Kunapipi 14 (3) 1992 Full Version

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

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (software preferably WordPerfect or Macwrite) and should be accompanied by a hard copy.

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ISSN 0106-5734
Acknowledgements

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

We are grateful to the Commonwealth Foundation for its support in providing subscriptions to *Kunapipi* for Third World countries.

We wish to thank Thomas Yoseloff for permission to reprint the wood cut which appeared in *The Voyage of the Bounty Launch*, edited by Owen Rutter and first printed by Golden Cockerell Press in 1934.

COVER: Wood cut by Robert Gibbings.

*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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THE YEAR THAT WAS 99

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The case is Christian’s mutiny. But your court
Won’t stomach that Christian. It smells of
Mercy. This tale’s awash like the Bounty’s
Bilge with meanings no one wants. Ay, it was
Christian’s mutiny. We were all there, you
All saw, Adams, black Matthew, gunner Mills,
By Christ, Adam’s mutiny! Jack Adams, John Doe,
Every-man-Jack’s mutiny! But your Lords
Need a hanging, not this tale rippling
Irishly like a stone in a green lagoon.

I remember the white untidy beach, my head
A washed up coconut jumping with sandflies.
If my fiddle were jailed and not fathom
Five in the Barrier Reef singing to catfish.
I’d strike up a jig the court martial
Would dance to! Michael Byrne, Irish fiddler,
Two thirds blind, on trial for my life.

I kissed that maid and went away,
Says she, Young man, why don’t ye stay

George Stewart, midshipman. That’s a truly
Life matter! Gentle George, drowned in leg-irons
In a panic of keys while your Captain Edwards
Jumps ship as light and easy as he’s danced
From your court. Tacks his ship on the coral?
Huzzah! Drowns his shipmates? Well away!
And George’s bounty, sweet brown Peggy, who
Ever chose a better wife in the South Seas
Or England? Crouched on the poop by the cage
Keening and I could smell the blood, George
Heaving at his chains yelling she was bloodying
The baby and us cursing double Edwards
She was after carving open her scalp
With a shark’s tooth.
All dark his hair, all dim his eye,
I knew that he had said goodbye.
I'll cut my breasts until they bleed.
His form had gone in the green weed.

Did she see her midshipman
Dead in Edward's box on Great Barrier Reef?
A life matter truly! And now I recall
The oath he swore her in Matavai bay
He'd never again set foot in muddy
England with its watery sun and broomsticks.
That sweet sundown with the wind offshore
Drunk with blossoms no white man had named,
He held up his left arm to my better eye
And I squinted at a heart with a dart
Through it and a black star. "What's this?"
I warbles, and he says "tattoo." Took him
All day and hurt like blazes. But permanent.
One of their words, tattoo. Strange how we
Needed their lingo to make a landfall.

*English boy, please tell to me
What is the custom in your country?*

The new Cythera. Two volcanic breasts
And a fern-lined valley. Half a degree
Leeward, you'd miss it. I'll say this for Bligh,
In the whole South Seas he'd smell out one
Breadfruit tree on a rock. But Tahiti
Scuttled us. There were oceans we couldn't
Sail and that island named them: taboo.
Another locution we harboured. We're
All marked with Tahiti, hearts and stars
And commemorations. You, Millward, is it
God's truth you've Tahiti's chart on your yard
And testicles? Morrison, scratching your
Journal of excuses, is your loving groin
Gartered with Honi soit qui mal y pense?
How d'you hope to escape hanging after
Pledges like that? Leave Bligh out of it,
Truly the only blind man in Tahiti,
A poor fool with his rules and longitudes
While Michael Byrne, fiddler, kept watch.
Taboo: Christian's mutiny. Ten of us
Of twenty-five still waiting to be hung.
King Louis had a prison,
He called it his Bastille,
One day the people tore it down
And made King Louis kneel.

II THE FIRST MAN

Tahitohito,
  the fifth Age when
  cunning gave birth to mockery.
  First

Was Ta’oroa the egg, tired of loneliness,
  and his wife Stratum Rock,
Ta’oroa of sure bidding, of the cloudless sky,
  who stood over the passage of the reefs.
Ta’oroa was a god’s house, his backbone
  the ridgepole, his ribs the buttresses.
Ta’oroa married his daughter Moon
  and moulted red feathers from which grew
all plants except breadfruit tree.
Ta’oroa conjured Shark God and Rooster
  and Octopus who clasped
  earth to sky, smothering all light until
Ti’i stood forth, the first man,
  and was angry,
Ti’i the boat-builder, clothed in sand,
  was angry demanding
Light and he wrestled with Octopus’ eight forearms
  till sky floated free
  shining with starlight and sunlight.
Then Ti’i the fire-maker, the axe-sharpener, was hungry
  and his oven was sealed at daybreak
and opened at nightfall
  but the meat was raw because
Sun was made drunk by space and hurtled like a meteor
  until Maui his firstborn
Roped his ten rays with ten anchor cables
  and day became a task’s length
and order was complete.
There is little scribal literature in nineteenth-century Polynesia, since those societies were ‘oral’. There were only a few literary travellers from the West to this part of the world, and few who attempted to record the literature. Virtually all that is ‘literate’ about the South Seas of that time are the visions by Europeans expressing their own ambiguous approaches to an Otherness which challenged Western life. This paper is a short study of two literary travellers who did observe the societies of the South Seas and recorded some of the literatures, but at the same time persisted in making these observations merely a reflection of their own interests.

Robert Louis Stevenson had come to the South Seas in 1888 because of respiratory problems. Sent by the New York Sun to write a series of travel letters of the region, Stevenson intended to return in 1889, but became convinced that he needed the tropics to survive. The letters – later collected under the title, In the South Seas – were full of history, geology, anthropology, oral legends, and notices of language, gathered during two of the three voyages Stevenson made. Coming first from Hawaii to Tahiti, Stevenson translated some Tahitian literature, but also worked on The Master of Ballantrae and ‘Ticonderoga’, works in his earlier mode that had given him his reputation. At the same time, meeting Prince Ori-a-Ori of the Tahitian royal family, Stevenson became his brother by exchanging names with him, taking Ori’s longer name Teriitera.1

Early in 1889, Stevenson, accompanied by his wife Fanny, began a second voyage to some remote islands not previously visited or written about by other Europeans. These islands included the Gilberts where drunken natives threatened them until the King, a whimsical tyrant, protected them, and thereby induced Stevenson’s admiration.2

In December, 1889, the Stevensons landed at Apia, Samoa, and Stevenson purchased a four hundred acre estate – Vailima – three miles from Apia, intending to become a plantation lord.3 He left Samoa afterwards only once for short visits to Australia and Hawaii before he died in December, 1894.

His life at Samoa was curious. On the one hand, he spoke against the semi-slave labour system used by American and European plantation and
Henry Adams Meets Robert Louis Stevenson

trade groups, and was subjected to attacks from those groups in the local papers. He began to record the history of colonialism, and supported the native king against the foreign powers. When the natives revolted, Stevenson allowed them to use his home as sanctuary and when they were defeated, he intervened to safeguard them from wholesale execution. Stevenson also took some ostentatious delight in aiding native prisoners, seemingly to rebuke the local colonials from the Western world.interestingly, however, Stevenson wrote in his story entitled ‘Mackintosh’ of a Samoan who murders his white lord who has forced the Polynesians to build roads; the story possibly reflects the fact that Stevenson himself boasted, somewhat as a ‘Lord’, of his role in getting the local chieftains to build roads.

As for Fanny, she too experienced a division of soul. While she enjoyed the islands as a visitor, it was quite something else to consider settling there for her husband’s health. Doubts about getting on with the natives may have led to Fanny’s mental break-down in 1893, which in Stevenson’s description appears to be a case of manic-depression.

Reflecting these ambiguous facts, Stevenson’s travel book *In the South Seas* marks a transition in his work. In it, Stevenson tells tales and stories similar to Herman Melville’s portrayal of the rituals of cannibalism, tattooing, and feasting found in the novel *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*. Unlike Melville, however, Stevenson dwelled with some relish on these activities. In his 1890 edition of *Ballads*, Stevenson relates some of the Polynesian tales he has heard, based on histories of murder and revenge, but he could not sustain a narrative line and their plots, seemingly mythic in the tradition of oral literatures, remain elusive to Western audiences.

However, the presence of Otherness in these stories influenced his themes in his three novels about the South Seas – *The Wrecker*, *The Ebb Tide*, and *The Beach of Falesá*. In these works, Stevenson fully undermined the Western idea of the South Seas as an Eden, a paradise of free love, and the home of ‘the noble savage’. Instead, Stevenson’s stories examine the Mr. Hyde-like invigoration of Westerners in response to evil in a world of moral ennui.

For example, in the novel *The Ebb-Tide* (1893), three impoverished Western outcasts from Tahiti seek to murder an English gentleman named Attwater, who has become rich through pearl fishing and controls his private island. Being outcasts, they seek to murder Attwater for his wealth. However, Attwater shows himself to be a tyrant who is utterly ruthless because he is secure in his beliefs as a Christian evangelist and Victorian moralist. One of the outcasts, an exiled Englishman who understands the code of the gentleman, is urged to poison Attwater. This places him in a dilemma. Not killing Attwater would mean siding with Attwater’s civilized tyranny. Killing him would place him as a renegade pirate. The man must make a decision in a universe which has no clear moral divisions. Indeed, all the men must make a similar decision, and the story ends with
‘the ebb-tide’ of each of the outcasts being discontented with any and all choices. Here Stevenson depicted how the moral and social problems of the West have destroyed the very paradise of freedom sought.

Curiously, despite such a transformation in his thought, Stevenson’s life in Samoa was interpreted in the fin-de-siècle West simply as an idyllic escape. Indeed, his hermitage at Samoa was an inspiration for the American historian Henry Adams, who, along with the painter John La Farge, was setting out in July, 1890, on his own voyage through Hawaii, Samoa, Tahiti, Fiji, Australia and Ceylon: ‘I expect to be a pirate in the South Seas ... imitating Robert Louis Stephenson [sic] .... Civilisation becomes an intolerable bore at moments...’

Adams also expressed a wish to meet Stevenson, and he did, in mid-October, 1890. Adams, a satirist of great power, parodied Stevenson as the restless European, weak and complaining, clearly an outsider and full of contradictions evident to others if not himself. Stevenson reportedly praised Samoan life except when he tried to account for his lingering discontent, in which case he praised Tahiti as a greener pasture.

Adams attributed Stevenson’s nervous restlessness to his disease, but he also, with some sympathy, questioned his sanity: ‘he cannot be quiet, but sits down, jumps up, darts off and flies back, at every sentence he utters, and eyes and features gleam with a hectic glow...’

However, more generally, Adams was satiric and never grasped the transformation of spirit that Stevenson was experiencing. Rather, he typified Stevenson as a Westerner ‘gone bush’, and thus similar to a madman. Adams wrote to John Hay of Stevenson after having met him and then having gone on to Tahiti:

Of all the Scotch lunatics who have helped to distort and mislead my mind since the reign of Lady Macbeth, I believe Robert Louis Stevenson to be the daftest.... He gave us an idea of Taiti that Paradise could not satisfy. All the men were Apollos; all the women were, if not chaste, at least in other respects divine. He detested Samoa and the Samoans, but adored Taiti and Taitians; though, to do him justice, he always excepted Papeete which he recognised as a hole. I have now seen all of Taiti that he ever saw.... The result has been one consecutive disappointment which would have been quite unnecessary had Stevenson been only idiotic.

However, this same letter reveals an ambiguity of attitudes present in Adams. Having first run down Tahiti, Adams himself then eulogized it for its surreal qualities, especially in the singling out of the colour purple, the chosen colour of the melancholic fin-de-siècle to be found in the paintings of Paul Gaugin:

The landscape is lovelier than any well-regulated soaker of Absynthe could require to dream in; but it is the loveliness of an âme perdue. In Taiti, the sense of the real always shocks me; but the unreal is divine. I can see nothing here but what is tinged with violet or purple, always faintly or positively melancholy; yet the melancholy glows like sapphires and opals.
Stevenson's beliefs and behaviour reflected much of Adams's soul. Adams was very Bostonian in attacking Stevenson for his lack of Western decorum and apparent uncleanliness. He socialized with the American consul in Samoa and joked about Stevenson's behaviour, noting how Stevenson often deferred social engagements because of his lack of dress.

Ignoring Stevenson's real poverty, Adams portrayed him and his wife as true 'gone bush' Westerners who no longer knew how to present themselves to their fellows. In the same letter to Elizabeth Cameron cited before, Adams played upon the American view of the poor Irish. Stevenson's home was said to be in

a clearing dotted with burned stumps exactly like a clearing in our backwoods. In the middle stood a two-story Irish shanty with steps outside to the upper floor, and a galvanized iron roof. A pervasive atmosphere of dirt seemed to hang around it; and squalor like a railroad navvy's board hut.

Adams went on to fix his first impression of Stevenson and his wife forever in his mind:

As we reached the steps a figure came out that I cannot do justice to. Imagine a man so thin and emaciated that he looked like a bundle of sticks in a bag, with a head and eyes morbidly intelligent and restless. He was costumed in very dirty striped cotton pyjamas, the baggy legs tucked into coarse knit woollen stockings, one of which was bright brown in color, the other a purplish dark tone. With him was a woman who retired for a moment into the house to reappear a moment afterwards, probably in some change of costume, but, as far as I could see, the change could have consisted only in putting shoes on her bare feet. She wore the usually missionary nightgown which was no cleaner than her husband's shirt and drawers, but she omitted the stockings. Her complexion and eyes were dark and strong, like a half-breed Mexican.12

Describing the same meeting to John Hay, Adams altered his metaphor from 'shanty Irish' to 'birds', and wrote:

Stevenson and his wife were perched - like queer birds - mighty queer ones too. Stevenson has cut some of his hair; if he had not, I think he would have been positively alarming. He seems never to rest, but perches like a parrot on every available projection, jumping from one to another, and talking incessantly. The parrot was very dirty and ill-clothed as we saw him, being perhaps caught unawares, and the female was in rather worse trim than the male.13

Adams recalled these depictions when speaking of yet another visit:

We found Stevenson and his wife just as they had appeared at our first call, except that Mrs Stevenson did not now think herself obliged to put on slippers, and her night-gown costume had apparently not been washed since our visit. Stevenson himself wore still a brown knit woollen sock on one foot, and a greyish purple sock on the other, much wanting in heels, so that I speculated half my time whether it was the same old socks, or the corresponding alternates, and concluded that he
must have worn them ever since we first saw him. They were evidently his slippers for home wear.\textsuperscript{14}

Stevenson was apparently unaware of these views, and was himself civil and complimentary. Writing to Sidney Colvin, his editor, Stevenson said: ‘when Adams and Lafarge [sic] go ..., it will be a great blow. I am getting spoiled with all this good society.’\textsuperscript{15} And to their mutual friend, Henry James, Stevenson wrote: ‘We have had enlightened society: Lafarge the painter, and your friend Henry Adams: a great privilege – would it might endure.’\textsuperscript{16}

Despite his Bostonian attitudes that precluded an understanding of Stevenson’s new material on the South Seas, Adams was personally attracted to Stevenson, and often was ambiguous in the same paragraph, as when writing to John Hay:

Stevenson absolutely loves dirty vessels and suffocating cabins filled with mildew and cockroaches; he has gone off to Sydney chiefly, I think, to get some more sea dirt on, the land-dirt having become monotonous. By the bye, for our eternal souls’ sake, don’t repeat what I say of the Stevensons, for he has been extremely and voluntarily obliging to us. I have none but the friendliest feelings for him, and would not for the world annoy him by ill-natured remarks; yet he is dirty.\textsuperscript{17}

Stevenson, it seems, was Adams’ model of the perfect social renegade—the man who escaped the oppressive parameters of Western middle-class society. However, Stevenson was also Adams’ model of the outsider—the man who both sensed and represented the Otherness of life for the literate Westerner of the day. This recognition brought Adams and La Farge to sympathize with Fanny, whom Adams earlier likened to a ‘wild Apache’ and an ‘Apache squaw’.\textsuperscript{18} ‘Both La Farge and I came round to a sort of liking for Mrs Stevenson, who is more human than her husband. Stevenson is an aitu, – uncanny...’\textsuperscript{19} To John Hay, Adams defined aitu, or aiku, as

a Samoan ghost, spirit, or demon in the Greek sense. The islands swarm with aiku, sometimes friendly, as of dead parents or children; sometimes hostile, as of tempters; occasionally verging on fetishes or symbols like the rainbow, or certain rocks; but at bottom simply uncanny. This is the note of Stevenson, although to us he has been human, not to say genial.\textsuperscript{20}

Speaking of one evening that was ‘wet and gloomy’, Adams related to John Hay a moment of Stevenson’s aitu, what might well have been the basis of Stevenson’s novel, The Ebb-Tide:

I shall never forget the dirty cotton bag with its sense of skeleton within, and the long, hectic face with its flashing dark eyes, flying about on its high verandah, and telling us of strange men and scenes in oceans and islands where no sane traveller would consent to be dragged unless to be eaten.\textsuperscript{21}
The point is that the ambiguity that Adams found fertile for his parody of 'the bushed Westerner' was present in his own beliefs and underlay his voyage, as he constantly revealed his own dis-ease. For example, when mentioning to John Hay that he was impressed with Stevenson's energy and sense of the uncanny, he would slip in his own complaints:

My dyspepsia here is greatly modified by a counter-diet of mangoes.... Stevenson is the only man whose energy resists the atmosphere, and Stevenson owes it to his want of flesh to perspire with. La Farge usually announces his arrival in one of the happy phrases which are La Farge's exclusive property: 'Here comes the aiku!'

In sum, the parody of Stevenson's Otherness allowed Adams to acknowledge tangentially his own struggle with an enervating dyspepsia and his ceaseless case of Western 'nerves'. Adams had initially spoken of his voyage as a happy, even sexual, quest for the 'old-gold maiads in Nukuheva' – the Marquesian isle of Melville's mythic Typee natives. The truth was that Adams was deeply disturbed by the inexplicable suicide of his wife in 1885 and the deaths of his own father and mother in 1888 and 1889 – deaths which signalled the end of his eighteenth-century convictions about his place in life. After his return to the United States, Adams would express his bewilderment about life in his celebrated The Education of Henry Adams (1907), which focused on living in a modern, technological society with values that have more in common with the eighteenth century.

Adams's voyage was to have been an escape from his old life as the author of a monumental nine-volume History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison (1889-1891). In fact, the only things that he found of interest in Stevenson were observations he could relate to his Western concepts of the evolution of nations. His letters were obsessed with questions about the place of the Polynesians in the history of the world. Were the Samoans more advanced culturally than the Tahitians or Fijians? What was the meaning of 'culture'? What was the relative status of each of these people on the cycle of history exemplified by the rise and possible fall of the United States and the previous republics of the West? What were the motive forces of history?

Adams acknowledged Stevenson's intimate knowledge of the South Seas. On the other hand, when Adams learned that Stevenson's travel letters were being published in the New York Sun, he wrote: 'I am curious to see his letters in the Sun. I never met a man with less judgment, and on venture I would damn in advance any opinion he should express, but he is excessively intelligent...'

From the few citations presented here, it is evident that the bulk of their conversations dealt with the relative status of the Polynesian nations, and the two men disagreed and sought to articulate those differences. Adams wanted to rank the peoples according to their morals, such as family life,
warfare, and relation between the sexes. It was a Victorian frame of ideology: if the morals of these people resembled those of Westerners because of colonial influences, they were to be considered decadent, on the downward course. All this was complicated for Adams by the fact that the Fijians still practised the clubbing of their women; ironically, if Fijians were considered to be a race yet to evolve, they had already passed beyond an heroic age since they lacked any evident poetry, oral or written. In contrast, the Tahitians, who inducted Adams into brotherhood (as they had earlier done with Stevenson), had an oral history (which Adams himself recorded), and should have been in their formative stage; however, for Adams, Tahitian history was ‘sad’ and ‘melancholic’ because of European domination, and deserving of the colour purple with its fin-de-siècle overtones.

In contrast, Stevenson saw the people of Polynesia less ideologically and more ambiguously. In his travel book In the South Seas, Polynesians were an indigenous race – with a development distinct from the West, including the matters of morals. Their history of cannibalism and practices of tattooing were aiku – uncanny matters of an Other world – only to the Western mind. However, unable to find a thread in such matters, Stevenson transformed their Otherness into an image of what could threaten a Westerner who was not able to believe any longer in the morals and values of his heritage. This was the thrust of the novel The Ebb-Tide.

The lives of these two men summarize two Western perceptions, neither adequate, of the islands: a pristine Paradise, about to be lost to Western consciousness as the price of ‘progress’, and a landscape of emptiness asking to be ‘filled in’ and rendered ‘meaningful’ by Western beliefs.

Superficially, these two men seemed totally different – Stevenson the apparent renegade, Adams a somewhat fastidious Bostonian. However, both were belated romantics. To the romantic, the world was an Other. To the belated romantic, one’s self was an Other that continually surprised one’s conventional self, denied one belief in traditional values, and challenged one to partake of the Other even at the cost of one’s presumed self.

NOTES

5. Hillier, op. cit., p. 28.
6. Ibid., pp. 41-5.
Henry Adams Meets Robert Louis Stevenson

7. Ibid., p. 196.
11. Ibid., p. 432.
23. La Farge also suffered from dyspepsia, as did a young friend, Theodore Dwight, who also had attacks of depression when visiting Adams in Polynesia; see *Letters*, Vol. III, pp. 223-34, 228, 311, 312, 331, 358, 390, 581-2.
24. Adams read Melville's *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* on his way to Samoa, and said that it sustained him on the voyage; to Elizabeth Cameron, 13 Sep 1890, *Letters*, Vol. III, p. 277. 'Nukuheva' is the isle on which the Typee valley is located. The term 'old-gold girls' or 'maiads' was the erotic term coined by Adams' intimate friend, the geologist Clarence King, who, on his visit to Hawaii in 1872, gave it to young native women; see *Letters*, Vol. III, pp. 277, 282, 283, 291.
28. Aspects of these questions, addressed by Adams, are given in his *Letters*, Vol. III: on Samoa, pp. 293, 295, 301, 302, 363, 364, 377; on Tahiti, pp. 405, 412, 417, 418, 429, 443-5, 455, 459, 472; on Fiji, pp. 506, 509, 514. In general, Adams tried to formalize a cycle of civilization among the Polynesians with the order of Samoans, Tahitians, and Fijians; but there were too many inconsistencies, such as, whether a war-culture precedes that of a civilized one, keeping in mind that the Samoans produced their poetry in their earlier war-like era.
Stephen Gray

THE ANNA MARY LETTERS
To Hans Christian Andersen

I

Ulva Cottage
Hamilton
Scotland
1 Jan. 1869

Dear Mr Andersen, My name is Anna Mary,
Last-born of Mary my mother, deceased
Of the desert fever while I was but a ‘wee bairn’;
I am but ten, too young to remember her voice.
I do like your fairy tales so much – the tin soldier and the ugly,
Ugly duckling. I would like to go and visit you;
When Papa comes home from Africa I intend
To ask him to take me. I live where he began
As a piecer of cotton, threading those bales...
Long enough to join us over six thousand miles;
What with the water-thrust and water-damp
The Clyde is perfect for the manufacture of cloth;
Without cotton my dolly’d have no clothes.
I’m sure he will agree. In the New Year.

II

17 June 1871

Four of his children in this cottage on the Clyde; good and damp
Enough to drive the cotton, even if it’s not Victoria Falls.
I send you the photo of my Papa and me:
His arm is about me and mine about my dolly.
I would like you to notice my hoop-skirt and pantaloons,
But not my face and hair scooped away, ugly still;
Papa draws back breath and calls me ‘sprightly’ now;
If you ask me he’s forgotten the meaning of his own hearth;
He says we’re sickly and weak, bad seed,
But he’s the one won’t kiss for bad teeth, rotten tongue;
He was born here, he should know; we were born
In the wildest desert so generous, where a man may breathe indeed.
He said bright Denmark was out of the question:
Only dark Africa calls, where he may make himself
A paradise away from this, his woven, wet hell.

III 24 Sept. 1874
O Hans Andersen, You will have seen from the papers
How the tale has no magic ending for us, quack quack.
My father is the one Mr Stanley found out there
And he could not persuade him to return to us.
Robert’s gone, Thomas and Ossie too –
Poor seed, this little mermaid never will swim;
What great, great sorrow I have had this year.
I did expect Papa to take me to your Copenhagen.
Instead of going the different places I fully intended
With Papa, I have been obliged to take the sad journey to London
To see what’s left of him buried in Westminster Abbey.
We had all wreaths of full white flowers
To lay on his coffin; our Queen sent one too
From out of her palace with deepest regrets.
I am the only one of our seed left alive now;
We shall be threadbare, me and my toy;
Don’t you think flowers are so beautiful,
Ice-white and wound in a heart –
The shape of the continent where his lies?

IV 30 Oct. 1874
Back at our industrious Blantyre:
Papa’s two most faithful servants were here last week
To visit me. Many interesting things they told
About Papa and one of them, called Chuma, made
A model grass hut in which he placed my doll
As an example, to show the position where
Father knelt and died; and Susi endlessly
Fussed with the bed to get it exactly correct.
Quack, quack, my dear. What else can I say?
Susi says they brought his remains back from Ilala
Only to prove to the consul at Zanzibar no black man
Poisoned him; he died of his own disease. Tin god.
You’re the one who understands
And I am your sincere friend.
William Crapps 'Bushgrove' house, Central Tilba, 1907.
Shadows linger on the deep verandah,
a woman shifts heavily in her chair,
puts down a needle, pours an icy drink
into a frosted glass. Her embroidery

lies on the weathered bricks, out of the heat.
This territory is governed by a law
unstated, resurrected every week
through rituals of family gatherings:

mother, father, brother, sister, aunt,
held in the long conundrum of their lives;
implicit truths that small explicit acts,
a hundred every day, still help define.

A family album lies upon the step,
nsnapshots haunting it of childhood –
that romantic, noisy world, that old domain
an undergrowth of early mystery

that parents do not ever fully reign –
but repeated stories make it sentiment.
The practised family rituals present
embroidered lives, needle-stitched and neat.

ARGUMENT

My cousin’s words challenge stories that
have been recounted over thirty years:
she mocks the lie of this, the easy myths
used to mask old pain, allay old fears.
Beyond the house a cyprus starts to sigh,  
a stiff breeze gusts, tugging flaps of bark,  
and washing on the line drags awkwardly.  
My aunt begins to cry. The air is dark.

Two hours of close recrimination later  
nothing is altered, though all seems to have changed –  
truth has found a way into the room  
remorselessly, showing us estranged,  

misunderstanding tainting all we do –  
or perhaps repeated myths and masks might tell  
that the generations leading to ourselves  
loved argument, and argued much too well.

MUDDLING BILL

Related to a second cousin, he  
arrived noisily in a battered car  
every christmas, to join in the cooked meal  
which, every christmas, was our ‘necessity’

made from fifty small contrivances,  
from English habit and inheritance.  
Mostly sullen, he cursed his long-boned dog,  
drank frothy beer in quick and pecking sips

looking constantly to left and right  
but rarely talked, except to praise the food  
or mutter about ‘dark-dealing government’.  
My mother called him ‘Muddling Bill’ and said

he was a miner, had always lived alone  
and seemed to have no interests: ‘He is  
the least attractive man I’ve ever met.’  
One year he stayed away. My father said:

’Someone has told him what we think of him’,  
and I was left to ponder how he lived,  
whether his public, muddled self became  
reconfigured in his private thought,
whether his nervous darting face looked on
a transfigured realm, where life and love were bold,
his dreams long explorations of rich thought,
a miner darkly chasing veins of gold.

