Kunapipi 17 (2) 1995 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 (soft-ware preferably Word for Windows or Macwrite saved for PC) and should be accompanied by a hard copy.

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Cover: Birdsville Track, Australia 1994. Photo by Grethe Kirkeby Poulsen

*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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Editorial Note

In Britain this year there has been a series of events, exhibitions, performances, conferences, to celebrate what has been called Africa 95. One of the most important of these events for the readers of Kunapipi took place at The Commonwealth Institute in October. The conference was organized by Ronald Warwick and was called ‘South African Writing at the Crossroads’.

Writers and critics from all parts of South Africa and of most of the South African races took part and ‘eye-ball to eye-ball’, as Mongane Wally Serote chose to express it, discussed and debated the future of South African literature and the power of the word to ‘decolonize the mind’. I found it appropriate to conclude this issue by including pieces from three of the participants. The three pieces chosen all represent different stages in the recent history of South Africa; Miriam Tlali’s moving account of what being black under apartheid meant for her, Elleke Boehmer’s record of lining up to vote on 27 April 1994, her recognition of the banality of evil and her hope that on that day ‘another banality must be put on record, a banality that is beautiful, that is benign’, and finally Mongane Wally Serote’s keynote address ‘The Fate of the Word’. In this speech he warns that there is still ‘no easy road to freedom’. He pointed out that it was not just South Africa but the whole world at the crossroads, a world that seems hell-bent on destroying itself. Serote rejoices that South Africa is leading the way: in a world in crises ‘South Africa has dared and pioneered’. ‘The word he said, ‘has the power to be dynamic. And that in my view, is the new find of South African literature’.

Anna Rutherford
The White Ants' Dreaming

A fable

The landscape of this country has a story to tell, but those who can still tell it speak a different language from those who have not yet heard it. Much of the country resembles an ant-colony in the presence of danger, the occupants agitated, unsure of their bearings, somehow ill at ease with their surroundings.

They have been told repeatedly that theirs is the safest country on earth, so what prevents these frightened ants from feeling safe? Those wishing to undermine the work of worthy, honest ants speak of a refusal to acknowledge what was done to other ants, who settled in this country long ago, before the white ants came. But the new ants have no memory of these events. They have been conditioned to forget.

The new ants, having made great progress, have advanced too far to understand what the old ants want, nor do they comprehend what the old ants feel for each other and their birthplace. The old ants are, it seems, opposed to change. The new ants are amazed at how the old ants can sit still for ages, rapt in contemplation, sunk in the psyche of their continent. The new ants are another breed, they like to cover distance quickly. Getting there is preferable to being here. Theirs is a world of shiny surfaces, they fear the dark.

The new ants have heard rumours of the love the old ants seem to feel for their lands, but they are sceptical of this. Searches of their data bases fail to furnish proof. Meanwhile, new ants buy and sell the land they seized by force, though they don't own it. Nor does it own them. Some would even say that it disowns them.

But if one day they were to find inside themselves that ancient love that comes before all other loves, their life-patterns would change. The formless agitation would become circles and cryptic lines that contemplate the hidden seams in rock faces, the veins in trees, the secret watercourse beneath the sands, the ways of schooling fish, the flightpaths of migratory birds, the formulae in seeds.

Then it would be clear to the new ants why they have felt unsafe. Then the old ants' spirits could lie down in their ancestral places. Then the land would trust the new ants with its mysteries, and take them to its inmost heart where they have never been.

The new ants would become the old, until such time as the cruel cycle should again commence.
I've tried before to memorise
the textures, fragrances and sounds,
the pearly trunks of candle barks,
the banksia's black, wizened cones,
wild ginger colonies with broad,
tough, rich jade Asiatic leaves
and blooms like torches in the filtered
shade, delicate as orchids or as dragon­flies, wing-petals raised, their coral
stamens messengers from paradise
when they exhale. I've tried to take
this essence in, make it an element
of me, the detail of the canopy, the forest
floor, each leaf, each tree, accompanied
by choirs so subtle, variously strident,
sweet, the unstudied polyphony of bird­
discourse, and I have failed. Each time
I leave, they blur into nostalgia, lose
clarity; when I return they ambush me,
sharp and fresh, alive, complete
with ancient mockery of kookaburras
in a ribald throng, reverberating
timbals of cicadas in astringent air,
the gentle play of leaves like ripples
in a peaceful sea, cloud-continents,
nomadic islands riding inland sky,
and all the distant fracture­lines
of spur and range ablaze with light,
anointed by vermilion sun and scarred
by fire, as here in isolation, realms
of animal and plant conspire, wild birds
come together to upbraid each other,
pipe and chime, a green dance circles
'Abydos', weaves spells that consecrate
and bind. The air is pure, the mornings
heavenly, the human heart goes free;
here it is higher, clearer, lighter,
easier to breathe.
Jena Woodhouse

