the contrary, denounces the relationship between father and daughter as an eminently debilitating force keeping women in a system of bondage – a bondage, however, based on a complicity between the captor and his victim. There is no escaping this colossal presence of the ancient patriarch whom the daughter desires in guilt and shame: ‘thick and bent as he was, it was really him she wanted’ (p. 125).

Contrary to Freud’s argument as to the onesidedness of the daughter’s desire for the father, van Herk shows reciprocity of desire, echoing Irigaray who, in her psychoanalytical study Speculum de l’autre femme, pointed out this reciprocity:

Ainsi, n’est-il pas simplement vrai, ni d’ailleurs tout à fait faux, de prétendre que la fillette fantasme d’être séduite par son père, parce qu’il est tout aussi pertinent d’admettre que le père séduit sa fille mais que, refusant de reconnaître et réaliser son désir – pas toujours il est vrai – il légifère pour s’en défendre.37

Since any realization of incest remains taboo, another form of seduction replaces actual incest: a masked seduction which, according to Irigaray, takes the form of the law. In the Apocrypha, God represents the Law, while in van Herk’s novel the father is the lawgiver and Judith is the ever-pleasing object of her father’s rule. She is marked by him, she belongs to him, she is his little girl to the exclusion of all other men and women.

Since the father-figure dominates, the mother-image remains pale by contrast. In a patriarchal society, the phallus is the symbol of value, while the non-phallic mother, in turn, becomes anti-value, so to speak, to the colossal presence of the patriarch. Although Judith recognizes her physical resemblance to her mother (‘her mother’s face, smooth and younger, looking back at her from the mirror’ – p. 43), she rejects the mother-image. She also rejects her mother’s world as one of simplicity (as opposed to her father’s world of complexity – p. 62). She rejects the womb from which she grew as non-phallic and consequently she rejects her own being as a woman. She rejects her mother as the passive, silent servant to father and daughter alike: ‘Beside him her mother was still and dull’ (p. 128).
Judith’s relationship with her father precludes, as rivals, any relationship with other women. And this ‘object-cathexis’ towards the father, as Freud would say, prevents Judith, as well, from enjoying hetero-sexual relationships. The incestuous bond exists, but its reality is denied, placed under a taboo and idealized. Sex with the other, under the law of the father – in this case with her boyfriend Norman, the ‘normal man’, the modern counterpart to the weak Manasseh of the Judith myth – would tarnish Judith’s image of man as the Godfather and Superman. In fact, Norman is this tarnished image. He is the pale reflection of the patriarch; he too thinks that ‘she was his, poised on his chair to swallow her, his body in an attitude of possession’ (p. 45). The patriarch incarnate, become sexual, sullies the idealized image. Judith can only feel hatred for this competitor who is but a ‘clumsy fool’ (p. 106) who thinks he has rights over her, ‘his lips tilted in a smile of possession’ (p. 107).

The bond between Judith and her father is a relationship of unequal partners. If the patriarch gives value to the daughter as Irigaray maintains, then their relationship is not only the traditional subject-object, male-female relationship one finds in a patriarchal society where the woman is equated with a child. In fact, the daughter is nothing without the value the father bestows upon her. Thus Judith’s escape to the city is an attempt to create value for herself and to free herself from her father’s debilitating, alienating presence. She physically severs her ties with the omnipresent father by moving away, but by no means does her rebellion – as is the essence of all rebellion – topple the patriarch.

As I stated earlier, the city in van Herk’s novel, a place of luxury, license and ‘lethargy’, ‘indulgence and submission … food and alcohol … and stale tobacco on her thick and furry tongue every morning’ (p. 154), corresponds to Holofernes’ camp. In this sense, van Herk’s city recaptures some of the allegorical images found in Renaissance paintings where Holofernes incarnates luxuria and Judith represents humilitas. The modern Judith’s boss, as the modern Holofernes, is a rich and successful businessman, brutal in his sexual demands, inconsiderate and ruthless towards women, who are but the objects of his whims. He is the true representative of the ever-recurring image of the original Holofernes.

Whereas the world of Judith’s father isolated the heroine from sexual encounters, her father’s physical absence eliminates taboos of that nature. Judith’s move to the city is the first step away from her father’s claim to exclusive ownership of her. Judith trespasses her father’s law by having sex with her boss. But unlike her biblical model, the modern Judith does not reverse positions, does not become the woman on top, but repeats the subject-object, master-slave relationship. It may well be that van Herk thinks that such reversals lack credibility, they are indeed an illusion as long as the patriarchal structure itself is not put into question at the same time.
Thus, in van Herk’s narrative, the modern Holofemes not only remains the master, but he truly becomes everyman, whose image is everywhere, ‘in shaving-cream ads, in the dark-haired man three seats down, in someone waiting at the corner for the light to change’ (pp. 44-45). He is an all-embracing presence, objectifying, ‘holding her ... captive’ (p. 13), physically imprinting his marks on her, and moulding her to the extent that she wills herself to be what her lover wants her to be: a faceless mask achieved by ‘acts of barbarity she had committed on herself for him’, a ‘change he had orchestrated in her’ (p. 175). Whereas Judith of the Apocrypha uses a mask as a deceitful means to charm and captivate her opponent with the ultimate intent to assassinate him, van Herk’s heroine plays the traditional role of woman. Her ultimate intent by masquerading herself is to turn herself into an object of desire as a means to charm her lover. The price she pays is the symbolical death of her own being, the loss of her identity.

Judith’s father, by giving value to the daughter, bestows upon her his identity; the daughter in turn rewards him by idealizing him. Similarly, Judith’s city lover moulds her into his desired object. He is the father-boss made sexually accessible. In the city, the God of Judith’s childhood seems to lose his power; he becomes frail and old, supplanted by his young competitor. As Judith’s idealized image of the patriarch temporarily fades, she replaces it with the physical presence of everyman. But authentic freedom – an illusion in the biblical Judith’s world – is a fantasy for van Herk’s Judith as well. For when the father finally ceases to physically exist, he is more powerful than ever. Behind the face of everyman lurks the patriarchal image. To claim that God is dead or to affirm, as does Daly, that he is ‘ultimately Nothing’ is to paradoxically affirm his everlasting presence. The lover can be abandoned, symbolically eradicated, but in order to achieve true freedom, the symbol of that power has to be destroyed.

In her final journey back to the countryside – to her Bethulia – Judith initially sets out to recover her father’s world. She returns to farm life in a decision to fulfil her father’s wish to raise pigs, and thus ultimately to satisfy her father’s voracious desires. As I stated earlier, Judith’s father was a pig farmer who ruled, like a feudal lord, over livestock and women alike. His daughter was a passive, insignificant onlooker, distanced from female companionship – the sows of the barn. Although the heroine in van Herk’s novel appears to continue to be an instrument in her father’s world, she in fact reverses that world. Judith moves from passivity to activity, from being ruled to ruler, from being an object of ownership to being proprietress, from woman to virago and warrior. This reversal symbolically expressed by Judith having her long hair cut off – manifests itself in her search for a new identity. The old Judith, reduced to insignificance under patriarchal rule, turns away from her biblical model towards what Daly calls the ‘Prehistoric Background’, becoming both Circe and Amazon.
Judith’s progressive destruction of the all-powerful God results in a shift: the redirection of the object-cathexis toward a mother image – a shift in which the matriarchal element vanquishes the patriarchal one. She enters into an almost mystical union with her sows, transforming them into ‘enchanted animals, Circe’s humans’ (p. 11). The ‘cave-like barn’ (p. 22) becomes a womb, where ‘their common female scents mingle’ (p. 25), a domain which Judith gradually conquers and which is off-limits to men. Similarly, she enters into a bond of love and friendship with her friend and mother-substitute, Mina. In van Herk’s novel, Mina is the rediscovered and revalued mother figure. Although Mina, the mother of three sons (one of whom will become Judith’s lover), is not especially different from Judith’s own mother, she serves to emphasize the reversal which takes place within Judith – her shift towards matriarchy. Thus Judith does not, as she had in the past, consider her mother any longer as the silent servant, unessential in the world of the patriarch; rather the mother becomes essential in her own right as life-giver and life-sustainer.

Although van Herk believes that woman’s essential tendency is to give life, she also shows woman’s opposing tendency to struggle against male power in order to protect her rights. As ‘the Amazon woman of Norberg’ (p. 148), Judith, in a bar brawl, hunts down a jeering male crowd, ‘a pack of howling coyotes ... brave because they were not alone, one supporting the other’ (p. 142). Judith reverses positions, emerging as the victor, not over one man, but over everyman; in the process, she demystifies man as hero. His heroism falters and he abandons his courage when woman dares to defy him. As the Amazon woman of a village tavern, however, she also distances herself from the deadly violence of her ancestor warriors. Her defiance is far removed from, for example, the rage which Monique Wittig expresses in Les Guerrillères. Rather, Judith’s tavern fight dissolves itself into laughter.

Nevertheless van Herk’s Judith is not free from the violence which characterized her ancestor of the Apocrypha, and by extension, the Greek magician, Circe. The primary scene of Judith slaying Holofernes reappears in van Herk’s novel when Judith castrates the piglets. Dundes, echoing Freud, interprets the decapitation of Holofernes as symbolical castration. Van Herk, merging the Greek magician and the biblical Judith, recreates this primary event.

While the mythical Circe symbolically emasculates men by changing them into swine, van Herk’s Judith sets out to symbolically break the power of men, first by breaking the sharp teeth of the male offspring of her sows, and then later – outdoing her mythical ancestor – by castrating them. ‘Not even Circe’s turning men to swine could equal it’ (p. 173). While Judith’s father castrated the pigs alone – ‘perhaps he did not want her to witness a male emasculating a male ... and saved himself from her discovery of his own sexuality’ (p. 176), Judith’s ultimate liberation from the patriarchal presence comes with the castration of her piglets, who are
rendered helpless, and passive under her knife. Judith literally unveils the male sex behind the phallus, thus demystifying the phallus and leading to ‘her discovery of man’s common humanity’ (p. 176). This castration scene, in the presence of her future lover Jim, completes Judith’s reversal of positions. An object in her father’s world, Judith becomes the subject, objectifying the male, who in turn becomes a passive onlooker while she castrates her piglets. In the process, Judith symbolically castrates her lover, removing the mask of male superiority which hides his ‘common humanity’.

God reduced to common man – Jim the father merged with Jim the lover – was a necessary synthesis in Judith’s world. But this synthesis evolves further, so that common man is reduced to an object. In the final scene of the novel, Judith and Mina watch while a breeding hog services the sows. The two women crack jokes and mockingly applaud the hog’s activities: ‘The boar turned startled orange eyes on them as if caught doing something foolish’ (p. 187). Perhaps echoing the laughter of her victory in the village pub, Judith’s mocking gaze entirely objectifies the maleness of the hog. Finally, in Judith’s world, while woman remains indispensable as protector, life giver and sustainer, man becomes only an instrument in the process of procreation – a breeding hog in van Herk’s utopia – Ulysses revisited as the father to Circe’s child. Van Herk’s Judith recreates the Amazon woman, who bore children but maimed, killed or blinded her male offspring. Ultimately, she reinvents the biblical Judith who became the mother of her people.

Whereas the archetypal image of Judith as sinner or saint, as a power of darkness or the source of life is upheld in fiction until the early twentieth century, later variations upon the myth diverge more and more from the original. In earlier fiction the archetypal image remains intact. Writers used myth in the sense in which Sartre and Roland Barthes explained the term: for Sartre myth was a “‘fragment d’idéologie’ destiné à masquer la réalité d’une situation et d’un comportement”; for Barthes, ‘le mythe avait pour charge de fonder une intention historique en nature, une contingence en éternité’. Not only did writers uphold the ambivalent image of Judith, but this image described the reality of the ambivalence of woman. In other words, ‘the mythical figures are symbols. These, it is said, open up depths of reality otherwise closed to us.’

In van Herk’s novel, the heroine of Bethulia undergoes a transformation. Her Judith becomes a modern woman in a world in which the absolutes of saint and sinner, good and evil, have become relative. Thus her fiction is less a repetition than a critical commentary on the traditional image of Judith. But does this Verfremdung, to use a Brechtian term, lead to the destruction of the myth, or is the archetypal image so powerful that it recovers itself despite van Herk’s efforts?