MARMALADE

Thin, ascerbic, Aunt Nellie seemed
oldest of my relatives although
only in her thirties and barely lined.

Her eyes glinted with an irony
as bitter as her marmalade; she grew
wizened pears that held a fibrous juice

I could barely stomach. 'They will do
the world of good for all of you,' she said,
gesticulating with her bone-thin hands

at each of us in turn. And every month
we paid ten dollars for the clinking jars
unloaded from her basket made of cane

covered with a teatowel. I would try
to see what else she carried, if some prize
was tucked away that might show more of her

than wrinkled pears and jam. But even when
one day she left her basket in my sight
all I spied were rows of close-pushed lids

lined up just like the maxims she bestowed,
all 'good for us', that I will not repeat
for fear they harbour secret bitterness.
Mark Mahemoff

FICTIONAL STREETS
(In memory of Hollywood film sets that were destroyed by fire in 1990)

As the sets chewed themselves into carbonized skeletons there were no screaming riots. Only the crackling of green money becoming white smoke. There was no mass evacuation. That happened long before when film crews collapsed tripods and snapped their cases shut, when stars hauled vast pay checks back to glitzy mansions and caterers stacked their trestle tables alongside boxes of cutlery and crockery and millions of leftover calories. When understudies learned new parts backwards in one light bulb apartments. And all the architects of fantasy went back to drawing boards adding height to the mountains of celluloid cliche.

SEAFORTH*

It’s what some people dream of in their weatherboard homes flaking simply and honestly with age. There’s a crane just ahead tearing chunks from the road like a shark ripping blindly into flesh. Yachts are smug as storks showing off on one leg.

Parked by the side of the road one falsely senses that all suffering’s been removed.
But if you stay for a while
the sound of sobbing, bitter as adultery,
will trickle from the thorns of a neatly pruned rosebush.

*) Seaforth is the name of an affluent sea side suburb in Sydney, Australia.

ROPES

He cries now
thinking of her smile
over coffee and cigarettes.
All the vicious words,
boredom and laughter,
the thrashing love that sanded it back
to a smooth new finish.
The hours of exploration
with hands, tongues and hearts
that felt like seconds
till they rolled out of sleep
and squinted into morning.
The telephone calls they waste their wages on
and all the letters he now sends
like ropes to pull her near.
It was exquisite. She ran her finger across the cool eggshell china, then carefully, very carefully, and gently, raised it by the delicate pink and perfectly rounded handle. It was as light as she had expected, and the green lettering on its underside spelt the familiar ‘Shelley’. Even from the doorway of the jumbled shop its distinctive beauty had shone – the subtle pinks and greys meeting in wondrous flowers on the pristine whiteness drew her closer with the desire to touch, to caress, to hold. Why did someone part with this treasure, what history did it hold, what moments had it witnessed, to whose lips had it delivered refreshing hot tea?

Picture this: A white cane garden table set for tea. The newly polished silver teapot – short and bulbous – filled with freshly brewed tea. Earl Grey. A small plate of delicate, crustless sandwiches, another of dainty pink-iced fairy cakes blending with the pastel glow of the tea-set. An entire set of Shelley ware – the cups, the saucers, the plates – sitting, sparkling, waiting. At the table, ensconced in a huge white cane chair a young woman, dressed in white. Of course. The picture is pure and perfect. Starched ruffles crisply clothe her paleness, blonde fresh hair is swept atop her head. Her body and face are composed, quiet, and also waiting. Enter a tall young man, as dark as she is fair, his eyes alight. The whole scene is now sparkling, the sunlight playing on the surfaces, beaming between the bodies, the embodiment of young love. He sits opposite. He smiles, she smiles. Her name is Shelley, yes, and her loving family has showered her with her namesake china over the years. The favoured piece, a plate, sits upstairs on her dresser before a spotless mirror. On it gently rests her gold locket and little birthstone ring each night as her head rests on the be-frilled pillow. Perhaps soon another ring will join the precious pile, doubly, triply precious. In the garden, the china between them commemorates her eighteenth year in the sun. Her loving, benign parents courted over just such a tea-setting and remembered those days in the name of their first born.

She lifts the teapot and pours with a practised, though shy, flourish. The saucer and its partner are handed across to the ready hand of the suitor. The overfull sugar bowl is offered. A waterfall of diamond grains splash on the linen cloth, to the tinkling accompaniment of Shelley’s laughter. More golden smiles as the shell-like edge of the cups are brought to two
pairs of lips. A sip. Two pairs of eyes reflect on the garden. She draws in the prancing daffodils, the symbols of Spring and new beginnings, that cluster under the mighty oak, the symbol of the past, of the unchangeability of time. His look encompasses the fresh green lawn and the several children playing. Playing croquet. The little hoops and solid mallets blend into the tea-time picture.

The boisterous youngsters are also playing chaperon though their eyes are more interested in the unpredictable progress of the small red ball than the slow, slow progress of two pairs of hands across the tea setting, across the basket weave table, drawn closer and closer... Four hands, two fair and soft, two strong and controlled, play with two cups, finger light bite-sized sandwiches, hesitate over tempting refreshments. Shelley lifts the Shelley once more to her moist lips. One of the stronger, darker hands moves quickly, determined and sure. It clutches at its gentler counterpart. It is sudden. It is electric. A gasp and the cup falls from Shelley’s grasp and falls, and shatters, shatters, shatters...

She resolutely returned the cup to its saucer and turned to the other merchandise: the sturdy dresser mirror, a clutch of tarnished medals, a cabinet of sentimental jewellery. Still alone in her thoughts she all but stumbled into a huge mahogany table. The quality of the grain was transmitted through the fingertips of the hand that she extended to steady herself. She ran her fingertips further along the surface. A light layer of dust was lifted in three long streaks. Beneath the dust the mahogany had a warm sheen. Several bumps and abrasions, and one scratch that was almost a gouge, attested to its history. No lightness and brightness and sentimentality; it would have sat in a functional dining room. Heavy curtains, of velvet quality, would have hung solemnly from dulled brass rails, obscuring the dancing sunlight. An equally solid sideboard would have stood to the right, thick ankled beneath a dull painting – a slaughtered limp-necked goose draped over more robust vegetable produce – perhaps a landscape, dreary and beyond recognition as an actual geographical locality. Around the table six, no eight, straight-backed, very upright chairs.

And seated on these chairs she could see a large family. A Victorian couple with their six offspring. ‘Mrs. Michaels, could you pass the salt’ the husband addressed the mother of his children. The salt in a dull silver basin is dutifully passed to the head of the table. It passes from Mrs. Michaels to Victoria to Harold to Jane to the large hand of the lord of the household. It is sprinkled generously on his meal, very generously on the roast goose, the relative of the subject of the painting above. There is silence save for the masterly mastication of Mr. Michaels and the childish chewing of unnaturally quiet young people. Yet there is a subtext – gestures, movements, could that be whispering?
The culprit is the youngest son. A youngest child holds a unique position, an honoured, treasured place in the scheme. Whether the charm and art of manipulation are learnt early to survive the flux of a family’s inter-relationships, or whether the parents are merely too exhausted from the sheer effort of rearing his sisters and his brothers to offer restraint, whichever, the baby gets away with more mischief than most. This baby, Arthur, age six, is disrupting the lower end of the dining table with impunity — though disrupting is an extreme description and only a relative measure against the strained silence of the remainder of the company.

His small bottom is shuffling in the straightbacked chair. A mutter is discernible: ‘one, two, three, four...’ His bread plate is manoeuvred toward the very corner of the table, his deep pudding spoon lifted and returned at some distance from his place setting. Diagonally opposite Cecelia’s crockery and cutlery are dancing in step, though her body and lips are calm. Their eyes are narrowed and piercing, their young jaws set for the competition. It is an on-going dispute having begun in the upper room of the house, the room called the nursery, the room miraculously cut adrift from the noise free zone of the rest of the house. Arthur started it, but Cecelia is a willing accomplice. At age eleven, she is the middle in a stepping-stone of sisters, and is not normally in alliance with a sibling so removed in age and gender. Nevertheless, they are together in this. It is harmless. They are bored children, that is all. Cecelia had been dutifully, if messily, embroidering her sampler. ‘ABC 123 If I should die before I wake Cecelia 1893.’ In one corner she had decided upon an original addition to the schoolgirl format. A small red rose. Or, as Arthur loudly pointed out, a rather messy knot.

‘No, it is like the roses on the tablecloth’ Cecelia retaliated, offended by the baby, turning her anger at her lack of skill on to him. ‘Is not.’ He is precocious, though not when it came to grammar. ‘You gonna do sixteen like on the cloth. Sixteen knots, sixteen knots.’ In a brilliant strategic play Cecelia countered, ‘There are fifteen roses on the tablecloth.’ That was the beginning, and by dinner time, by the time the goose’s skin was crackling brown, it really mattered how many embroidered red roses sat clustered before each of the family’s place settings. They had each, all, spent many, many silent dinners surrounded by these roses, had counted them countless times. Tonight they would count in earnest.

The tableware continues its strategic movement around the table. The bowl of potatoes was almost upset and now tilts precariously against the ornamental candle-holder. Gradually the little roses are given air, gradually the shadows give way to light.

Mrs. Michaels is not consciously aware of the war of the roses, and is only dimly aware of the muttering, the manoeuvring, the thrown challenges. Yet her mind is on the roses. Maybe her children’s antics have inserted them and the memories simply followed. Those endless evenings of waiting. Mrs. Michaels had the same natural ability as her daughter
when it came to embroidery – she felt she was not very good at anything, but Mr. Michaels said that was fitting. Still, she had painstakingly stitched every part of the cloth that now lay so functionally before her family... Her own mother had set her upon the project during her courting days, that heady summer when they were both young, when he was less gruff, less pedantic, less... She looked down the table at her husband now. More gruff, more pedantic, more... She retreated to the memories. To pass the waiting evening hours until his visits, she would sit by the window, a sentinel eager to catch the first possible glimpse of his long legs and jaunty step as he rounded the corner into her street. The embroidery lay more often in her lap than in her hands, and Mr. Michaels was as eager as her eyes through the window, so the cloth was not finished by the time their families gathered in the stone church and he promised to love and honour, and she vowed to obey. Marriage was not an end and the waiting continued. Waiting until he returned each evening, waiting nine long months until Victoria blessed their home with her arrival. Now surely she was complete – a husband, a child... The tablecloth with its roses was completed after several more years, several more children, after very few more blessings. And here it was on their solid mahogany table, and here was her family gathered around it. Mr. Michaels was enjoying his goose, Victoria was looking pretty, perhaps she should start a cloth, and Simon be in longtrousers, she must mention it to Mr. Michaels again. Her eyes continued to scan the table and were arrested by the disarray of serving dishes and cutlery. What were Arthur and Cecelia doing?

Before she could voice this question a booming voice from the netherend demanded an answer for her. Cecelia was startled, but Arthur, so intent on his counting, was stunned. His knife, temporarily and inexpertly gripped in his chubby left hand, scudded across the cloth. It was thin from many years of use, from many harsh washes on the scrubbing board. It ripped, it tore, little red roses lay stranded on either side of the schism.

She did not want to imagine the reaction to the mishap, but as she ran her fingers once more over the table and down through the gouge she could hear a little voice: 'It was sixteen, it was sixteen.'

Her own little voice of curiosity wandered over embroidery and lace and silk and linen and sure enough, at the back of the shop, the starched whiteness of antique material hung and beckoned. It was a popular buy in the 80's and 90's. The upwardly mobile do not have comfortable grandmothers from whom to inherit beautiful pillowcases, dainty handkerchiefs, history rich table cloths; they buy their nostalgia in antique shops, at exorbitant prices. No, she would not allow her imagination free amongst the softness, the purity. It did not matter who cried into the lace handkerchief, and sobbed into the pillowcase, who spilt wine on the linen tablecloth, and why. But what balls, what handsome cavaliers, what waltzes
had the gloves in the brimming hatbox been to, seen, danced. Some still lay in pairs, a few hid in the pile alone, testament to some adventure, some mishap, or merely someone’s forgetfulness and neglect. Long fingers of black searched upward through the pile, brazen and shocking amidst the youth and purity of pearl and cream and white. Was that the owner’s intention? To shock? She plucked it from the pile and its partner emerged with it. In her hands, in the light, they took on a funereal tone. The possession of the wanton or the widowed?

There was little colour in this corner; only the clean and white remnants of wardrobes seemed to be put up for sale. Where was the more functional clothing of ancestors, the dirt brown to hide the dust, the dull red to camouflage the stains of living? Gone, their lives too well lived? Flicking and fingering through the jumbled rack she felt the textures of the uniform white: the softness of long life, the harshness of starch, the itch of lace; until she came to the christening dress. It was so small, so very small, hanging there awkwardly on a cheap pink plastic hanger, a throw-out from one of the modern, truly off-the-rack children’s department stores. Though tiny across the shoulders, it hung from the rail as long as its petticoat neighbour. And though dainty in its proportions it was as elaborately detailed as a traditional wedding dress. The neckline rose in a soft ruffle of lace, the short, puffed sleeves ended in a similar gather. The bodice was wonderfully embroidered, cream thread and pearls on cream silk, the pattern reaching down to the hem. The attention to detail extended to the seams. Her mother would have called them nightdress seams, the edges turned in to each other to avoid any rough irritation. Someone must have truly loved the child. The richness of the little baptismal frock had a professional feel, so the parents were wealthy and could afford to show their love in this very material way.

Which did not detract from the young mother’s caring and commitment, her unconditional love for the babe lying lightly in her arms. Her heartbeat was erratic beneath her own more-than-Sunday-best attire, yet the child was peaceful, asleep and content, oblivious to the pomp and ceremony being enacted in his honour. It was only a small church and could never achieve the pomp of St Paul’s or Westminster Cathedral. She’d left that behind in London, to come to this new world, to be with her husband, to have this beautiful child. The ceremony was cloyingly High Church, full of ritual and spiritual comfort – so far from the dust and immediacy of their homestead. The hymn roared to an end and the Minister approached the font in a cloud of incense. Her son’s minute nostrils twitched at the invasive, sickly odour, but calmed back to sleep. Soon she would have to hand the bundle to Reverend Jones, taking care to manoeuvre the long and graceful dress, taking care not to startle the little one. For one last long moment she gazed into his face, etching into her memory the soft black lashes resting against silken cheek, the pale lips sucking
slightly and unconsciously, the ear tiny and shell-like. Irresistibly her hand was drawn, and softly, lightly, with infinite love and tenderness, she stroked her baby's cheek.

How silly, how foolish, how could she? She swept the one tear from her own cheek and silently chastised herself for this incomprehensible surrender to useless sentimentality. A dress, a child, who cared? She would not succumb again of course. The cool, sharp, uncompromising extravagance of an ornate teacup was more to her character she decided as she made her way back to the clutter of china on the shelf top. It really was beautiful. The lines and elegance of 'Shelley' would always appeal.

'It is superb.' She started as the saleswoman echoed her own thought from close at hand. Composed immediately, she discussed the china amiably and knowledgeably, 'Shelley', 'Royal Doulton', 'Wedgwood'...

'You must have quite a collection' the bespectacled saleswoman admired. 'Well, oh, yes' she stumbled. 'I've bought a few pieces over the years.' But how could she ever explain about her collection? Who would believe her anyway?

'And this lovely set, are you interested in adding it to the rest?'

Oh yes, and oh no. There was no point in this any more. She lost interest and disengaged from the saleswoman with consummate skill, leaving no bad feeling of a sale lost, merely the glow left by companionable chatter.

She left the Antique Market slowly, steadily. Once outside and out of sight her shoulders went up, her head down, and her step quickened as she moved back to reality. Her mind jolted with every tread. To own such a small treasure, to be able to gaze on its beauty every day was all she wanted. She wanted to buy it, she needed the comfort of its beauty, but she could never take it back to the house. Not to him. He'd already destroyed everything she'd ever loved. First he lashed out at her, leaving bruises and broken skin, the blue marks of his violence always in places that could be conveniently covered in the office, always so controlled in his uncontrollable rages. Always so sorry, so sympathetic afterwards. She was not stupid: she shouted, she threatened to tell. He grew more subtle after her mother questioned a bruise on her thigh. Then he learnt that destroying the things she loved caused more pain and heartache than mere bodily harm. The china was first. All those pieces she'd got together over the years, her proud little collection, they shattered one by one. The first cake plate went when she didn't have dinner ready on time, the Art Nouveau coffee pot when she'd talked to his brother too long at the Christmas party, a piece for not enjoying a film, it was too painful to list, but she remembered it all, each fragment she swept up. The slaps and crockery was not enough: the furniture was gauged and broken. No-one came to visit any more; neither would allow them. Once, just once, she left. And returned from a chorus of disbelieving heads—she was upset at loosing the baby that was all, and angry, she didn't mean the things she said...
about her attentive, understanding husband who called every day. Samson, her ginger tom was not at home to greet her return. A warning. She’d loved that cat.

She stopped buying antiques long ago.
Geoff Goodfellow, writer and performer, was born in Adelaide in 1949, in whose working-class suburb of Semaphore he still lives. He left school at fifteen and worked at various occupations including steel fixer, hotel bouncer, boxing promoter, carpenter and salesman, before a severe back injury forced him to retire from his job as self-employed builder in 1982. He has been writing poetry since 1983; since 1984 he has performed throughout Australia and abroad, conducting writing workshops, holding posts as writer-in-residence, and addressing audiences, at a diverse range of institutions: schools, universities, arts festivals, gaols, maximum-security prisons, trade unions, sporting clubs, youth and welfare groups, employer and management-training authorities, and industrial sites. Geoff Goodfellow has toured internationally on two occasions (Europe, China and the USA in 1988, Germany in 1992). His publications (all Wakefield Press) include: *No Collars No Cuffs* (1986, 1989); *Bow Tie & Tails* (1989); *No Ticket No Start* (1990); and *Triggers: Turning Experiences into Poetry* (1992).

This interview was conducted by Gordon Collier and Geoffrey Davis in the latter's apartment in Aachen, Germany, on Sunday, 27 June 1992.

In terms of your reading and in terms of getting people to write, you've gained access to institutions in Australia such as prisons and schools – there may be a great divide between those two sets of institutions – and you have done so through determination and persuasion. What do the authorities think of what you're doing? And: there's a widespread conviction that Australian society is characterized by militant or aggressive egalitarianism. Does authority in Australia play along with this formative myth?

I don't reckon there's much difference between schools and gaols except with schools you go home at three-thirty in Australia. Often the people who set the rules up in schools are very much like the people that run the gaols. There are also those people in schools who want to censor me; there are certainly people in gaols who want to censor me, and I've been subjected to many discussions within gaols over censorship issues. I always fight those issues, though, and I guess part of the Australian tradition of being a larrikin is quite evident within me because of my own family background. I was brought up by people who challenged, and who set themselves up as adversaries; so it's natural for me to want to work in
that environment. So I’ve had struggles with gaols, with the Drug and Alcohol Services Council.... They agreed to my doing a three-months residency there in 1990, and then they did a bit of background checking, and made me sign a form to say that I wouldn’t write material critical of the way that they ran their system – which distressed me somewhat; but they had me placed in a position where that residency hinged on another – the whole lot was combined under one funding body, and I had to play ball with them to a certain extent. But I certainly gave them a good deal of argument during that residency – so much so that one worker who was quite on side with the way that I challenged the system wanted me to do some further work. And mid-way through the arrangements, they tried to pay me a labourer’s rate, as a way of dissuading me from taking the job. I took that up as a challenge, and said: ‘I’ll get in touch with the Transport Workers’ Union and I’ll stop all deliveries to your depots.’ The bloke that I put that on was, I thought at that stage, a good bloke; he asked me not to go that way, that it would be embarrassing for him in his position, so I dropped off. So I guess I do drop off at times. But most times I fight them.

In order to get in, do you have to engage in any kinds of covert activities?

The covert activity’s more so when you’re in there. I guess that you’ve got to sell yourself in, and that’s difficult at times. With the gaols, it’s not so difficult to sell yourself in to the upper hierarchy; it’s the middle management that cause the problems. The upper hierarchy are generally quite liberated people who really want to change the system. And inasmuch as I’m a trade-union poet in many respects, it’s the power of the union that operates within gaols, particularly in South Australia – the power that that union has, the hold it has over the management – that causes quite a deal of distress. And that particular union won’t have a bar of me.

You said a couple of days back that poetry doesn’t change the world – it has a catalytic function, which can bring about change, or persuade people to change and instigate processes of change. You’ve brushed up against, or have run into, authority at pretty well the highest levels of Australian political culture. How much goodwill did they bring to this venture, assuming that you brought all the goodwill you could, and how much goodwill have you had left over after this encounter with them?

Many of them have lent reasonable support, but they don’t really want to go the whole hog. They might believe that you’re doing the right thing, but they don’t want to set themselves out on a limb; and that was brought home to me when I did a tour in Tasmania with the Federal Minister for Justice and one of his advisors, who said: ‘The only reason you’re in my car is that the Federal Minister knows that if you’re in his car talking to
'Jim—it was a two-hundred-kilometre drive from Hobart to Launceston—'you'll be goin' wah-wah-wah about all yer mates that are languishing in cells all around Australia, trying to get them out! So I've got the job to drive you up there because of it.' That in some way shows that they know that I'm an urger; and you have to be an urger to operate the way that I do. I think I can go back to that Minister and get further assistance from him. I know I've got an open-door policy with the bloke who runs Correctional Services in South Australia; but he's also told me about the way the system operates in Australia: when I've caused trouble inter-state. For instance, I caused quite a bit of trouble in Darwin Prison in 1990, they were on the phone every day from Darwin, ringing through to Adelaide trying to get some guts on me that would allow them to put the clappers on me.

*What do you mean by 'causing trouble'?*

Well, 170 prison officers threatened to go on strike in Darwin Prison if I went into the Berrimah gaol, because I'd been into the Beatrice Hill gaol and I'd established that there was an isolation block there that they held prisoners in. I was given a tour of this gaol by this prison officer for much too long—he showed me the pig-pen and the fowl-yard and the bakehouse, and I said: 'Look, fair dinkum, I've come here to talk to the prisoners—you know, I've seen these sorts of things before, I want access to the prisoners.' 'I've been told I have to give you this tour,' he says, 'but before we go, I just want to point out this area over here,' and he's pointed out this huge, flat area of turned-over earth. Then he said: 'That's the main occupation of the prisoners here.' And I said, 'Whaddaya mean?' He said, 'Well, they dig the mimosa grass out'—mimosa is a native American grass that has somehow got established in the Northern Territory and it just takes over like bamboo—and I said (I looked up at the sky, and it was about a 38-degree day, it was bloody hot): 'So they go out there and dig that up through the day, do they, in the sun?' And he said, 'Yeah,' and I said: 'How much do you pay 'em?' and he said '35 cents per day per man.' I said, 'Fair dinkum! I thought slavery'd been abolished!' I said 'Slavery's out, mate! If you asked me to go and dig that fuckin mimosa grass out for 35 cents a day I'd tell ya to get fucked, straight off!' And he said, 'Well, you'd go on the go-slow,' and I said, 'Well, you'd better show me the go-slow.' So he took me over to a pair of adjoining rooms no bigger than an average Australian toilet, and he said, 'That's where you'd go—at about a metre two hundred wide and twenty-one hundred deep and maybe twenty-five hundred high, and it had a little window in the back that was well above eye-level. The front was just a barred door, basically. And he said, 'That's where you'd go—in there.' There was no hand-basin, no toilet. He said, 'Of course, you get a camp-stretcher to sleep on and a bucket for a toilet.' And I said, 'Okay, so you're gonna come back the next morning and tell me to dig mimosa grass up for 35 cents a day, and I'm
gonna tell you to get fucked again straight off; so whattaya goin' to do? Bring back half a dozen of your mates and bash me? If I'm backed into a corner – you know: I'll fuckin go right off in there, and no-one's going to get in behind me.' He said, 'Look, even the big Groote Eylandters' – and they're much bigger than the Australian Aboriginals, and bear in mind: this prison has got about 95% black population – he said 'Even the big Groote Eylandters, when we come over the next morning, they say: "Please boss, please, let me out, boss, let me out! The mozzies're eatin' me up, boss!"' I said, 'Yeah – you fuckin arse!' Well, when I got back into Darwin, I found out that there was some film of this isolation block; I wrote a poem about the cell and got the ABC to run the film, I read the poem, backed up by the film, and caused a good deal of strife up there. But, again – looking at poetry as a catalyst for change – what did happen there, after that poem was written, was that those cells still exist – but now with a handbasin, with a flush toilet, with flyscreens on the doors, flyscreens on the windows, no prisoner to be kept in there for longer than twenty-four hours without express permission of the Manager. So – that's what I mean when I say that poetry can change things. It can highlight things; I mean. no-one is really interested in prison reform in Australia – I don't think anywhere in the world too much. Politicians certainly aren't interested in it. People want revenge – it's our natural instinct as animals to want revenge. So most of us would think: 'Well, let's build bigger prisons and let's give people longer sentences.' But most of the people we send to gaol get out, so I guess we have to temper our concerns with some degree of humanity, or we're gonna pay a much bigger price than what we're paying now.

I wonder what sort of perception the prison management and screws have developed of what it is that they're seeing coming through the gates to talk and read to prisoners. Do they see you as a poet, or as a political militant and shit-stirrer?

Exactly.

Do they have any idea of what poetry is? because at various times you've alluded to a myth they have, or maybe it's only a weapon – a backlash weapon – of classifying poetry as 'poofter stuff'. They know you're a hard man – it's got around – and you can deal out as much as you get. Are they scared of – the word?

They're scared of being pointed out. They're scared that I'm gonna see something that they're doing, or that I'm gonna grab a phrase that they use, and that I'm gonna put them on the page. I think that's their biggest fear. They also see me less as a larrikin than as a lout. There's a big difference between a larrikin and a lout in Australia. They see me as being far too liberal and very anti-authoritarian; they see me being extremely aggressive because of the way that I read poetry. I mean, I don't really
read poetry, I perform poetry. I make them aware of my presence when I'm in the gaol, too; and I have a rule that no prison officers should come into the room when I'm working, and I fight to maintain that, because if I'm going to be running a workshop and having blokes writing stuff, I don't want screws to see what they're writing, because I'll be getting them to write about those people who are brutalizing them. And about other issues: I mean, I try and get them to look at their lives, and I think if we can look at our lives we start to find some answers. We can see the spin-off effects, not only on ourselves but on our victims, if there are victims; or we can start to get some notion of why we are like we are, if we're going to write about what our family life has been. I guess that most of the screws are people who have very little education; they're not very much different from the prisoners themselves, so it's a bit scary for them. They know what you're doing – they watch you all day if you're in there, they can see you walking, they can see who you're communicating with; they've got pretty much total control over you – but they can't really see what you're thinking. And if they know that you're reading and writing a lot of poetry, it terrifies them if they can't get hold of the page and see what's going on.

Have you ever sort of turned round any screws? I mean, not through trying to, because your concerns lie completely elsewhere. But have you ever convinced any of the screws of the validity and worth of what you're doing? Or are they even more unregenerate than the prisoners?