CICADA COLONY, MOUNT TAMBORINE

Clamped hard against the textured bark
beneath the swaying canopy, they temper
the blurred edges of a song of sighing,
fleshy leaves; their brilliance of tone
resounds and ricochets, intones and rounds
tree-sibilance to brilliance of phrase.

In this cicada-heaven on the mountain we
are trespassers; green cobra-hoods of lilies
make us start, and buttress-roots baulk paths.
First syllables of pod and spore and seed
are crushed by careless feet, with arrow-
heads of fern and rust-brown fungi.

We crane at phraseologies of fronds
that cartwheel into sky, slim-columned
palms, and huge green hands of giant
stinging-trees; untitled fruits adorn
our trail with violet, inky blues and coral;
looping into shallow pools of sun, lithe
as a snaking vine, the interrogative of head
and neck, a warning sign......

The words for awe
and fear were not invented here, this universe
was set in train millennia before our time.
We stumble under language-trees attuned
to darker lores and rites, conditioned
by smooth surfaces and glassy light.
In a climate of review of historical cartographies and narrative methodologies post-colonial writers have modified their fictional strategies to demonstrate diverse and relative ways of seeing and saying. In this liberation from textual imperialism the capitalised voice of English has been more properly located as 'one among others' and its authorised forms of literary expression reassessed as post-colonial writers reconsider 'not just the tradition but the episteme which underpins it'.

Transgressions of generic boundaries (between poetry, prose and life-writing or history and fiction) have transformed discourses and there has been new interest in ideological perspectives and intertextual spaces other than those inscribed by colonial prerogatives. The previously dominant veracities of the 'reflectionist or mimetic model of cartography', with its 'self-privileging western modes of knowledge' have been interrogated.

In this process, the power-breaking functions of language, legend, naming and spacial appropriation have been revealed and there has been an overdue acknowledgment, consideration and representation of indigenous realities. This has its inherent dangers: an Australian historian recently reminded enthusiasts that 'speaking for is not the same as speaking with' and, in this society, the opportunities for indigenous people to speak out for themselves, remain circumscribed.

Relativising readings and deconstructing historical fictions has not solved on-going social injustices or the protracted trauma of Aboriginal people. However, fiction is valuable as a licensed space which provides
the means of depicting cultural practices and privileging previously silenced voices. It provides the opportunity to consider the constraints of logonomic systems and provides an arena where hierarchies like those that have prevailed between history and fiction, (dichotomies of real and fictional, truth and lies) may be contested. Jane Marcus, has observed that:

If all history (or at least historiography) is a fiction, as contemporary theorists tell us, an interesting question for the literary critics is whether all fiction is history. It is easier for the literary critics to accept the new narrativity of historians and, since Foucault, the study of history as discourse. Can historians, accustomed to raiding the literature of an age for examples, accept an equal revelatory force in fiction as in events, as evidence of a lived reality?....the writing of history is all a matter of the construction of more or less plausible plots.  

This argument relates specifically to the elision of women’s voices from Australian history, (Marcus, like Kate Grenville’s ‘Joan’, observes that ‘when women read traditional male history...they throw up their hands at its bias and prejudice’) but the view of the constructed nature of representation is echoed and confirmed by Carter’s analysis of ‘cultural conditions’ as he defines Australia as ‘a place in which meanings are not fixed but created in utterance’. In this climate, the writer of fiction is no longer confined by mimetic allegiances or single views of ‘truth’ and the narrational modes of contemporary writing reflect acknowledgement of diversity. The celebration of difference, without idealisation of alternatives or undervaluing inherited cultural perspectives, represents a central challenge for Australian writers.