In order to achieve the destruction of the archetypal representation of Judith, van Herk sets out to remove the heroine from the biblical setting
and to destroy the heroic qualities attached to the apocryphal image. Her heroine is not fighting for the survival of the status quo – patriarchal Hebrew society – but against male power and for the establishment of a new, matriarchal society. Quite clearly the trivialization of van Herk’s Judith, together with the infusion of classical models into her text, add to the Verfremdung from the original. Nevertheless, paradoxically, despite van Herk’s attempt to destroy the archetypal image, that image remains more powerful than ever. For Judith of the Apocrypha and her classical sisters share the same traits. All three are castrating warrior figures, and depending upon who gazes upon these symbols, these mythical heroines uphold the image man projects onto women as ‘sadistic monsters’. Furthermore, van Herk’s Judith is not only Circe, but is the metamorphosis of woman into an idol of the cult of motherhood – a veritable Venus of Willendorf. Thus Van Herk’s Judith remains the Other – in de Beauvoir’s sense – retaining her mythical attributes. As in the original, her Judith reverses positions, but also as in the original, van Herk’s Judith achieves no reversal in society.

The biblical Judith creates a matriarchal fantasy in her ritual dance and song, but submits to the prevailing patriarchy. Likewise, van Herk’s Judith creates a utopian fantasy which is restricted to the small domain of her farm – to her society of sows – which nevertheless leaves the outside patriarchal world unaffected. Both Judiths become the matriarchs of their households, rather than rulers of a new societal order. Ultimately, van Herk does not escape mythology; her reversal – as is true of all reversals – only succeeds in reflecting and strengthening the original myth, and continuing the dichotomy of male/female, subject/object relationships. Placing the woman on top, as van Herk does, still reflects this dichotomy; it does not break away from the traditional structure of the myth. Van Herk’s Judith does no more than restate Barthes’ contention: ‘Il apparaît donc extrêmement difficile de réduire le mythe de l’intérieur: car ce mouvement même que l’on fait pour s’en dégager, le voilà qui devient à son tour proie du mythe: le mythe peut toujours en dernière instance signifier la résistance qu’on lui oppose.’ Van Herk resists the myth but the myth reappears within her resisting narrative.

NOTES

2. C. 1612-13, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.


8. *Judith* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978); all quotations are from this edition.


12. de Beauvoir, p. 193.


20. Ibid., p. 22.


22. Daly, p. 79.


25. Turner uses this term in many of his writings. In his *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), Chapter IV is entitled ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in “Rites of Passage”’.


34. Daly, p. 39.
36. Daly, p. 78.
38. Daly, p. 79.
40. Daly, p. 79.
42. Dundes, p. 29.
45. Daly, p. 44.
47. Barthes, p. 243.
You slept for the best part of a day. You woke to inform me you'd had
enough of sitting and being travelled by trains, aircraft, ferries. Now you
wanted to do some walking. But eating first. You were hungry.

Then you were a bit bashful and added bits about only if it was alright
with me – you hadn't even asked if I was working today and what had
happened to yesterday? You smiled but there was a question mark hover­
ing over your head as surely as if the cartoonist had just placed it there.
I said it would be better than just 'alright', I was on the later shift. Your
English was getting rusty. Better than my French and the German I didn't
have.

I went across the road to the bakery for rolls and the teabread I remem­
ered you liked. A mixed bag of girdle scones, oven-ones and pancakes.
We ate and then took the bus, past the airport, to Melbost. Through a
larch gate and we were on the marram grass under a yellow winter sky.
It was August.

We passed by someone with his dog. One of the few people who walked
here most days. Most of the usual walkers, habitués of the shoreline, had
dogs. Working collies or the bigger pet breeds, ones that needed to get
out. This man had stopped me once and told me that he remembered my
uncle coming here to swim, most days in the year. That was after the run
from town, with a run back to follow.

This time, he admired your hat – hand-dyed, hand-spun. He was old
enough to have a memory which recognised that but he'd never encoun­
tered one with such a long tassel. You wanted to give it away to him. I
rested my arm on your jacket sleeve to warn you. The poor man would
have been embarrassed.

It was the wind then, from the North-east, not that strong but funnelling
down and Broad Bay not looking its usual benign self. You talk of it like
a person, you said and I said, yes. You were amazed at the scale of these
sands, at low-water springs, from the outcrop of conglomerate at Melbost
stretching, broken only by groynes and one more tidal island to more
harsh rocks at Aignish, under the old cemetery. We could go there and see
the Macleod stones. Weathered carvings.

But, walking, you asked, in that direct way, what this Bay meant to me.
You sensed something. No. No-one I knew well had drowned. Someone
I used to fish with had lost a son. But that was before I was aware of
these things and it was further up anyway, where the river went in, north of the town and what you might call estuary, really. Broad Bay hadn’t been too bad to me.

We looked over the coiled patterns across the cold shallows. Lungworm casts in the muddier areas and bleached razor-shells in the cleaner ground. Rich feeding.

The best haddock came from there, I said. You asked why it was ‘came’ in the past tense and not ‘come’. Bigger boats with bigger nets, electronics in the wheelhouse, markets or just the times, changes. I said it all like that, unfairly. You were surprised at the emotion and I was unwilling to expand.

We didn’t hold hands. We were close, though and left the Macleod stones for another day. You pressed me for the story. I warned you it wasn’t so easy to stop me.

I might not know High or Low German but haddock were ‘schellfisch’. You recognised the word. Not often seen in Switzerland except on the contents list of frozen packets. You didn’t have a clear picture of the fish to go with the word.

We looked again to Broad Bay and across to the watchful column of Tiumpan Head light. Shift your eyes from there and take a big sweep to the north. We’ll start from there, though we can’t see it. There’s the harbour at Port of Ness, then Skigersta, with a slip and both of these tricky in any swell. Going south, there’s Cellar Head and a geo – that’s a steep inlet where you could just about haul a boat up from the sea – at either side of it. Ruins of fishing bothies built into the side of the hill. Then Tolsta village with a jetty, tidal and seeming dead with useless bollards now looking like rusty sculptures. It could never have been any good, towards low water but it must have been worth all that went into developing it, once. Let’s make this clear. The fishing, for the full reach of Broad Bay, had been good. Note the tense.

That jetty at Tolsta made you think of the inland sea in the Soviet Union, where the water had dropped back. The sources had been harnessed for irrigation schemes and the trawlers or drifters or whatever they were lay stranded and dying like beached whales. On this island the stem and stern posts of redundant drifters were still alive as oak posts, taking the strain of fences.

But on Broad Bay, it had been line-fishing. Take Brevig, another geo, hiding under the villages of Coll, Back, Vatisker. Not great shelter but the harvest had been worth the risk. Cod, plaice, dabs, whittings, yes but the haddock was the fish. How did it look?

Like St Peter’s fish. Not to be confused with the French for John Dory. The thumb-marks are on that one too and the Norwegians, it has to be admitted, call it St Peter’s fish, as well. But that’s not what I was taught. I was shown how to tell a haddock from a whiting by that mark. At the feeding of the multitude, when the catch was shared, the print was seared
into the grey black flank of the haddock and it’s there yet. There was more than five thousand fed from Broad Bay.

I think I grew more self-conscious then, surprised at my own intensity but you were happy with my role. I wouldn’t give you the standard tour. I betrayed feelings.

Small-lines had only about a hundred snoods – that was thinner, shorter pieces spliced to the main line. Each had a small hook, baited with mussel or herring strip and worked from a smaller boat than the Ness ones which worked deeper water with the great-line.

Yes, there was one Brevig boat left. She hadn’t been broken at her keel or worn to death by being winched up that geo. Even stranger, she hadn’t been burned or broken-up when the fishing was done. She was sedately moored in Stornoway harbour and was simply named Broad Bay. A Coll man had done all right on the fish and found the capital for a shop. Became a merchant. Others did the catching but he too must have had a memory because he wouldn’t let the boat go. He had her engined, put her mast in the loft and there she was like a double-ended harbour launch with mahogany seating. Some might say she’d gone up in the world, like the guy himself.

Others preferred her as she had been. Lighter. Everyone you talked to in Coll seemed to have been on her at one time or another. She had a distinctive stern shape, with the bend in the top planks going two ways then meeting their opposite numbers in the oak sternpost. Once you saw one, with that line, you’d know another.

I’d chased her history. ‘Loch A Tuath’, the North Loch, Gaelic for Broad Bay, had been a red herring. That name had been stencilled on the bow of a Ness-built boat which was much more recent than the fish-merchant’s.

Then I’d approached research the right way. I talked to the Fishery Officer I knew, working in the office where all the old registrations were kept. No art. I said what came into my head. Did he still listen to Hendrix? Yes and he still plugged the stratocaster into the amp now and again. Only for himself, well except for the odd gig, if it was somewhere he fancied and the company was good.

He turned her up for me. There she was on a page of finely handwritten entries. Broad Bay. SY 594. 1912. Durness. No, not Deerness, Orkney. Definitely Durness.

I’d to resort to the phone, to trace the boat builders. A father and son, Angus and Anson Mackay built Orkney yoles at eighteen to twenty feet, for Lewis customers. So she’d come over, out of Loch Eriboll into weird tides, under Cape Wrath and into the Minch. The new sail must have been creaking as it stretched, the crew getting the feel of the boat, maybe sorting the ballast as they made for Triumph by dead-reckoning.

And bits of her were still afloat. But you were cold now, through the Harris wool gensey I’d lent you. And I was gabbing on. That easterly
wind had some bite. We were lucky to see the long and nearly empty bus at the turning-place, the driver having a smoke.

You were caught by the thought of these fish. Miraculously you asked further, over tea. You were getting used to the brew, simmered a while on a ring of the cooker. I would have been happy to talk more about fish but I had the back-shift to do.

You were still up when I got back. My father was in bed. In our kitchen, you opened Davidson’s ‘North Atlantic Seafood’ and we heard the three blasts as the ferry came in, operating astern propulsion, against the wind which had veered to the south and picked up.

Some people were happy to read Raymond Chandler again, on their holiday, content with style and not even bothered about sorting out events in the narrative. You’d gone round the corner to find the bookshop I’d described and asked for a detailed work on species of fish.

If they were for cooking as well as for looking at, this was the one, the man in the shop had said. You told me that this author, Davidson, called them thumb-prints as well. This is the quote: ‘In this the haddock resembles the John Dory and fishermen of Boulogne therefore call it faux Saint Pierre...’

Pity they’ve got that the wrong way round, I said and you livened to a debate, taking the hook and quoting from that work to say that John Dory was St Peter’s fish to the Portuguese, Spanish, French, Swedish, Norwegians and Danish.

But I knew that it was really haddock which were mentioned by Mark, Luke and John. You didn’t see so many John Dory in the inshore waters round these islands. But, you said, there was bound to be other species with thumb-prints and wasn’t the Sea of Galilee fresh-water, like that inland sea in the Soviet Union?

Don’t talk science to me, woman, I’d said. Everyone I knew, who’d given me instruction in fishing – and they ranged from real townies to my relatives on the West Side – they all said the same. That print on the haddock was burned into my senses at an early age.

We gave up on rhetoric then. I can’t remember if our fingers touched, across the table, then, by that open book. I know I wanted them to.

I slept late in the morning, tired from that last back-shift and preparing for the changeover to the killer first night-shift. You had made a salad. I tried not to look wary as you blended mustard, cream and a touch of sugar with oil and vinegar. You were impressed at the Webb’s Curlies grown in a fish-box which had been converted into a cloche by nailing a half-barrel-lid at each end, to take the curve of polythene. You have to defeat the wind, to grow anything here.

I could listen then to your openness. Not so many details but you told the bits that mattered. Your intensive training in Therapy. Family illness. Your father first and then your mother. Nothing that would get better, in either case. Tragedy wasn’t really too strong a word. Your letter was short
notice of your coming over, you knew, but you had to have a rest. That
could be an active one. I wasn’t to worry.