If you're gonna work in that area, it's very hard to walk a double line and have conversations with the screws and conversations with the prisoners. So I choose to ignore the prison officers. [...] I'll minimize whatever conversations I have to have with them, because I think that if I'm seen by the prisoners talking to those officers – and often they'll be watching me come through the yards – they could think that I'm having two bob each way. And I guess that I've got to be staunch and face up to the fact that staunchness is a big part of prison life. [...] I can't be a politician; I'm no diplomat, by any stretch of the imagination. And when I've tried I've failed. I tried one night in a hotel in Port Lincoln, which is a country gaol - there were a group of six prison officers in the hotel who spoke to me as I walked through the hotel, and I'd just arrived at the hotel to go to the gaol the next day. I heard this pommy accent, and I thought: 'It's gotta be a screw,' and I sort of gave him half a nod, went to the bar, bought the cigars that I was after, and on the way back I had this conversation with myself, in my own head, and I thought: 'They might be farmers that have gone broke, they might be just a different culture of people to those that operate in city prisons'; so when I went back I stopped and said, 'Oh, you've got a couple of new arrivals'; 'cause a couple of my regular blokes who were in the main gaol in Adelaide had been shifted over there. 'Yeah,
we've got Spike and Trevor Gardiner here.' And I said, 'Well, they're both a couple of good blokes, actually.' And he says, 'You can tekh them baack with ye if ye lahk.' And I says, 'Well, I wouldn't mind; I don't judge a bloke by his tattooes' – Spike's covered in them – I said, 'Spike's got a heart as big as a lion, and that's how I judge a man, not by what he's wearing on his body as far as blue ink is concerned. And as for Trevor, Trevor's just a poor harmless bloody junkie; I've known him for nearly fifteen years.' And he says: 'What's Spahk, a fookin weht-lifter?' And I said, 'Well, you fookin see him every day of the week – talk to him, ask him.' And he's looked at me, and I had this new jacket on which had quite wide shoulders and made me look half as big again as what I was, and he said: 'What are ye, a weht-lifter too?'. And I said, 'No, I'm a poet, and a former professional boxer.' He said, 'A professional boxer wraatin poetry?! Isn't that sweet!' And I said, 'Tough men cry, mate - tough men cry.' This other screw leaned through the group, and he said, 'Oh, we're not too bahd a boonch over here, Geoff,' and I said, 'Yeah, the screws here do seem better than the screws in Adelaide.' And he said, this first bloke: 'Ah dawn't lahk bein called a screw.' And I said, 'Yeah, the screws here do seem better than the screws in Adelaide.' And he said, this first bloke: 'Ah dawn't lahk bein called a screw.' And I said, 'Well, get another fookin job, then.' He says: 'Ah dawn't lahk bein called a screw!!'. And I said, 'Well, can you write? Get a job as a parkin' inspector!' He 's lifted his fist, and he says: 'Ah ought to ... ! Ah ought to ... !' And I said, 'Well, you fookin go for it, mate- but you fookin miss with the first one, and I'll knock you right fookin out; you can have it in here or in the fookin car park; I'm real easy if it has to come to that.' And this bloke who was the acting manager of the gaol was there in the group – and he was formerly from Yatala, and I guess that, of all the screws I'd met, he would be the most fair man that I've met – Tony Kelly is his name – he's grabbed me on the shoulder and said, 'I think it's time for you to go, Geoff;' and again he had the pommy accent. And I said, 'You might be right, Tony.' Anyway, I've got out to the gaol the next day, and this particular officer that had the loud mouth had the dark glasses on - I guess they wear dark glasses 'cause they don't very much want to have eye-contact with you; and he's got the arms folded, and the dark glasses on, and as I walk past him I said: 'I'll tell the blokes what a fookin dog you are, too!' And I did, naturally, and they gave him shit; and the next time I went back, I was barred from the gaol, and the reason given was for threatening to assault a prison officer. So I went into town, saw the Head Office at the Department of Correctional Services, argued my case, told them the full story, and said that the prison officer had in fact threatened to assault me, and I'd agreed that if he wanted to do it that way, well, that was okay. And I got entry into that gaol again. But when
I went back there with the permission of Head Office, they still tried to stop me. So I said, 'Well, ring up Head Office and check it out.' And they said, 'We’re autonomous here, we dawn’t have to.' And I said, 'Either you ring them up and do it, or I’ll go down the phone, I’ll ring up the radio stations and the TV stations and we’ll have a discussion here at the gaol - we’ll get you a bit of media coverage.' So they went into a huddle, came back to me, and said, 'Yes, you can come in.' So they’ve taken me in; and he says, 'Ye’ll have to wait for ten minutes till we get som blawks oop.' Anyway, ten minutes later, they’re all fuckin smirking at me and winking and fuckin walking past, and I thought: 'They’re up to something.' Anyway, they’ve taken me into the room, and there’s twelve of the blackest faces I’ve seen in an Australian gaol together as one group. And they said: There you are, Mr Goodfellow, we’ve gawt a group for ye from the Pitjantjatjara lands! They only speak Pitjantjatjara!’ And I walked in, and I said 'Nyuntu ini ngananya? Ngayulu ini Kunmanaranya; nyuntu palya?' Which is 'Hello, my name’s Geoff Goodfellow, what’s your name?’ And that blew ‘em out. And this screw looked at me and he says: 'Do you speak their language?’ And I said, 'Well, you do, don’t you? Don’t you speak to them in Pitjantjatjara?’ He says, ‘No, no-o-o.’ And I says, ‘Well, you should; If you’re going to have prisoners from the Pitjantjatjara lands, you should be speaking to them in their tongue.’ And he just shook his head and wandered off. Anyway, I was doing a Pitjantjatjara language course at that time, and I knew just enough to be able to talk to them. I guess that in my presentation of poetry I’m an oral poet – I use my eyes, my hands, my body; I use a different range of voices and intonation – and those people, I mean, their whole culture reads that sort of information just as much as anything else. And they just pissed themselves with laughter for two hours. They dead-set loved it.

The screws with their pommy accent; and the Pitjantjatjara – there are two questions relating to ethnicity here.

Yeah, the Poms have accused me of being racist, too; and I should say that. But I said, 'Well, how do you determine that?’ They said, 'You have all these pommy voices’ – ‘cause I’ve got particular poems where I use pommy accents to highlight them – and I say, ‘Well, it’s not being racist, that’s the reality of the situation’ – that there are around about 80% Poms working in the prison service, and all I’m doing is picking up on the fact that there are those Lancashire voices, Yorkshire voices, London voices, and driving them home.

This enclave of screws – 80 percent, as you say, from what used to be called 'Home’ – what the hell do they do it for? Is there a form of internal alienation involved here? You might say that in some way they’re not Australians, or don’t want to be tuned in.
I think that they take the job because you don’t need specific educational qualifications. Any mug can do it. Australians in the main don’t really want to turn a key on their brother. There are Australians in that job, of course, but in the main they’re Poms. I think they often get their mates to come in when their mates arrive out here: ‘Oh, coom aht here, you’ll get a job aht here, you dawn’t need no qualifications.’ And you can also get a lot of overtime out of that job, because if you stir blokes up and create a jack-up you’ve got immediate overtime. You don’t have to be too bright to work out how to get a bit of overtime if you’re a screw. You just start terrorizing a few people and you’ll have it quick-smart. The people who take the jobs have been oppressed most of their lives; you give someone a bit of power, whether they be a prison officer or a poet, and they can abuse it. I’d say, being fair, that sometimes I do abuse my power as a poet; but I think that the majority of them are abusing their power every moment of the day.

You’ve come across nobody who has linguistic skills in Aboriginal languages who works for the Prison Services – specifically delegated to work with the live Aboriginal population?

No, no; you get the occasional Aboriginal prison officer, but they get that hard a time from the prisoners that they don’t normally stay in the job very long. So I guess there’re major problems there; I don’t know how you can overcome those sorts of problems.

If we slapped the stock label of white working class on you, it doesn’t automatically align well with your commitment in terms of close-up familiarity with Aborigines. Do you see yourself as in any way untypical of the great mass of the white Australian working class?

I think that I’m in a minority there. I’ve been chastized for walking in marches down the main streets of Adelaide; I’ve been given a hard time by blokes that I’ve known all my life, and I say, ‘Well, get fucked, you know, they deserve some quality of life too’; I mean, everyone deserves a quality of life. Through the Seventies I made a good deal of money, I had a successful business, I had a V-12 Jaguar; and the turning-point in my life was that I hurt my back really badly, and I was sitting in a coffee lounge one day in a northern South Australian town, squirming in pain, having muscle-spasms, and I looked at my watch, and just as I looked up, three Aboriginal blokes staggered past the window, and they were all drunk and had binder-twine tying their shoes up and cuffs dragging on the ground and beanie hats pulled down over their ears and dirty old coats on and a bottle of plonk in their hands. But they were all laughing. And here I was in my own little safe white environment, with my nice car, and my nice clothes on, and looking at my expensive French watch;
and I thought: I’ve got all these fuckin material possessions, and I can’t laugh, and here are these blokes with the arse hangin out of their pants, and they’re laughing in the face of what most whites would term great adversity. And I thought: where are they going? And I thought: they’re going round the pub to drink. Now, you know, I’ve never had a drink in my life, ’cause I’m too terrified. I know I’d be a maniac if I did. But, I thought: if I was a drinker, I could go round there and perhaps I could learn something from them. And I thought about it, and when I got back to Adelaide I went and enrolled at the then Underdale College of Advanced Education to do an associate diploma in Aboriginal Studies. I’d been expelled from high school at 15; I never passed Year 10 – always told that I was a dill and a half-wit and a birdbrain and wouldn’t be any good etcetera etcetera. And I was really sceptical about whether I could perform. I had three children at that stage, two of my sons were at high school, and I thought: well, I’ve got nothing that I can do; I can’t do anything physical for the rest of my life, I really have to learn some new skills; I’d just started to write poetry. And I went and did this course. Well, after I was there for three or four weeks I soon woke up – an associate diploma wasn’t worth a scratch of cockie-shit, and they’d duded me. But I thought: if I pull out, my kids are gonna think that I’m piss-poor and I can’t handle it, and I thought: I really want to be here to find out if I’m an idiot or not. So I stayed for twelve months; I got seven distinctions out of the nine subjects, I worked out that I wasn’t a dill, I started reading books, I could see the value of books, though when I went to school we were made to read poets that had been dead for two hundred or three hundred years and I couldn’t understand the language that was in it. I still can’t, and don’t want to, understand that language now. I want to use the language that people speak every day of the week.

The kind of subversive freeing-up you’re working towards all the time involves getting people away from what you’ve called their ‘punch mentality’ – in a way, by harnessing the energies and the mind-set of that self-same ‘punch mentality’. I suppose I’m trading off the aggression that the people with the punch mentality have, but instead of it being a physical aggression that’s turned on someone to damage them, or to damage your own self – your fist, for instance, punching it through a door – to use that energy so that you relive that experience and become de-traumatized by dealing with it. I don’t want them not to feel that anger: some people are always going to feel anger at the injustices they have suffered, that they have caused, that have been thrust on them; but if they can understand where that anger comes from, and if they can learn something about themselves by going through that anger, maybe time and time again, I think then that the cogs start to mesh. A lot of people find that too confronting. Some of my audience are too scared to come and talk to me after a reading because they think that
I’m a fuckin lunatic! A violent person that’s likely to bite the tip of their nose off.

It’s also the classic role of the poet at the peak of his power, isn’t it? Of course, that rather depends on the nature of the audience, and you seem to be speaking to radically different audiences, from students at university to prisoners and....

Yeah – now, prisoners will just flock in to hear the type of stuff that I read, and all of a sudden they’re seeing this aggression that’s normally a big thump of the fist as something that’s just pouring out of the mouth. But they’re seeing it in the rest of my body, and they’re relating to it, they’re keying in straight away, and they’re seeing themselves in me, I think. Many of my audiences who have seen perhaps very ‘violent’ things in their life – maybe a tea-towel fight in the kitchen, with the end of the towel being put under the tap first, you know? – they can’t relate to what I’m on about. They don’t want to know about people’s noses being bitten off in hotels, or people’s eyes being pulled out in pubs and squashed into the floor. But if poetry is going to be written about the birds and butterflies floating around the Oval, it’s gotta be written about those real parts of our society, too, that sometimes don’t get spoken about very much. There are many poets who are writing about all these beautiful things in life, and that’s not to say I don’t appreciate the beautiful things. But I want to chronicle, too, the horrors that I’ve seen, because I think that they can be a catalyst for change.

If a young bloke hears a poem about a bloke getting his eye pulled out in a pub and squashed into the floor, or someone getting their nose chewed off, maybe when they’re at high school in Year 10 or 11 or 12 – I mean, they might be getting away with most of the kids in the school and being able to belt everyone there and thinking they’re pretty good. But they hear a poem like that and they might think: ‘Well, shit! some people don’t know any fuckin rules; maybe I’d better pull out of this game!’ That’s one of the reasons I want to write.

A lot of people see prisons as being a kind of reflection of society and social structures in an extreme form. Although the everyday existence that prisoners lead in these institutions is ritualized and highly artificial, even in terms of whatever work they’re going to be engaged in or forced into. Let’s jump back out of this environment and into another one that you’re engaged in – building-sites, factories; the actual structure of the everyday, workaday world. You would see differences, would you?

Yeah; and one of the very interesting things about this is those poems of mine that are very critical of the prison system often are not well received by blokes on building-sites. There’s only really a minority that will really be ready to accept those poems as valid, because they’ve done a night in the cells or they’ve got a brother that’s done a whack in gaol, or maybe
they themselves have been in for a short period of time. But most of those
people that work on building-sites have got a very strong work-ethic, and
they don’t recognize that often prisoners see crime as being work anyway.
They see them as being bludgers on society, and they’re not particularly
sympathetic to the sorts of attitudes that I reveal through writing about
prisons. But there again, those workers want their story told, too; and I
guess everyone wants his or her story told. And those building-workers,
after having a serve of me on a building-site, will often come up to me on
the street and say, ‘Ah, mate, you’re our voice, you’re our medium, you’re
our main man — you know; it’s terrific that you’re writing stories about us
or poems about us or telling people what we do.’ I mean, they really do
see their working lives as being a little bit more significant than what they
were before. I think it provides dignity for lives that are often very much
underrated — except for the blokes working on the job: they’ve got dignity
there, amongst themselves, but going and sitting on a bus on the way
home from work in a shitty old pair of jeans and a dirty old shirt, they’ll
notice that people don’t want to sit next to them; that’s one of the reasons
that maybe they see themselves as being not very significant.

It seems to me that there’s a difference between building-workers and prisoners,
or your work with them, in that you are teaching through writers’ workshops to
get prisoners to verbalize their own experience. You’re not just going in to per­
form your work. What about the kind of feedback you’ve had from prisoners as
they begin to find their own voice through what you’re teaching them?

In a prison, on an average, ten percent of the prison population will attend
the workshops. They’re not compulsory. I’m allowed to put posters up,
and they’re generally for two-hour sessions. So in a prison like Yatala
where there are a hundred prisoners, there will generally be ten that
attend as regular as clockwork. Often what the authorities have done,
though, is to put on football matches or basketball matches at the same
time to clash on the same night at the same time, to try and draw my
audience away. Sometimes that has had an effect; but there are always
those really staunch blokes who recognize what the politics of the prison
are and why that is occurring. So they’ll come regardless, even though
they’ll be really eager to get off their chairs and get out there; they’d be
with me. And of that ten that will come, I would say that probably seven
will write a reasonable amount. There’ll always be that two, three or four
that’ll be more interested in listening than in writing, that are too scared
to commit themselves. What I do is show them drafts of poems that I’ve
published, so they can see that this isn’t something that’s happened once,
it’s happening over twelve drafts or fifteen drafts. They can then see that
I make spelling errors; I’ll expose myself; and in the book that I’ve just
published, Triggers, I’ve put a draft that has got a word spelt wrongly. My
publisher said, ‘Well, you can’t publish it with a word spelt wrongly,’ and
I said, ‘Get fucked! You know – I’m a goose; I’m not perfect, and I don’t
want to show myself as being perfect.’ So I try to show them that dic-
tionaries are there for mugs like us, and that we should use them, but that
it shouldn’t stop us from saying what we need to say. I show them my
handwriting, which is generally quite untidy – I mean, it’s scrawly, or I
write generally in block letters but it’s not neat. But I say, ‘Well, this is
what the general public sees when a book is put out,’ and show ‘em the
print-face, ‘so it doesn’t matter how untidy your handwriting is, how bad
your spelling is – don’t let that stop you from telling your story.’ And
many of them get a real buzz out of telling their story. Many of them then
don’t have the self-confidence to be able to express themselves verbally
the way that I will, so I’ll give them that additional skill of how to per-
form the poem, and run performance workshops for them also, to show
them how much stronger their work is than what they may perceive it to
be. And I go through the poems and, say, show them things like under-
statement and overstatement, and talk about that; I try to talk about things
in a very simple sort of a way. I mean, I’m not a very complex sort of a
person; I might write poetry that is sometimes complex and has several
layers of meaning, but generally I see poetry firstly as being communica-
tion. So I tell them to communicate and to trade off the language that is
within them, not to use heightened English, not to use a thesaurus, but to
use the storehouse of language which we all have as individuals.

But one of your particular concerns is the way in which the social life of a lot of
these people is impoverished by things like certain kinds of mass communica-
tion – that they can be rendered silent, even without knowing it. Do you see yourself
as revitalizing that which is dormant inside these people, then, and battling
against certain forms of mass communication that tend to deaden people?

Yeah, most certainly. I’ve published three books of stuff by people in
institutions, and when I publish their books I distribute them to schools
and to sociologists that I know, and to people that I know need some
more depth of understanding about what their lives are. And part of the
deal is that contributors always get three books – they get a book for
themselves, a book for their mother, and a book for their father. Because
most of them come from split families. Or, in the case of adults, maybe a
book for their wife, another one for their parents. But always getting three
books, and then trying to get those books into prominent places where
they’ll be seen. Another way that I’ve got their poetry out is, I had a radio
program put together of writing done by women at the Northfield Wo-
men’s Prison in South Australia. They had a night of radio in Adelaide on
the university radio station; which doesn’t mean they had a gee-normous
audience. But I took a swag of poetry from the Northfield Women’s Pri-
son, got a group of women to read the stuff, they put out a program, and
then I took a bundle of cheques up to the gaol – for $15, $30, $45 – and
that caused a storm of protest from the authorities, 'cause you're not allowed to earn money while you're in gaol. They were dead-set spewing. Then I said, 'These cheques are not negotiable, they've got to be paid into the accounts of the women.' It was a big buzz for those women to have their voices heard and to be able to hear themselves, or hear their own work read out publicly. There was a section in one of the books that I put out from the Northfield Women's Prison - there was a big pommie screw that was sexually harassing the women, so I said, 'Well, write a poem about him and put 'im in his place; and this is the purpose of poetry for me, and it can be the purpose of poetry for you too.' And everyone in the prison knew who the sexual harassment offender was. I then went into Head Office and tried to get hold of a group of leaflets on sexual harassment to give to the women - I rang the Women's Advisor in the Premier's Department and got her to go out and speak to the women about sexual harassment, and said, 'You know, these women shouldn't be getting sexually harassed by male prison officers, it's not on; if it were happening in private industry these blokes'd be in court or they'd be dismissed.' It took a bit of shunting around to get that attended to; but they're the sorts of activism, too, that the middle-management people don't like me getting involved with.

Are you the first writer who has been a writer in residence in the Australian prison system?

No. no - there have been predecessors. Rodney Hall, who's the chairman of the Australia Council, was, I think, perhaps one of the first people in Australia to work in prisons. Other people, too, did it before I came on the scene. But I think that I've probably been a bit more militant than some of those other people, and that I've kept niggling away, sometimes under great adversity; I don't buckle under to authority figures, because of my own background, my two brothers had both been in gaol, so I have a passionate concern about gaols. And - I'm a fighter. And I think you have to be a fighter to work in that environment.

Poetry and books; books of poetry; performance. As a performance poet, you are not letting words lie inert on the page, but you're actively involved in a process of translation - what you've already written down, you translate.

Yeah, I'm always trying to bring those words alive at public readings, and I think that is important. But I think, too, that it's important that the words are published, and that I'll always publish. And I guess one of the reasons that I'm so keen to do public readings is because I want to live as a writer - I don't want to live through getting unemployment benefits and writing poetry and telling lies on sheets to the Government each week, which a lot of other people do. That bothers me; but if I can do lots of
public readings, and if people can hear my voice – they don’t need to hear me read every poem, but they’re gonna know how to read my stuff. And I’ll challenge people; I’ll say, ‘Take these books home, don’t read the poems sitting in a lounge chair under your standard lamp, but jump up and do them – you know how I do them: *you* do them!’ One of the reasons that poetry is not all that popular is because teachers in schools, for instance – and for that matter, I suppose, lecturers at universities – have to front up to that same group of people day after day after day, and often they don’t want to put themselves on the line and take a chance on performing a poem as I would perform it and make a goose out of themselves when they have to front those people every day; where, on the one-off, I come in, I go out, and that’s the end of it. But I think it’s good that the system is accommodating people like me and allowing me to get up and have a public voice in schools and colleges and unis now.

*How much compromise do you allow yourself in order to avoid too much of a separation between orality and print, when the particular nature and quality of your message is at stake? This question of the message, of its transcription, and of potential information loss can be quite problematical.*

Well, I try to lay the poem on the page as a script. I see the poem not just as a poem but as a script for performance. So I would hope that through my work in schools, particularly in South Australia, which is my home state, that I’m trying to teach kids how to read poetry. And not many people do really know how to read poetry. Anyone who knows how to read a poem can pick up my book and should be able to get the message, I figure. I might be wrong; I’m just one little speck.

*For your performance style, which is electrifying for an audience, it would be very useful to have your books published together with tapes of your performance...*  

My book *Triggers* has been launched already in South Australia, in New South Wales and in Western Australia, but the official launch of it is going to be at the Australian Association for English Teachers and the Australian Reading Association annual general conference at the Wrest Point Casino later this year. I would like to be able at some stage to couple the book with a cassette tape and a video. That way I’ll be an exportable commodity – anywhere in the world, basically. And that will give me a much greater coverage. I’ve had plenty of opportunities to do video in the past, but I’ve always steered clear of it because I thought that it was just a way of prostituting the artist; because people take fuckin pirate copies, and I guess you can’t blame them, because most of the world’s in recession. But I’ve reconsidered my views towards that and I think that I’ve probably had a small-minded approach to it, and that my book-sales will grow from video, and people will be more enquiring and want to know more about
me, and will perhaps buy the other books. And the first book is now in its 8th reprint, the second book has sold five thousand copies, and the third book sold five thousand in eight months — No Ticket No Start. Five thousand in eight months — I mean, in Australia that’s not bad!

From your approach to writing as you express it in Triggers, and from the care and consistency you obviously invest in your public performances, it’s clear that you’re aware of how crucial the interplay is between craft and communication; but maybe you see limits and limitations. I’m talking here about your perception of other people’s writing. You may draw the line where a writer’s thought gets too devious or ‘crafty’ (in a playful sense) for high-impact contact with an audience or a readership. In such respects, you seem to have a pretty effective shit-detector as far as other writers are concerned. Where do you begin baulking at other writers’ efforts to come to terms with what they conceive of as ‘reality’? Is the only true reality for you your own, or can you accept parallel universes?

I can only accept reality as I know it, and I guess I’ve read many books that I’ve had to stop reading because they don’t reflect the realness of the situation. There was the case in Australia of a book winning a Miles Franklin Award, and I won’t name the book; and I don’t see myself as a great literary critic, and I’ve been asked at times to write critiques on books; and I’m not really interested in doing that. I guess I read this book on great recommendation, and the book was just so inadequate for me that I thought, how do they give out these literary awards? Is it through the writers knowing where to put colons and semi-colons and commas and full-stops and how to paragraph? Or is it on what they know about the subject they’re writing about? Somehow, I think that the colons and the semi-colons are incidental; they have to be roughly in the right place. This particular book It was about a working-class pub in Sydney. And it just didn’t ring true — I mean, this bloke had had a fuckin peek through the door, and I reckon he’d been too terrified to go in. But he’s had a look, he’s seen a bit of rough trade, and he’s thought: ‘I’ll run home and write a bit on this — this is all right!’ Then the next day he’s thought: ‘Well, I haven’t quite got enough, I’ll go back and have another look,’ and he’s looked in, and it’s looked a little bit rougher, so he’s thought, ‘I’ll just have a little look through the gap here, or I might even sit in the car for an hour and watch who goes in and who comes out, and then I’ll know what they look like.’ But he’s never actually been in there and fuckin heard how they respond to one another. I mean, it never worked for me; I hand-balled it to my brother, who’s a former merchant seaman; he said it was the greatest heap of shit he’d ever read. And I hand-balled it on to other blokes in the prison system, and it wasn’t anyone’s reality who lived among that culture. And I guess that’s why I have to implicitly know that I’m on the right track when I’m writing something, because I know that there’s always going to be someone in the audience who can pull me up
if I’m wrong. [...] It doesn’t matter if you’re over the other side of the world, there’s always someone that can check you out. And that’s important to me, because I know that if anyone wants to fire off from the audience, I’ll be able to fuckin back up at a hundred miles an hour. Though I don’t drop off in a hurry at all, if I write something. My old man told me a few things in my life. The two major sayings that he gave me were ‘persistence pays dividends’ and ‘hurry slowly’. I don’t think there’s anything better than ‘hurry slowly’ for a writer. When I first started writing I used to hurry quickly, and it meant that I’d stay up until four o’clock in the morning, fuckin race down to the post office, and send a poem off to a literary journal, then look at it in a different head-space the next day and think, ‘Fuck, that word’s wrong,’ or ‘I could have said that a better way,’ so now I’m inclined to sleeve stuff away in a drawer, leave it for a week, go back when I’m in a different head-space, check it out. And I’ll need to be one hundred percent happy with it, because once it’s there and it’s committed to the page it’s there for life. I mean, there’s no fuckin second chances, there’s no jumping off the fuckin bus when you’re on the bus; as Ken Kesey said: ‘If you’re on the bus, you’re on the bus.’ I’ll re-write my own work – but only before it gets typeset.

In your own life you have in some important respects undergone a massive sea-change in terms of your attitudes, behaviour, relationships etcetera. But at the same time there must be a core of your own personality that’s persisted unchanged all the way through, and which is part of the driving force that got you writing in the first place and – leaving the continuing urge for professional survival aside – part of the driving force that’s kept you writing continues to inform everything you do, even though you’re concentrating on heads and people and the fates of other people. You’re concentrating yourself outwards, but drawing from your own innermost depths. What do you think makes you tick, and keeps you ticking over, in the sense of how Geoff Goodfellow the man connects up with Geoff Goodfellow the poet? Is there any sense in which you are writing out your own history, therapeutically or otherwise?