This discussion outlines the narrative strategies employed in a remarkable fiction exploring ontological propositions in relation to cross-cultural contact. James Bardon’s Revolution by Night, depicts indigenous people as islanded within a sea of white ignorance and disempowered by racial violence. The range of the investigation is epic and its outcomes tragic, but the novel does attempt a significant cross-cultural translation and investigation of a non-white world view. Aboriginal writers, like Sam Watson and Mudrooroo, have explored cultural and linguistic representation through fiction but Bardon, writing from the ‘outside’ has different agendas. He does not presume to ‘speak for’ but rather sets out about the limitations of his culture’s logocentricity and attempts to find a language that might convey the struggle to understand, acknowledge, dignify and prioritize being rather than saying: a communication system which is completely foreign to his narrator. This is a text about access rather than authority but I would argue that it does not represent a neo-colonial appropriation of Aboriginal language or lore but rather offers a revelation of different ways of seeing.
Revolution by Night enacts a journey inland both physically and metaphorically and the mapping of topographies of place and mind are integral. The narrative’s structure, content and mode of expression is designed to emulate and celebrate ‘the aesthetic and compositional properties of a Central Australian sand painting.’ The narrative has 21 short sections and addenda which includes:

- Notes for an Imaginary Language
- A Monograph ‘Interior – an analysis of Australian art’
- and a [fictionalised] fragment of Charles Sturt’s visions.

The narrator of Revolution by Night, is Professor Jack Terrence Dutruc, a survivor of the Williora Massacres, who eventually commits suicide but leaves a diary which represents one aspect of the journey of the text. Given the skin-name, Tjungerrayi, by the Aboriginal people, he is entrusted to record their story, ‘so all the white men will know’ (p.206). For reader and writer this is difficult territory as the monologues and instructive dialogues are patterned by the hesitations, anxieties, silences and difficulties of translation of the witness striving to encompass the ‘fullness of gesture’ of another system of language and knowledge:

I transcribe and I itemize the signs upon my notebook and ask how the relationship between the signs made the story talk. Billy Titus-Mindah is sort of growling and wheezing at once about how each sign can mean this, then mean that, it can have two or three meanings depending on where everything else speaks. When it speaks here, he whispers, when it speaks there, when I come and add this place to that. No time in the story, I try to say, yet he won’t talk about time, he doesn’t want to know where it’s at, spreading out more spaces before me so as to say what the story said. I am trying again, marking in my notebook the story-lines which he is singing, uiri, the names of, because sing means name ‘Same word’, he says, he trickles his fingers about in the shape of the cave he has told me of and seems to waste his thumb upon the incising now. The water-man emerges out of his song, he says, like this, ‘You see’, this, and he dabs his thumb into the direction he is singing, where the track went in the story he has brought to me this afternoon, and I understand there is no time in the story, only space, time can only be known by the names of the places over which the song goes, talking so softly you can only gradually catch their words, they are sliding their fingers upon the paper, closing their eyes as they do, and suddenly I am thinking of how I, of all the people, have brought myself here to watch them put the lie to what McDouall Stuart and Sturt thought. (p.23)

This story of the Central Deserts has historic precedents and tensions between documentation, life-writing and intellectual speculation, shape the text. Geoffrey Bardon, the author of Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert and Mythscapes: Aboriginal Art of the Desert and the brother of James Bardon, the author of Revolution by Night, travelled together in central Australia in the 1980’s. It was Geoffrey Bardon’s experience in
the 1970’s as the art teacher who supplied western painting materials and encouraged the work of Pintupi indigenous artists in the Papunya region in the 1970’s, which provided the stimulus for this fiction. It has been suggested that the Pintupi people, ‘demoralised by their dispossession’, found some dignity and incentives to produce art work, and achieved a revolution in art. 

Paternalism is countered by James Bardon’s fiction which records event but foregrounds the deprivation and loss inherent in this black/white transaction. Unlike the author of Songlines, this writer is appalled by his ‘apocalyptic vision’ and the narrator’s view is not presented as privileged or proprietorial. Unlike Chatwin’s view of a dying culture, Bardon reverses the mirror to suggest that white absence from black history is a kind of ‘death’ and his fiction thus turns away from established forms to revalue and re-inscribe what Sturt, with his Eurocentric view, labelled the ‘far language’ (p. 67).