The mood changed again, as we couldn’t have sensed it would, when
you admitted you’d stopped at the fish-shop. It was still called Broad Bay.
It must be the same one, you realised, even if the owner was different.
You had even seen what must have been haddock, in the window, but
had lost courage. You were shy of cooking fish for me. I seemed to be an
expert.

I was ashamed. Only obsessed, I said and you should know by now not
to get me started. One thing she wasn’t clear about — did I use to be a
fisherman?

She had to promise not to be disappointed, losing the illusion of meeting
a real, wild Hebridean. I’d never had to fish for my living. Even now, I
helped a friend out sometimes but I always had a choice. I’d go out, on
days off, if it suited me.

Even if I wanted to, you wouldn’t let me play it down. You really did
want to know. The hook and barb had gone through. So I told you how
I’d set lines once or twice.

Usually I’d gone angling with a fair bit of technology. We all read the
catalogues. We even shared an echo-sounder to detect a bo — that’s an
underwater reef which would foul a net and so couldn’t be trawled over.

Once, our plans to round Tiumpan Head, going north, met with the right
conditions. The twenty-five footer cut glass most of the way and you were
aware of the vibrations from the three cylinder engine. We’d have been
excommunicated from the Sea-Angling Club and banned from competi-
tion-fishing for life. We had three long-lines, coiled in wicker. The skipper
directed me in keeping the sequence as I baited each of them. Even one
hook flying free and it could get messy.

A float, twenty fathoms of cod-line, a weight then the sequence of a hun-
dred hooks flowing true to another weight, another twenty fathoms
and the second float. If you lost one end, you still had a chance of re-
covering the line.

The skipper showed us a transit. Out of the bay, holding the Tiumpan
on the quarter and looking northwest to the skyline till you made out
Muirneag. Standing from all that flat ground you could just about call her
a mountain. Holding Muirneag and Tiumpan steady till you picked up
your cross-bearing, to fix your mark. But that was deeper water. Not for
us today. Soon it maybe wouldn’t be for anyone. Boats that had used up
other quotas, moving in. It was getting dragged to death down there, the
small stuff choking amongst the prawns. The line was selective. Like the
drift-net for herring. And exciting with it.

We were after the soft patches, with rough ground that would rip any
gear, all about it. We found some. One line was heavy, rasping with
dogfish that no-one wanted. They ate them on the West-Side. Cured them
first, in salt and oak-wood smoke. The second line had been on the
nursery slopes, coming up with clean hooks and a few small fish, which we returned, save for some reasonable whiting. I won’t forget our last line. The hypnotism of looking down to see the catch come up like washing on a string. Blank areas, as if the wind had done the damage. A few slimy snoods, broken or bitten off. Yes and what we had come this far to catch. Several smaller groupings of decent haddock, hefty and nodding, with bulging flanks. They came over our port gunn’le as our bow was held off what little wind there was.

A scallop had been gripped on one hook. The skipper took his knife to the shell and put the fruit to his mouth. They eat oysters like that, he said. I shook my head but tried the next one when it was held out to me. I swallowed it whole.

When we brought the boat back to the mooring, there was another ritual, foreign to me till then, but adopted by me since. Being the youngest, I was to make five equal piles. Yes there was four of us but one was for the boat’s expenses – or for the one who took responsibility. I was to turn my face the other way then as someone pointed and asked whose pile that was. I called the names. The boat’s. Willie’s. Mine...

I knew you were with me, all the way when I told you these things. But surely there must be some of those fish left, you said. I said, yes, the stragglers but did not try to explain further.

You were surprised, some days later, the night-shifts near done, when I said I would go down to the Club Weigh-In. I don’t know why I wanted to. Our crew of that day was scattered and the man I’d call the skipper had gone off everything to do with clubs and competitions. He’d fallen out with the committee and wasn’t too fussed, because he’d lost his taste for weighing and photographing big dead fish that didn’t always get eaten. Maybe I went because I’d see some other people I didn’t want to lose touch with.

When I got over to the west side of Number One pier the chartered boats were coming in to berth. I had a full set of smock-oilskins on, looking the part, as the rain came down thick. Not much wind behind it. I wore clogs, like the East Coast boys, working on the immense purse-nets, laid out on Number Two.

I gripped the rope that someone threw and I suppose it all looked right. I thought I was ready. Made the nod. The man on deck below was not the skipper. That was maybe the thing. He didn’t want to do or say anything that would look assertive. He should have shouted up to me, from boat to pier, to keep me right. He kept his sea boots on that deck, teeth on his tongue.

I put weight on the rope but it was against the strain on the gantry. Below me, hooks went into the cut-out handles of the bottom fish-box of three, all stacked together. A murmur was starting to go round the pier. They’d hit them. Pretty well ideal conditions with the tides on neaps.
They'd found the haddies. I didn't have to ask where they'd come from. I thought I'd seen the last of them.

A single fish was placed on the top box, the thumb-mark prominent. I began to haul. The catch should have swung to the other side of the post on the pier. There should have been waiting arms. I should have called over to someone else, someone in the forming crowd at the point of Number One, trying to get a glimpse of some of this catch.

The boxes were coming up, bridled together and swaying. The block on the gantry was running fine. It was working after all. You could see at a glance that these fish had never been in a net. A haul from out the blue. The broad blue.

The pull became jerky. I remember the feel becoming awkward. It wasn't a question of strength. I wanted again to shout for someone but didn't. I don't know why. The three boxes glanced against the concrete rim of the pier.

That guy on deck did not seem to stir in his boots when the fish which had come from below came tumbling on him from above. The boxes hit the gunn'le just as the swell was taking the boat a yard or so from the greenheart piles. The cluttered decks were strewn with haddock, a few speckled things among them. But the black harbour water, between the smudged black gloss of the boat and that pier, bulged with haddock forms.

If I'd moved quickly, I could have brought a lot back. I just looked down. There had to be a gaff aboard. That booted figure kept his stance. He knew that there wasn't any gaff or long-handled net aboard so there wasn't much point in rushing about. So he was calm. The few other people on the pier who had seen what happened gasped, looking down at the pale bellies in the water, now spreading out on the tide. The fish would be wasted. The fat harbour seals would get them.

I don't know if it was these watching people who stopped me from trying something. Maybe it was the thought of clambering down a weedy ladder, in clogs or bare feet, to try to recover the fish by hand. All this rational stuff comes only now, after it all, as I'm trying to return the honesty I owe you. At the time I think it was simply a feeling. Stumbling around wouldn't have brought the fish back and would have felt wrong, like the jerking tensions on that rope, working against the swing of the gantry.

So I didn't make a big thing of saying sorry, looked down to the angler I knew - who would have won the competition - then took my end of the rope round to the other side of that post. Hooks went into handles again and boxes began to come up, smoothly enough but only one by one, to the waiting arms.

My Swiss friend, that is the full story of the schellfisch, which I didn't tell you at the time. I grudged you the bare realism when you returned from your big walk, hungry. I just pointed to the bundle of newspapers
by the sink. We unwrapped them together and, even faded, they were still beauties. It was you who said it. Here was the real St Peter's fish.

All I said was, yes, you'd been right, there was still some of those fish left. Let's just say that people I knew had been out on Broad Bay. They'd found them and taken them, their basketfuls from their mark.

I took the knife to one and you shuddered. The head was left on and I took the white liver to mix with oatmeal, seasoning and a touch of chopped onion. The stuffing went back inside the mouth, down to the gills. You were horrified but I said the only way to cook it was this way and simmered, whole like a salmon, but in milk, with leeks.

You were sad at the head with opaque eyes staring up at you, as you said. Yet you ate. You ate from it all, everything here and not just so you could say you had tasted our traditions. That is why I think of you now and can say how you moved me and still move me.

I couldn't say it then as I couldn't admit to my part in the waste in the harbour, the spilled boxes. Maybe if I'd been able to talk, quietly, about what was between the more lyrical memories, we might have touched. And if we'd touched, you might have come back to me.
THE SWALLOWS RETURN TO SARAJEVO

From a winter of African dawns bloodying
The veldt, the first swallows have come:
Returning to Europe, England, Yorkshire,
To some reference point marked by instinct
On the furled chart of the planet
Chased by martins and swifts, they gleam
Gunmetal blue in the April sun.

In Jugoslavia, they slice up a sunrise
Sector by sector, surprising the sky
With their outflung ambush of wings.

At Sarajevo, Serbian soldiers wait
In gardens wild with lilac and broom;
The scent of blossom smothers hearts
Tripwired by trembling gulps of air.
Sun freckles them like boys,
Their hands sweat on rifle butts;
A sniper fires and they press
Their fragile heads to an earth
Which stinks of war.

Across the suburbs, behind boarded
Windows, or feedbags stuffed with sand,
The Bosnian militia crouch, expecting
Them, expecting each moment,
Each tick of the clock,
Each passing second
Of the stillness of the day
To spill their lives into the unforgiving
Legend of their people’s past.

Overhead the tails of swallows flicker,
Knitting and purling the placid air.
They signal memories of unmown fields,
Of mothers calling from doorways,
Cradling a jug of milk, folding  
A white sheet from the washing line  
Or dozing in a wicker chair under pear trees,  
Where sun bleaches the broken fence.

Your girl still waits, the swallows say —  
On a streetcorner, in a small town —  
Polishing her red shoes against blue stockings,  
Watching the sky for rain that just might come.  
Shopkeepers slam down their shutters,  
A crippled woman limps and sings, sweeping  
Rotten fruit from the market square.

Pigeons scatter, surround the steeple  
And return, surrendering white wings  
To the church clock’s halting chimes.

The boys’ eyes open to take in all  
That is real and here and now.  
It means little:  
That trail of ants welded from snips  
Of copper wire, aimlessly marching;  
Their own fingernails purple with dirt;  
The smell of sweat, the hot stickiness of boots.

It’s all changeable, mutable, all negotiable  
Under the mortars’ hammering auction,  
The wheedling of bullets that flick up dust  
From empty village squares,  
Shatter plaster from the town hall,  
Thwack into bodies still moving or falling  
To bleed between the cold vee of their sights.

The swallows turn: metallic bunting  
Blown adrift or decoys dropped to distract  
Radar which scans horizons like a hawk  
They search for their ruined nests,  
Crying from crimson throats  
For all that is lost.  
Wanting to begin again,  
To hatch another brood, whatever  
Toll this spring may take of them.

That one urge lasers the world’s map  
Lodged in their heads, bringing them
To this village, to this street,
To this house, where they begin to build
On unassailable stone.

AFTER ‘DESSERT STORM’

Trees are glazed with half-thawed snow,
The lake’s reflection flinches,
Suffering frigid air’s caress as sun
Sinks to reddle the sky’s dull flank

Ice chinks at the water’s edge,
Chiming against the calls of coots;
Water’s black meniscus freezes
And stills a slowly ebbing light.

There, where frozen tongues of sand
Spit the lake, a diver hunches,
Shuddering its dark silks, ruffled
By a bitter west wind’s probing.

From cities smoking at the coast, from
Cranes and quaysides and berthed ships
It hurled inland, choosing this tarn
To weather out another killing gale.

The stark trees drip mist;
A single droplet, bloodied by the sun,
Glints in what is left of light.
The new moon is a gourd of ice.

The diver moves as I move, cautious
To the lakeside; it turns, enters water,
Sculls clear, then slips back into
The gasping mouth of its utterance.

Light-flickers smooth an outcry of waves,
Seconds flit by, a flight of mallard
Skid-lands. My breath’s heat hews out
A vanishing statuary of air.
Then the lake blurts a black gondola
Tracing sleek silver on the gathering dark
No calling it back: it vanishes
Towards an interrupted journey east.

Its wing-beats lift it over lit towns
Towards the cry-strewn coasts of its lineage.
No meeting point, but swallowed words
And its sheer plunging from my world.

Here is a new moon rising, its face
Ghosting the fallen sun; here is darkness
Sprinkling a premonition of stars, and here
My foosteps, beating at the path's cold iron.

DANDELIONS

They'll grow anywhere, dandelions,
Their seeds flocking to a mist,
Swarming in faint dreams of light
From a far dimension of Space,
Weaving the sheer silk of air,
Staining it to watered milk.