Oh, most definitely! Unreservedly so. Besides those two sayings of my old man, there is another one of his: ‘you never compromise your integrity.’ I’m definitely trying to understand myself and my life and the lives of those people around me, and that’s why I write. I naturally write for an audience, too. I’m not the type of bloke that’s going to sit down and write a poem to amuse myself – one that will never be shown to the world. I find writing hard, I don’t think it’s easy, I don’t think it ever gets any easier; and if I’m going to write something I’ll write it to – to make a quid, to make an earning, to survive; because I don’t want to go and do anything else. I mean, I don’t make my money just from writing, because you can’t make your money from writing, especially poetry. But I make my money from what Eric Beach – a New Zealander originally – said is ‘the
perks of poetry.' And I like that saying. So it's readings, workshops, seminars. But I don't do any personal writing in a journal; I expose myself, and I guess that writing is a bit like nudism. I mean, I can take my clothes off and run round the room and say, 'Look at me! Look at me!' and the audience wouldn't get much of a thrill, especially on a cold day. But I think that I can thrill an audience on a cold day or a hot day by exposing the inner part of me and showing people that there is no shame. I mean, you live your life and you have regrets, certainly; but I don't try to file stuff away in the Not to be Exposed basket. And I guess that's to do with your integrity. Not everyone is going to like you, but you can't make everyone like you. But I don't need everyone to like me. I mean, I like myself! I think I'm not a bad bloke! And I guess that's a problem with many of the people that I work with, especially in gaols - that they don't like themselves very much. And a lot of the girls that I work with, those that have been sexually abused - they fuckin hate themselves. But I think that amongst bad there's always good. And I guess that came from my parents, too - that there are some bad bastards in the world, but most of those bad bastards have got a bit of good in them if you dig deep enough to find it. I don't want to charm my audience by saying, 'Look, I'm a fuckin nice guy, and I'm a moral guardian of the world' - you can't be a moral guardian of the world; I don't try to be morally prescriptive. I would try, though, to be suggestive, and allow people to make up their own minds. I might want to lead them in a particular way, and I certainly do try to do that; but without necessarily saying, 'This is the only path.' It's maybe the only path that I know, but for some people it's a path that they don't know. And if I can take them down some paths that they don't know, I reckon I've done a fuckin good job!

When you were crawling round on all fours after your back injury - and this is recounted in Triggers and it's part of the background or preface that you employ in your readings - there was a book lying on the floor, and for me this book has assumed mythical proportions because you never - until I read Triggers - named the author of the book. It could equally as well have been an anthology of the best of British or something. And, in Triggers, it turns out it was Banjo Paterson. Banjo Paterson was responsible for disseminating some pretty potent Australian myths which have nourished many generations of realistically-inclined Australians - okay, a combination of myth and reality. You don't sell myths. How do you connect up with Banjo?

Well, it was to see that he was using simple language. And I think that the poetry that I'd been previously exposed to at school had been talking about fir trees. And fur as I understood it was something that grew on rabbits. The only poetry that I can remember from school is by John Masefield, and I picked up a book from over there earlier today, and I sort of smirked at myself when I picked it up: the title about the sea [an Oxford
anthology by Jonathan Raban lying on the table]. And as soon as I picked up that book, the words went through my head. This is the only poetry from school I can remember. ‘The sea, the sea, the open sea,/ The blue, the fresh, the ever free’; poet: John Masefield. Now, I remember learning that like you had to learn Pythagoras’ Theorem for maths classes at school. And that’s the only poetry that I remember from school. I think the only reason that I connect up with it is because I’m untypical of many Australians, inasmuch as I’ve got red hair, and pale skin. And every time I went down to the sea as a kid I got fuckin burned! And it was always a savage fuckin time for me, going to the sea. It also meant that I would have had to have got two lots of public transport, because we lived a long way from the sea in terms of Adelaide, and I never went to the sea all that much. But the majority of poetry that I read didn’t relate to my life. But this Banjo Paterson book – it wasn’t really relating to my life, either, because it was about an Australia that’d long gone, and all that mythology about bushmen, it’s shit as far as most Australians are concerned, but we hang on to it – well, some of us. One of the reasons why I don’t say at readings that it was Banjo Paterson is probably ’cause I like Henry Lawson better. And a poem like ‘Faces in the Street’ – you know, I might read that about three times a year, especially in the economic climate that we’re in today, because we’re suffering in Australia, and I guess there’s suffering all over the world. But ‘Faces in the Street’ – I mean, it’s a beautiful poem, and it could’ve been a 1980s poem as well as an 1880s! Well, it was just that easy way of using language, I suppose, that I saw initially. And when I stopped reading Paterson, I thought: ‘I’ve got all these stories in me.’ I mean, he’s talking about all these characters, and I thought: I know plenty of characters. So, what am I gonna do? Am I going to write poems or am I going to write stories? And I thought, ‘Fuck, if you wrote a story you’d have to write about two thousand five hundred words, but if you wrote a poem you could do it in two hundred and fifty words!’ I thought, ‘Well, poetry will be easier, I’ll write poetry.’ I now think that it’s easier to write a piece of prose than it is to write a poem. But I like the effects when I’ve written a poem, because I can grab someone in three minutes rather than have to stretch them out over twenty minutes to tell them the same thing. They have to think a bit, they have to use their own imaginations a bit more...

No Ticket No Start’s got a marvellous picture on the front of you in a blood bucket reading to a circle of admiring building-workers on site. Perhaps we should come to your involvement with building-workers, your role as a trade-union activist, the question of how such performance affects your use of language, and the kind of response you’re getting from what is after all a very unusual audience for a poet. And to pick up from that: you told us how the prison authorities regard you and your work; what do the bosses in the industrial sector think of your activities?
The media in Australia are a bunch of right-wingers who definitely set up the climate for even working-class people to be anti what I was doing. There were headlines in the papers that read ‘Bosses’ Dread Poets Society’ and another newspaper report that carried a full-page story saying, ‘He’s Our Modern-Day Banjo Paterson (But We’re Not Ready For Him Yet)’ and they’ve interviewed ten people in the street and got their comments and they’ve all said ‘These blokes should be on the job working – they’re paid to work and not to listen to poetry; if they want to listen to poetry, let ‘em go and do it in their own time’; but my answer to that is: if they were going to go and listen to poetry in their own time, it’s something that they wouldn’t do, and I reckon we get educated right through our life – but a lot of people consider that we go to school and we get an education and then we leave school and education finishes. But we do learn new things every day of the week. And employers have got a responsibility to educate their work-force. If they’re going to employ people, they’ve got a responsibility to those people, and we shouldn’t live just for dollars and cents; we need that, we have a vested interest in being able to make money to survive, but money shouldn’t be the end of the penny section - we need quality of life also. A lot of people who go to work on building-sites have been people like myself who left school at fourteen or fifteen years of age, who never see art as being important, who will go and build an art gallery but will never go back to it, who will build the venues that poetry is read out in, but would never go to hear a poet because they think it’s poofier stuff, because they’ve only been exposed to that old British poetry – and I can only talk about Australian schools in my era. Now it’s different; I mean, it is starting to change. But anyone who knows anything about education knows that the syllabus does lag behind around about twenty years as a rule, and I guess that academics have got a vested interest there because the research material is on their shelves and it’s easy to sell the old stuff; you don’t have to think much about what’s going on, you don’t have to look any further than your bookshelves, you don’t have to get off your arse and drag yourself away from your own family; you can have that quality of life with your family, and go down the beach, or ratting off somewhere for a dirty weekend. But I want to show those blokes on building-sites how poetry can reflect ordinary everyday events in ordinary everyday language. I want, too, for the bosses to hear me; I was keen for the bosses to hear me as much as I was keen for the workers to hear me. And I’ll quite often say to the boss as I walk through a building-site, ‘Look, I’m pullin’ up two hundred and fifty of your blokes, but just ‘cause you’ve got a fuckin white shirt and a tie on, mate, don’t feel like you’ have to fuckin stay in the backdrop – get yer arse out the front and have a listen, too!’ And initially, most of them said ‘No thanks, I’ll go and do some real work’; but curiosity kills the cat, and most of them had to come and have a sticky-beak. But after they’d heard me reading poems about domestic violence, and drug and alcohol
abuse, and other poems on racism and sexism, many of them started to say, ‘Look, I’ve got another site up the road, fuckin’ hit that! you know, didn’t know your stuff was gonna be dealing with issues, I thought it was just some fuckin union ploy to pull the blokes up.’ So, many of the employers have actually come on side with me; but many of them try and manipulate me, I suppose. I went to Western Australia last year and I worked at the Burrup Peninsula, which is the big gas works, and they have a big plant there that they call a train, where they convert gas into liquid and ship it off to Japan. And this French boss that worked there took me on a guided tour of the plant – wouldn’t allow me to pull up all the workers, but said ‘You can pull up small groups of workers and read poetry to six or eight blokes at a time.’ So I guess I compromised with him, ‘cause I knew if I didn’t do that I would be reading to no-one, and I was interested in having a sticky-beak – I mean, I’ve got that curious edge about myself, too. We’re all sticky-beaks, I suppose. So I go off on this tour with him, but he keeps saying to me all the time: ‘You must write a poem about the company, you must write a poem about the company, show the harmony, show the harmony!’ And I says, ‘Oh yeah, mate, I’ll show the fuckin harmony all right.’ He just became so repetitive he was just like a fuckin chanting line in a poem. And he said: ‘We’ll publish the poem in our company journal.’ So I sat on the plane on the way home and started to write it, and shortly after I got back to Adelaide, I was happy with it and sent the poem off. But of course he didn’t like the tone of the poem, because he was a Frenchman; he didn’t have an Australian sense of humour, I guess. The poem is one of those, again, distinctly Australian poems, because it uses phrases and words that would only be known by Australians. I’ll read it to you, and maybe talk a little bit about the language that’s in this poem. It’s called ‘The Pilbara Work Force’:

There are no railway lines into Karratha
but mobs of workers wait to join the train
Big Baldy sells platform tickets –
and gets full freight for wild-west slaves
when a ticket gets a start
but the conductor checks them all
frog-squatting on his desk
demanding harmony
he is known to check old scores
then sing the blues to union heads
when he finds a note that sounds off-key
harmony is what he asks
and he likes to dictate all the lyrics
no stops
no shunts
no arcing-up at awkward points
are his demands
but when the mercury reaches fifty
there's no inclement weather clause to cool the tools

'No fochi way,' the workers say
yet from his airconditioned hut
their conductor stays
to tap his tune
clacketty-clack stay on track
clacketty-clack stay on track
clacketty-clack stay on track
but the workers have developed
a variation on his theme
and through the Pilbara now
their harmony rings off ironstone in the rising heat
clacketty-clack up the whack
clacketty-clack up the whack
clacketty-clack up the whack

Now, the reference there to Big Baldy is to the union rep, and he sells the platform tickets, which are the 'no ticket, no start' — he sells union tickets, and gets full freight for Wild West slaves — you know, top wages, for those slaves who go out to the wild West, and it's pretty wild territory out there. But the conductor checks them off, frog-squatting on his desk demanding harmony — I mean, this Frenchman would get reports in from other industrial sources all over Australia to see if they've got a militant activist likely to get a start. And he's known to check old scores, then sing the blues to union heads when he finds a note that sounds off-key. I mean, anyone who wasn't right on with his politics wasn't gonna get a start. And he kept this 'harmony, harmony' to me all the time, harmony is what he asked, and he likes to dictate all the lyrics. No stops, no shunts — a shunt is another way of saying a start. No arcing-up; and workers out there talk about arcing-up: 'We'll fuckin' arc up if they wanta give us fuckin' shit.' Comes from arc-welding. When the mercury reaches fifty there's no inclement weather clause to cool the tools — even at fifty degrees those blokes have to stay out there and work in the sun. And I find it incredible that there's no inclement weather clause like they have in other capital cities. When it's thirty-four degrees in the city it's knock-off time. No Fochi way, the workers say — well, he was from E.P.T. Fochi, which are a French firm out there, so I just turned that around: no Fochi way. And they're building this train — the plant is called a train, so he's saying clacketty-clack, stay on track. And the workers are saying: clacketty-clack, up the whack. Up the whack means get the wages up a bit higher. Up the whack is not up the arse or anything, it's up the wages; the whack is the whack you get in the sky-rocket, in the pocket. So, when the company refused to publish the poem in their journal, the union sent me a fax and let me know, so I sent a fax off to the Western Australian newspaper, and it became quite public. There was a slice in the paper where I said that I wasn't there to appease the demands of the company, and I wasn't there as a public relations consultant for the company, but I was
there to represent the workers. And my views reflected the views of workers. So I made a cassette tape of the poem, and they played it to a mass meeting of the workers, and then the union put out a poster where it said: ‘Late last year some culture was introduced to the construction work-force on the North-West Shelf gas project in the form of Geoff Goodfellow, working-class poet. As a result of his visit on site, he sent back a poem of his thoughts on the project, and in turn a request was made to the project managers, K.J.K., to include the poem, “The Pilbara Work Force”, in the construction newsletter, The Burrup Builder. K.J.K. refused the request, with some excuse that it did not fit their editorial line. Therefore the poem has been printed on this poster for workers on site to enjoy without Big Brother, K.J.K., inflicting any censorship.’ And then: ‘Definition of censor, from The Macquarie Dictionary: 1. An official who examines books, plays, news reports, films, radio programs etc. for the purpose of suppressing parts deemed objectionable on moral, political, military or other grounds. 2. Any person who supervises the manners or morality of others.’ So that poster went up all around the town, I was in that same town later, seeing a blue on that same job, and attended a stop-work meeting of three hundred and fifty workers, I addressed the workers and they all walked off the job and went home. The union officials that introduced me then went in to negotiate with the management; when the management head saw me, he said: ‘He’s not coming in,’ and they said: ‘He’s coming in, he’s with the Trades and Labour Council and he’s coming in to the meeting’; and he said, ‘No, you’ll have to wait out here in the foyer.’ And the union official said, ‘Are you worried about him writing a poem, are you?’ And he looked at me, and I said: ‘Mate, if you’re worried about me writing a fuckin poem, you just make me wait in the fuckin foyer and you’re fuckin guaranteed of one! If I come to the meeting, then you may get one – but you may not; but if I’m in the fuckin foyer, you’ve fuckin got one!’ And he said: ‘You better come in.’
An Inter City Express speeds me
east from Aachen
to Essen
throughout this journey
I find i’m on the side of
Bayer
but drawing closer to their
logo
a giant facsimile pill
mounted high above their factory
there is little i can
swallow
as i cross their cross
i’m confronted by its
symbolism –
& begin to wonder
is this a cross to the
living?
is this a cross to the
dead?
or do Bayer consider
all things to be equal?
i consider what is most
patently obvious
a Bayer factory wall
covered in a film of yellow
a Bayer factory wall
covered in a film of white
& as i pass on through Duisburg
i consider the Bayer workforce –
wondering what price they pay
for their film development.
Ama Ata Aidoo's Voyage Out: Mapping the Coordinates of Modernity and African Selfhood in *Our Sister Killjoy*.

The African critic re-reading Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* in Europe’s year of Our Lord 1992 is, more than most, enjoined to relate the novel, in a mode of maximal irony, to the ambience of triumphalism that has marked much of the year. For 1992 commemorates the five hundredth anniversary of what might be described as the mother of all voyages in the Western imagination, Columbus’s historic ‘discovery’ of the New World. That classic moment of European history, lifted out of time altogether in the rituals and gestures of triumphal celebration, has functioned, and continues to function, as both metonym and allegory of the West’s self-extension over a world desirably refigured in its image. In the historical narrative of Western national-racial consolidation, Columbus appears as one of the founding father figures, enjoying a central, mythic stature not unlike that of his fictional apology, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. If, by mentioning Columbus and Crusoe in one breath, I appear too quickly to be aligning historical ‘fact’ with the palpably fictional, the reason is that what seems to be a tenuous connection between the two is, in fact, a necessary one. For to turn to *Robinson Crusoe* is to see a fiction whose performative dimension vigorously essentialises the historicist and teleological codes of representation – the same codes that narrativise Columbus’s ‘discovery’ – that have consistently centred a dominant West in relation to the rest of the world. In this regard, the fictional *Robinson Crusoe* stands as one of the foundational, and momentously affirmative, literary underwritings of the nationalist-racialist codes of historical representation that project Europe over the non-European world.

In Defoe’s traveller’s tale the eponymous hero is represented as the masculine genius of a race, the genius that transforms the misfortune of shipwreck, and the hazardous unknown, in the European imagination, into the triumph of the West recovering itself, discursively, axiologically and economically, in and over its margins. In the fullness of time, Crusoe symbolically domesticates and incorporates Europe’s Other into a
Westerncentric universe. Be it the fictional Crusoe in the New World or his historical avatars in Africa – Livingstone, Burton, Stanley, Cecil Rhodes – these geniuses of a race mark those moments which inaugurate a discourse of historical coverage that insures Eurocentric norms as world-historical values.

I recall these figures and moments in the ‘worlding’ of history if only to underscore, in our contemporary moment, the necessity of acknowledging the presentness of our immediate past in any understanding of today’s global arrangements. Especially in 1992, history returns with the force of the simple manicheisms of victor and vanquished, Europe and the people without history, the West and the rest of us. So much of the fact of the significance of the West we may readily acknowledge. Yet, as Appiah observes, this significance is too often unproblematically alchemised into other kinds of supremacy, and the West then becomes a permanent representative and locus of ‘universal’ value. The distinguishing marker of the value of the West has been projected onto the concept of modernity, promoted ideologically as the medium within which the West finds its unique self-possession and expression, and towards which non-Western others must modularly aspire in order to find the viability of their own societies. Hence, in a discussion of nationalism within a modernist framework, Gellner can typically declare: ‘nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of high culture on a society whose previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases the totality of the population’. ‘High’ and ‘low’, as they are deployed here, correspond putatively to the ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’, respectively; then, again, they are categories grasped as occurring within a spatio-temporal hierarchy that arrogates originality and dynamism to the first term and opposes to it the backwardness and irrelevance of the second. Thus oppositionally defined, modernity occurs within, and takes its measure from, the evolutionist, forward-looking, codes of a Eurocentric master narrative of history.

A great many texts written in post-colonial locations, however, have engaged, and continue to engage, in revisioning a model of thought and a discourse of history that singularise modernity in terms of a world under Western eyes. These interrogations of the European historical script grow out of the realization that for those of us on the margins colonised by the West, Crusoe’s regenerative transformation in our space has spelt the shipwreck of our histories, the histories of Europe’s Others. As I turn to an other traveller’s tale, Our Sister Killjoy, the metaphor of a shipwrecked history becomes a useful mnemonic with which to characterise the Ghanaian writer’s reflections on the conditions under which the modernity of Africa is purchased. From a perspective that interprets a modern Africa in terms of her cannibalization into an alienating universe of discourse, Aidoo brings a skeptical feminine intelligence to an examination of her place within an unbroken continuum of a history of colonialism and neocolonialism. The African woman writer seizes the initiative on Africa’s
behalf to make a timely intervention into the discourses that a European
-cultural apparatus writes over her home and her continent.

Our Sister Killjoy opens under the sign of the modern: as Sissie, the
heroine, prepares to leave Ghana for Europe, we are told that aeroplanes
today 'bridge the skies' between Africa and Europe. But Aidoo is hardly
singing a paean to the advantages of modern technology. Her self-
consciously ironic perception fixes the 'bridge' between Europe and Africa
in terms of 'a cruel past [and] a funny present' (8). As she relates past and
present the trope of bridging concentrates the full ironic force of a coun-
terfactual meaning: the sign of Africa's modernity, inflected as it is by the
experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism, occurs in a time of crisis
and a space of fracture. Within the framework of Sissie's voyage, then,
Aidoo responds to a disorienting modernity, and centres a timely demand
to activate Africa's history protagonistically, beyond a debilitating self-
irony.

In the main I have chosen to look at Our Sister Killjoy within the rubric
of a pan-African literary nationalism and to follow the performance of the
narrative voice as it graphs a counter-discursive energy that unsettles the
myths that singularise history as the story of Europe and its dependent
Others. Aidoo's novel undoes and reverses those structures of meaning
and being that, in Fanon's words, enslave the black person to 'the white
man's artefact'. The novel's counterfactual truth is that 'the expansion of
Western civilization in modern times' constitutes a juggernaut phenom-
enon which 'chokes all life and even eliminates whole races of people in
its path of growth' (112). And to counter this dialectic of 'negativism',
Aidoo proposes the ethno-cultural imperative of knowing and affirming
an African self through a poetics of a will-to-power, a strong survivalist
ethic, and the urgent task of recovering an Africanist mode of knowledge
and being. The demand to rescue collective agency from history is put
urgently in various parts of Our Sister Killjoy:

Of course we are different. (p. 116)

We are in danger of getting completely lost. We must not allow this to happen.
(p. 118)

Time by itself means nothing, no matter how fast it moves. Unless we give it some-
thing to carry for us; something we value. Because it is such a precious vehicle, is
time. (p. 113)

We are not responsible for anybody else but ourselves. (p. 114)

If the process of forming a national subjectivity, as Renan would have it,
involves many strategic forgettings, his account might nevertheless be
taken as a description of national identification in a European context
where, historically, selective amnesia has proved an anodyne for revealing
the national subject more fully to himself. Alas, in the African context
where to be a nation at all means to be overdetermined from without,7 communal forgetting ceases to be a simple pragmatic affair and becomes a symptom of a fracturing, because belated, modernity; a problem rather than a resolution of one. This is the sense in which Aidoo envisions the collective amnesia afflicting a Westernised Africa as implying a forfeiture of history itself; and, with it, the survivability of an entire people. Consequently, what she proposes in her novel is an aesthetics of unforgetting, a literary-nationalist project to recover the African to and for him/herself. It is a position that is consistent with Mudimbe’s argument elsewhere for the need for the African to go from ‘the situation in which he or she was perceived as a simple functional object to the freedom of thinking of himself or herself as the starting point of an absolute discourse’.8

If, as Alice Walker defines her, a womanist is ‘committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female’,9 then, Aidoo is her womanist, par excellence. In Our Sister Killjoy she involves us in a committed struggle to repair a ravaged pan-African imaginary – ‘the soul that is.../ Fled’ (29), as she puts it – through the mnemonics of a narrative performance that utilises the African woman positively as a trope for remembering self and history. A qualification needs to be made, however, if we are to come to terms properly with the inclusiveness of Aidoo’s politics. To the extent that a masculinist version of pan-Africanism has tended to overlook woman’s presence (of mind) in the nationalist undertaking, Aidoo’s position as a woman enjoins her – and us – to complicate the politics of nationalist address. A masculinist prescription for visionary African writing, like Soyinka’s in his Myth, Literature and the African World, valorizes works in which the ‘ontology of the idiom is subservient to the burden of [their] concerns’.10 In practical terms what this means is that Soyinka, unable to address the ontological question other than as a monologic ethno-cultural one, does not remember a single African woman writer in his seminal work. A nationalist project that collapses women’s voices too easily into men’s, and hence occludes the former, is one that Aidoo’s reactive stance engages in Our Sister Killjoy. For if Aidoo’s heroine is ‘Our Sister’, the sister who belongs to us as Africans, she is also a ‘Killjoy’ and a ‘Black-eyed Squint’, given to the ‘outrageous, audacious, courageous [and] willfull behaviour’11 that define Walker’s womanist.

Aidoo’s strategy in Our Sister Killjoy is to recall the African soul to itself, against a masculinist version of an Africanist discourse, from a new and stridently tendentious position. Where representations of the African woman in Africanist literary discourse have consigned her to an ontological location that belied her agency, it is characteristic of Aidoo’s vigorous language to make woman’s voice heard. Florence Stratton has argued, and justly, that woman as a trope in African male writing:

actually elaborates a gendered theory of nationhood and of writing, one that excludes women from the creative production of the national polity, of identity,
and of literary texts. Instead, woman herself is produced or constructed by the male writer as an embodiment of his literary/political vision. Our Sister Killjoy gives short shrift to those representations. The politics of the novel’s address specifies its addressee clearly as ‘my brother(s)’: those African men who must hear from a different location within a shared Africanist social, cultural and political praxis. The ‘Black-eyed Squint’ is thus poised to defamiliarise the familiar monologic forms of address and to cheat us of the comforting illusions we have built around them; but, importantly, she is also the reflective traveller, sketching, in her journey, the ground for our collective reorientation. Placed against either a centrist, or masculinist, or metropolitan perspective, Our Sister’s ‘squint-eyed’ perceptions – and the utterances they generate – constitute a novel form of eccentricity, in the first instance. Seen, however, in terms of projecting a self-constituting Other, away from a stifling centre, her eccentric speech becomes a tactical, deliberated manoeuvre; one which, ultimately, sustains a powerful normative function. As Craig Tapping describes it, Aidoo’s narrative of the African woman’s ‘search for an identity within an ailing and disparate community suggests the adaptive politics and transformative radicalism of [her] “historical and cultural imperatives”’. Aidoo, adapting and transforming the novel form, aims at breaking through the false forms that confine the modern African consciousness, and, complementarily, at rehabilitating and projecting for it the actuality of a possible consciousness. Her narrative, configured in a ‘spatial’ mode that brings prose, poetry and a vigorous dramatic dialogue together in a graphic adaptation, recalls the poetics of traditional African oral performance. About Aidoo’s reworking of traditional sources in Our Sister Killjoy, Owusu has observed that she sees ‘the future of African literature in a judicious return to an African tradition that has always underscored the fundamental ‘unity’ of the vast continuum of verbal discourses’. The continuity of prose, poetry, drama, song and dance in traditional performance confirms it as a ritual mode that meaningfully integrates the experience of the collective in a total and complete form. It is in this function of mediation – bringing apparently disparate elements together to reveal a continuum underlying all experience – that Aidoo’s aesthetic most dynamically attempts to re-member and modernise the old Africa.

In order to relevantly frame the totality of a modern African condition, Aidoo’s traditionalist aesthetic must ‘travel’ through the configuration of contemporary human geography and the history that ratifies it. For Sissie to leave home is to amplify her perspectives; it is for her to know that a Western-sponsored modernity is implicated in an unequal distribution of economic, social and psychic resources that perpetuates the dependency complex of so-called ‘Third-World’ peoples. It is to know that she lives in a neo-colonialist global formation in which the march of capital increasingly foreshortens a truly catholic, human perspective. Out of these real-
ities, and from Aidoo’s Africanist perspective, the aesthetic venture and the human adventure that is history are related meaningfully within the terms of discursive, cultural and political struggle, resistance and transformation. Thus, in *Our Sister Killjoy*, the struggle against the hegemonic forms and complexes deposited on the African psyche by the depredations of a colonial and neo-colonial history issues into an effort to recover for the African the self-apprehension without which contemporary history becomes the successive temporal punctuations of his/her victimage. Voyage and voyager are redeemed by Aidoo’s traditionalist aesthetic from the order of sheer happenstance and take on the function of cognitively mapping out the outlines of an other history, an other mode of being and acting in the world.

This mapping function is elaborated in the reiterated prolepses of *Our Sister Killjoy*. Often rhetorically preceded by ‘From knowledge gained since’, these self-conscious, attention-getting, ‘poetic’ parts take us away from being lost in the temporally successive flow and mimic immediacy of narrative to moments of mediation when Aidoo strips the world of its outward, superficial forms, and ‘spatializes’ time to fix historical, social and existential verities. This is the aspect of the novel that inscribes a mnemonics of unforgetting, and it is given a broader scope in the final section when the heroine has come into her own, speaking in the authoritative register of mental decolonization. Owusu aptly observes: ‘Since knowledge, in Aidoo’s text, is power, gaining knowledge of self in relation to one’s (mental and physical) environment is considered necessary preparation for self-empowerment’.15

‘Charity’, as the old proverb has it, ‘begins at home’. Sissie, the exemplary figure of unforgetting, saves some of her harshest criticism for her brother Africans who are sold on the empty rhetoric of a liberal universalism. Aidoo’s critique is of a piece with Fanon’s prophetic warning in his essay, ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’. Fanon, charting the implications of the disproportionate positioning of the post-colonial African nation and its leader class, observes that, with the passing of time, a genuine nationalist consciousness could lose its integrity, leaving ‘the confusion of a neo-liberal universalism to emerge...as a claim to nationhood’.16

Fanon’s analysis of a colonial African middle class wholly emulative of its European counterpart modifies but retains the explanatory force of Hegel’s model of the Master/Slave relationship. In Hegel’s dialectic, the master’s quest for recognition imposes upon the slave the desire to possess the master’s value as his own value; in Fanon’s redefinition for his thesis on neo-colonial relations, the introjection of European values by a mimic African middle class becomes both the condition and consequence of excessive self-abnegation:

[T]he national bourgeoisie identifies with the Western bourgeoisie, from whom it has learnt its lessons... In its beginnings, the national bourgeoisie of the colonial
countries identifies itself with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West. We need not think that it is jumping ahead; it is in fact beginning at the end. It is already senile before it has come to know the petulance, the fearlessness, or the will to succeed of youth.18

Aidoo begins from a similar premise. As she sees it, to the extent that the the elite African seeks the validation for his being-in-the-world elsewhere, away from his history and people, he remains a problematic representative of an African nationality distanced from a consciousness of itself.