The narrative structure is not bound by western conventions of time, space and sequentiality and it crosses between genres merging dreams, visions, recollections and diary entries. Instead its patterns echo integrative oral traditions. The prose emulates: ‘the song [which] is spatial in its repetitions, because it uses its tone by affirmations, not unlike a figurative and therefore expanded sense of the literal in language’ (p. 230).

There are diverse linguistic translations of painting sequences: honey ant, wind or water dreamings, ice-dreaming, special children’s dreaming, naughty-possum or Yam spirit dreamings, each with their varied tones and modulations. These lyrical passages contrast with Sturt’s self-conscious highly wrought meditations about the ‘veiled continent’ or the linguistically distant and debased utterances of those countering black knowledge with white violence. There are also hallucinatory renditions of drunken distortions of reality.

In terms of structure, the narrative works backwards, or perhaps more accurately, revolves, simultaneously, from the most ‘surreal’ but regrettably ‘real’ experience of the Williora massacre, with its nightmare evocation of colour and sound being re-envisioned by the painters’ singing, through to the abstract dissertation which accounts for these events retrospectively Stephen Mueke suggests that:

Bardon does not want his readers to see what he describes, he wants to trace out the line of his meaning physically, ...by reciting his words aloud, perhaps by breathing the same long deep breaths as his prose breathes.

Muecke re-uses Geoffrey Bardon’s term ‘haptic art’ to define the progression from eye (a visualization with equates with distance) to experience, implying closeness or identification, to suggest the characteristics of Dutruc’s conversations with ‘the makers’.
example, meaning is extra-lingual in this transcription of the honey-ant dreaming where the syntax, soft sibilances and kinaesthetics of the prose, evoke sensation enacting the distance between representational art and transformational depiction:

There are night sun-bursts of voices to that where the children sit and tell very quietly how the honey-ant made the sand, how the stippling and hole-shadow, the dotted shadowed balls which set a ground firmly about are the small balls of sand the honey-ant makes, and then the children touch softly by forefinger and thumb, the index of each circle crossing the arc, where you see their fingers drawing themselves about softly, where children’s fingers move as they sing, calling the darkness out of the signs so they can see nothing before the signs are put in. And I see the paintings again, the way the eye sees, and the soft outlines of the silences between words saying the little stories of the animals they have seen, because those animals were sleeping now without shutting their children’s eyes. ...and I say ‘What ngari, what that?’, pointing at the round balls of sand they hold up for me in the warm whisper-filled dark. ‘What ngari me?’ I say, and they, ‘Honey-ant here, here,’ and point at the physical sign of the earth. ‘You mean the honey-ant makes the painting?’ I say, and someone whispers back, ‘Becomes the honey-ant, becomes’. [my italics] (p. 38)

Barry Hill has claimed that:

Our culture’s distinctive cast of mind is to separate from the object in order to know it rather than identify with it as subject in order to understand it and the larger scheme of things.  

In the monograph entitled ‘Interior’ which investigates ‘hieroglyphs in Australian Art’ Bardon has Dutruc suggest that a further difficulty in cross-cultural relations is that: ‘we are culturally set in such a way that the visual representation of our consciousness is understood as being quite different from and in many instances in opposition to the worded idea’ (p. 227). Bardon also explains that:

The form of the hieroglyph is in the worded image or image as word, the very thing-in-itself after which so many painters in the western tradition have sought. The paintings, as transcriptions of sand-paintings, or body or churunga inscriptions, which themselves are transliterations of the sand-painting forms, seem to be both representations and embodiments of matter. (p. 225)

The paradox of word as medium but inhibitor of identification is apparent in Bardon’s text. Walter Ong considered a similar phenomenon in Interfaces of the Word where he analysed the consequences of the print medium’s visual emphasis and the loss of sound/sense dimensions of orality: the distance between mimesis and irony.  