They settle on our shoulders,
On the roofs of cars or houses,
On gravel paths,
Or by the roadside;
You wouldn't rate their chances higher
Than icicles in hell.

But in spring they come through:
Obvious things forgotten, which suddenly
Are remembering themselves everywhere:
Rising through damp soil and cold and rain,
Through fretted autumn leaves, loving
The lengthening days' fragile light.

They take over garden paths,
Flower beds, verges, window boxes;
They punch through tarmac in the street,
Their tap roots spiking into graveyards
To rock the headstones, their bold faces
Brightening the names of the dead.

The first flowers I took my mother
Were dandelions:
Snapping a fistful of stems,
Their sap trickling down my wrist,
Sticky as sperm,
Their yellow heads oozing a faint
Scent of piss and bitterness.
I smelled the space between their lives
And mine.

This one clings to the outhouse roof,
Gulping in heat from the May sun
With grateful little nods,
Downy as a new duckling,
It’s baby head lolling in a faint breeze
That teases it to fall:
It is a ripe womb,
A belly of spores,
A full moon, a grey-headed sage
Trembling with one season’s wisdom.

Tomorrow wind will strip you,
Tearing out that gloss of filaments;
Your bald pod drying to a husk,
Your root slumbering between roof slates,
Under winter stars – their suddenly
Blooming flowers of frost –
And December’s inquisitive wind.
In spring you’ll pull the house down,
Or try to.

And if I’m here, and you make it,
I’ll come down one day, woken by
The hunger of starlings, taking in
Today’s milk from the doorstep,
Yesterday’s news from the paper,
To find you, suddenly overripe.
Landeg White

OXFAM PLC

For once, I knew these people, their
Names and histories. Their children
Suckled or clung to trouserlegs as

The players warmed up with rippling
Arpeggios on the stinkwood xylophone,
Its gourds like swollen udders.

They talked of the past good-humouredly
Since the foreigner was interested.
They had their anger. Terrible things

Had been done. But mine was no more
Use to them than yesterday's burnt
Millet stalks, all they had for fuel.

Chords plonked like a signature. Open
Two-handed fifths, the players
Octaves apart on the 8-foot instrument

Summoning the dance. The father-
Drummer, crouching by the charcoal
Brazier, quickened the python

Skin of his cunning and boom,
Boom-bih-bih-boom, commanding,
Boom, the skinny and alert, or fat

And generous, bih-bih, the enchanting
Children, the wide-eyed, boom, children,
To become that bubbling counterpoint

Wrung from the wood slats, sizzling
In the hollow gourds, the sound waves
Hitting vertebrae in body-quakes
Of pleasure. I knew this dance,
These people. In the New World,
4000 miles ago, they

Jumped to the dustbin steelband's
Clangour in the same concentric
Circles, talking in the same manner

Of history and their lives. They had
A terrible, precise anger, They were
Up from slavery. But their dance's

Panorama was an affair of day-break,
Foraging into the boulevards from
The burning cane of their past.

(That was another age, before our banks
Coined under-borrowing, before
Oil became a weapon splitting

Wealth from work and spawning
The blood-dimmed trade in weaponry.
Then the banks called in their debts.)

Today, like X-rays of starvation,
The people stare out from our less
Illiberal journals. We are more

In control than ever. Their dance is
That the second child must die
That the fourth child must die

To save the others. They are octaves
Beyond anger. Watching this alien
Ballet of our dangled

Food Aid, it is their history's
End, to select each other. We are told
The doomed children understand.
I am fifty years old
and writing to you from high summer.
Wheatfields from the hollow
  to the swelling horizon
Have been combine-scythed
  in swirling parallel strokes.
There are swallows up here
  clicking in African languages.
Black cattle wading
  in the shadows of olive trees
Are barely visible
  so black are the shadow pools.
Cicadas among the cornflowers,
  are sawing at their washboards
(A linking image from my ‘50s bored teens to your own, as

Suddenly articulate
  you start your own journey).
Whatever I can give you
  has long been given if at all.
There’s little else you will
  draw on beyond occasional cheques.
But I want to write of my love
  for you over seventeen winters,
Both the barren anxiety
  that shadows your present choices,
And my pride in you
  and your emerging designs
Like a carnival of poppies
  crowding the disturbed soil
Of motorway embankments
  with their gift of summer.
My fifty first year, the year's last afternoon,
My son attacked, my wife flown to his bedside,
I am walking the concrete walkway by the estuary
(Rhythm, give me steady feet, this is an emergency).

Imbecile malice! 'You fucking black bastard, go home
Nigger!' as he walked from his friend's home
Home. Panic
Spiralling on satellite
Links, my son's face
Broken by drunks, tickets,
currencies, embraces, flight, and me
Walking the white untidy beach by the white spray.

I've been bloodied in Africa, not mine but his dear
Mother's home and distanced it, an accident,
The malice of thieves, not to be written of till
Horror at their bombed camps could truthfully
Set the tone. But what of Thatcher's indulged
Sons, erect for Britain? And what
Now of that black anger? And how can my fifty
Foolish years sooth his pain in the city
We came home to, secure from hatreds?

Seven days past we walked together another
Much loved beach between the windblown sand half-
Burying the upturned pleasure crafts of summer,
Funky Lisboa, Valha me Deus, Neptuno, Lucky Luke,
Between them and the ruffled sea darkening to pewter
Was a column of wet sand like the one before me,
Glass-smooth, incandescent with each spent
Breaker. It mirrors the wrecked day. Its frontiers
Shift like Poland, slashed with bloodstains, bruising
To purple, the bridge's evening necklace of traffic,
Shimmering moonrise and the spinning lighthouse.
Like a wet street at midnight, it is open to everything
Between darkness and darkness. It is where to be.
Dear Bank Manager,

I have received your letter. Thank you very much: threats, intimidations, and all.

So what, if you won't give me a loan of two thousand? Or only conditioned by special rules and regulations?

Because I am not white male or a 'commercial farmer'?

(And in relation to the latter, whose land is this anyway?)

I know that but for what I am not, you could have signed away two solid millions, and not many questions asked.

Of course I am angry.

Wouldn't you be if you were me?

Reading what you had written was enough to spoil for me.
all remaining eleven months of the year, plus a half.

But I won't let it.

I had even thought of asking God that the next time round, He makes me white, male, and a 'commercial' farmer.

But I won't.

Since apart from the great poverty and the petty discriminations,

I have been happy being me:

an African, a woman and a writer.

Just take your racism your sexism your pragmatism off me;
overt covert or internalised.

And damn you!
HOMESICKNESS
- for Anna Rutherford

This afternoon,

I bolted from
the fishmarket:

my eyes smarting with
shame
at how too willingly and sheepishly
my memory had slipped up
after the loss of my taste buds.

- Just like an insecure politician creaming up
to his boss.

Familiarly in an unfamiliar land,
so strong and so sweetly strong,
the smells of the fish of
my childhood hit hard and soft,
wickedly musky.

All else fall into focus
except the names of the fish.

While from distant places in my head
The Atlantic booms and roars or
calmly creeps swishing foam on the hot sand.

But I could not remember their Fantse names.

They were labelled clearly enough
- in English -

which
tragically
brought no echoes...

One terrifying truth
unveiled in one short afternoon:

that
exile brings losses like
forgetting to remember ordinary things.

Mother, when next we meet, I shall first bring you your truthspeaker’s stone: the names and tastes of fish are also simple keys to unlock secret sacred doors.

And I wail to foreign far away winds: Daughter of my Mother and my Father’s Orphan, what is to become of me?

And Those like me?

AN INSIDER’S VIEW – for Kinna VI

Even a self-imposed exile is another prison.

I opened the gate, banged it shut on myself, and threw the key away. Or just misplaced it.

I thought I could get that key again and easily if only I could find some time, and carefully look.

But in this nightmare world of:

Aliens Compliance Orders Temporary Work Permits
regular applications for regular visas
permanent residence requirements
Green Cards,
    Red Cards and
Blue...

...And not to mention:

just learning to cope
in places where
I cannot take anything at all for granted,

we know that
other doors out of this prison are open
    all the time.

But they only lead to suminado:
the backyard
the outhouses
the fields beyond.

So of course
I can run all I want. To
other lands other exiles.

Going home is another story.
'Therefore, Phaedrus, go back to that speech-writing commander, whose word is the law in this place and whenever he loves one can afford to pay with more than endearments; I tell you there's no gain in an old and a young outcast staring through the stream at their twenty toes; refreshing in this heat to pass the time in lessons, but usually you know I'm paid too for what I recommend...'

'Love is not for money; money is for other things.'

'I said, you know I'm paid too for my advice; refreshing in this heat to pass the time in dialogue, staring through his stream to find our twenty toes. You cannot give my science the love it deserves.'

'You're beginning to repeat yourself; I said I wanted your love, not his.'

'I heard you the first time; look at my wings, I have not seen yours sprout and uncurl.'

'You always talk in poetic devices; say what you mean.'

'Foot, blue veins, used blood, that what you want? Your tender toes have never worn down stone.'

'He dandles me; he softens my slippers. I see your big toe is up, the hairy patch, the rising moon.'

'I know, boy, stop this now.'

'And as the water flows, so will I be a horny man and you be gone...'
Mending the Schizo-Text: Pidgin in the Nigerian Novel

Post-colonial West African writers writing in English may have been too scripturally schizophrenic, too busy with the dichotomy mother tongue/other tongue, to account fully for the presence of auxiliary contact languages in their writing. Yet it is in that space in-between, in the contact language itself, that writers like Kafka and Louis Wolfson 2 have nestled to redefine writing in the mother tongue. I will here examine how Pidgin has insinuated itself into the very texture of Nigerian writing, at first under the decorative guise of an unobtrusive, ‘auxiliary’ language confined to dialogues and, subsequently, as the potential vehicle for multilingual and cross-cultural hybridized poetics.

I will focus on Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE or EnPi), originally a trade language born out of the contact between English and various other African languages. Its complex origins, which are a major source of disputation among monogenetic and polygenetic theoreticians, 3 are only relevant in so far as they explain why Pidgin English in contemporary Nigeria is at present both a first stage in acquiring English and a non-official lingua franca which has currency along the West Coast. Its increased creolization and its growing status as a first language (especially in Bendel and Rivers States) find their corollary in the post-colonial Nigerian novel of English expression precariously poised at a historical interface between the neo-colonial upsurge of English or ‘english’ 4 and the rehabilitation of indigenous African languages.

The writer’s attempt at representing Pidgin as it is spoken in the streets and then at forging a ‘pidginized’ artistic medium has to be understood against the vast spectrum of post-colonial English language experimentation in the Nigerian novel. These experiments have engendered, at best,
skilful schizo-texts in which the African language is latent and the European language manifest, in which there is an almost Manichean opposition or power relation between the mother tongue and the other tongue. Gabriel Okara’s experiment with lexico-semantic and morpho-syntactic relexification in *The Voice* (1964) is thus far the most eloquent experiment, but also one that is bound to lead to an artistic impasse. Pidgin is notably absent from the novel for, as Okara told us in a recent interview, ‘it is a primarily oral medium’ and ‘not too many people would be able to read it’.

In other schizo-texts onto which an ‘ethno-text’ has been grafted, the mother tongue has often been fossilized in adages. Achebe’s ‘palm-oil’ proverbialization is a case in point; the gnomic discourse acts as a narrative lubricant helping in the expert transplant of the Igbo ethno-text and makes the Igbo language look like a dusty dinosaur whose last gasps histrionically foreshadow the death of a species.

Given the post-colonial stalemate between mother tongue and other tongue, it would appear that the Pidgin medium mends the schizo-text by dissolving the infernal ‘binarity’ between target and source language. The literary use of Pidgin would thus transform this mutual cannibalism into a bilateral creolization or *métissage* of two or several registers, the necessary prelude to cross-cultural syncreticity.