Such a consideration, for instance, informs the manner in which Aidoo focalises Sissie’s encounter with Sammy – ‘her fellow countryman’ – at the German embassy dinner at the beginning of Our Sister Killjoy. By way of a careful orchestration of narrative distance, Aidoo’s technique reveals an African lost to himself, a morbid figure of alienation who provokes in Sissie an overwhelming feeling of sensuous distaste:

He spoke [the German] language well and was familiar with them in a way that made her feel uneasy.

Our Sister shivered and fidgeted in her chair.

Saliva rose into her mouth every time her eyes fell on her countryman’s face.

(p. 9)

In Aidoo’s radical narrative shorthand, Sammy, ‘the African’, becomes the ‘single man’, disconnected and disengaged from any sense of communal belonging. With no ground of his own to stand on, and compromised by the assault on his desiring African body by the hedonic forms of the West, he has quite simply mortgaged his soul for a mess of potage: ‘His voice, as he spoke of that far-off land, was wet with longing... Perhaps he had been invited to dinner just to sing the wonders of Europe?’ (9).

It is types like Sammy that provoke those moments of sharp invective and suasive polemic in Our Sister Killjoy. In such moments, Aidoo characteristically settles a vituperation on the elite African male, the pseudocosmopolitan who:

[Can only regurgitate what he has learnt from his bosses for you [and] ... even more dangerous, who in the face of a reality that is more tangible than the massive walls of the slave forts standing along our beaches, still talks of universal truth, universal art, universal literature and the Gross National product. (p. 6)

Aidoo addresses here the alien technologies of representation internalized by, and occluding a proper historical understanding in, an African leadership that by default is male. As she presents it, the ‘universal’, as long as it is defined elsewhere, serves as a strategy of surveillance, its purpose to assimilate Africa into a death-dealing dependency on the centres of metropolitan power. The modern methods may be more subtle than the slave forts which, in their time, placed strategically on the African coast, helped Europe to monitor captive populations, but they are no less pernicious.
Moving from slave castle in Africa to feudal castle in the heartland of Germany, therefore, Aidoo’s counterawareness of history displaces a liberal version of the world and pursues the emphatic reminder by Benjamin that ‘there has never been a document of civilization which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism’. Brecht’s version of this historical insight is even more pointed: ‘the mansion of culture’, he declared, ‘is built on dogshit’. To those two deflations of Eurocentric humanist and culturalist pretentions, Aidoo brings a third, grounded self-consciously in an Africanist perspective. As Aidoo delineates Sissie’s relationship with Marija, the German woman she meets in Bavaria, we need to remind ourselves that an implicit critique of a liberal-humanist ethic is going on. Sissie confirms this in a silent response to Marija’s German culturalist pride as she pronounces judgement on a materially wealthy but humanistically impoverished Europe:

There is nowhere in the Western world is a Must –
...No city is sacred
No spot is holy
Not Rome,
Not Paris,
Not London
...And
the why and wherefores
Should be obvious (80).

Sissie, the exemplary Africanist, irreverently rediscovers Europe as the heartland, not of a humanism, but of racialism and imperialism. Aidoo gives us this theme in a spare mnemonic: the names Big Adolf and Small Adolf, belonging to Marija’s husband and son, respectively, remind us, through ironic indirection, of the modern barbarian Hitler and the racist excesses of his Third Reich. Race, as Aidoo insistently points out in her novel, has always mattered as a marker of difference and a pretext to deform human relationships. In the circumstances, Marija, ‘daughter of mankind’s/ Self-appointed most royal line,/ The House of Aryan’, cannot, in any pure sense, be Sissie’s friend: it is not a level playing field for all, contrary to what a liberal romance of ‘the Great Family of Man’ (121) will have us believe. A fundamental asymmetry of power coincides with Sissie’s and Marija’s racial locations, and displaces the notion of a catholic femininity and a common, universal humanity as meaningful political possibilities in the here and now for Aidoo’s novel.

In what once was the heartland of Aryan supremacy, the black African woman and her white European counterpart figurally replay the conditions under which a solicitous Western script sets up canons of ‘universal’ taste and appreciation, and educates its other to acquiesce in them. As
Sissie battens on Marija’s plums, ‘with skin colour almost like her own’ (40), Aidoo almost literalizes a metaphor of the techniques of seduction and gentle coercion which secure Africa’s ‘cannibalization’ and incorporation into a Western universe. For Sissie to succumb to Marija’s advances is to excessively forget her self, it is for her self to be annihilated. Her resistance of Marija’s sexual advances figures what Aidoo sees as the need to actively cultivate an African self-presence to counter the subtleties that seek our consent to the decadent forms of the West. We are encouraged to read in Marija’s desperation and loneliness the ironic possibility that Western culture is dysfunctional, a dead-end which cannot provide the terms for a viable definition of African selfhood. For the self-conscious woman writer a survivalist ethic is an African imperative. Aidoo declares uncompromisingly:

Dear Lord
I believe
Only in the
Survival of
My kind
...I have to –
I have to – (98).

To believe otherwise, it seems, is to further the catastrophic course of contemporary African history.

In the section of the novel titled ‘From Our Sister Killjoy’, Aidoo’s survivalism is elaborated into a cautionary allegory. Here, Aidoo will once more ‘literalise’ the metaphors of a death-dealing West sucking African vitality into its maw in a contemporary event that fired the imagination of the modern world. This is the moment of Christian Baarnard’s transplanting of African hearts into the chests of white people in South Africa. While the procedure of the ‘Christian Doctor’ begs a questionable ethics for Sissie, her African ‘brother’, Kunle, is unwilling and unable to acknowledge those questions. Kunle, wholly given over to the progressivist imaginary of the West, illustrates Aidoo’s polemical point that ‘we have been caught at the confluence of history and...it has made ignorant victims of some of us’ (118). In a woeful misreading of history, Kunle believes the white surgeon tearing out black hearts and replacing them in white bodies is helping to usher in the black ‘millenium’ (101). The irony is not lost on us when Kunle dies in a car accident in his native Nigeria, victim, appositely, of the white man’s artefact. Aidoo rubs in both irony and metaphor: Kunle’s insurance, taken out with a ‘reliable’ British firm ‘with cousins in Ottawa, Sydney, Salisbury and Johannesburg’ is forfeit because he was overspeeding. The ever-present danger for the African is that of hastily forgetting his/her location in time and space, history and geography, and needlessly self-destructing as a consequence.
Aidoo’s enlarged awareness reveals an Africa continually shortchanged in the processes of her insertion into modernity, as much by her own sons as by others. Hence the necessity for setting up a reiterative mnemonic register in Our Sister Killjoy to exorcise the tragic forgettings that precipitate the massive national failures of contemporary Africa. Aidoo’s is not a politics of blame that simply settles all the failures of Africa on the depredations visited on it by the West. What Our Sister Killjoy intuits as the historic failure of African national elites is, above all, given sustained expression in terms of a willingness to remain trapped in the white man’s artefact.

The debates between Sissie and her brothers in the third part of the novel turn around this difficult and all-important question: the self-perpetuating cycle of dependency that defines an African elite. The contemporary reality is that a relentless commodifying of value by a Western-sponsored capitalism has not failed to seek Africa out. Lured by Western currencies, the skilled African, who ought rightly to be the insurance of the collective, has become – as imaged in Aidoo’s polemic – a symbol of its foreclosure as he refuses to give up a privileged location in the West and return home where he is needed most. Aidoo’s frustration repeatedly seeks an outlet in the weighty interrogations of the fourth section of the novel. ‘Was it not part of the original idea’, she asks:

that we should come to these alien places, study what we can of what they know and then go back home?
As it has turned out, we come and clearly learn how to die ... from a people whose own survival instincts have not failed them once yet. (p. 120)

Aidoo’s understanding diagnoses the modernity of Africa as a condition of psycho-affective disequilibrium resulting from alien and alienating desires.
As though in response to Gellner’s modernist hierarchy, which wills the forgetting of ‘low’ cultures in the triumphal certainty of their inevitable supersession by a ‘high’ Western culture, Cardinal Zoungrana has observed:

Beyond the refusal of exterior domination [by Africans] is the urge to reconnect in a deep way with Africa’s cultural heritage, which has been for too long misunderstood and rejected. Far from being a superficial or folkloric attempt to bring back to life some of the traditions or practices of our ancestors, it is a matter of constructing a new African society, whose identity is not conferred from outside.

The return of Aidoo’s heroine at the end of Our Sister Killjoy is executed in the positive spirit of the Cardinal’s transformative traditionalism. Sissie’s homecoming underlines the commitment of the woman novelist to an Africanist project of collective self-recovery. As her physical self flies home from Europe, we understand Sissie to have been a mental voyager,
too. Through Aidoo’s aesthetic performance, we see the exemplary African woman completing, in her circular journey, a circuit of meditation and mediation that vitally re-members an other time, an other space, in order to promote a home-grown ethic of collectivity and survival. Aidoo’s urgent ontological and political imperatives centre the need to recover and remember a forgotten archive of African values as a first step towards forging a subjectivity for African men and women, a subjectivity in history, a history of our own. Her demand is not sentimentalized. The pressing requirement is to transvalue the old values of Africa, and to bring them into a meaningful relationship with the present and the future, with the exigencies of an inescapable modernity. For the Ghanaian woman novelist, it is not simply a question of a perfect past and a bad present, but ‘which factors out of both the past and the present represent for us the most dynamic forces for the future’ (116). Her challenge to us ultimately is to will ourselves out of the wreckage of history, and to wrest from that wreckage the collective agency that alone will underwrite our survival as a whole people.

NOTES

2. For an excellent account of the role played by Robinson Crusoe in European self-fashioning, see Peter Hulme’s Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean:1492-1497 (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 175-222.
6. The full text of Renan’s comment reads: ‘Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.’ See Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’, in Nation and Narration, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.
7. Consider Fanon’s ‘The Negro [is] never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites...’ Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 212.


15. Owusu, p. 356.


23. We might also remember here Rev. S. R. B. Attoh Ahuma’s prescient comment in 1911 to the effect that ‘Intelligent Retrogression is the only Progression that will save our beloved country. This may sound a perfect paradox, but it is, nevertheless, the truth...’ See his *The Gold Coast Nation and National Consciousness*, 2nd ed. (Liverpool: Frank Cass, 1971), p. vii.
The White Rooster

He tossed from one side to the next; he sighed, he got up and rummaged in the plastic box for tablets, for a headache and nerves. I lay on the same bed watching him in the dark. The luminous hands of the alarm clock pointed eerily to 4. When he turned the radio on, I got out of bed. There wasn’t much I could do for him. His beloved was dying and he was grieving for her – on my bed.

It is like a video-strip in my mind, that Easter Weekend when I first discovered I was sharing him with someone else. You put yourself in the right mood for misery and the whole thing comes back, complete with the colour of her wrapper, the nylon scarf and the tribal marks on her cheeks.

The job down south had been a turning point in our marriage – a detour, a bypass – a pleasant diversion for him in unfamiliar territory. He was to live away from me and the children for two years. I had discouraged him from going, I had put on tantrums, wept, created a scene in the presence of his close friends. But he was determined in his grim, tight-lipped manner. That was the beginning of our separate lives, for him a new lease of bachelorhood and the privilege of being alone after sixteen years of marriage, for me, feelings of despair, rejection and incompleteness in a foreign culture. He came every Friday evening though, after sundown and left before sunrise on the Monday morning. It was also the beginning of his life as a travelling husband and of all the trappings that go with it.

I lay awake at nights and wondered if he was cut out to be single like some people are. I called him my ‘silent Buddha’, my ‘sadhu’, my ‘Buddhist monk’, sometimes, as he sat in the living room lost in thought, coiling a single strand of hair around his finger. He doubted like Graham Greene. Surely that Genesis story was a myth like all the other creation myths. Surely, the earth being one of the numerous planets in the Universe, was not the only privileged one. Why didn’t God make us perfect in the first place? Why the Fall? Why the test? Did God fear competition from man? What is sin anyway? Is it not a societal, cultural phenomenon?

When he moved away from us, he chose an austere existence in a three-roomed house standing crookedly on sandy soil with a single mango tree in the yard. Lizards chased each other over the cement steps leading to his place. The heat beat down with a vengeance on the corrugated zinc roof. The river was only minutes away, an enormous sheet of glass as far as the horizon, but you had to go up the slope on the road to see it. The place
had neither electricity nor water in the taps. A metal water tank sat precariously on a cement platform outside his front door. He used candles, and sometimes sat in the dark with his radio on.

'I have no emotion left for pets,' he declared once, when the children wanted to bring the dog into the house. Dogs had to be chained and kept in their place, strictly for guarding the house. Where were his emotions, I wondered, if he had any at all. His grandmother, with whom he had spent his early childhood in the village, found use for a child only when she needed firewood, or water from the stream. 'As far back as I can remember,' he would reprimand our private-school-trained, urban children, 'I did everything for myself.' To me, it sounded like something from the previous century – the boy from the village going to school in town, with his mat rolled up and his steel trunk on his head. Where was I, I wondered, as he walked miles to school from the railway station, in his khaki shorts, holding his Cortina shoes in one hand. They pinched. By the time he was ten years old, he had dispensed with everyone around him – he was fully capable of looking after himself. It is that self-same boy in the faded photograph that I saw in him now – tough, resilient and independent even of a God.

I was made to be part of a team, conditioned for marriage and for a life which venerated the husband. My Indian heritage kept my grandmother behind the steel almirah when she spoke to my grandfather; my mother had had her marriage arranged for her at seventeen, and derived her life's satisfaction from watching my father eat his meals and in caring for his needs to the minutest detail.

She was a receptionist in that little private hospital tucked away among the Neem trees at the end of a bumpy stretch of dirt road. His sister's house was right next to the hospital – a roomy house with children playing on the verandah amidst piles of washing that awaited ironing. It was here, in his sister's yard that he would sit on steamy, hot afternoons with his glass of beer, watching the bustle outside the hospital. They exchanged greetings as she came in for the afternoon shift. He knew she was from a neighbouring village by her accent; she spoke his language except for those colourful phrases peculiar to her village. She helped out in his sister's house whenever she was off duty, cooking, ironing or plaiting someone's hair. She would have merged with the other invisible members of the extended family who did odd chores around the house, if it weren't for the fact that she stood out in my husband's mind.

Sometimes she would come forward to take his empty glass inside. He looked her over and enquired gently about her work, her parents, her village. She would answer in monosyllables, but she was a constant presence in his sister's house when he was around. If he didn't see her there when he stopped by after work, his eyes searched her out. Sometimes he would park his car outside the hospital and go in to greet her.
It was when my husband moved into the three-roomed house that I felt the first stirrings of unease – he would have called it jealousy. He was leading a life of his own, unaccountable to me as a partner in marriage. And what was wrong with that? I knew several commuting husbands, men who for years lived away from their families in big cities visiting their wives and children periodically. Hannatu, Biola and my other women friends didn’t brood over companionship or the lack of it, nor did they get hysterical over similar, convenient arrangements. They accepted it with grace and lived their lives to the full. They kept the household going with the help of numerous sisters, cousins and brothers-in-law, the children fed and sent to school, the vegetable patch weeded, the poultry-yard swept and the Volkswagen Beetle in manageable condition. The husband arrives for a weekend and it is like Christmas! A chicken freshly slaughtered for his dinner, the pepper-soup bubbles in the pot, the house gets tidied and order is restored for forty-eight hours. He comes to a ready-made home. He mercifully escapes the grinding routine and the problems encountered in his absence – the malaria attacks, the pneumonia, the broken arm, the petrol queues and the electricity cuts.

With me it was never a honeymoon when he drove in on Friday evenings. I bristled with resentment. By Saturday, I loosened up a little and narrated all the trivia that had kept me going in his absence. I expected an hour-by-hour run down of events from him. But he carefully sifted and censored and selected what he told me. I blossomed in his presence though, however brief it was. In the way he took control of things from the moment he arrived. There was a precision, a firmness even in the way he turned on the radio. He always got the frequency and the metre-band he was looking for, clean and clear, not fuzzy and muffled as I heard it usually, with sea gulls crying in the background.

It was on one of his weekend visits that he mentioned her, very casually. He didn’t single her out for mention – he remarked in passing that he would be in a real strait, if it weren’t for his niece and a certain Agnes who came each week to help clean his little house. He didn’t have to say more – my wifely intuition determined the rest. And that is where, I presume, it all began. He sipped his beer in the living room and watched her thin frame through the open door as she dusted and lingered over the louvres, folded his dressing-gown tenderly, and made his bed. Week after week she was into the little intimate details of where he kept his toothbrush, the side of the bed he slept on, the way he hung his shirt by the collar in the corner of the wardrobe-door. He watched her leave her fingerprints on everything, and as he moved about his solitary house late in the evening, he felt her lingering presence.

At Christmas and Easter, we usually accompanied him down south for a brief holiday, and we stayed in this stark and crooked house, without water and electricity. I had the uneasy feeling right from the start that my being there was an intrusion. I went about the house changing things
around, putting his shirts on hangers, trying to leave my stamp where she had been. The house was spotless. The children enjoyed this place hugely. It was like camping, they said. An empty living room with two chairs, an ash-tray and a little Sony pocket-radio on the dining table. His files, books, Milan Kundera and John Updike lay scattered on the floor. The kitchen had a kerosene stove, a box of matches, one set of cutlery, a plate, a coffee mug and an aluminium kettle. No ‘fridge. No flowers.

He went to work as usual while we were there, calling at his sister’s place to see her before coming home to the little house. He was a dutiful man, my husband, and made sure he did the right thing by her, and by me. Some men are clumsy when it comes to two women, they lie, they cheat, they are so heavy-handed about it, it shows. One of the women suffers, and it is usually the wife. I suffered within but not because my husband treated me badly. Oh, no! I suffered because he was so adept, because he was such an artist and because he ‘loved’ me in his own way. He was so careful not to hurt me that in my Anglo-Saxon-trained, Indian mind, his deception seemed doubly worse. He bought expensive presents for the children whenever we visited. He took us to the Palm Grove Restaurant where we sat under palm trees as freshly tapped palm wine was brought down from the trees and served along with peppered meat grilled on hot charcoal. He was ‘bridging the cultures’ admirably. He had, as they say, his act together. I was the misfit sitting in the heart of Nigeria, donning a brightly coloured wrapper and blouse, but within, experiencing an irreparable loss. The Indian movies of my childhood and youth hadn’t prepared me for this.

I was six years old in my purple skirt and blouse and hair plaitsed and tied with purple ribbons. It was my first week at school. My father was the newly posted magistrate in that town. My mother, the daughter of a wealthy landowner, was conscious of our social standing and expected me to be friendly with suitable well-dressed children at school. But the teacher came by to visit at the end of the week, and in between the coffee and the tiffin that arrived on a stainless steel tray, I heard her say to my mother: ‘This child has a large heart, Ma. She is always with the poorest girl in the class, that peon’s daughter who comes to school with a row of safety pins on her blouse, and no chappals... The child has the heart of a saint, Ma.’ Where was my large heart now, and my saintly disposition?

It was when his friend Yakubu was visiting that I first heard of the white rooster. A tribal funeral rite, he explained, where at a man’s death (or a woman’s), all his earthly lovers presented themselves at the burial with a white rooster each. It was a ceremony discreetly carried out at the tail end of the funeral when the immediate family had left the place. But it was not without its spectators who boasted of the man’s conquests or the woman’s promiscuity as the case may be. Adultery, tacitly or openly accepted, got a public airing. Yakubu made a joke of it in his usual facetious way, something about the white roosters lining up to follow the man to
the other world. It intrigued me though, as many of my husband’s tribal customs did. Why white? White that is worn by widows in India, symbolically shunning the colour and splendour of this world on the death of a husband? White that stands for unblemished bridal purity and innocence in some places? White that now signified adultery, deceit, ‘the other woman’.

That Easter my uneasiness poisoned our entire visit. Not without reason though. He seemed more familiar with her than ever before, a mutual understanding that excluded suspicion and query. Agnes didn’t come to clean the house while I was there. However, I did see her from time to time. With me she was polite, almost respectful, like the pubescent ‘amariya’ in the Hausa culture, distractingly invisible, hiding behind her nylon ‘gelle’. It was a little tableau in which he and she were the central characters and I, the unseen but all-knowing chorus.

I lost out on all counts. I hadn’t neglected him or his household or our children. They had always been my priority. He had never complained. But I was not her and could never unlearn myself to be. I did all the little things that wives usually outgrow after sixteen years of marriage – freshly squeezed orange juice when he came in after a game of badminton, his meals served on special plates, flowers in vases, books and cards, in and out of birthday seasons. But I was not monosyllabic like her, nor servile, even when I tried to be a wholesome and cheerful chattel. My education and upbringing came through when I dusted the louvres. She was without expectation; she had him when he chose to be with her, and demanded nothing of him. When she was not in her hospital uniform and smelling of antiseptic, she was in what seemed to be her one and only faded blue wrapper. She didn’t listen to the radio and didn’t claim to know about existentialism. But she probably knew how to love.

That was eight years ago. Since then my husband has resigned his job down south and has moved back with us. Every time his travels took him in that direction, my thoughts went to her. But I assuaged my fears thinking that distance would have cooled his ardour.

The grimness with which he announced her illness startled me. She was dying of an undiagnosed disease in the same hospital where she had worked. A telephone message had said she was on the decline. A cloud hung over the two of us that entire evening; he, choked with grief, tried to doze in snatches with the radio on. I tried to read a book, my head splitting with questions. It didn’t come as a surprise to me when I saw him packing his travelling case early in the morning. If there was a message for him at the office that she had died, he would travel directly, he said. The menacing white rooster rose like a spectre in my mind.
In Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues*, and Gail Scott’s *Heroine* protagonists, frequently doubling as narrators, set out on quests to discover places, people, histories, and personas which might provide a sense of belonging, strength, and psychic peace. None of them find what they initially anticipated and resolutions are more difficult than imagined. Given the current Eurocentric biased theoretical climate and some post/colonial resistances to it, the novels’ plots and their ‘unccentred, pluralistic, and multifarious’ content might be considered as either post-modernist or post/colonial at the expense of some kind of critical compromise. For instance, some post-modernist critics’ privilege, formalism, and/or ambivalence might blind them to the post/colonial historical roots or influences of these literary texts’ practices; while some post-colonialist critics may object to the juxtaposition of novels set in Sri Lanka, Québec, and the United States as diluting the coherence of what constitutes the post/colonial politically and in literature.

Cultural differences certainly demand vigilance against totalizing what defines texts as signs of post/colonial or resistance literature. But the sites of Sri Lanka, Québec and the United States in the novels in question do share common post-modernist ground in terms of how they are constructed to dramatize cultural imperialism, post/colonial relations of power, and imaginative strategies of resistance. For instance, Tamil and Singhalese story-telling apparently informs *Running in the Family* but Ondaatje’s knowledge and practice of post-modernist strategies heightens the novel’s cultural work as a post/colonial expatriate’s text. *Heroine*’s interweaving of ethnic, gender and class politics within an English text rooted in québécois neo-nationalist left politics, anti-heterosexism, and feminist theory is simultaneously post/colonial and post-modern. *Volkswagen Blues* is more classical realist but its intertextualities and post/colonial sense of displacement and alienation can be interpreted as post-modernist. A realist text is not inherently any less interrogative, nor is a post-modernist work necessarily any less anti-colonial. What this paper attempts to do is to
interpret how – to gloss Stephen Slemon’s call for the consideration of Second-World texts as ambivalent examples of literary resistance\(^5\) – \textit{Running in the Family}, \textit{Volkswagen Blues}, and \textit{Heroine} negotiate the difficult terrain between post-colonial and post-modern strategies of resistance.

The title \textit{Running in the Family} suggests an inherited familial trait – borne out by the author’s father’s dipsomania – while at the same time indicating something frightening and/or elusive. Ondaatje’s quest as an expatriate writer and family biographer is ‘to touch [his family] into words’ (22), but he is also afraid of what he may discover about them – especially his father – and himself. For instance, an italicized third person passage signals how the author identifies with his father’s alcoholic madness and how their ‘nightmare’ is the same (see 17). A variation on this motif appears in the chapter ‘Asia’, when Ondaatje relates a friend’s comment ‘that it was only when I was drunk that I seemed to know exactly what I wanted’ (22). Then there is the mythic nightmare ‘story about [...] his father’ which Ondaatje says he ‘cannot come to terms with’ (181). This time it is more detailed and frightening; especially given the notion of his father having ‘captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through’ (182).

Ondaatje’s fear of repeating his father’s fate is finally feverishly rendered in the chapter ‘Thanikama’, or ‘Aloneness’, in which an account of one of his father’s drinking binges becomes a self-referential passage on the process of writing.

In the bathroom ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode [...] He knelt down on the red tile, slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. It was page 189. He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them. He sat down forgetting the mirror he had been moving towards. Scared of the company of the mirror [...] He drank. There. He saw the midnight rat. (189)

That the reference to page 189 occurs on the same page in the actual text is a powerful conceit. It reinforces Ondaatje’s fear of becoming like his father, of being his mirror image. The chaos of the scene emphasizes how the forces affecting the life of Mervyn Ondaatje were more powerful than he was and how, in the face of such chaos, as Michael Ondaatje confesses in the acknowledgements, the text’s seeming ‘authenticity’ is a mere ‘gesture’ (206).

The ‘Family’, as the setting and the map at the beginning of the text implies, is also Sri Lanka (11). Ondaatje, as expatriate writer, grapples with its post-colonial familiarity and strangeness; for which his father’s schizophrenic binges become a nightmarish icon. Sri Lanka’s long colonial history is summarized in the epical invocation of its many names.

The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name was changed, as well as its shape, – Serendip, Ratnapida (‘island of gems’), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon – the wife of many.
This passage is made more poignant by the subsequent reference to the arrival of the author’s Dutch ‘ancestor [...] in 1600’ and the self-referential pin-pointing of the event ‘Here. At the centre of the rumour. At this point on the map’ (64). Like other references by Ondaatje to his own seduction by and ‘invasion’ of Sri Lanka, to the power and the impotence of his sword of language to conquer the elusive ‘here’, ‘this point on the map’, there is an acceptance of the limitations of his ability to logocentrically know and transmit Sri Lanka’s history. Or as he says of his father, though it is applicable to his expatriate’s quandry in fictionalizing Sri Lanka: ‘There is so much to know and we can only guess’; ‘the book again is incomplete’ (200-01).

This does not mean that Ondaatje is a revisionist apologist for colonialism. The colonizers’ ‘false maps’ (63) have several textual equivalents in other Occidental misperceptions and metadiscourses. For instance, Paul Bowles is cited as writing that ‘[t]he Sinhalese are beyond a doubt one of the least musical people in the world’ (76). Edward Lear is cited as caricaturing the local inhabitants as primates: ‘[t]he brown people of this island seem to me odiously inquisitive and botherly-idiotic. All the while the savages go on grinning and chattering to each other’ (78). But where Lear’s colonial perspective led him to dismiss the local peoples’ ‘chatter’ as a sign of their presumed inferiority, Ondaatje turns familial chatter and gossip into fantastic, seductive, reminders of its civilizing function and cultural value. Or as such ‘intricate conversations’ are eulogized: ‘No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized’ (26). Contrary to the imperial necessity of trying to pass off its ideology as objective and the local as insignificant, Running revels in the subjective blurring and multiplicity of everyday facts and in a consequent re-centering of the local as primary as opposed to peripheral.