This is also the province of post structuralist theory - determining the linguistic frames through which we construct reality - but the debate between the prioritization of orality and literacy is extended here by the analogue of transformation and by an inversion of presumptions about the colonizing of the spoken word. Here the
sign is not merely spoken or written, but lived in the synthesis of speech, body, and art.

Bardon cites the acknowledged, but still salient demonstration of different ways of seeing, in the European reliance upon a horizon – 'the European way to feel that the landscape had form'.\(^\text{17}\) He suggests that if the view of the world and its configurations is mapped in another way, seen from above, horizonless, scripted by hieroglyphs which not only indicate but embody meaning, this represents 'an affinity with the land' and a radical re-thinking about metaphysical relationships:

> The human body is the only structural horizon in the sand paintings and as such is internal to the observer and therefore unexpressed in the designs ...It is as if one were looking down upon the earth beneath one's feet and imagining the designed and patterned earth as an immense centrifuge. (p. 225)

Aptly, the structure of the narrative is therefore not linear but centrifugal, 'revolving' from the death of Tjapaltjari who has, at the outset, the dreamings which are then created through the narrative in his hands. This 'history of creation', is painted in the sands of the desert, on bodies, turungas and ultimately on the fifty foot scroll which culminates in a depiction of the extremely potent night dreaming entitled' Katjala Wananu: Son after the father', which has the 'unspeakable' power to 'take back all the white man's towns and cattle stations' but is as yet unfinished (p. 207):

> It was such a titanic journey full of hundreds of great chapter-doors or windows along the inward-invocations of the painting and each huge window of a track or dreaming seemed to speak to and of the main in a brooding, sinuous track massing to a thousand miles. And it was full of such cruelty and power that you could feel the danger well up about the sometimes crouching, sometimes squatting men now the making had begun. (p. 204)

*Revolution by Night* might be described as a 'singing into being' of events in need of re-inscription in a white community at risk if it fails to recognise that its way of seeing might be, from an indigenous perspective, blind. This text questions the very basis of European thought and sets it in a time frame whereby it becomes merely one transient picture in an ancient song line. It challenges the 'cult of forgetfulness' that obliterated black history and offers a demonstration of this culture's simultaneous life and art\(^\text{18}\) Dutric, the outsider, insists that:

> They are a captive nation and they understand this. ...They measure their enslavement by the lifetime of any ordinary man they say now and four such men have been born and died as children of a father since the captivity has begun. It is not enough to have made all the seen earth from what was before unseen, and they know this. (p. 26)
In these ways the mapping/making/creation (story-telling, history-making, truth seeking) devices of two cultures are juxtaposed. Sturt’s journey is mapped by time, space and deprivation. In contrast, the Aboriginal song-journey brings into being an ancient oral legacy embracing a history of existence, the law, culture and knowledge of forebears – a huge creative space suspended in a kind of living hell defined by the word ‘captivity’. Barry Hill, notes that European ‘maps wrote out local knowledge’ but it was the whole language with its attendant ideologies which obliterated definition. ‘They aridly appropriate ‘new’ ground as distinct from a fruitful encounter with territory more than likely owned by someone else. Such a map tends towards dogma, a relic of a once lived thing’ (p. 74). In direct contrast between the dead past and the live present, we are told that: ‘In the desert hieroglyphs there is a sense of becoming’ (p. 227). In this text, Sturt is enough of a visionary to be troubled by the limitations of his maps and the premise of ‘form emerging from formlessness’ is questioned:

In my dreams I saw that great map upon the wall of the house in which I slept, and on the map were inscribed pedigrees, time-grids, interior-clouds all circumscribing the older worlds and the map was a kind of mirror, of a blindness, which I could not quite understand, the dream said, for recorded history and ordinary form had long since left whatever now remained. The exactitude of truth had quite vanished here, and what the hand drew was not what it saw. And this is an unconsolated place, the map said, and what dies in part must always deny the conscience of the act, and therefore become the whole. (p.15)

In ‘The Approach to the Night Continent’ we are told that:

Sturt had written in the margins of his notes about symbolic form the words, ‘Revolution by night’, and beside the words, ‘Therefore the form is its very lack of certainty or shape. It is strange to understand that all possible meanings may be exhausted by what you may see. How you cannot symbolize that which has no form’. And then he wrote of a great night-book he was entering in, in which there was no human order in the words. That he understood that he read a very silence in order to see that sand and stone, and it was all like the Devil telling you what darkness your flesh had made. (p. 21)