It is not possible here to outline the literary history of EnPi, but let it be said that after a false start as an embellishment and slot-filler in plays and novels alike, it functioned for a while as baby talk and bush talk to become later the medium of urban prestige and integration (and therefore of disidentification with Tradition), the mode of inter- and intra-ethnic communication and eventually a mother tongue. Its protean capacity for adaptation makes it ‘the language ever more suited to the times’, a phrase Achebe used in *A Man of the People*, a novel that contributed to further establishing the infamous, albeit cathartic, ‘levity of Pidgin’. I will focus on three writers who correspond to various stages in the literary history of Pidgin – Joyce Cary, Cyprian Ekwensi and Ken Saro-Wiwa – who helped move Pidgin from the *staccato* language of low-life or characters in third-person narratives to the wrought-up medium of first-person narratives.

Despite allegations against Joyce Cary as a colonialist or, as Obiechina labelled him, a ‘crocodile writer’, this Irish Saurian nevertheless made the earliest use of Pidgin in *Mister Johnson* (1939) while confining its use to dialogues and, curiously enough, to soliloquies and afterthoughts.

*Mister Johnson* is a young half-literate third-class filing clerk on probation at Fada Station in the Hausa-speaking part of Bauchi and Gongola in Northern Nigeria in the 1930s. He is perceived by the local population as ‘a stranger ... from the South’ whose ethnic group Cary did not care to identify. As a coastal Nigerian, he speaks Pidgin with Ajali, ‘a light-coloured Southerner’ (p. 18). Yet he can effortlessly switch to ‘good Eng-
lish' (SE) when addressing the British District Officer, ‘but in the clipped accent of one using a foreign tongue’ (p. 25), or when addressing the local authority, i.e. the Waziri ‘for a greater effect’ (p. 39). But he pitifully falls back on ‘Cook’s English’ (p. 77) when caught clumsily trying to steal from the safe. In this particular instance, Pidgin accompanies a fall from grace.

Echeruo remarks that the first sentence Johnson addresses to Bamu, the village belle – ‘What pretty girl you are’ (p. 13) is ‘too idiomatic to be in character’. He unhesitatingly attributes to Johnson the misuse of the adverb in the next sentence – ‘Oh you are too pretty’, which should read ‘very’ or ‘so’. In fact, the lapse from English to Pidgin corresponds to Johnson’s code-switching from Hausa, which is here recorded in SE according to a tacitly accepted practice among African writers which prescribes the use of the dominant or ‘elaborated’ code to render the dominated or ‘restricted’ code. Johnson has been in Fada for six months and speaks, or rather patters, Hausa with the local people, who know neither English nor Pidgin. It is indeed very likely that the compliment that Johnson calls out to his mavourneen who ‘no talk English too good’ (p. 106) is in Hausa, whereas the second sentence is an afterthought that he is addressing to himself in Pidgin, for throughout the book, Pidgin is the histrionic language of Johnson’s soliloquies. The bilingual strategy of code-switching thus explains what Echeruo has construed as an inconsistency in Cary’s artistry. In that respect, Johnson adumbrates later characters in Nigerian writing who speak Pidgin not in default of but in addition to speaking English. This makes Cary a precursor in rendering not only Pidgin but the attendant strategy of code-switching as well as language stratification in West Africa.

Although Cary may have exaggerated the English substratum of Pidgin as a concession to his metropolitan audience, he is likely to have recorded the Pidgin he himself had to rely on as an Assistant District Officer, for Cary reportedly failed his Hausa language examination in 1917 and could hardly speak the language. The ‘babu-type of English’ Obiechina accuses Cary of having carved out for the circumstance is in fact a Pidgin imported from Southern (Coastal) Nigeria in the 1930s, which was later to merge with Pidgin Hausa or Barikanci. As such, it exhibits few characteristics of modern NPE. A statement like ‘I give you plenty money’ (p. 39), to mean ‘I will give you plenty of money’, may well have been recorded as it was spoken, as a deviation from SE. It is indeed closer in structure to the Ibibio-informed Pidgin that Antera Duke, an Efik slave-trader, used in his diary at the end of the eighteenth-century than to its later and more modern counterpart: ‘A go giv yu moni bol[r]ku’, bol[r]ku being favoured over plenti, which is in Enpi a verb expressing plurality.

What this pseudo-Pidgin does share with its modern counterpart, however, is the symptomatic tinge of ‘levity’. It is indeed used in the humorous soliloquies and springy songs modulated by Johnson, the ‘fool chile’ who revels away the time with drums and smuggled gin. This levity
inevitably conjures up the legions of mattoids created by colonial writers and the many portrayals of ‘natives’ with their innately ‘cheerful’ disposition. Such inherited levity inevitably adds its mite to Cary’s allegedly reductive statements about Africans. That is why Cary’s rendering of Pidgin has been seen as part and parcel of a colonialist strategy aimed at establishing a captious equation between the ‘baby talk’ of Mister Johnson and his putatively infantile mind. In fact, this seemingly hypocritic treatment of NPE pertains to a more complex discourse, which takes into account Cary’s Irishness and his own ambiguous relationship to the English language which, in turn, may explain his crafty concern with mastery overy idiom. Cary has meticulously phoneticized a character’s idiolect, whether it is Johnson’s Hausa-informed lingo or the truculent old coaster Sergeant Gollup’s jovial colloquial English. Presented as a botched aspect of second-language acquisition, Pidgin has to be examined in situ, in the state of hybridization it had reached in Nigeria in the 1930s. Cary’s phonetic treatment of Pidgin can only in bad faith be subsumed to his supposed elaboration on the African-as-emotional-child formula. It is thus fair to assume that Cary did not use Pidgin to connote linguistic incompetence as an index to racial inferiority but to represent linguistic stratification and to point to its potential role as the interlingua of coastal West Africans.

Cyprian Ekwensi has expanded on ‘the levity of Pidgin’, or what Onitsha Market Literature established as unbecoming jocularity, to comment and reflect on the fraudulent frivolity of Lagos urbanites. More to his credit, however, Ekwensi is the first West African novelist to have produced a full-fledged ‘Pidgin personality’, the glamorous prostitute and kind-hearted sugar-mummy, Jagua Nana. Her first rebuke to her lover, Freddie, is in a pseudo-Pidgin fleshed out by some of its deep grammatical features as in ‘You better pass many who done go and come. You be clever boy, and your brain open’. The use of the present perfect ‘done’, the comparative ‘pass’, and the third-person personal pronoun ‘dem’ are some of those deep features. But in what follows – ‘You young, too. You know what you doin’. You serious with your work. Yes! Government kin give you scholarship’ – the use of ‘know’ instead of ‘sabi’ and ‘kin’ (can) instead of the more common ‘fit’, as well as the generally English syntax, show that Ekwensi retained only the superficial elements of Pidgin, its ‘feel’ but not its deep structure. Had Jagua Nana told her own story in the first person, she would have retained the deep structure of Pidgin along with Igbo and Yoruba interferences. In third-person narratives, however, it will often be difficult to determine whether this erosion of Pidgin is attributable to the author’s ignorance of the language, as is the case with Ulasi’s Many Thing You No Understand, to his effort at making Pidgin palatable for metropolitan English consumption, to the character’s alienation from his speech community, or to the gradual assimilation of Pidgin to a substandard variety of English in
metropolitan centres such as Lagos. One thing is sure: Pidgin, as the main language of the protagonist, fills the interstices in the mother tongue/other tongue cleavage; the mother tongue is here part of these ‘embarrassing reminders of clan or customs’ (p. 5).

Ekwensi has thus established Pidgin as the curious prestige language of this demi-monde of urbanized loafers and prostitutes who have paced their lives to the city bustle and to the beats of African high life. Yet, Jagua is also competently trilingual. Though Mister Johnson is more literate than Jagua, her proficiency in Pidgin, Igbo and Yoruba makes Cary’s protagonist look like a deficient polyglot and a foetal ‘Pidgin personality’. Of these languages – Pidgin, Igbo and Yoruba – Pidgin is the only register of communication to have a truly interethnic function in both the text and the context, which here refract one another, as it were.

We can catch a glimpse of the future role of Pidgin as the lingua franca of coastal West Africans faced with the extralinguistic deculturation-acculturation process when we consider Jagua’s rival, Nancy Oll, whose parents originally came from Sierra Leone. She consistently communicates with her Igbo husband in Pidgin, even after she has completed her studies in England. One can surmise that their children will probably speak Pidgin at home and that, if Jagua had children, their native tongue would be Pidgin as well. This is the case now in Nigeria, since first-language users of NP, ‘mainly children of urban mixed families’ have been attested ‘particularly in the delta cities of Warri, Sapele and Port Harcourt in Bendel and Rivers States respectively’. The creolization of Pidgins inchoated in fiction not only reflects but anticipates the sociolinguistic reality, fiction being here not mimetic but essentially proleptic.

Pidgin has decidedly evolved from a trade language to a public patois, a sermo vulgaris of a kind. As such, it continues to be associated with a half-literate subculture and with either low-life or low-income characters which stand comparison to the illiterati or idiotae in Western European medieval culture, those indocti or rustici, country bumpkins who communicated in vulgar Latin. The developed Pidgin personalities in the Nigerian novel are thus for the most part idiotae who have little or no formal education and have not mastered the dominant idiom, SE. In other words, most Pidgin locutors in novels speak Pidgin because they do not speak SE: prostitutes, city-slickers, gangsters, stalwarts, passenger touts, petty-traders, bole-kaja thugs and other nefarious outlaws. Other popular fiction pieces such as Joseph Mangut’s Have Mercy (1982) confirm the stylistic function of Pidgin as a social indicator of one’s status in life and as a barometer for measuring exposure to literacy. So does Achebe’s latest novel, Anthills of the Savannah. Close examination of recent fiction confirms that the linguistic behaviour of the Pidgin locutor continues to be looked down on, stigmatized in comparison with Standard (Nigerian) English, the linguistic standard set by the glottopolitical situation and, more precisely, by the education system, which has always acted as a yardstick for formal
social acceptability and prestige. Although we may note, among some Nigerian novelists, a growing refinement of concern in revising the earlier use of NPE, the latter remains an 'auxiliary' language into which a character slides, slips, lapses, as in a fall from a higher register.

It is against such a schizoid background that Saro-Wiwa’s novel *Sozaboy* (1985) came into being. It is thus far the most conscious and sustained linguistic experiment with non-standard speech in the West African first-person narrative to emerge from the tiny corpus of writing in Pidgin. Sozaboy is a naive recruit thrust into the atrocities of the Biafran War with, as his only weapon, a capacity for elation that comes close to Mister Johnson’s. He speaks a lawless lingo which is meant to be the discordant voice of post-Civil War Nigerian society. It is made up of three registers – his mother tongue, Kana; ‘broken English’, that is, the unsystematic use of strings of English words; and Standard Nigerian English – themselves amalgamated in a Pidgin-based idiolect on the verge of creolization, which Saro-Wiwa has called ‘rotten English’. As an ‘artefactual dialect’, its making can be traced linguistically, as in progressive drafts, down to its constitutive elements. As a construct, it conveys a new seriousness that could potentially oust the earlier ‘levity of Pidgin’, which has now taken on a neo-comic guise in entertainment programmes on the radio and television, and in newspaper columns and cartoons.

Saro-Wiwa provides a glossary clarifying non-standard use of English at the end of the book’s twenty-one ‘Lombers’, i.e. chapter numbers, called thus after the speech habits of the Ogoni or Khana people of the Niger Delta. Pidgin words and phrases are used, such as ‘this girl na waya-oh’ (this girl is something else); ‘na je-je’ (it’s stylish); ‘abi the girl no dey shame?’ (is the girl not shy?); ‘water don pass gari’ (matters have come to a head). The Chief Commander General’s regimented language is rendered in a glut of phoneticized mispronouncements of SE such as ‘Tan papa dere’ (Stand properly there); ‘Hopen udad mas’ (Open order march); ‘terprita’ (interpreter). Some words and designations are presumably of Kana origin, such as ‘wuruwuru’ (chicanery; cheating); ‘ugbalugba’ (problem); ‘tombo’ (palm-wine) and ‘Sarogua’, the ‘ancestral spirit, guardian of Dukana’, itself a coinage ‘meaning “a market in Khana” based on the pattern of the existent Gokana (“village in Khana”).’