The text is too joyous in its humorous homages to Ondaatje’s extended family, and their class privilege was too great, to indiscriminately summarize them as ‘victims’; yet their cultural colonization is pervasive. The lighter side runs riot from Mervyn Ondaatje’s failed career at Cambridge (31-2) to the prevalence of ‘imported songs such as “Moonlight Bay” and “A Fine Romance”’ (46). The long-term internalization of such foreign influences results in the self-deprecation apparent in one of the text’s epigrams: ‘“The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils, whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat”’ (12). In the conclusion of the chapter, ‘Karapothas’, a metaphor for foreigners – ‘the beetles with white spots who never grew ancient here’ (80) – the tragic consequences...
of Occidental imperialism are savaged in a poem by Lakdasa Wikramasinha:

Don't talk to me about Matisse...
the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio
where the nude woman reclines forever
on a sheet of blood
Talk to me instead of the culture generally –
how the murderers were sustained
by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
villages the painters came, and our white-washed
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (85-6)

Ondaatje's strategies in the text attempt to avoid perpetrating such cultural violence.

Yet as much as the 'flavour of lost-generation romance' of the text accents the 'fading splendour [...] damaged hopes, [and] impinging tawdri ness?' of Sri Lanka's colonization, the exoticism is perhaps too class bound to avoid romanticizing the eccentricities of privilege. It is also ironic that the attentions to Ondaatje's mother's life make her formidable agency seem almost unexceptional, non-descript (unlike her theatrics! (see 170-71)) – '[she] calmly asked for a divorce, demanding no alimony [...] trained herself as a housekeeper-manager and supported us through schools by working in hotels in Ceylon and then England till she died' (172). There is clearly a whole other auto/biographical fiction waiting to be written about Doris' 'blasted' life, the potential of imaginatively expanding her anti-colonial struggles against the 'dark unknown alphabet', as Ondaatje poeticizes it, of her marriage (150). In short, it is difficult not to read Ondaatje's masculine identified emphasis upon his anti-heroic father as eclipsing the heroine-ism of his mother; as partially recapitulating or re-internalizing the oldest colonial discourse.

Gail Scott's heroine is attracted to and disillusioned by Québécois left politics and the sexual revolution of the 1970s and subsequently attempts, both personally and artistically, to create an ideal feminist persona. The various quests of the author/narrator/protagonist, or 'heroine', for a revolutionary left-nationalist state, sexual liberation, new ways of writing about female experience, and a feminist paradise, are all post/colonial in terms of their historical continuity and identity politics. Yet as much as the heroine as Anglo "other" from Ontario may sympathize with the neo-nationalist struggle of the québécois, the male privilege of "sexual liberation" and the heroine's difficulties in overcoming her internalizations of gender oppression cause her to shift focus from the male-dominated anti-colonial discourses of class and ethnicity to that of feminism. Class critique remains important but it has a particularly feminist cast, as in the recurrent scenes with the itinerant 'grey woman': 'The heroine trembles... Thinking she senses how a woman can end up like that. By being a slave
to love until she hates herself’ (123). A similar fatigue with or subversion of provincial, exclusively white, ethnic tensions occurs around recurrent appearances of a ‘Black tourist’ (9) who asks a male white revolutionary, and by proxy the white heroine (and reader): ‘“how would you treat me in a novel? Among other things, I bet at every mention you’d state my colour”’ (78). In an attempt to establish a new socio-linguistic, non-racist, practice he is thereafter simply referred to as the ‘tourist’.8

Most of the novel circulates around the heroine’s struggle to wean herself off of her dependencies upon her lover/comrade, Jon, and his disregard for her as a woman and artist. Jon is one of the leaders of a sectarian left organization called ‘F-group’ and the heroine slowly and painfully learns that he is as phallocratic and traffics in women as much as the capitalist system which he would overthrow. Accordingly, he ‘defend[s] F-group’s decision to drop questions like feminism’ the better to ‘intervene directly in the workers’ movement’ (97). The heroine is as a result increasingly attracted to radical feminism and the solution, which the heroine’s friend Marie offers time and again, that ‘[a]s feminists [...] our responsibility is writing’ (113). ‘FORCE yourself to write [...] By your own words you may start to live’ (172).9 The resultant novel, Heroine, is just such an experiment.

The idealism inherent in such a strategy is reined in by the novel’s dramatizations of pressing women’s issues (i.e. wife abuse, sexploitation, the unequal division of domestic labour); its function as a moving auto/biographical case-study of the contradictions of female liberation; its discursively fragmented, anti-logocentric structure; and its parodies of its own earnestness: ‘Maybe the pneumonia I got last winter was the cause of the final humiliation. Of course, a real heroine would never get dragged down like that’ (166). The process of the heroine’s feminist empowerment is linear but the fragmented shifts in time and the repetitiveness of certain scenes may make this less obvious upon a first reading. One advantage of this narrative strategy is that it helps create a greater sense of the laboriousness of the heroine’s process of change. Another advantage is that it makes it easier for the narrative to avoid getting bogged down in the mechanics of verisimilitude or dogma.

The recurrent bathtub scene is a case in point. It marks the time present of most of the novel as the heroine, masturbating herself with warm faucet water, contemplates her past and future. The reader, however, cannot appreciate the full significance of the first manifestations of this scene, nor of the heroine’s ability to pleasure herself, until the full narrative has been played out and she leaves the tub (presumably to work on the novel). So too, the initial lesbian discourse – ‘I’m lying with my legs up. Oh dream only a woman’s mouth could do it as well as you’ (9) – can thus be enounced and returned to without becoming the absolute focus of the text. After all: ‘[a] heroine locked in time could be the ruination of a novel’ (132).
One of the last bathtub scenes also radically shifts from the heroine coming to a larger global picture:

Oh. The ripples jerking up the stomach. Don't stop. Get it while you can. Damn. Just a tickle. After I always feel like crying. Then some starving Africans walk across the television screen. Reminding me that in larger contexts, North America is like a soap opera for the white and educated. (161-2)

Or as the heroine imagines 'a Black man[']s' thoughts: ""In this city everyone's a minority"" (63). Given the novel's celebration of linguistic 'free associat[ion]' (78) as an attempt to get beyond the conventional restrictions of language and as a means of marking multiple subject positions, the oxymoronic phrase 'everyone's a minority' concomitantly foregrounds the multiple identities and/or solitudes of individuals, the cosmopolitanism of Montréal, the paradoxical minority status of the majority of women/heroines, and a black majority perspective.

The negative consequences of male dominated culture and language are also often critiqued and parodied. For instance, some of the terms of the feminist slogan 'A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle' are inverted and recycled in an allegorical dream sequence about Jon's affair with a female swimmer. They both get cast as fish whom the heroine tries to drown until she remembers: 'you both like having your head held under water. BECAUSE YOU'RE FISH' (167). Read: BECAUSE YOU'RE COLD-BLOODED! The subsequent death of a 'Papa Moon' fish which Jon had given the heroine fulfills a second revengeful dream (176) as the male adjectival sign, 'Papa', of male appropriation of a matriarchal sign, the 'Moon', is canceled out as if by sympathetic magic. This sequence, like the novel's title, subtly signals the feminist import of the Umberto Eco epigraph to the novel: 'We use signs and the signs of signs only in cases where the things themselves are lacking' ([5]). I am also tempted to read the names 'Jon' (J-O-N) and 'F-group' as subtle signs of the male oppression of women. In such a reading 'Jon' is a paradigmatic substitute for 'John' (J-O-H-N), as in the client of a prostitute, and the letter 'F' is an acronym for 'fuck' or 'fucking' – something which the 'Johns' of 'F-group' would seem to do with and especially to their female comrades as much as anything else.

Yet it can be argued that women's different relationship to language is more theorized than practiced in the novel; that the heroine's discovery of how to live thanks to writing, the poetic self-indulgence of the rambling narrative, is too dependent upon a post-modernist aesthetic that can only speak to the initiated. Or as Arun Mukherjee has argued in terms of post-modernist theorists' over-emphasis upon the literary destabilization of reality: 'precisely because a literary discourse is caught in several affiliative networks, its ideal reader, one who has epistemological privilege, is someone who is a cultural insider, who, in S. K. Desai's words, possesses "cultural inwardness"'. Considered from this perspective one
should perhaps read the heroine’s ostensibly progressive translation of the ‘black’ sign into ‘tourist’ – to reinvoke the aforementioned epigraph by Eco – as indicative of the device’s own lack; that it is too gratuitous, too contaminated by a universalist tradition of racial hegemony and erasure, to support a resistive postcolonial reading.

This does not mean that the heroine should not try to make it new. After all, the novel’s use of language and its narrative structure and content are important contributions to the dis-Man-tling of the Romance genre. And as much as the novel lambastes the colonial condition of women it also continually suggests the way forward is yet to be fully imagined. Or, as the closure tantalizingly reads:

[... ] the heroine feels that old desire for a terrible explosion.
She thinks: Maybe I should talk to someone [....]
She walks a little farther, wondering.
She passes the grey woman sitting in her long skirt on the cement block.
She thinks: Maybe I should talk to her.
She thinks: The question is, is it possible to create Paradise in this Strangeness?
[... ] Looking to the left, the right.
She – (183)

This open-ended closure underscores the vulnerability of female subjectivity under patriarchy and the difficulties in imagining, let alone sustaining, new gender roles, while creating a sense of militant vigilance without falling into the trap of romanticism.

Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* tells the story of a novelist, Jack Waterman, and his search across the United States for his long lost brother, Théo, as well as Jack’s relationship with a young métis woman, Pitsémé. During the quest Jack and Pitsémé recount and discuss many things, especially the subjection of the indigenous peoples. Pierre L’Héralt convincingly argues that the text’s ‘rapport with America [...] inscribes the exploration of a culture and of an identity which can no longer be seen as pure, but as necessarily mixed’. I am less convinced, as shall become apparent, about the thoroughness of the text’s ‘non-ideological position’, as L’Héralt puts it, of how its openness presumably allows it ‘to accept everything’ and to avoid a ‘hierarchizing perspective’ (L’Héralt, 39). *Volkswagen Blues* definitely attempts to move beyond the monolithic tradition of québécois identity politics, but it is not without its residue.
of disparate intertextual references, remind us of the fictionality of the narrative and hence encourage us to be more writerly, skeptical readers.17 What is more, like Arun Mukherjee, I am wary of presuming that a classical realist text cannot be ‘interrogative’ – especially in terms of its content.18 Such is the function of a number of the novel’s intertextual references and the consequent questioning about the subjective limits and ethnic biases of knowledge and narratives. For instance, Jack fondly recalls how during his childhood, as a result of having read so much, Théo would recount stories about Étienne Brulé, the first coureur de bois, as a hero who fought against conflict between whites and natives and as interchangeable with a Wild Bill Hickock or Buffalo Bill (64-69). Pitséméine abuses Jack of this white biased romantic vision when she recounts how Étienne Brulé may have been put to death by a group of natives for grossly transgressing their moral codes (76-7).19 Later, Jack attempts to head off Pitséméine’s wrath against white heroes by denouncing Buffalo Bill for having been a scout for General Custer and for warring against the Sioux (see 170). Such shifts throughout the text are not mere capitulations of one discourse to another but, as with Pitséméine’s subsequent recognition ‘that Buffalo Bill had not only committed errors during his life’ (170), are indicative of some of the dialogism of the text – as when Pitséméine laughs at her own monological discourse about what separates indigenous peoples and whites (see 28-9).20 Such instances dramatize how the givens of any narrative or cultural mythos need to be scrutinized and judged as much for what they don’t (or could) say as for their dogma. They also offer nuanced models of ‘internalized conflict’ (Slemon, 39), discursive alternatives to the polarism which is often one of the strongest negative heritages of colonialism.21

Like Scott’s novel, Volkswagen Blues problematizes hero worship while querying the possibility of a post- post/colonial, non-racist, and non-sexist sense of what is heroic. Thus, when Pitséméine is stricken with doubts about her ability to know and speak from any position of authority because of her métis status Jack’s reassurance to her is that ‘you are something new, something that is beginning. You are something that has never yet been seen’ (224). One could read Jack’s discovery of his brother’s progressive paralysis as the tragic conclusion of a life of dissipation and of Théo’s and Jack’s failed heroic quests except for the fact that Jack has learned that ‘[m]aybe I only loved the image that I had made of him’ (289). This half-declaration, half-question suggests that Jack’s meta-narrative about Théo as a heroic, womanizing, man’s man and modern coureur de bois as québécois nationalist leaves something to be desired, that Jack has begun to consider that these interdependent meta-narratives have negatively constructed and progressively paralyzed Théo and himself.

Still, Volkswagen Blue’s healthy skepticism about narrative truth and heroism are contradicted and contaminated by elisions of the histoire’s and Jack’s points of view and the text’s traffic in the semiotic field of the
indigene. Poulin’s novel is less obviously autobiographical than On-daatje’s or Scott’s, but the discursive slippage evident in the histoire’s inability to fully record the murmuring (58) or an outcry (210) by Pitsémine which Jack fails to hear suggests that the narrative is more univocally constructed than it might appear. This slippage is perfectly in keeping with Poulin’s admission that: ‘The question of the “I” and of the “He” is a very important problem for me. Each time, it’s a nightmare [....] I can’t choose between the two [...]. Sometimes, I’ve adopted the special technique of writing with an “I” and correcting it by changing the “I” for a “He.”’ The result is not simply a matter of technical doctoring, but of the potentially contradictory cultural work when a discourse written in one voice is made to pass for another. A number of Pitsémine’s historical accounts are cases in point. Presumably, in keeping with their pro-indigenous content, they are meant to create a sense of an oral tradition. But they are often too mechanical in their presentation – and clearly the result of Poulin’s own reliance upon the many cited historical sources – to provoke an adequate sense of cultural difference and emotional anger (see 114-16, 171-74, 204-08). The most striking example of this is when after a long account by Pitsémine of atrocities by the U.S. Cavalry the histoire awkwardly informs us that: ‘[Pitsémine] still had something to recount, but this was done very briefly. She simply wanted to say that the Indians were also guilty of massacres’ (208). The afterthought and tone smack of tokenism.

Pierre L’Herault claims that in the conjunction of Jack’s and Pitsémine’s ‘identities, it is the amerindianness which predominates’ (35, ftnt. 18). This is relatively true given the amount of Pitsémine’s discourse which is devoted to indigenous history. Yet Pitsémine is clearly a positive stereotype of what Terry Goldie refers to as the ‘Indian maiden’ as ‘the “good” Other’ ‘who tempts’ Jack ‘towards the liberation represented by free and open sexuality’ (Goldie, 15). This is operative when Pitsémine seduces Jack in a YMCA hostel and playfully cross-dresses as a male (64-8); or when Pitsémine wants to celebrate their arrival at the Continental Divide by making love next to the highway but Jack ejaculates prematurely because they are ‘outside’ (220-22). In keeping with the standard female indigene’s role, Pitsémine’s companionship and guidance on Jack’s quest are also crucial to his ability to know and ‘to enter the land’ (Goldie, 65), to identify with its américanité and thereby make it his own.

Pitsémine’s orality is central to her discourse and as Goldie points out ‘[t]he orality of the [indigene...] seems an intrinsic part of their image’ (107) in white literature. What is more, ‘natives’ are regularly represented as ‘literally enthralled by the power of writing’ (107). This is definitely the case with Pitsémine. She is said to read ‘with a voracity that [Jack] had never seen before’; to ‘always carry a book’ (41); to ‘steal’ books and to illegally ‘borrow’ books from libraries (42); and she is defined as ‘a book maniac’ for whom ‘ONE WORD IS WORTH A THOUSAND IMAGES’
This enthrallment, like Pitsémine’s sexuality, is too central to a racist white discourse not to be problematic. There are instances that evidence some parodic comic value, as when Jack and Pitsémine are huddled outside at night and he states: ‘I thought that Indians were never cold’. But her response is more dependent upon racial stereotypes than it subverts them: ‘I said that I was not a real Indian’ (58).25

The cultural work of the semiotic field of the indigene is made that much more complicated given the novel’s valorization of the French as more benign than other colonizers (46). Or as Pitsémine says of the voyageurs: ‘in general they were better behaved towards the Indians [...] than those who carried out the same occupations on the American side’ (46).26 Interestingly, in spite of Jack’s aversion to the violence of America — ‘One would say that all of America was constructed upon violence’ (129) — the québécois love affair with our américanité also pervades the text. As Québec has moved closer to some form of greater independence québécois interest in defining our américanité, as opposed to Canadianness, has grown. Volkswagen Blues can be read as being rooted in this social discourse. Consider the histoire’s invocation of the preface to Jack Kerouac’s On The Road: ‘The road replaced the old “trail” of the pioneers march towards the West; it is the mystic link which binds the American to his continent, to his fellow countrymen’ (258). This fantasy of the sprawling cohesiveness of America and of québécois communion with it is heightened by Jack’s and Pitsémine’s many friendly encounters with people capable of communicating in French — be they German car mechanics, Franco-American journalists, Saul Bellow, the captain of a river boat, a tramp, a peep show manager, or a québécoise stripper. Evidently some of this can be accepted as a device to maintain the francité of the text, but to anyone familiar with the unilingual Anglo hegemony of American culture it surpasses the limits of credibility. This symbolic erasure of cultural difference, as with the text’s reliance upon Pitsémine as the good, friendly, indigene romanticizes the facility of fusion with America (and its First Nations) and may thereby contribute to a more facile understanding of québécois américanité and amérindianité at this historical juncture than might be prudent or desirable.27

Given the differences in these novels’ feminist and ethnic agendas, as well as their different textual strategies, it is important not to overly synthesize their cultural work. Still, as Second-World texts which negotiate the difficult terrain between post/colonial and post-modern strategies of resistance some hypotheses are in order. Michael Ondaatje qua expatiate auto/biographic narrator imaginatively attacks colonialism instead of succumbing to madness like his father. Little direct opposition is made between these two subject positions, but much of the text’s post-modemist and auto/biographical fictive play marks the differences between Ondaatje’s privilege and consciousness as an expatriate writer and his father’s construction by his colonized culture. Such themes would have been just
as possible within a more unified, ‘realistic’, narrative; but to depict Ondaatje’s father as a more unified, though still tragic, colonial subject within a less fragmented and eclectic narrative would likely have been less evocative of the disruptiveness and alienation of colonialism, or of the difficulties and contradictions involved in the development of Ondaatje’s post/colonial consciousness. As in Scott’s novel the presumed unity of individuals may be challenged by post-modernist devices such as fragmented discourses, but there is still a persistent faith in individual and collective agency. Or, as was mentioned earlier, contrary to the imperial necessity of trying to pass off its ideology as objective and the local as insignificant, *Running* revels in the subjective, dialogical blurring of everyday facts and in a consequent re-centering of the local as important as opposed to peripheral.

Gail Scott’s heroine’s subject positions are also constantly in flux and in question but not at the expense of a post/colonial vigilance against heterosexism, classism, and ethnic or racial chauvinism. In keeping with the ideological disillusionment of the failures and shortcomings of the sectarian left in the 1970s and early 1980s, Scott’s post-modernist strategies resist a unified, anti-colonial reading and help emphasize some of the complexities, contradictions and difficulties of literary and political engagement. Even more than is the case in *Running in the Family, Heroine* exploits a hyper-subjective, dialogical blurring of the everyday as a means of valorizing the personal, and especially women’s experience, as political. A more ‘realistic’ approach could have addressed this theme and its critique of the phallocratism imbedded in male dominated left-nationalist politics and language, but it may not have been as effective in evoking the struggles, inspired leaps forward, and setbacks involved in the development of a feminist consciousness and writing practice. Still, it remains questionable as to whether the text is any more successful at denaturalizing or foregrounding post/colonial content than a well written ‘realist’ approach; especially when the novel’s aesthetic of the initiated may alienate as much as its alienation effects can make for more vigilant readers.

Ironically, Jack Waterman’s failed quest, like Pitsémine’s doubts about her own monologism, valorizes the liberatory potential of the process of exploration. Nevertheless, though *Volkswagen Blues*’ sense of displacement and fearful discovery has much in common with works like *Running in the Family or Heroine*, it is more ideologically imbricated with the vestiges of colonialism – as evidenced by its semiotic field of the indigene. Of course, this is not inherently a result of the novel’s more realistic genre. Robert Kroetsch’s *Badlands*, for instance, evidences similar problems around the portrayal of a shamanistic native woman.²⁸ It may, however, have much to do with the text’s implied facility of the liberatory potential of writing (see 289); with a humanist project which is not as self-reflexive or self-critical as Ondaatje’s or Scott’s post-modernist approaches. On the other hand in spite of some of the aforementioned weaknesses of *Volkswagen
Blues' historiographic digressions, they can create a sense of the horrors of colonialism for the indigenous peoples and so they may still be able to inform and move readers to appreciate indigenous resistance.

Finally, it is important to note that all three texts and their quests are fundamentally concerned with quandaries about absent, impotent, or exploitative paternal or male figures. The extent to which these are related to post-modernist and/or postcolonial agendas varies amongst the three texts, but their commonality to both critical discourses suggests an important common ground of resistance which is far from ambivalent. In the case of Running in the Family, Mervyn Ondaatje and his dipsomania are signs for colonial alienation and dissipation; but they are also signs of a male centred angst which confines women, such as Aunt Lalla, to comedy and reserves tragedy for the Father. The degree to which this gendered emphasis is a result of the post-modernist self-reflexivity of the text or simply its auto/biographic focus is debatable; but as I implied earlier the anti-colonial potential of an auto/biographical fiction on Doris Ondaatje's life is occluded in the process. This perceived lack, however, is highly subjective and in no way detracts from the text's successful integration of post-modernist and postcolonial sensibilities.

Scott's Heroine is almost a polar opposite in regards to women since its post-modernism and its post-colonialism are centred in feminist critiques of patriarchy and romance. A heroine within this paradigm, as with much of the portrayal of Pitsémine, is not as dependent upon hero/in/es as Jon (or Jack, or Ondaatje) are, but is more her own active agent, in keeping with the text's anti-essentialist feminist and post-modernist discourses. Some of Heroine's postcolonial signs - i.e. Québécois left-nationalism, the black tourist, and the starving Africans motifs - may too easily juxtapose the Third and First or Second Worlds, but Heroine's feminist send-up of left nationalism is undoubtedly a strong reminder of the need for vigilance against postcolonial neglect of gender in favour of ethnicity, race or class; a strong, imaginative, reminder of how most forms of hierarchy are fundamentally rooted in sex-gendered divisions of labour and domesticity.

In Volkswagen Blues, in contrast with Jack Waterman's quest for his more macho brother, and in spite of her stereotypical function as a sensual, mystified, "other", Pitsémine and her discourse also subvert sexist notions of female physical weakness, irrationality, and mechanical inaptitude. From the other side of the heterosexist gender divide, Jack's passiveness, his bad investment in male hero worship, and Théo's paralytic denouement are consistent with and parodic of a neo-nationalist tradition dating back to the québécois appropriation of Frantz Fanon in left publications like Parti Pris which associated the colonization of the québécois with male psychosexual and social castration. In the nostalgic post-referendum climate which haunts the margins of Jack's quest for his long-lost nationalist brother, the text's fascination with québécois américanité and amérindianité, and Théo's tragic condition, there is a search and lament for
the québécois nation that has not come to pass. The valorization of Pitsémine as a métisse holds out the slight hope of a new post-nationalist, post-post/colonial culture for Québec, but it is symbolically eclipsed by the semiotic field of the indigene, the end of Pitsémine’s and Jack’s love affair, and the closing sense of ‘l’immensité de l’Amérique’ (290).

Given that all systems of thought, genre or criticism eventually exhibit an overtotalizing overreach or a point of self-critical fatigue, what may be most important about the current post-modernism vs. post/colonialism debate is to recognize when and how the two discourses or genres overlap and abet one another to their mutual benefit. As always, few generalizations about these two modes can be relevant unless considered on a case by case basis. A novel like Volkswagen Blues may be more conventionally ‘realistic’ than a ‘post-modern’ novel like Heroine in the plotting and the details of its portrayal of a quest for identity, but a judgement as to the validity, success, contradictions, or failures of its post/colonial discourses is not only dependent upon the extent of its postmodernity. Likewise, the post-modernity of Running in the Family or Heroine does not automatically exclude post/colonial discourses nor mean that they are necessarily any more ambivalent. Each of these three novels exhibit various forms of postmodernist and post/colonial resistance. What has to be resisted is resistance to building upon how they can be produced and read to their mutual advantage.

NOTES

1. As I have stated elsewhere, like many other people in the field of ‘post-colonial’ studies I am not satisfied with the political implications, especially for non-Occidental studies, of this hyphenated term. My use of the slash in ‘post/colonial’ is a gesture towards emphasizing the socio-political differences between, say, the former ‘White’ Dominions, as they were racistly re-named, and other former colonies and current neo-colonies. Unfortunately this gesture still obfuscates Second World countries’ neo-colonial roles vis-à-vis the United States’ and other imperial powers (or Canada’s relationship with its indigenous Nations).


8. Surprisingly, though the then recent appearance of the novel may have had much to do with it, Barbara Godard said that the ‘black tourist [...] remains an inexplicable figure’, other than his providing ‘the frame for each chapter’. See Book Review, Border/Lines, Spring/Summer, 1988, 50-1.
9. See also Marie’s discourse on 130.
10. See Janice Kulyk Keefer, ‘Me, Myself, and I’, Books in Canada, October 1987, 35-6, for a sometimes hyperbolic, though related critique.
11. See Mukherjee, op.cit., 5. Though Mukherjee’s critique concentrates upon cultural insiders in terms of the gap between Eurocentric cultures and theory vis-à-vis non-European societies and literatures, it is also part of a more general dissatisfaction with the postmodernist tendency to devalue realist fiction and impose its own universalist biases. See also S. K. Desai, ‘Arun Kolatkar’s Jejuri: A House of God’, Literary Criterion, 15, 1980.
12. My thanks to Bob Majzels for reminding me of the importance of Heroine’s subversion of the romance genre.
14. It should be noted that L’Hérault appropriates some of Pierre Nepveu’s ideas and terms in the elaboration of his analysis. See Nepveu, l’Écologie du réel. Mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine (Montréal: Boréal, 1988), especially 93 & 216.
15. I am using the term histoire in accordance with Catherine Belsey’s summary and citation of Emile Benveniste’s use of it: ‘History [histoire] narrates events apparently without the intervention of a speaker. In history there is no mention of “you” and “I”; “the events seem to narrate themselves”.’ See Belsey, Critical Practice (London & New York: Methuen, 1980), 71; and Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics (Miami: University of Miami Press), 208. ‘The authority of this impersonal narration springs from its effacement of its own status as discourse [...] the reader is invited to construct a “history” which is more comprehensive still [...] Through the presentation of an intelligible history which effaces its own status as discourse, classic realism proposes a model in which author and reader are subjects who are the source of shared meanings, the origin of which is mysteriously extra-discursive. It thus does the work of ideology in suppressing the relationship between language and subjectivity’ (Belsey, 72).
16. Classical realism has been defined by Catherine Belsey, à la Barthes, as being composed of ‘illusionism, narrative which leads to closure, and a hierarchy of discourses which establishes the “truth” of the story’. See Belsey, ibid., 70; see also Roland Barthes’ S/Z (New York: The Noonday Press, 1974).
17. See Roland Barthes’ use of these two terms in S/Z, ibid., 4-6. ‘The writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages [...] But the readerly texts? They are products (and not productions)’ (5). Of course, as Barthes mentions elsewhere, texts are rarely simply in one of these modes but a hybrid of both.
18. See Mukherjee, op.cit. This approach goes against the formalist grain of Belsey’s and others’ use of the term interrogative (Belsey, Chap. IV).
Running in the Family, Volkswagen Blues and Heroine

19. It is implied that this explanation of Brulé’s death (see Volkswagen Blues, 70, 75-6) has been gleaned from Percy J. Robinson’s Toronto During The French Regime: A History of the Toronto Region From Brulé to Simcoe, 1615-1793 (Toronto: U of T Press, 1965 [1st edition, Ryerson Press, 1933]); but I found upon consulting it that there is no such account given. Either Pitséméine’s anecdote is meant to be part of her general fund of knowledge, or Poulin was being deliberately misleading for the sake of an in-joke about our logocentric faith in the truth of the written Word.

20. The complexities of Pitséméine’s dialogical perspective on herself as a métisse are not gone into during this article but it has to be noted that her sense of self is not idealistically presented as being resolved or without problems. However, to re-appropriate an earlier citation from Pierre L’Hérault, Pitséméine does embody the notion of how ‘identity [...] can no longer be seen as pure, but necessarily mixed’ (L’Hérault, 28).

21. Having said this, Mukherjee’s aforementioned article is a useful reminder of how too global a definition of what constitutes post/colonial writing can erase differences between post/colonial cultures and can place far too much emphasis upon the subjectivity of the post/colonial cultures [being] inextricably tied to their erstwhile occupiers [...]. It claims that “the empire writes back to the centre” (Rushdie), implying that we do not write out of our own needs but rather out of our obsession with an absent other’ (Mukherjee, 6).

22. See Terry Goldie’s Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures (Kingston, Montreal, London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), for the most extensive analysis to date of this phenomenon.

23. Though it can be argued that the name of Jack for the protagonist, his profession as a writer with five previous novels to his credit, and his residence in Quebec city create a similar sense of authorial self-referentiality for those readers familiar with Jacques Poulin’s career; that it acts as a form of valorization of the text’s verisimilitude.


25. Likewise, Pitséméine may ostensibly hide a hunting knife under her clothes because of an unexplained ‘misadventure which happened to her during a trip’ (60), but negative paradigmatic signs of violence can circulate around her as a naked, knife carrying, indigene as much as they do around the implied aggressor – especially since her being oblivious to carrying the knife implies a troubling ‘naturalness’ to her implied potential for violence.

26. Such a passage seems innocent enough until we consider how it glosses over the historical differences in the fur trade which, prior to the conquest of New France, was strategically controlled by the French (who could therefore afford or had to be more benign), and how implicitly it ahistorically contrasts the relatively static socio-economic status of the French regime with the much later and quite socio-economically different American imperial context.

27. I am thinking especially of the contradictory Second-World geo-political attitudes of Québécois whom, while still burdened with socio-political baggage from hundreds of years of colonization, given our current greater sense of ourselves as a société distincte and our faith in Québec, Inc. seem increasingly prone to our own imperial projects and discourses – especially towards the indigenous peoples.


29. At the time that I write this, I am referring to the post-1980 nationalist referendum period in Québec and not the forthcoming 1992 referendum.
30. See Jean-Claude Lauzon’s recent film, Léolo, for a variation on this lament for an unachieved nation, in which Pierre Bourgault, formerly one of Québec’s most militant nationalist leaders, plays an ambiguous, spectral keeper of a strange baroque museum of québécois cultural artifacts. Léo, the precocious protagonist, who would prefer to be identified as an Italian (Léolo), has no worthy male figure to emulate within his dysfunctional family and eventually succumbs to the ingrown madness inherited from his grandfather.

From a 1656 writing book.
CAROL SICHERMAN

‘Transport Me ... into the Hearts of Men’: Bharati Mukherjee’s Darkness

In the miniature painting described by Bharati Mukherjee in ‘Courtly Vision’, the final story of Darkness, we see an emblem of Mukherjee’s own art, an example of intertextuality in which the description of a painting becomes a text that provides the entire book ‘with a means of interpreting it and of justifying its formal and semantic peculiarities’. Mukherjee’s anonymous painter depicts ‘Count Barthelmy, an adventurer from beyond frozen oceans’, admiring ‘a likeness of the Begum, painted on a grain of rice by Basawan, the prized court artist’ (p. 195); at the end of the story, the Emperor Akbar – third and most notable of the six great Mughal emperors – cries out: ‘You, Basawan, who can paint my Begum on a grain of rice, see what you can do with the infinite vistas the size of my opened hand... Transport me ... into the hearts of men’ (p. 199). As he leads his army out of the capital, Akbar wishes not merely to travel to meet the enemy but to engage in a more thrilling kind of travel, a voyage of the mind and heart. He wants to be transported.

In this kind of ‘transport’, a spiritual and intellectual ecstasy, individual identity is expanded, translated, so that multiple identities coexist in a single consciousness. Mukherjee is herself a ‘translated’ person, in the root sense (borne across) noted by Salman Rushdie, and Mukherjee’s fiction translates Indian and Western cultures into one another. As Rushdie says, while ‘it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation... something can also be gained’; rootlessness ‘can lead to a kind of multiple rooting’. This may be a peculiarly Indian concept: for Mukherjee and Rushdie, the ‘translated’ person experiences loss and gain, not one or the other, as Shiva is male and female, not one or the other. Such a person does not have a single identity but, instead, ‘a set of fluid identities’ (Darkness, ‘Introduction’, p. 3).

In her introduction to Darkness, Mukherjee charts her path from a V.S. Naipaul-style ‘expatriate’ living in Canada and describing her characters’ pain with ‘mordant and self-protective irony’ to its opposite – an assimilated, Henry Roth-style ‘American writer’ of tolerant insight into an extraordinary range of characters (pp. 2-3). Like her character Dr. Manny Patel, a psychiatrist at Creedmore State Mental Hospital, she ‘is not one for nostalgia ... not an expatriate but a patriot’ (p. 98) who has accepted the
task of defining the term ‘American’, welcoming assimilation as something ‘genetic’ rather than ‘hyphenated’ or ‘hybrid’, abandoning her earlier irony because it was ‘the privilege of observers and of affluent societies’. ‘Chameleon-skinned,’ Mukherjee now enters ‘lives ... that are manifestly not my own ... across the country, and up and down the social ladder’. The final stage of Mukherjee’s transformation from ‘expatriate’ to ‘immigrant’ – an immigrant whose ‘roots are here’ in the United States – took place while she was writing her section of Days and Nights in Calcutta, a nonfiction account published in 1977 of a year spent in Calcutta with her Canadian-American husband, Clark Blaise, and their two sons. Although in May 1979 she still referred to herself as an ‘expatriate writer’ she had shifted to the term ‘immigrant writer’ by 1981, when she said she was ‘still hoping to write the great Canadian novel’. That hope was destroyed by her increasingly bitter perception of Canadian racism, described in her controversial article ‘An Invisible Woman’, and her liberating immigration to the United States. That immigration resulted in Darkness, in which for the first time she achieved her ambition to ‘break out of mimicry to reinvention’.

The range of theme and setting achieved in Darkness is the ground of Mukherjee’s subsequent work to date. Middleman and Other Stories, the book that followed Darkness, implied her willingness to be a ‘middleman’ for the stories of Americans and permanent residents of many ethnicities besides the Indo-Americans who dominate Darkness. The stories in Middleman are located throughout the United States and in Mexico, Canada, and Sri Lanka; they depict Americans of varied ethnic backgrounds as well as Hungarians, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Trinidadians, Afghans, and Asian Indians of many stripes. Continuing this expansiveness, her latest novel, Jasmine, takes place in Punjab, Florida, New York City, and rural Iowa.

I wish here to define the connections between Mukherjee’s art and her themes in Darkness, above all the titular theme. I begin by demonstrating how ‘Courtly Vision’ serves as summation though not summary of the book, for the themes of ‘Courtly Vision’ – art, sex, the encounter between East and West, spirituality – echo those of the preceding eleven stories. In attempting such large themes in the frame of a miniature – ‘Courtly Vision’ occupies a mere five pages, Darkness itself only 199 – Mukherjee the American adopts and adapts the aesthetic of the Moghul miniature painting with its crazy foreshortening of vanishing point, its insistence that everything happens simultaneously... In the miniature paintings of India there are a dozen separate foci, the most complicated of stories can be rendered on a grain of rice, the corners are as elaborated as the centers. There is a sense of the interpenetration of all things.

‘Total vision’: that is what Mukherjee’s Emperor Akbar demands of Basawan, his leading painter and it is what Mukherjee demands of herself.
In ‘Courtly Vision’, Mukherjee describes a painting such as we’ve encountered in earlier stories – a painting such as Nafeesa in ‘The Lady from Lucknow’ hangs in rows in her house in Atlanta (p. 30), such as Leela’s husband takes her to see at Sotheby’s in New York (p. 129), such as the cynical Maharaja ‘sell[s] off ... for ten thousand dollars’ to Americans ‘who understand our things better than we do ourselves’ (p. 135), such as Dr. Manny Patel’s American ex-wife, Camille, retains as part of the divorce settlement. Wayne, Camille’s lover, holds her ‘against dusty glass, behind which an emperor in Moghul battledress is leading his army out of the capital... Wayne has her head in his grasp. Her orange hair tufts out between his knuckles, and its orange mist covers the bygone emperor and his soldiers’ (p. 154). The violent collocation of red-headed American and Mughal emperor – the painting may be the very one described in ‘Courtly Vision’ – is typical of Mukherjee’s work, leaving the reader to tease meaning out of the mist.

Mukherjee’s extraordinary verbal miniature in ‘Courtly Vision’ is not immediately recognizable as a story in the sense that the other pieces in Darkness are. The opening paragraphs are disorienting:

Jahanara Begum stands behind a marble grille in her palace at Fatehpur-Sikri.
Count Barthelmy, an adventurer from beyond frozen oceans, crouches in a lust-darkened arbor... The Count is posed full-front... (p. 195)

Gradually, one realizes that some, although not all, of the language is that of a subliterary genre, the auction-house catalogue, as the concluding words make plain:

“Emperor on Horseback Leaves Walled City”
Painting on Paper, 24 cms x 25.8 cms
Painter Unknown. No superscription
C. 1584 A.D.
Lot No. SLM 4027-66
Est. Price $750 (p. 199)

As the dollar sign indicates, the painting is being auctioned in the United States; one remembers ‘the Fraser Collection of Islamic miniatures at the York Avenue galleries’ that Leela Lahiri in ‘Hindus’ visits at Sotheby’s New York auction house (p. 129).19
‘Emperor on Horseback Leaves Walled City’ is divided into a number of distinct scenes. The title points to the figure of highest stature, the Emperor Akbar, who ‘occupies the foreground of that agate-colored paper’ (p. 198). In the story, however, we do not hear about his scene until more than halfway through. Mukherjee’s opening paragraph focuses on another scene, singling out one of Akbar’s numerous wives and naming her – Jahanara Begum20 – just as many of these stories place in the center those who appear marginal in North American society. In contrast to
Mukherjee’s stories of the marginal, however, in the painting we see major figures on the stage of Indian history as well as the slave girls, courtiers, and other anonymous attendants.

Anyone acquainted with Mughal painting would recognize the ‘walled city’ as Akbar’s City of Victory, Fatehpur-Sikri, the splendid complex of buildings that the emperor ordered constructed in 1571 and then abandoned in 1585, a year after the date of Mukherjee’s painting: 21 Mukherjee’s visionary Akbar knows that soon ‘my new capital will fail, will turn to dust and these marbled terraces be home to jackals and infidels’ (p. 199), although Fatehpur-Sikri will remain preserved in paintings and in fact exists today for tourists. In including Basawan in his painting, Mukherjee’s painter is paying tribute to the most phenomenally gifted of Akbar’s stable of brilliant painters. Basawan and Mukherjee’s unknown painter share the twin purposes of documenting historical events and ‘transport­ing’ the viewer into the ‘hearts of men’.

Mukherjee’s painting records a specific moment in history, when Portuguese Jesuit priests arrived in response to Akbar’s warm invitation to visit and to bring ‘the principal books of the Law and the Gospels’. 22 Their visit was documented by Akbar’s artists. 23 But just as Akbar’s painters reached far beyond merely documenting Fatehpur-Sikri, the verbal art of ‘Courtly Vision’ reaches far beyond the confines of a catalogue description; interwoven with the language of the catalogue is the language of the fiction writer – interpreting, describing, implying:

[The) simple subservience [of the Begum’s slave girl] hints at malevolent dreams ...
... The Begum is a tall, rigid figure as she stands behind a marble grille...

Oh, beauteous and beguiling Begum, has your slave-girl apprised the Count of the consequences of a night of bliss? (p. 196)

Mukherjee is playing (seriously) with her reader, melding the genres of fiction, history, and the auction-house catalogue in order to clarify her subject. That subject is nothing less than the complexities of mind and feeling produced when a person from one highly developed culture travels to, and then enters into, another such culture.

Besides the lustful (and apparently fictitious) Count Barthelmy, two other (and historical) European travellers are depicted in Mukherjee’s painting. ‘Fathers [Rudolph] Aquaviva and [Francis] Henriques, ingenuous Portuguese priests’ who ‘have dogged the emperor through inclement scenery’ (p. 197), now sit under the Begum’s window. While Barthelmy is transported by lust, the supremely assured Jesuits have come in order to transport – that is, to proselytize the people whom they meet – but not to be transported themselves. Through the letters of the historical Aquaviva and Henriques rings their anticipation of Akbar’s conversion in response to the Christian texts and paintings that they have brought. Although failing in its ultimate aim, the Jesuit mission left lasting aesthetic traces, for the ‘wondrous paintings’ (p. 197) that they brought introduced themes and
techniques of Western art that had an immediate influence on Indian painting.24 ‘Courtly Vision’ invites us to look back on Darkness to observe the multiple perspectives of Western and Indian art, to see how Mukherjee herself has ‘accommodate[d] a decidedly Hindu imagination with an Americanized sense of the craft of fiction’.25 In ‘Courtly Vision’ she implies that what appears to be a book of short stories about mostly unconnected characters26 has a unity analogous to that of a Mughal miniature incorporating several related but separate scenes, a unity discoverable by the discerning viewer.

The structure of ‘Emperor on Horseback Leaves Walled City’ – and therefore of ‘Courtly Vision’ and, ultimately, of Darkness – is distinctly non-Western. As Mukherjee leads us through the painting’s multiple scenes, it may seem (to a Western eye) an exquisitely painted hodgepodge, intolerably overpopulated with innumerable anonymous bit players and six named major characters (Akbar, Basawan, Fathers Aquaviva and Henriques, Count Barthelmy, and Jahanara Begum). Yet the painting is unified by style and by themes that it shares with many of the stories in Darkness, above all the themes of art and of darkness.

‘Courtly Vision’ is about a work of art that itself includes two scenes with a specifically artistic content, the scene in which the Jesuits display European paintings ‘on the arabesques of the rug’ (p. 197) and the scene depicting Akbar’s farewell to Basawan; the latter, which concludes the story, occupies the largest space. Whereas Mukherjee’s imagined painting offers ‘life’s playful fecundity’ (p. 197), the European paintings depicted within it – monotonously repeating the theme of ‘Mother and Child, Child and Mother’ (p. 197) – set ‘precarious boundaries’ on that fecundity: here Mukherjee implies a sort of allegory of the relationship she establishes between the ‘precarious boundaries’ set by Western rules and the non-Western rules that paradoxically enclose the ‘boundaries’ as her imagined painting includes the European art. To the emperor, raised in Islam, the European paintings seem ‘simple and innocuous, not complicated and infuriating like the Hindu icons hidden in the hills’ (p. 197) and implicit in the imagined painting. When Akbar calls a last command to Basawan, his ‘co-wanderer’ – ‘Give me total vision’ – Mukherjee implies that Basawan’s vision will incorporate Western perspectives; even more important, she implies that Basawan will experience that state of being ‘united with the universe’ that she describes as her own feeling when she wrote these stories (p. 1). This experience, of course, is what used to be called ‘inspiration,’ and it is related to the state of ‘grace’ to which several of her characters aspire (pp. 10-11, 60, 69, 146) and which may be symbolized by the light toward which Akbar rides.

Going toward but not yet engaged in battle, Mukherjee’s emperor rides out into the ‘grayish gold’ of ‘late afternoon’ into light that ‘spills’ over the entire painting, ‘charging the scene’ with unusual excitement and ‘discovering the immense intimacy of darkness’ (p. 198). Akbar’s Indian
darkness beckons, intense and sexual, in contrast to the North American darkness that is a setting for other characters' painful illuminations of their fractured conditions.

When, in the story entitled 'Tamurlane', Mounties arrive hunting illegal immigrants in Toronto, the employees of the Mumtaz Bar B-Q swing into their defensive routine: ‘Mohun and I headed for the basement and since I was taller, I unscrewed the light bulb on my way down’ (p. 123). Into the tense darkness of the basement one of the Mounties calls, ‘Light?’ – and illuminates the basement himself with ‘a torch, brighter than a searchlight’ (p. 123). These immigrants bring darkness with them but not their own light. In North America the energizing interchange of light and dark depicted in 'Courtly Vision' vanishes; Indian darkness proves untranslatable, and North American darkness is threatening. Perhaps, having crossed the taboo Dark Water, the immigrants have forfeited cultural protection. When Leela Lahiri in 'Hindus' speaks of ‘the gathering of the darknesses we shared’ (p. 135), she refers to the literal dark skins of the immigrants but even more to the shadows they inhabit within American society; she refers as well to the ghettoes Mukherjee shuns, to self-protective gatherings of the dark-skinned such as the party hosted by a maharaja in a ‘third floor sublet in Gramercy Park South [in New York] … where the smell of stale turmeric hung like yellow fog from the ceiling’ (pp. 132-33).

For the most part, the darknesses of Darkness are metaphoric; they affect the atmosphere of the book subtly, much as the turmeric enters Leela's nose or the 'winter light ... discovers' the darkness in the Mughal miniature (p. 198). In a California darkness inhabited by ancient Hindu deities, 'even a nine-year-old American boy with good grades can confess his fear of gods and unholy spirits' and beg his Punjabi-speaking grandfather for a 'new ghost story' to allay his fear of the old (p. 183). In 'A Father', Mr. Bhowmick wonders how he could 'tell these bright mocking women', his sceptical wife and daughter,

that in the 5:43 a.m. darkness, he sensed invisible presences: gods and snakes frolicked in the master bedroom, little white sparks of cosmic static crackled up the legs of his pajamas. Something was out there in the dark, something that could invent accidents and coincidences to remind mortals that even in Detroit they were no more than mortal. (p. 61)

How, indeed, can he speak of quintessential Hindu darkness when his wife shouts in idiomatic American English, 'Hurry it up with the prayers' (p. 60), and his engineer daughter, Babli – graduate of Georgia Tech – tells him: 'Face it, Dad.... You have an affect deficit' (p. 61)? In the pre-dawn darkness he prays to the image of Kali, 'the patron goddess of his family' in Ranchi (p. 60). Adorned with her customary 'garland strung together from sinners' chopped off heads,' Mr. Bhowmick's Kali resides in a 'make-shift wooden shrine' that he himself has made for her in 'Woodworking I and II at a nearby recreation center' (p. 60). Detroit seems an appropriate
location for a goddess ‘associated with the periphery of Hindu society’ and ‘worshipped ... in uncivilized or wild places’. As he chants Sanskrit prayers, however, Mr. Bhowmick mistakes her expression, imagining her to look ‘warm, cozy, pleased’ (p. 60); in Detroit he forgets that Kali is ‘glistening black’ (p. 60) because she represents destruction and disorder on a cosmic scale.

At the end of the story, Babli Bhowmick becomes Kali – ‘her tongue, thick and red, squirming behind her row of perfect teeth’ – a monstrous echo of Mr. Bhowmick’s image of Kali with her ‘scarlet and saucy ... tongue ... stuck out at the world’ in a gesture of defiance familiar to Westerners (pp. 73, 62). Babli and Kali have ‘the same terrifying personality, ... the same independence’. Incarnate in an American young woman who considers ‘this Hindu myth stuff ... like a series of super graphics’ (p. 65), such darkness attains a thoroughly Hindu power. ‘Both terrible and sweet ... alternately destroying and creating’, Kali is ‘a destroyer of evil so that the world can be renewed’. Like Kali ‘without husband, consort or lover’, Babli is nonetheless pregnant – by artificial insemination, to her father’s Hindu horror. If her pregnancy is a kind of renewal, it is one beyond the ken of Mr. Bhowmick, who in the final paragraph brings a rolling pin ‘down hard on the dome of Babli’s stomach’ (p. 73). As the kind of mother to whom Kali’s devotees prayed – ‘Mother ... thou art the spoiler of my fortunes’ – Babli is indeed like Kali-Mata, to whom her father prays (p. 71), for she is ‘capable of shaking one’s comfortable and naive assumptions about the world’ and inviting ‘a wider, more mature, more realistic reflection on where one has come from and where one is going’.

When Mukherjee reveals the defiantly American engineer Babli translated into Kali, she illustrates how Indian immigrants and their children may be swept up into the darkness of their ancestral past. Those Indians who, like Leela in ‘Hindus’, marry white Americans may find themselves separated from their dark community. Leela has to be dragged by her husband to Sotheby’s to view an exhibit including paintings such as that described in ‘Courtly Vision’: ‘It bothered Derek that I knew so little about my heritage. Islam is nothing more than a marauder’s faith to me, but’ – and the ‘but’ is revelatory – ‘the Mogul emperors stayed a long time in the green delta of the Ganges, flattening and reflattening a fort in the village where I was born, and forcing my priestly ancestors to prove themselves brave’ (p. 129). Similarly forced to acknowledge her complicated heritage, this would-be American without an accent is in fact keenly aware of her Brahmin ancestry, and when she speaks ‘Hindu’ (Hindi) to a fellow Indian, she admits her inescapable inheritance. Even those of Mukherjee’s characters who have ‘wanted all along to exchange [their] native world for an alien one’ (p. 164), who seek to be ‘pukka Americans’ (p. 170), are betrayed by their own words; for them, English remains a ‘step-mother tongue’.37
In ‘Nostalgia’, Dr. Manny Patel (M.D., Johns Hopkins) attempts to be a ‘pukka American’. But when Mr. Horowitz, a schizophrenic patient, attacks Dr. Patel physically and abuses him verbally as ‘Paki scum’ – a phrase ‘about as appealing as it is for an Israeli to be called a Syrian’ – Dr. Patel ‘reach[es] automatically for the miracle cures of his Delhi youth’, in this case masala tea. ‘Shutt[ling] between the old world and the new’, in the aftermath of Horowitz’s attack Dr. Patel instinctively takes himself ‘home’; home, however, is Little India in Manhattan, not his native land or his ‘three-hundred-thousand-dollar house with an atrium in the dining hall’. In his Horowitz-weakened state, Dr. Patel easily transforms a venal shopgirl named Padma into the lotus goddess Padma, mentally replacing her ‘“Police” T-shirt and navy cords’ with ‘a sari of peacock blue silk’ and ‘bracelets of 24-carat gold’. No lotus goddess, Padma of Little India turns out to be part of a blackmail scheme. Having discovered the treachery of nostalgia, Dr. Patel writes ‘WHORE’ in his own feces on the hotel mirror and resolves to ‘make up for this night with a second honeymoon’ with his American wife. But as we learn from a second story in which he figures, ‘Saints,’ his marriage is already wrecked, and soon his ‘big house in New Jersey’ will be sold.

In ‘Saints’, Dr. Patel’s fifteen-year-old son, Shawn, doesn’t feel himself to be a ‘real American’ despite his American mother. As he scans the telephone directory looking for some version of his Hindu father, he comes upon ‘Batliwalla, Jamshed S., M.D.’; too ignorant to recognize the name as Parsi (Batliwalla is himself a minority in the Indian context), he walks at midnight to Batliwalla’s house. Seeking to ‘become somebody else’s son’, Shawn identifies with Batliwalla’s ‘dwarfkid’ son, whom he can see studying energetically as if ‘he’s the conqueror of [the] alien’. A kind of miniature Akbar translated to the upstate New York town to which Shawn and his mother have moved. As the story reaches its climax in the literal dark, we observe Shawn identifying at once with Ramakrishna – the ‘Hindu saint who had visions’ (153) about whom he’s read in a book sent by his father – and with the emperor in the miniature painting against which Wayne thrusts his mother. Told in the first person, the story poignantly describes Shawn’s fantasy that, like Ramakrishna, he is ‘in a trance in the middle of a November night’. But Shawn’s trance, unlike Ramakrishna’s, fails to relieve him of his daily pain.

Ramakrishna is never named in ‘Saints’, because for Shawn the name means nothing. Readers acquainted with the renowned ascetic and visionary, however, will identify the Calcutta saint of the gift book as Ramakrishna (1836-86), famous for ‘see[ing] the Divine Mother [Kali] in all things’. It is not surprising that a follower of Kali in his trances ‘sometimes ... kicks his disciples’, who beg him: ‘Kick, kick’ (p. 153); he tells his ‘young boy followers’ that he loves them as he would love ‘a sweetheart’. When he breaks an arm while entranced by the
Ganges, he finds 'no separation' between 'love and pain' (p. 155).\textsuperscript{40} Mukherjee chooses those aspects of Ramakrishna that would appeal to Shawn, who resembles the saint because he suffers and 'can't hurt' (p. 158), aspires to transcendence, dresses like a woman,\textsuperscript{41} and has a boy follower (Tran, a Vietnamese refugee). The book Dr. Patel has sent is one that once gave him, so his inscription reads, 'happiness ... when I was your age' (p. 153), but there is another connection as well: 'The saint died of throat cancer and was briefly treated by your great-uncle, the cancer specialist in Calcutta' (p. 153).\textsuperscript{42}

Whether the teenage Dr. Patel really felt 'happiness' or whether his recollection is colored by nostalgia we cannot know. We do know Shawn's misery; like Ramakrishna, he is 'mentally confused about his own identity'.\textsuperscript{43} Later in the upstate-New York night, darkness enables him to feel a momentary surge of identification with his other model, Akbar, the 'potentate in battledress' (p. 158). Yet Shawn has conquered nothing, and his pathetic claim to be a 'visionary' (p. 158) is belied by his mother's shocked realization that his night-walking is accomplished in her coat, hat, and thick make-up. One moment a transfigured transvestite, another moment a breather of adolescent obscene phone calls, Shawn is one moment an American, another moment an Indian. In his unstable national and cultural identities, he is a recurring type of character in Mukherjee's fiction.

The title of Shawn's story, 'Saints', alerts us to another aspect that ties him to other characters, including Akbar in 'Courtly Vision'. While most of Mukherjee's characters are resolutely secular, in key stories characters seek for grace, for light in their spiritual darkness, for grace triumphing 'over all that's shameful in human nature' (p. 17). Dr. Patel believes that 'gods and goddesses ... could leap into your life in myriad, mysterious ways, as a shopgirl, for instance, or as a withered eggplant, just to test you' (p. 105), and Mr. Bhowmick senses spiritual presences in the Detroit pre-dawn. This theme frames Darkness, appearing at the end of the book in 'Courtly Vision' and at the very beginning in 'Angela', in which the title character is a Bangladeshi orphan rescued by nuns from the ditch where she was left for dead at dusk during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971. Renamed and raised a Catholic, the Muslim-born Angela has been adopted by a Protestant farming family in Iowa and is now being wooed by Goan doctor.\textsuperscript{44} 'Only a doctor could love this body', she thinks, aware of her scars (pp. 19, 11). In America 'for less than two years' (p. 9), Angela has been 'forced to assimilate' (p. 17): a high-school cheerleader, she speaks of her newly acquired Iowan 'sisters' and her 'Dad'; she knows how to soothe grief with Diet Coke (p. 9); and she has learned to enjoy a Sunday pork roast because 'pigs aren’t filthy creatures here as they are back home' (p. 14).