At times Saro-Wiwa, like Ekwensi, conveys only the ‘feel’ of Pidgin by retaining some of its signal features like the reduplication of the adjective for emphasis and the non-inverted question. This method, however, makes NPE look like an impoverished variant of the standard norm, which Sozaboy fails to understand and refers to as ‘big big grammar’ or ‘fine fine English’ (p. 77). At other times, Saro-Wiwa delves into the deep structure of Pidgin, causing the unwary, non-Pidgin reader to infer – perhaps wrongly – the meaning of such phrases as ‘simple defence’ (civil defence); ‘some time’ (perhaps); ‘whether-whether’ (no matter what); ‘as something used to be’ (maybe); ‘does not get mouth’ (has no rights); ‘man’ (penis);
and 'country' (ethnic group). NPE has been stripped of its African element and the mother tongue thus repudiated; the discursive mode of English has been minorized. The chinks between mother tongue and other tongue can now be freely filled with this post-Civil War linguistic stew. We do not know, however, whether this 'rotten' medium will rot away and die or whether it will, in the author's words, 'throb vibrantly enough and communicate effectively' (p. i).

The new generation of writers like Osofisan, Iyaiy, Oyekunle, Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Fatunde, as well as other well-meaning rhetors writing politics from the grassroots, have been said to further contribute to the dismantlement of Pidgin by subjecting it to some sort of 'plastic surgery' and thereby creating other schizo-texts. New contradictions indeed emerge from coining a pseudo-Pidgin. A linguist from Ibadan has taken both formal and popular dramatists and journalists in the mass media to task by highlighting these contradictions. She contends that it is not EnPi proper but some kind of free-for-all linguistic mixed-grill or cocktail ... that displays evidence of an ever increasing exploitation of the peculiarities of speech that have come to be associated with Zedubaya, the hero of Masquerade [and whose structure essentially derives from] doing violence to the structure of both English and EnPi [with the result that] quite often it has the air of bad English donning a top coat to NP structure.22

Allegations against this linguistic 'free-for-all' stew indicate that EnPi is in urgent need of standardization, especially since EnPi has outgrown its stereotyped functions as a trade language for the uneducated and the flighty medium of slapstick comedies. It has indeed become a viable lingua franca and, in its quasi-creolized form, is now used for broadcasting news and television dramas such as Samanja. Originally transmitted in Hausa on the Kaduna station, Samanja was changed to 'a variety of Pidgin' once it was elevated to network status.23 As with any strong currency, we are now on bound to watch the upward moves of this peculiar 'inter-language'24 as it fluctuates between two systems of patronage.

As Aghyisi contends, standardization entails codification, a single accepted convention for written NPE and the choice of a variety that enjoys wide recognition. Such regularization would then encourage the acquisition of literacy in it. The most promising route seems to be through literature, she argues, provided the writers consider themselves as 'language gatekeepers'. Yet, of these writers, like the poets featured in the 'Poetiri' corner of the weekly Lagos Life, only a few are really proficient in NPE.

By helping name the metonymic gap between target and source language, Pidgin has become part of the post-colonial Creole continuum and is thus paradigmatic of cross-cultural writing. Just as the Creole continuum theory is relegating English to the periphery and taking the pidgins and creoles as its core,25 Pidgin writing is relegating English to a
substrate in the text and context. We may thus be witnessing a transfer of legitimacy from the writer's filial bond to the mother tongue to his affiliation to a communally owned creole. As an interlanguage, this tertium quid may be cast out as a linguistic still-born by future generations of writers, or it may be championed as the hallmark of literary languages in contact, that which mends it all.

NOTES

1. A modified version of this paper was read at the 1990 EACLALS Conference held on 2-6 April in Lecce, Italy.
3. Polygenetic theories of origin for pidgins hold that each pidgin is genetically related to the corresponding standard language, from which it diverged under the influence of a similar sociolinguistic situation. The monogenetic theory posits a general pidgin(-creole) as a common ancestor which has developed distinct and mutually unintelligible varieties. See Dell Hymes, ed., *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).
4. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 8. They distinguish 'between the “standard” British English inherited from the empire and the English which the language has become in post-colonial countries ... between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, English, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world'. Instead of 'Nigerian English', however, I will use 'Standard Nigerian English', which, in its hegemony, is close to Standard English or SE.
6. The word 'ethno-text' was coined by Alioune Tine in ‘Pour une théorie de la littérature africaine écrite’, *Présence africaine, New bilingual series*, No. 133-134, 1st & 2nd quarterlies (1985), p. 106.
24. The term is from Larry Selinker, ‘Interlanguage’ in International Review of Applied Linguistics, 10 (2) (May 1972).
ODE OGEDE

Negritude and the African Writer of English Expression: Ayi Kwei Armah

In 1967 an article decrying the absence of an ideology which could facilitate Africa's decolonization appeared in the Paris-based influential journal of black studies, *Présence Africaine*, and its young author Ayi Kwei Armah, then twenty-eight years old, cited Senghor's Negritude as an artistic statement which reflects the political leader's inferiority complexes, his slave mentality. Negritude cannot lead Africa to freedom, he declared, and described it as 'the flight from the classical Cartesian big white father France into the warm, dark, sensuous embrace of Africa, into the receiving uterus of despised Africa'. Negritude, Armah added in the same article, is a wooden attempt to perpetuate western assumptions and stereotypes in reverse because 'the image of Africa available to Senghor is obtained through the agency of white men's eyes, the eyes of anthropologists and ethnologists, the slummers of imperialism'. Impatience and youthful exuberance could be discerned in this article but, twenty years after, in 1987, Armah still persisted in his outright condemnation of Negritude, even though in between no less than five novels, six short stories, a poem and a number of essays have poured from his pen, all of which, as I will show, together substantially resembles Senghor's work in tone, intention and achievement. In the 1987 article Armah reinforced his original conviction about the irrelevance of Negritude to the modern needs of Africans, arguing that 'Negritude is a blind artistic summary of actual relations between Europeans and Africans from about the start of the slave trade to the latest adjustment programme designed in Washington, Paris, London or Rome for adoption and implementation by an African elite that still refuses, out of sheer inertia and habit, to do its own thinking'. He thus joins Wole Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi and Ezekiel Mphahlele, who are also English-speaking Africans who show insensitivity to the significance of Negritude, although their own works are replete with the main features of this ideology. These features include the common aims among these writers to reassert and revive the cultural values, identity and dignity of Africans, and to glorify the ancestral achievements and beauty of Africa, through usages, images, references and symbols that are taken from African traditional life. Armah more than anyone illustrates the curious way in which the English-
speaking African writer’s persistent criticism of the occasional tendency toward sloppy sloganeering and posturing in Negritude writing has tended to obscure his own reliance on the essence of the theory.

The place to begin is with the number of paradoxes in African literature in the colonial languages which Armah’s work brings into focus. One of his quarrels with Senghor is that Armah considers it hypocritical for Senghor to be ‘swooningly extolling the beauty of black womanhood’ in poetry while Senghor is married to a white woman, and yet a similar criticism can be made against Armah, who directs his work primarily at an African audience but started publishing in some of America’s most bourgeois and conservative magazines, outlets to which only a few African elite with international contacts have access. Furthermore, he wishes to be a teacher — and an artist who wants to be a teacher should be direct, open, clear and accessible — but Armah, like Okigbo and Soyinka, hides behind mystifications in what is generally regarded as his uncommitted work. Believing that communication between the artist and his readers should be through the medium of the work, Armah neither granted interviews nor gave speeches in the early phase of his career, preferring to remain a recluse. Thus, although he addresses himself primarily through an African sensibility, some of his mannerisms smack of the attitudes of decadent western artists, such as James Joyce and William Faulkner, with whom Armah has often been compared. Not until recently, partly in response to adverse criticism, has Armah begun to write more openly, stripping his work of the old veneer of Obfuscation.

It is important to point out right away that while Armah shares with Senghor the ideal of restoring the lost African dignity, he was able to initially transcend the romanticism which constantly forms a major limitation in Senghor’s work. This is an achievement which owes more to the social and historical conditions that inform his early writing, rather than the individuality of creative genius, for progressively, Armah finds himself increasingly trapped in a situation where he has to ultimately fall back on the Senghorian mystique. Born in 1939 in Takoradi Ghana, Armah witnessed as he grew up the cultural confusion engendered by the colonial experience. After his primary school education, secondary school and sixth form education at Achimota, he worked for eight months as a Radio Ghana script writer, producer and announcer before leaving for America in 1959. When Armah started writing upon returning to Ghana in 1964, the phase of colonialism in which the various European colonial powers physically obtained political and economic domination over the territories they invaded, save for Southern Africa, had virtually ended in Africa, although it had been replaced by its new form called neo-colonialism. This new evil formed the issue to which Armah directed his writing; he no longer felt called upon to paint a picture of traditional African society in the Senghorian, glamourized perspective, as opposed to that presented by the European which denied the African tradition any form of dignity.
Camara Laye, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi and a host of other African writers had together with Senghor shown all that in the early phases of their work. A matter of greater urgency was the need to discuss the fact that political independence, far from ending the problems of colonialism, was in fact intensifying these problems. The African leaders who took over from the European masters simply put on the robes of their predecessors and then marched in their footprints, thus emerging as the new colonialists. Not only were the structures that facilitated colonial subjugation and exploitation left intact or fortified; infected by European materialism, the leaders became wild in their drive to acquire the luxury goods of Europe, such as cars, refrigerators and European style houses. Corruption became pervasive. The leaders ran away from the responsibility of good government to alleviate the hardship of the majority, and threw the societies into chaos, giving the new generation of African writers material for their work. Armah belongs to this generation. 'There was nothing at home so unexpected as to shock him', Armah said. When he started writing Armah was rather in 'the position of a spore which, having finally accepted its destiny as a fungus, still wonders if it might produce Penicillin'. All his writing is conceived in such therapeutic terms, as an attempt to heal the wounds of colonialism, to lead Africa to freedom.

His international fame was established in 1968 with the publication of his first novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, although Armah had made his debut with 'Contact', as a short story writer. Moved by the novel's power Eustace Palmer has remarked: 'Even if Ayi Kwei Armah had not written a second novel' he would still have to be mentioned in any discussion of the African novel. Overnight, Armah became a sensation and a growing body of commentary started to develop around his work. While the quality of this novel, and of the subsequent ones, was very high, ironically the criticism has been largely obtuse. Glossing over the main concern of the novel to assert traditional values, most critics have been content to merely level charges of racism, or misanthropic neurosis, mischievous intent and slavish imitativeness against Armah, although more careful attention to the author's in-forming vision, has proved to the more perceptive ones among them that Armah shocks Africans with the squalor around them primarily to force the people to revitalize the more healthy aspects of their values.

*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* has remained the most vivid and vitriolic attack on those squalid interests that have led to the betrayal of the independence dreams of the underprivileged Africans. The impact of the novel derives from the consistency with which Armah uses the quest motif to present Africa's post-independence maladies through the experiences of a particular African country. The action of the novel is woven around the protagonist, the man, a vehicle through whom the disorder, filth and irresponsibility in Ghana are examined. The narrator's periscopic over-view of Accra lays bare the national psychology with regard to the
corrupt practices taking place between drivers and conductors of public transport and their police collaborators on the roads; the neglected and crumbling offices, such as the Railway administration block; the filthy streets and toilets in Ghana. There is a naked contrast between the opulent life style of a few elite and the stark poverty of the underprivileged. Attributing the deterioration of the national life of Ghanaians to the erosion of traditional values which are embodied in the man, the author brings the man to life as symbol of traditional altruism, discipline, humanism, communalism and industry, and so as both an individual and a pious ideal on whom the other members of society are asked to model themselves. Although considered a fool and despised by his associates because he refused to accept bribes and to use his connections among his classmates in highly placed positions to enrich himself, the man remains committed to honesty until his position is vindicated by a military coup which topples the civilian regime. In the novel the author's linguistic dexterity and high moral tone are already evident and he comes close to the oral tradition in his didacticism, in his exploration of the communal consciousness of Africans and in his apt use of allegory, anecdote and symbolism.