It is 'grace [that] makes my life spin', says Angela (p. 10). As she puzzles over the meaning of grace, she visualizes it as 'a black, tropical bat, cutting through dusk on blunt, ugly wings', an image associated with the beauty
and horrors of the Bangladeshi war that took place in ‘the lavender dusk of the tropics’ (pp. 11, 19).\textsuperscript{45} Angela, who seeks grace, is herself an instrument conveying grace to others, for the Lord has given her the capacity to express beauty, a means of transcendence; in the orphanage in Bangladesh she learned to play the piano, and ‘together, pianist and audience, we have triumphed over sin, rapacity, war’ (pp. 16-17), over all that’s dark in human nature. Having endured violence, she has been transfigured by it; Mukherjee agrees with an interviewer’s suggestion that violence is ‘necessary to a transformation of character’,\textsuperscript{46} a view apparent in the incidents of political and domestic violence that figure in nearly every story and in most of Mukherjee’s other work. Believing in miracles, Angela ‘wait[s] for some sign’, knowing that ‘I’ve been saved for a purpose’ (p. 19). It is toward such a sense of spiritual purpose that Shawn Patel gropes as he leafs through the book on Ramakrishna.

Although none of Mukherjee’s characters aspire as consciously as Shawn to be saints in America, most are trying in some way to adjust the dreams of their prior life to their present condition, and often they have trouble reading the present; even so, all – in the words of the title character of \textit{Jasmine} – seek ‘enlightenment ... sensing designs in history’s muddles’ (p. 52). In Dark\textit{ness}, often the characters’ ‘English isn’t good enough’ (p. 8), even when it’s so fluent that they sound as if they’ve ‘lived here always’ (p. 140).

‘English’, we must recognize, means the entire panoply of cultural signs that so fascinate Mukherjee, not merely the American dialect of the world language. In ‘Visitors’, a recently arrived bride named Vinita understandably thinks that a Calcutta-born but United States-raised young man shot in muddy ‘two-tone New Balance running shoes’ is ‘just another American’ (pp. 167, 172) or, if not exactly an American, then a ‘looter of American culture’ (p. 172), another modern-day Mughal emperor. Although Vinita’s education as a French major at Loreto College has prepared her to ‘disarm an emaciated Communist pointing a pipe-gun at her pet chihuahua’ in Calcutta (p. 173), she has no idea how to handle ‘the mad passions of a maladjusted failed American’ (174). She finds in Rimbaud the \textit{mot juste}: ‘Oh! quel Rêve les a saisies ... un rêve inouï des Asies’ (p. 172). What can a ‘dream that has seized them, the unheard-of dream of Asias’ mean in Guttenberg, New Jersey (a suitable setting for newly invented Indo-Americans)? When the dreamed-about now must do the dreaming, it is small wonder that they experience some sense of dislocation.

A displaced person at home nowhere, Ratna in ‘The World According to Hsü’ is expert in ‘the plate tectonics of emotion’ (p. 54). As she sits in a hotel dining room far from her Montreal house, she feels ‘for the moment at home in that collection of Indians and Europeans babbling in [‘step-mother’] English,’ a ‘mutually agreed upon second language’ (pp. 56, 54). The half-Indian, half-Czech Ratna demonstrates how Mukher-
Bharati Mukherjee's vision encompasses those whose misfortune it is to have no vision, nothing more than a bleak awareness of their dislocation.

The World According to Hsü', which takes place in an unnamed former French colony, is the only story in Darkness to be set outside of North America. Although at first glance 'Courtly Vision' is set in India, the actual New-York auction-house setting may hint at a kind of cultural bargaining that goes on in many of these stories. Many of Mukherjee's characters are trying to make 'small trade-offs between new-world reasonableness and old-world beliefs', like Mr. Bhowmick in 'A Father' (p. 64). In being 'caught between rules' (p. 72), the Bhowmicks may remind us of Akbar when he attempted to foster a syncretic religion and admit alien aesthetics to his artists' visions. In choosing that moment in Mughal history for 'Courtly Vision', Mukherjee reveals her characters' and her own dilemma and opportunity. 'Hide nothing from me, my co-wanderer', Mukherjee's Akbar commands Basawan (p. 199) - and thus Mukherjee commands herself, traveling into the inner spaces of characters both settled and homeless. 'Nothing was excluded', Mukherjee comments on a Hindu temple frieze; her remark helps explain the essential Hinduism of a writer at home everywhere.

Concluding Darkness with a rich allusion to Akbar's deliberate mixing of East and West, Mukherjee emphasizes the emperor's intellectual curiosity and spiritual exploration, reminding us of the representatives of different cultural, religious, and aesthetic traditions whom he invited to his court. At Mukherjee's command, a similar variety of characters people her stories - Angela, the Muslim from Dakha turned Catholic by a twist of fate; Horowitz, the Jewish schizophrenic in a Queens psychiatric hospital; Batliwalla, the Parsi doctor in upstate New York; the Sikh grandfather in California who claims to have killed Gandhi in Delhi ('The Imaginary Assassin'); innumerable others from Calcutta, Ranchi, Ludhiana, and elsewhere on the subcontinent; and assorted North Americans ranging from the Iowa Presbyterians of 'Angela' to Ann Vane of 'Isolated Incidents', a graduate of 'Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's' school in Toronto who stares at the 'Chinese and Indians and Jamaicans, bent over their snack-packs of Kentucky Fried Chicken' (pp. 81, 93).

As she sits in 'a Colonel Sanders spot on Bloor' in Toronto, Ann reflects that 'home was a territory of the mind' (pp. 89, 90). No matter whether in Toronto or Georgia or New York, any immigrant or immigrant's child attempting to integrate and still retain fundamental ties with 'home' may comfort herself by claiming to be 'a traveller ... at home everywhere, because she is never at home anywhere' (p. 31); but more likely he will find himself, like Dr. Patel, 'a traveller over shifting sands' (p. 112), sometimes striding onward, sometimes stumbling, sometimes falling. For all their particularity, Mukherjee's characters are part of a world-wide phenomenon; they struggle to be 'at home' in North America while attempting to avoid
what Rushdie has called 'the largest and most dangerous pitfall' that may entrap the immigrant, 'the adoption of a ghetto mentality'.

For these travelers intend to stay, to become settlers, to lay claim to North America as the Mughals laid claim to India. Although Mukherjee declares that her fiction is 'about conquests, and not about loss', her characters do endure the disorientation that is the lot of most immigrants. If there is a conquest, it is that of Mukherjee the artist as she gives shape to her characters' experience of fragmentation. Implicit in 'Courtly Vision' is Mukherjee's wry revision of Akbar's yearning for 'a utopian India' where all peoples could live in peace. Perhaps the best way of penetrating Darkness is to understand it as another work in the spirit of Akbar, tolerant of diversity while seeking unity of vision. As Akbar was a conquerer and a syncretist, hoping to create a new vision out of elements of previous ideas, so Mukherjee's 'insurrections of language, [her] subversions or deliberate destructions of sacrosanct literary forms', aim at creating new vision. In Darkness she charts the territory to be conquered, territory worthy of 'epic' treatment in some future 'maximalist' fiction. In closing Darkness with 'Courtly Vision', Mukherjee may look not only back to the preceding stories - sad, often violent, sometimes funny - but forward to some future fiction in which her characters' life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness come a good deal closer to the goal than they do in Darkness.

In Mukherjee's writing of the 1980s we see the pursuit but no more than a fleeting achievement of happiness. Yet her reader, like the viewer of a Mughal miniature, does experience happiness. As he rides into the darkness of war, Mukherjee's Akbar demands a kind of light, for he expects Basawan to describe the future 'in a way that makes me smile' (p. 199). This suggestion of the delight afforded by Mughal paintings, even when they describe subjects such as fear and death ('Tell me who to fear and who to kill'), also applies to Mukherjee's own works of art. Into her 'simple and innocuous' Western narratives she enfolds the 'complicated and infuriating' lives of her Hindu characters in North America, striving for the realistic description, multiple perspectives, and transcendent delight afforded by Basawan and his colleagues. The final command that she attributes to Akbar sums up Mukherjee's own effort as an artist: 'Transport me ... into the hearts of men'.

NOTES

1. A number of reviewers made this observation, including Peter Nazareth ('Total Vision', Canadian Literature, no. 110 [1986], p. 190), Patricia Bradbury, and Hope Cook; for Bradbury and Cook, see excerpts in Contemporary Literary Criticism, vol. 53 (1989), pp. 266, 267. Subsequently, Mukherjee herself declared: 'My image of artistic structure and artistic excellence is the Moghal miniature painting' ('A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman', in The Writer on her Work: New Essays in New Territory.


6. Mukherjee has written approvingly of Rushdie’s concept ‘that immigration ... is a net gain, a form of levitation, as opposed to Naipaul’s loss and mimicry’ (‘Prophet and Loss: Salman Rushdie’s Migration of Souls’, *Village Voice Literary Supplement* [March 1989], p. 12).


15. ‘Mimicry and Reinvention’, op. cit., p. 147.


19. Sotheby’s did indeed auction the Malcolm Fraser collection in 1980 in three lots, in London on July 7-8 and October 13-14, and in New York on December 9; Leela must have made her visit during the New York public exhibition on Dec. 4-8. The painting depicted in ‘Courtly Vision’ is not, however, in the New York Sotheby’s sale, though one can imagine it in the London sales. The July sale in London included a painting (Lot 84) depicting ‘a ruler on horseback leading an army across a battlefield, warriors firing arrows and brandishing swords and maces as a decapitated soldier falls from his horse’ (*Catalogue of Fine Oriental Manuscripts, Miniatures and Qajar Lacquer ... The Property of Malcolm R. Fraser ...*). Lot 240 in the London October sale is in a class with Mukherjee’s painting (*Catalogue of Fine Oriental Manuscripts, Miniatures and Qajar Lacquer ... the Property of Malcolm R. Fraser Esq. and Other Properties*). The Dec. 9 New York sale included a painting somewhat similar to Mukherjee’s, lot 10: ‘A Procession of Figures Moving to the Right, Mughal, circa 1590-1600’ (*Fine Oriental Miniatures, Manuscripts and Islamic Works of Art Including the Fraser Album*); its estimated price was $3000-$5000 (it sold for $4600); Mukherjee’s eye for detail was clouded when she provided an estimated price of $750.

20. Mukherjee’s Jahanara Begum is apparently a resident of Akbar’s harem, which one European visitor claimed housed ‘more than 300 wives’, another ‘as many as a hundred women’ (qtd. Brand and Lowry, *Fatehpur-Sikri*, op. cit. pp. 105-06). Akbar had a granddaughter named Jahanara, the daughter of his son Shah Jehan and Mumtaz-Mahal.

21. See Brand and Lowry, *Akbar’s India*, op. cit., p. 159. Akbar’s successors continued to use the palace complex occasionally until at least the middle of the seventeenth century and ‘a considerable portion of Akbar’s harem [sic] remained ... long after 1585’ (Brand and Lowry, *Fatehpur-Sikri*, op. cit. pp. 3-4).

22. Akbar’s letter, in John Correia-Afonso, ed., *Letters from the Mughal Court: The First Jesuit Mission to Akbar* (1580-1583), Foreword by S. Guri Hasan (Bombay: Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture, 1980), p. 1. Fathers Rudolf Aquaviva and Francis Henriques arrived at Akbar’s court from their base in Goa on 28 Feb. 1580, soon joined by Father Anthony Monserrat; the mission ended in Feb. 1583 (Correia-Afonso, pp. 9-10, 123). The battle for which Akbar is leaving might be one in his 1580-81 war against his half-brother, whom he defeated at Kabul in 1581 (Correia-Afonso, p. 93; Brand and Lowry, *Akbar’s India*, op. cit., ‘Chronology of
Important Historical and Artistic Events', pp. 158-59 – this chronology is the source for other dates I mention). Fr. Monserrate was part of Akbar's entourage in the final expedition of this war (Correia-Afonso, pp. 96-97).

23. See frontispiece in Brand and Lowry, Akbar's India, op. cit.

24. The first painting by a Mughal artist to show the influence of Christian art is dated ca. 1580, the same year that the Jesuits presented Akbar with several examples (Welch, India: Art and Culture, op. cit., p. 164). Basawan's painting of the subject is dated 1590-1600; see Brand and Lowry, Akbar's India, op. cit., p. 102 (plate 66). Akbar's enthusiasm over Christian religious art is a frequent theme of the Jesuits' letters (Correia-Afonso, op. cit., pp. 31, 33-34, 48-49, 58-60). As for 'dogg[ing] the emperor', Akbar ordered Fathers Monserrate and Aquaviva to accompany him on military campaigns, an experience made more difficult by illness 'alone in a Muslim country, without physician or medicines' (Aquaviva, letter dated 25 April 1582, in Correia-Afonso, p. 101).

25. Mukherjee, Days and Nights, op. cit., p. 286.

26. Dr. Patel and his family do, however, appear in two stories, 'Nostalgia' and 'Saints'.


28. The eponymous heroine of jasmine also becomes Kali when she murders her rapist (p. 106). Kinsley notes that later Hinduism modified Kali’s terrible aspect to some extent, so that she became 'not only the symbol of death but the symbol of triumph over death' (op. cit., pp. 124, 118, 125).


30. Kinsley suggests that ‘Kali may be one way in which the Hindu tradition has sought to come to terms ... with the built-in shortcomings of its own refined view of the world ... by reminding Hindus that certain aspects of reality are untamable, unpurifiable, unpredictable, and always a threat to society’s feeble attempts to order what is essentially disorderly: life itself’ (op. cit., p. 129).


34. Roshi Rustomji-Kerns notes the tendency of Mukherjee’s ‘fellow South Asian immigrants’, who see themselves as ‘successful citizens of America’, to dismiss such scenes of violence in Mukherjee’s work as ‘only well-written South Asian American gothic’; Rustomji-Kerns herself implies that Mukherjee has provided ‘a voice to speak of the immigrant experience’ (‘Expatriates, Immigrants and Literature: Three South Asian Women Writers’, Massachusetts Review 29, 4 [1988], p. 659).


37. Mukherjee used the term to describe her own relation to English in ‘Mimicry and Reinvention’, op. cit., p. 147. Soon after, however, she dropped any claim to linguistic alienation (Carb, ‘Interview with Bharati Mukherjee’, op. cit., p. 649).


39. Ramakrishna describes himself ‘writhing in anguish of heart[,] cry[ing] at the top of my voice, ‘Come, my boys! ...’ A mother never longs so intensely for the sight
of her child, nor ... a lover for his sweetheart, as I did for them!' (qtd. Anon., *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 196).

40. Christopher Isherwood describes this often-related incident in terms close to Mukherjee’s (*Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 2nd ed. [Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1980], p. 245).

41. Like Shawn, Ramakrishna began dressing like a woman as a teenager (Isherwood, op. cit., pp. 35-36). Carl Olson devotes a chapter to this and related behavior, said by some to be insane (*The Mysterious Play of Kali: An Interpretation of Ramakrishna* [Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990], pp. 49-67). Toward the end of his life, Ramakrishna’s ‘sex-role confusion was “gradually” being cured, and he was becoming ... more certain of his male sexuality’ (Olson, p. 50). Another possibly relevant aspect of Ramakrishna’s thought is the religious eclecticism that he shared with Akbar. Ramakrishna’s vision of Mohammed, in 1866, led him to a period of Islamic practice; his much more intense Christian experience, in 1874, lifted him ‘into a new state of ecstasy’ in which ‘Christ possessed his soul’ (Solange Lemaître, *Ramakrishna and the Vitality of Hinduism*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann [Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1984], pp. 109-10).


44. As a Goan, he is presumably Catholic.

45. This dusk is darker than but still related to the dusk of only other scene set on the Indian subcontinent, that in ‘Courtly Vision’. The image of the bat appears later in *Jasmine* (p. 162).

46. Qtd. in Connell, Grearson, and Grimes, ‘An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee’, op. cit., p. 8. This interview develops the theme with particular reference to *Jasmine*, in which Mukherjee’s preoccupation with violence reaches its fictional apogee. That preoccupation may have been furthered by the nonfiction book that she wrote with Clark Blaise, *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987; Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1988); ‘The Management of Grief’ in *The Middlegman*, which is narrated by a grief-benumbed woman whose husband and two sons have gone down in the Air India crash of 23 June 1985.

47. Mukherjee, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, op. cit., p. 171.


50. Welch, *The Art of Mughal India*, op. cit., p. 11.


53. For their advice regarding an earlier draft, I am indebted to members of the Westchester Women Writers group: Eileen Allman, Jayana Clerk (whose knowledge of Indian culture illuminated my darkness), Phyllis Fahre Edelson, Mary Ellen LeClair, and Ziva Piltch.
The Year That Was

SINGAPORE 1991/2

By any measure 1991 and 1992 were crucial years for the literary, dramatic and arts scene in Singapore. The publication, in 1991, of George Nonis' book, Hello Chok Tong Goodbye Kuan Yew almost signalled a new mood, a new phase in the cultural and literary ethos of this small nation-state. Nonis commented that it had taken him a long time to bring his book (a book essentially of cartoons lampooning political life in Singapore but taking some risks of the sort he thought the new Prime Minister – Goh Chok Tong – will be more receptive to than the old Prime Minister – Mr Lee Kuan Yew) but that he finally decided to do so after hearing and reading of Mr Goh Chok Tong and the 'open' style of government.

This 'open' mood also saw the setting up – and subsequent report – of a National Review Committee on Censorship. For a long time writers, artists, and film and television people had been nervous about censorship and several had had their works objected to. The setting up of a Ministry of the Arts and the Singapore National Arts Council (this latter body chaired by a very respected Singaporean – Professor Tommy Koh) meant here was a chance for an overhaul. And the overhaul did begin. Several young writers and people connected with the arts were appointed to this National Committee and their recommendations have had a fundamental impact on the production and circulation of arts. Of course, the majority of Singaporeans – if we are to believe the Press and media – were quite uncomfortable with some of the Committee's recommendations (such as allowing the 'R' rating for films to be aged 18) and wanted a more conservative dismantling (if at all) of existing censorship rules and procedures. Thus Singapore did – and does – get films which previously was not possible (The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Wild at Heart, Basic Instinct...) but there are still strong restrictions and some films, one guesses, will still never be allowed commercially (i.e. the concept of 'art' cinemas and 'adult' cinemas is not one which sits comfortably with the conservative population). It is interesting to note that while some lobbying for a magazine such as Cosmopolitan took place, the magazine (along with predictable others – e.g. Playboy) remains banned/censored.

But the relaxation is real and not to be frowned upon. Apart from the cinema, its big impact has been on the fiction produced in Singapore and on the plays performed. Several controversial plays (with nude/near nude scenes for example) have been allowed on stage but to audiences eighteen and above (I should state that for films the 'R' rating is for those above twenty-one). While ministerial comment has been to signal caution lest the relaxed atmosphere becomes promiscuous, the actual productions have been fairly free – thus plays such as Private Parts and Two Clam One have taken the concept of theatre freedom to new heights in Singapore.

The visual art scene has been similarly freed from anxieties of certain censorship; thus quite explicit nude drawings featuring sometimes portraits of the artists themselves have made their appearances at places like The Substation and been the subject of discussion and debate. Sexuality as a theme is very much in the light as it were as more and more young Singaporeans begin to express their own perceptions openly and artistically. For the first time in Singapore's art history, artists were now prepared to put their
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own private life as artists for public view – a bold, challenging step which prompts
newfound confidence but which also still invites strong resistance.

In 1990 the present writer had publicly stated that ‘the next few years will see an in-
evitable increase in the production of literary works which, while not being particularly
of a high literary quality, will, nevertheless, be very popular’. The context was the over-
whelming success of sensational storybooks, fictions of the supernatural, horror, the
bizarre, the ghostly. Both 1991 and 1992 saw this prediction coming through almost
of literary readership seemed to be changing; the macabre, the deviously comic, the
strange and the frightening were hot themes, and among them they captured readers.
Sales of books at the Annual Book Fairs reached unimaginable heights with some titles
selling thousands over a couple of days – a phenomena perhaps not unknown in some
countries but certainly new to the Singapore literary scene.

Much of the new reader-following can be attributed to two factors: one, a willingness
on the part of writers to venture forth into newer areas of expression (so the comic book
now becomes an accepted part of ‘literature’) which attempt to make sense of ‘taboo’
experiences (hence several books dealt with themes of homosexuality, bizarre sex, trans-
vestism) and, two, a more open discussion of various books and issues by the reading
public. It must here be noted that one major breakthrough was achieved by and
through the publication of Excuse Me Are You a Model by Bonny Hicks. This autobi-
ographical book, written by a young twenty-one-year-old model who confessed to having
an English father who wanted nothing to do with her, affairs with several different men
and the trials which invariably awaited a young woman in the modelling industry/busi-
ness, made a huge impact on the Singaporean sensibility. Public forums and discus-
sions were held where the author was condemned, damned, praised, defended and
where she herself appeared to give her side of the story. Excuse Me Are You a Model
took Singapore literature by storm and within a few it had unprecedented sales and the
author became a ‘literary’ figure overnight! The book is significant; written simply but
with enormous candour, it basically said, ‘look at me, I didn’t go to University, this is
my story, these are the men I’ve been with, this is my background and this is what it
took me to become a professional model.’ It is, in its own way, a moving book, naive
perhaps at times, but on the whole mature, confident, assertive, frank, honest. It was
the brutal honesty which disturbed and offended the moral pundits, chief among them,
ironically a woman who was (and is) involved with women’s rights! Bonny Hicks went
on to write a second book, this time a novel, Discuss Disgust, again having as her
theme the untalked-about subject of women who prostituted themselves discreetly in order to
bring up their kids. Written primarily from the point of view of the young heroine (if
that term could be used) the book disturbingly challenges the image of Singapore as a
squeaky clean, morally upright society. Other books which might be mentioned here
include Joash Moo’s Sisterhood (again the subject of comment in the Press regarding its
morality since it appeared to endorse and condone those who were transvestites), Gopal
Baratham’s Sayang (described by many readers, at least verbally, as being almost porno-
graphic), Antonio Chan’s Lusts from the Underworld (a racy story of gangsters and sex),
Colin Cheong’s Poets Priests and Prostitutes (motorcycle gangs, girls and the contradic-
tions of evolving identities), Felix Chia’s The Lady in Red and her Companion (naughty
stories about naughty women), Johnny Lau’s Medium Rare (a lot of sex and the bizarre,
made into a film), Johann Lee’s Peculiar Chris (about a gay), Sumiko Tan’s Sisters in
Crime (culled from the newspapers and police reports about women in crime) and Felix
Soh’s Harlots (about sex and its deviant pleasures, withdrawn within weeks of publica-
ton account of its unhealthy morality).

The above should not lead readers to conclude that no serious fiction/poetry was pro-
duced (incidentally many of the writers venturing into categories discussed above see
themselves as ‘serious’): several were. Gopal Baratham’s _A Candle or the Sun_, Rex Shelley’s _The Shrimp People_, Simon Tay’s _Stand Alone_, Kelvin Tan’s _All Broken Up and Dancing_, Catherine Lim’s _The Women’s Book of Superlatives_ and Alex Soh’s _Double on the Rocks_ are all works of fiction which deserve special attention – in them a certain literary quality is obvious, as is the treatment of significant themes which transcend simple grids of time and place. Koh Buck Song’s _A Brief History of Toa Payoh and Other Poems_ should be mentioned as it tries to document, poetically, the radical nature of physical change in Singapore – a change impinging on the psyche of the sensitive. Boey Kim Cheng’s _Another Place_, his second volume, continues and expands the obvious strengths found in his first volume of poems, _Somewhere Bound_. Boey’s is an important poetic voice and he is a poet to watch.

A survey of this nature will be incomplete if attention was not drawn to the establishment of the Singapore Literature Prize – funded by a publisher and administered by the National Book Development Council. It carries a top prize of $10,000 and several minor prizes. The Annual National Book Awards has, recently, been challenged to name their judges – a call which the present writer has been consistently making since their inception many years ago. Anonymity in judging is no longer seen to be excusable and with controversies surrounding the latest awards (the Award went to Rex Shelley and Gopal Baratham was awarded a Commendation – Baratham declined the Award insisting that his novel ought to have won!) the sooner the Book Council announces publicly its annual judges the better.

On the whole things are really looking up in Singapore; there is heightened scholarly interest in Singaporean literature (though we still await the first real study of it!) and creative writing is actively being promoted with several Creative Writing Programmes in the offing. These programmes allow the bringing in of international writers to Singapore to share their experiences and achievements. Doris Lessing was in Singapore in 1991 and it is hoped that Nadine Gordimer will be here in 1993. Publishers are now far more willing to publish local books and many of the big international publishers are also moving into the area. _Singa_ continues to publish established and new writers and public readings of prose and poetry are encouraged and well attended. For the first time in Singapore’s history, there was a series of readings at a pub co-ordinated by Kirpal Singh – every Sunday for three months the readings continued – unfortunately the fortunes of the owner of the pub got into complications and the readings ended quite abruptly! But there is a definite interest and a definite future here!

It is likely that as Singapore matures and as the ruling ethnic demands a more serious stocktaking, the arts are going to flourish. Moves are currently underway to have all Singapore schools expose their students to Singaporean writings. There is full support coming from many different quarters and it will behove the Singaporean writer to realise the new emphasis and be ready for delivery!

KIRPAL SINGH
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

GORDON COLLIER teaches at the University of Giessen.

GEOFFREY DAVIS teaches at the University of Aachen.

JANE DOWNING was born in Australia and was brought up and educated in Australia, Tanzania, Ireland and Polynesia. She is now living in the Marshall Islands. She has completed two novels and one collection of short stories.

GEOFF GOODFELLOW – see interview.

STEPHEN GRAY is a South African poet, critic and novelist. Formerly Professor at Rand Afrikaans University he now freelances. His latest volume of poetry, Season of Violence, was recently published by Dangaroo Press.

PAUL HETHERINGTON is an Australian poet living in Canberra.

KWAKU LARBI KORANG is Ghanaian and is doing post-graduate work at the University of British Columbia.

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KANCHANA UGBABE was born in India. She received her doctorate from Flinders University, Australia, and now teaches at the University of Jos, Nigeria. She is married to a Nigerian. Her writing explores the difference in cultures and the difficulties such differences sometimes create.

LANDEG WHITE is the head of the Centre for Southern Asian Studies, University of York. His latest book of poetry, View from the Stockade, received much acclaim. His long prose poem Bounty will be published by Dangaroo Press in October 1993.
KUNAPIPI
International Arts Magazine

FICTION
Jane Downing, Kanchana Ugbabe.

POETRY

ARTICLES
on Henry Adams’ and Robert Louis Stevenson’s Perceptions of the South Seas; Ama Ata Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy; Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family, Jacques Poulin’s Volkswagen Blues and Gail Scott’s Heroine; and Bharati Mukherjee’s Darkness.

INTERVIEW
with Geoff Goodfellow

THE YEAR THAT WAS

COVER
Wood cut by Robert Gibbings