In all essentials the next novel, *Fragments* (1970), and the stories 'Asemka' (1966), 'An African Fable' (1968), 'Yaw Manu’s Charm' (1968) and 'The offal kind' (1969) have followed the same didactic and liberal-humanist pattern, although the works are certainly not mere preparatory exercises for the radical novels to follow. The critic who describes *Fragments* as 'the story of Baako, a young man of 25', who returns to Ghana after five years of studies overseas only to be frustrated in his country, is wrong. True, the novel contains a good measure of the inner drama of the anguish of the idealistic young man who wants to be a producer in a society that has no room for such ideals. As with the man in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the action of *Fragments* is centred around Baako. Nevertheless, like the preceding novel, *Fragments* is really about African societies, about the need for Africans to abandon unhealthy social habits and return to traditional industry, simplicity and integrity in order to carry their society forward. Thus Armah directs a fair measure of his satiric venom at the elite who should lead this programme but as yet are far from attaining the expected standard. The Director of Ghanavision, where Baako works, regards his work as an opportunity he has won to ingratiate himself with the authority for his own self-advancement to the detriment of the nation. On the other hand Baako’s work seeks to sensitize the people through films based on the experience of the local people. Thus Asante-Smith’s opposition to Baako’s work derives from the commitment of the two personalities to different systems of values. In the story 'Yaw Manu’s Charm' Armah attributes the self-serving sychophancy involved in the attitude of the elite to the failings of the educational system inherited from the colonial era, a system which encourages individuals to
regard the acquisition of a western certificate as a tool for self-
advancement rather than a tool for national development. Yaw Manu, the
protagonist in the story, is representative of the average African. Basically
honest and hard working, the bank clerk in a colonial set up is eventually
forced to abandon all morals, resort to juju, examination malpractices and
finally stealing from his employer in order to pass the Cambridge exam-
ination which he has repeatedly failed, all in a bid to meet society’s re-
quirement for social advancement. The integrity of the average African is
perverted by institutionalized false values.

The notion of African culture which Armah seeks to rehabilitate is articu-
lated in a recent article entitled ‘The Festival Syndrome’, \(^{21}\) which has
substantially resolved the inconsistencies in his previous thinking ex-
pressed in ‘African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific’. \(^{22}\) The most sensible
demonstration of cultural awareness, he explains in ‘The Festival Syn-
drome’, ‘would be to use available resources’ to ensure that Africans are
able to contain the scourge of drought, famine and poverty ravaging their
continent. ‘Culture is a process, not an event’, such as FESTAC, which
Armah describes as ‘wasteful demonstrations of intellectual bankruptcy’:
‘The development of culture depends on a steady, sustained series of sup-
portive activities whose primary quality is not a spectacular extravaganza
but a calm continuity.’ Armah cites the examples of the Chinese, the
Japanese, Americans and Europeans as people who rely on their culture
to improve their daily lives, through their ‘publishing houses, television
stations and movie industries working full time to promote their culture
on the domestic level, but also to export it’. Africans should look inward
to themselves, improve their inventiveness, management strategies, shun
corruption and regain their self-reliance. \(^{23}\) This is the view of self-reliance
that lies behind the objectives of Baako, the central figure in
Fragments; the author does not deny that westerners and Africans can learn from
each other’s civilizations, but laments that in Africa’s relationship with the West
only the evil aspects of western civilization seem to be magnified.

One advantage the short story medium has over the novel is urgency.
‘Asemka’ (1966) is of particular interest in that it is cast in the form of an
allegory, a technique which looks forward to The Beautyful Ones Are Not
Yet Born and Fragments, and shows the working relationship Armah estab-
lishes between the short story form and the novel. ‘Asemka’ tells of the ex-
periences of Mr Ainoo, of his life as an adult. He works as a clerk in the
city and has abandoned his traditions in favour of middle-class western
values. The narrator in Asemka, like Naana who champions tradition in
Fragments, is an old woman who is critical of the culturally dislocated
Ainoo. Even more than Fragments, ‘Asemka’ relies on techniques of tradi-
tional story telling for its support. The narrator ascribes Mr Ainoo’s
‘srange’ attitude to pride, a cultural affliction rather than an idiosyncrasy.
He is the new African brought up in the ways of western individualism,
arrogance and independence; and he is scornful of communal solidarity, humility and respect for elders, qualities which are cherished by Africans. ‘An African Fable’ (1968) further dramatizes the insensitivity of the black elite and demonstrates why the elite cannot be entrusted with the moral health of the nation. The imagery in ‘An African Fable’, even more than in ‘Asemka’, is sustained, as in the novels. In this macabre story of bestiality, the African elite, represented by an inexperienced warrior, sets out on a quest for leadership which turns out to be an adventure for self-enrichment. The warrior journeys across Africa, ‘down through the lands of the middle’ into ‘the moistness of the forest land itself’ in the south. The warrior’s inability to resist the human and material resources of Africa is a metaphor for the greed of the elite, for as in Senghor’s ‘Black woman’, Armah embodies Africa in the image of a woman; the quest of the warrior leads to his confrontation with colonialism, symbolized in the sexual encounter between the woman (Africa) and the rapist (the West) but, paradoxically, the warrior drives the first colonialist away and then becomes the new rapist.

When we get to ‘The offal kind’ (1969) we are struck by a dimension of anguish which is more disturbing because it is a human one. In the story, as in Achebe’s ‘Vengeful Creditor’, a young girl, Araba, is given away by her poor mother to a powerful town lady: ‘She was going to be the lady’s household help, and if she was good and learned everything there was to learn, she would perhaps be a lady herself one day, perhaps.’ As in Achebe’s story, the vague promise is never fulfilled. While Achebe focuses on the consequences of the attempt by Veronica, the ten-year-old protagonist, to make Mr and Mrs Emenike pay for failing to fulfil their promise to send her to school after serving them well, Armah stresses Araba’s consequent debasement. Over-worked, exploited, starved and denied freedom, Araba is ultimately forced into prostitution where she is further exposed to double-faced exploitation, at the hands of men, and at the hands of Elizabeth, a retired prostitute who becomes Araba’s new mistress. In vain, Armah stresses that Araba is not basically deficient, she possesses the elemental emotions clamouring for self-reliance. Instead of seizing the opportunity to make a frontal attack aimed at destroying the structures which legitimize Araba’s inequality, the author asks the likes of Araba to take their destiny in their own hands and never allow themselves to be duped again. This liberal/humanist approach contrasts with Ousmane’s, for example, in ‘Black girl’, where Ousmane casts a glance at such a problem as Araba faces, from a racial perspective.

In contrast to Ousmane, the direction of Armah’s thinking in the early phase of his writing is that he seeks equitable distribution of the national wealth but avoids calling outright for a revolution in the orthodox Marxist sense as the best means to bring about egalitarianism. Armah calls for a change of conscience among the elite, whom he believes capable of reform, in order to promote a healthy social and economic environment in Africa.
The weakest point about his politics, which the later works, fortunately, correct, lies in Armah’s belief that the elite must eschew greed, shun imported western cultural artefacts, political institutions, neo-colonial economic structures and imported mode of conduct, and revitalize African values. He asks the underprivileged masses to resist their exploitation and the excesses of the elite. These are unrealistic requests which ignore the fact that the elite lack the vision and will to reform themselves and the exploited people cannot change their situation without revolt.

*Why Are We So Blest?* (1972) marks a new phase in Armah’s writing, in which he breaks away from the liberal and gradualistic approach to the issue of decolonization. Advancing the battle which the author initiated in his earlier work against the erosion of African values by the West, *Why Are We So Blest?* demonstrates the manner in which western education as an agent of neo-colonialism turns Africans into citizens who are alienated from their roots but are not given the status of white men due to white racism. These Africans, who revolt against the western values they have absorbed, see themselves as the liberators of their people from colonialism and are often looked up to by their people as saviours. However, the violence of westerners has deprived these Africans of dignity and self-assertion and the Africans cannot recover their roots. Western violence is heightened by sexual exploitation, in which western women exploit myths of the sexual superiority of Africans. These myths are new versions of the older myths of Africans as savages; and so the dream of inter-racial harmony recedes, as Africans continue to be victims of white racist stereotyping. In Fanonian terms, Armah advocates decolonization by violent means if necessary but disqualifies western-educated Africans from the struggle which they lack the ability and orientation to lead.

*Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1978) are the immediate artistic realization of the radical shift in the continuing modification of Armah’s thinking. Significantly ‘the back to Africa’ theme of the novels had been anticipated earlier on in ‘Contact’, which appeared in 1965, a year after Armah’s return from the United States of America, with the memory of America still fresh in his mind. The story concerns itself with the experiences of Lowell, a black American who can neither feel at home in white society, to which history has condemned him, nor in Africa, from where he has been severed. Lowell’s predicament, due to being caught between two antithetical cultures, is used to illustrate the fate of other Americans of African descent. As with most other stories, ‘Contact’ is simultaneously naturalistic and symbolical. It is winter in America where Kobina, an African college student, attends a party at Lowell’s apartment, to reach out for understanding with others but, as it turns out, effective communication, especially between blacks and whites, is often elusive. Carin, a white girl who desires to live with Africans, is satirized as a liberal who, like Aimee Reitsch in *Why Are We So Blest?*, feels guilty at being treated as a superior
because she is white and so is involved in an exercise in expiation of her racial guilt which also gives her some gratification. In fact, Carin cuts the figure of a ludicrous, naive and escapist person and her longing for identification with black people is simply academic and superficial. The psychosis of Kobina, due to white racism, pales into insignificance in comparison with the predicament of Lowell, who has become disoriented to an extent that he not only looks down upon his ancestry but peddles standard Euro-American myths about Africa. Armah is convinced that true partnership between blacks and whites is not attainable since whites are unwilling to dispel their prejudice and arrogance, attitudes which provoke rather than suppress animosity.

Opposing the stand of activists such as Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, who argue in their book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, that black people must ‘create power bases, of strength, from which black people can press to change local or nation-wide patterns of oppression’, if they are unable to take over completely, as in America, Armah asks black people in America to return to Africa spiritually and physically. Dispirited by white racism, Armah is convinced that, while the situation in Africa is far from perfect, black Americans certainly have better prospects in Africa, their ancestral land. And although on the surface Armah’s request, which echoes the teachings of the Black Muslim Movements of the sixties spearheaded by the Jamaican Marcus Garvey, may seem ridiculous and impractical, the Israelis by airlifting thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1985 have demonstrated how Africans, too, can be re-united with the people of their racial origin in America.

An important achievement of *Two Thousand Seasons* is the ability to probe beyond the confusion and pain, and the surface of contemporary Africa. Written together with his next novel, *The Healers*, while Armah was living in Tanzania from August 1970 to May 1976, both novels demonstrate the influence of Nyerere’s ujamaa or socialism, especially with regard to the open attack on feudalism and all forms of inequality in society; and the explicitness with which the author espouses the traditional values to which he urges the return of Africans. These are traditional ‘reciprocity’, ‘wholeness’, hospitality and creativity which have been eroded by colonialism. Armah published the novels in the East African Publishing House, ‘an African outfit based in Nairobi’, staffed mainly by Africans, as part of his effort to ‘effectively break out of the colonialisn stranglehold of western publishers such as the Heinemann African writers series’, to reach his ‘large African audience’ directly.

By delving into Africa’s past the author is able to trace the root of the problems facing Africa to the first and the continuing encounter with the tormenting colonizing Arab and European powers. Africans were originally one people, who lived communally and were self-sufficient; they have a culture that distinguishes them from Europeans and Christians, Arabs and Moslems. Armah now feels the need to explicitly expose his
negritude, feels the necessity to counter all forms of imperialist distortion of African history in order to establish the authentic African personality:

We have not found that lying trick to our taste, the trick of making up sure knowledge of things possible to think of, things possible to wonder about but impossible to know in any such ultimate way. We are not stunted in spirit, we are not Europeans, we are not Christians that we should invent fables a child would laugh at and harden our eyes to preach them daylight and deep night as truth. We are not so warped in soul, we are not Arabs, we are not Muslims to fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the wilderness and call our creature creator. That is not our way.31

Two Thousand Seasons, like Ouologuem’s Bound to Violence, is of particular interest in its handling of the ‘Arab factor’ in African history. Armah debunks false notions of African history and re-writes it from a Pan-Africanist perspective, bringing into sharp focus the predatory and destructive role Arabs played when they infiltrated into the egalitarian African society where, taking advantage of certain weaknesses in the set up, such as African hospitality, they gained a foothold in Africa. Some shortsighted Africans who allied with the Arabs to impose a feudal structure on Africans are exposed. And Armah writes that the more permanent harm caused by the Arab invasion is the religious division that develops in the community.

The resistance by a group of African women to their sexual exploitation by Arab debauchers is exemplary. The women take cognizance of the fact that the Arab invaders could not have gained access to themselves without the connivance of a handful of African stooges, the askaris or zombies, who procure African women for the Arabs to engage in sexual orgies with them. Thus when the women stage a revolt, in the tradition of Ousmane’s women in God’s Bits of Wood, they show greater intelligence than their enemy and defeat them with a good measure of violence. When it is forgotten that the violence of the women has been necessitated by the oppressors’ unremitting application of force, coercion and violence to brutalize and exploit their subjects, the significance of the revolt of the women will be lost and an impression will be formed that Armah professes violence for its own sake, as a result of which ‘the humane sensibility tends to recoil a little’.32 In fact, it should be remembered that Armah’s emphasis is on the teamwork which the women display in their struggle against exploitation. This is the communal spirit the writer would want to see restored in Africa; the author does not regard the elimination of the enemy as an end in itself.

Armah’s ideal society is gleaned from African history, from myth and legend and also conceived from a Pan-Africanist perspective. Although Armah remains faithful in this novel to the reality of colonialism and neocolonialism which continue to bedevil Africa, his literary warfare directed against oppression has shown the way toward liberation.
In *The Healers* (1978), which marks the climax of his fictional achievement to date, Armah returns full circle to the whole question of roots, the return to African indigenous values, as a precondition for emancipation. The most political of Armah's novels to date, *The Healers* shows the way in which the thrust of his thinking has somewhat moved away from abstract moral notions of culture, even though the ultimate goal remains the restoration of the old order. The novel emphasizes the primacy of resistance to physical conquest as an antidote to imperial domination, and relies less on myth and more on history than *Two Thousand Seasons*. The disunity that rendered the powerful Asante nation of Ghana vulnerable to British imperialism is presented as a paradigm of how other black communities were undermined during the period of western imperialist incursions into the continent. Armah asks all black people to unite in their struggle for emancipation.

The success of this novel of self-reassessment results quite substantially from the way in which Armah talks through an omniscient narrator, who plays the role of a wise epic performer, drawing his inspiration from tradition in order to redirect the present. This didactic element in *The Healers* is woven around Armah’s fascination with traditional life. Although the novel avoids any simplistic polarities, Esuano stands for traditional black communities experiencing the tensions of transition from communalism to colonialism, a change from a well-ordered state to chaos. Disunity is the disease afflicting black people, the antidote is unity, another major theme in the novel.

An outward sign of the structuring of *The Healers* on the short story tradition in Africa is the division into chapters of semi-independent events. The internal link with folk tale is established by the portrait of Densu, the hero of the novel, whose exploits become indispensable to the successful outcome of the resistance to physical conquest by British imperialists. Modelled on the trickster image in folk tale, the creative, intelligent, selfless and honest achiever not only gives up obvious victories in village sporting competitions but even has occasion to risk losing his own life to save Anan, his friend, from the machinations of the corrupt local court politicians, and thereby demonstrates his abhorrence of unhealthy rivalry and injustice. He escapes a plot by the members of the court to make him a scapegoat for their criminal murder of prince Appia and links up with Damfo, a leading healer in the eastern forest where he is initiated into the healing profession and made a better person who can serve his society more efficiently.

Sadly, the revolution has not occurred on the scale Armah had envisaged for Africa. ‘Half way to Nirvana’, published six years later in 1984, is a crusty story which conveys Armah’s attack on the elite for making a cynical, exploitative game of the liberation effort in Africa. Christian Mohamed Tumbo, who is at the centre of the action in the story, represents Africa in the Anti-Drought organization. He symbolizes Africa’s
political leaders of all religious and ideological persuasions, but can also be seen specifically as an indirect reference to Oliver Tambo, leader of the African National Congress of South Africa, and thus to the leadership of the liberation movements in Africa. Christian Mohamed Tumbo attends a conference organized to combat drought in Africa. Drought is the symbol of neo-colonial domination in Africa. The charming, rotund Tumbo's eyes are like 'trapped sparks' and his cheeks are so smooth they are described as 'baby cheeks', indicating his comfort and luxurious life style. So comfortable is Tumbo in his job that he is opposed to ending Africa's 'catastrophe drought' and hopes the problem will continue indefinitely. He loves conference sessions in western cities to discuss Africa's problems because he sees them as 'excellent for working up a thirst ... for the real objective of such gatherings: drinking'. The discussions, during which Tumbo sleeps, are abstract and themselves framed in equally vague language, and are going on when Tumbo experiences a nightmare in which Africa's deserts become 'forest and gardens'. As he prayed for the return of drought, 'the deserts regained their dryness' and Tumbo happily sees 'the familiar signs of famine' on the continent. Tumbo comes from a poverty-stricken background, which he would hate to return to. He was for fifteen years a poorly paid geography teacher in a secondary school in a village, whose position of respect among the villagers became eroded by growing materialism in the country. Through contacts he overcame the handicap of low qualifications and got the job with the Anti-Drought organization, which has enabled him to settle his debts and to live on the fast lane. We return full circle to the cutting intimacy of observation underlyng Armah's writing; the author does not regard Tumbo as being essentially evil but upholds the idea that false political, social and economic structures are responsible for the corruption of the politician. Thus, he stresses that when the structures that endorse the false values are destroyed, the fallen leader can be redeemed. This is the vision that lies behind his sympathetic treatment of the African elite, an essential-mindedness that is devoid of any sense of triumphant revenge necessary for national reconciliation.

It can thus be seen that Armah's writing captures the whole gamut of the black experience and draws its force from the attempt to ingraft into English the language of traditional story-tellers, griots and dirgers to produce a new alignment of meanings, incantative patterns, repetitions, myth and images. Although he begins by idealistically looking up to the elite in Africa to bring about change for the better, he gradually comes round, as in Ngugi and Ousmane, to see Africa's destiny more realistically as lying with a community of dedicated, selfless people, whom the author asks to unite in a common onslaught against neo-colonial forces. In the senghorian fashion, while Armah highlights the qualities that distinguished traditional culture from western culture, he asks for a more syncretic attitude between Africa and the West, an attitude of mutual respect
and tolerance which will enable Africa and the West to learn from each other's civilizations. Armah's language, like Senghor's in his poetry, shows how the two cultures can be harmoniously brought together. And so claims such as Larson's, that 'Armah has gone to rather great pains to make it clear that he is writing literature first, and that the Africanness of his writing is something of less great importance', must be seen as sweeping generalizations typifying unsubstantiated attempts to locate his work in an alien western tradition, away from the African tradition where it belongs.

NOTES

5. Ayi Kwei Armah, 'African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?', op. cit., p. 19. Equally baffling is the fact that not even Nyerere's imagination appears to Armah at this time adequate for the task of combating neo-colonialism, hence he also dismisses ujamaa as 'the sort of simplistic formulae dispensed by the less astute religious orders'. Nkrumah's 'African Personality' is similarly scorned, although Armah's work was later to show resemblance to Nk'rumah's ideas.
6. See 'Larsony or Fiction as criticism of fiction', Asemka, 4 (1976), pp. 1-14, where Armah writes in reply to those who accuse him of modelling his work on the work of western writers such as James Joyce: 'For the benefit of anyone curious to know where I did get the organizing idea for Fragments from, it grew out of a conversation with my elder brother concerning the quality of life at home.' Although influence does not necessarily deny an author claim to originality, it all too often leads to charges of plagiarism, especially against African writers, hence Armah reaches the equally extreme position of dispelling the faintest ghost of western writers from his work. See, for instance, Charles Larson, who merely stops short of invoking the ghost of plagiarism in The Emergence of African Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 242-277.
18. See Moyibi Amoda, ed., Festac Colloquium and Black World Civilization (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine), p. 193, for in-depth discussion of these values associated with Africans.
31. Ayi Kwei Armah, Two Thousand Seasons (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 3. All further page references after quotations in the paper are to this edition.
34. The Emergence of African Fiction, p. 247.

*Leaving the Highway* owes its remarkable qualities as a piece of criticism to the twofold focus of interest that is sustained throughout the text. By way of presenting a state-of-the-art account of fiction-writing in New Zealand in the late 1980s, Mark Williams consistently pursues the argument into the spheres of a probing reflection on both the limits and the enabling possibilities of what he tries to define as a specific tradition in the literature written in his own country. Thus, although the book ostensibly concentrates on the latest fiction produced by major figures like Janet Frame, C.K. Stead, Keri Hulme, Witi Ihimaera, Ian Wedde and Maurice Gee, the author's steadfast concern with the depths of tradition, and with the pull it exerts even on such achieved novelists as these, gives the work an impressive scope in terms of both historical investigation and aesthetic speculation.

In particular, one is struck by Williams's inclusive and dynamic conception of tradition. He does not hesitate for example to look back to Sargeson from the vantage-point afforded by post-modern rupturings of the real, as they occur in Frame or the later Stead; these enable him to foreground the subversive in Sargeson, hitherto eclipsed in large part as an effect of perspective, and to point to continuity where other critics have hailed a break from the 'masculine realist' line in New Zealand fiction. Undoubtedly, *Leaving the Highway* will leave its mark on the critical imagination in New Zealand for this convincing attempt to found a national literary tradition upon the social-critical vein of fiction established by Sargeson and continued in the work of Frame, Stead or Gee. Most of the fiction tackled in the book is considered in terms of its relative departure from realism and cultural criticism as the dominant modes of writing in New Zealand. Even the work of Hulme and Ihimaera, grounded as it is in their feeling for the culture of the Maori, is approached largely for what it offers in the way of criticism of Pakeha society.

Williams's flexible sense of tradition also accounts for the moderateness of his politics. It is certainly remarkable, considering his nagging preoccupation with the national forms of literature in New Zealand, that he manages to eschew the rhetorics of rejection often associated with radical nationalism. Taking his cue from Wole Soyinka, Williams makes his position explicit from the start, by asserting that any source of knowledge is relevant to the making of fiction in the post-colonial vortex of inheritance. The upshot can be found in the analyses themselves, where Williams points to foreign influences with the ease of erudition. Another consequence is that *Leaving the Highway* emerges as a meeting ground for the two constituents of New Zealand's sense of cleft identity. The book accommodates an awareness of the lasting influence of the European literary 'high tradition' (as Stead would have it) on the forms and themes of New Zealand fiction; but it also allows for the validity of Maori claims to centrality in the task of defining identity through literature (as expressed by Hulme and Ihimaera). By and large, the un-failing clarity of exposition evinced by Williams when dealing with the cultural background to fiction-writing, involved and tension-ridden as it is bound to be in the context of the sesquicentennial celebrations, definitely contributes to make the book the success that it is.
Yet it could be argued that Williams’s dedication to continuity and reconciliation results in a further, paradoxical decoupage in the stuff of tradition. This is noticeable in the chapter on Frame where the material seems to have been selected to fit the theme of cultural identity. Such choosy criticism derives from the methodological decision to view fiction and culture as mirror images of each other, and may not be objectionable in itself. But some problems arise when Williams engages with those writers whose political and aesthetic assumptions he does not share. One gets a sense that his impatience with Hulme and Ihimaera’s respective brands of radicalism was instrumental in his too swift dismissal of their work as structurally incoherent. If anything, this impression is reinforced by the contrasting ease with which the critic empathizes with the work of Wedde, whose voice is allowed a greater presence in the text (by way of quotations), perhaps because it affirms a vision of cross-culturalism similar to his own. The chapter on Wedde is brilliant throughout. Therefore, however much one may fear that fiction by Maori writers is being misrepresented here, such reticence must efface itself and make way for the recognition that this is a book strongly shaped by the author’s original understanding of tradition and culture in a post-colonial context. Nobody will want to frown upon the illuminating insights it offers, whether these are received as the harvest of high-standard criticism, or as the stimulus of vivid polemics.

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