This narrative suggests that we have played out the premise of ‘form emerging from formlessness’, that European ‘blindness’ or failure to see seems only nameable in terms antithetical to those already used in describing creation - hence the western recourse to dualist terminology and the summoning up of the devil as the epitome of darkness. The text suggests a stirring in the desert, that, a revolution is at hand, as another reading may now supercede this version/ vision of creation. What we are left with is a post-christian (or prior understanding) of Satan’s fall. He informs Sturt that: ’you are at the coastline of that
unimagined land of Sacred Names Written in Sand that the night travellers might believe his true death came with his own eyes’ (p. 201). Paul Carter observes that: ’Sturt’s true confrontation was not with landscape but with the figure of Death; but Death was not a feature of the country but a mirror of his own metaphysical enclosure’ (p. 84). Thus framed, the ‘non-pastoral’ land fails to offer something of value to those seeking other than what is there. While the white men search for water, the Aboriginal painters explain that the ‘sand is everything’ but this truth and link with the land is also lost to western eyes. Sturt notes that: ‘the Night Continent was ... like an error in the imagination of the world. ...you never see this night continent but only what it is not...’ (pp. 66-67) and the further he explores (geographically and introspectively), the less able he is to equate his language with what is seen or understood : ‘I have whispered to my journal that we have become men painting a landscape from another world’ (p. 115).

In the narrative’s post-script Sturt decides that in the face of this reality a new language is necessary to facilitate seeing. What begins as a demonstration of radical difference and culturally isolated visions momentarily ‘lightens’ to admit a small potential - a realisation that understanding may not have been entirely obliterated by the learned cast of thought which has previously inhibited sight. The diarist begins again like a child undoing ‘blindness’:

So that I made each letter in a kind of alphabet in the shape of stones, clouds, trees, sand-drifts now, sometimes like the exact shape of the object we saw. Sometimes made greater or abridged by shouts in that dark, like some story told to you long ago about animals which could not speak unless they were seen. Interiors of great stars, like unspoken words, all hidden in Night, where an original language was, and possessing me for dreams. (p. 217)

This narrative is nothing less than an attempt to articulate and review the parameters of European discovery, theimaginative horizons whereby we define ‘our’ world and the language and style of fictions whereby such knowledge has been perpetuated. It is also an attempt to right an imbalance – to re-value alternative ways of seeing which pre-date the intellectual constructs of our age.

When the story is complete there is an abstract dissertation, at a safely encoded academic distance, but this adjunct to the preceding narrative does not authorize but contextualize. It completes the author’s thesis by demonstrating its distance from the life of the text. While it serves an interpretative function the scholarly words now seem ‘foreign’ as the narrative has already embodied and prefigured it. The authority invested in both worlds is, therefore, set side by side.

Except for the brief moment when the explorer/visionary reaches the limits of his language and is forced to consider an alternative expression for the world he encounters, Bardon’s narrative illustrates
subject/object distinctions and the in-between states of those ‘travelling towards the other’ but does not foresee reconciliation. Communities remain isolated by their readings of place and each other and language does not wholly provide an agency of communication of anything other than inscribed distance. The monograph ‘interior’ considers Cassirer’s understanding of the provisional nature of language as a means for ‘discovering rather than representing’ truth and articulates a need for:

an idiomatic eye, one which temporizes words through a spacial naming by form. If the hieroglyphs do nothing else they do this. This is Goethe’s ‘exact sensory imagination’. We should be shaping sensible matter by letting its form shape us, thereby acting out the original dreams of mankind to be in harmony with what we presume to understand. (p. 226)

While this fiction mirrors cartographic practices, it deliberately avoids the arrogance of documented certainties:

The implicit claims of maps to accuracy are undercut by the fact that they are embedded in a continually transformative discourse, and thus tend to utalize obsolete forms. A network of classical and medieval myths are found in explorer’ constructions of Australia and especially in the metaphoric references to mapping within the text...Australia needs to be examined in terms of Europe’s ‘othering’ of the rest of the world.20

and in adopting a ‘transformative discourse; perhaps testifies to Wilson Harris’s view of the potential of new fictions as a means of reinscription:

on the surface post-colonial texts may deal with divisions of race and culture which are apparently obdurately determined, [but] each text contains the seeds of ‘community’ which as they germinate and grow in the mind of the reader, crack asunder the apparently inescapable dialectic of history.21

It is probably not a coincidence that a recent, visiting exhibition of surrealist art commemorating the work of European writers and philosophers, whose art reflected their interest in the subconcious workings of the human mind, was called ‘Surrealism: Revolution by Night’. If Surrealism caused a major ‘revolution’ in the way of seeing and re-interpreting the world from within a western perspective, then the Revolution depicted or foretold in this narrative – the entirely different way of representing, viewing, reading and recording the world – from an Aboriginal perspective – is of a larger scale and far more revolutionary in its implications.
NOTES

3. ibid, p.116.
7. James Bardon, Revolution by Night (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1991). All further references are for this edition and are included in the text.
8. Huggins, op. cit. p.43. Huggins warns of the general inadequacy of white literary representations of black ‘speaking’ as demeaning or exaggerated but Bardon avoids these pitfalls in his representation.
10. I am indebted to Professor Stephen Muecke of the University of Technology, Sydney who referred me to Barry Hill’s article ‘Mantric Maps: lost and found’ in Voices 1991, pp.74-84 and his own article ‘Haptic Visions: Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation’, Agenda No. 33, September, 1993, pp.21-23.
11. Carter, Overland op. cit., p.83. Carter notes that Bardon has another story to tell: not of a burgeoning Renaissance, but of impending apocalypse.
12. Hill, op. cit., p.80. In ‘Mantric Maps’ speaks of Geoff Bardon as ‘a kind of angelic midwife to a cultural re-birth’ but later qualifies this view with the recognition of the contrary aspects of white appropriation of Aboriginal cultural artefacts/ knowledge.
14. Muerke, op. cit., The thesis on representation is more elegant than this brief reference indicates.
17. Ashcroft, op. cit., p.41. Bill Ashcroft reviews this ‘Excess’ in De-scribing Empire where he notes that: ‘crucially the horizon itself is created by language. As Wittgenstein (1976:56) says, ‘the limits of my language are the limits of my world...the model of the horizon also links space and time because the contextual horizon initiates a process of traversal by the act of consciousness. This linking of space and time leads to the further conclusion that consciousness is language.’. The latter claim is contentious.
19. This may be a further reading of ‘the son after the father’.
20. Carter, Overland, op. cit., p.84.
Stuart Newton

OUTBACK

the trees not evergreen so much as evergrey
within that ghastly blank of an empty centre
and alien man moving through drifts of spinifex
feeling something watching him with expectation
that he would succumb to the blue of frustration
and become an image in the dreamtime mirage

and Charles Sturt writing in his drip-sweat journal
so great the heat that every box-screw drawn
the horn handles of instruments and hair-combs
split into fine laminae and lead dropped from pencils:
our hair has ceased to grow
our nails as brittle as glass.

and Voss into night advances
the neighing of a tethered horse,
a distant bell, the occasional cry of night birds
alone interrupt the silence of the camp.
The fire smoulders slowly under the large meat-pot
and heaven's bright constellations pass unheeded
over the heads of dreaming wanderers

following the Barcoo northwards
to Carpentaria Gulf
turning westwards and losing itself
in the central deserts
and somewhere among the complex
ephemeral waterholes
he died and even now they find
the bleached bled bones of his entourage
with Voss vanished into his dreams
and Burke, with camels and horses and fifteen men
in a race with John Stuart who gave up half-way,
set out from Melbourne to cross the ghastly void
armed with planning and well-equipped preparations:
splitting up to advance a party to Cooper's Creek
to establish a depot beside a permanent water-hole
then splitting again for a last fast dash north,
a thousand miles away. Burke and Wills,
King and Gray.

the plain stretched in front of them
- a low line of purple hills
- gums clumped around a water hole
the only goal because each was new

Three returned weakened exhausted
leaving a message carved on a tree
Returning to the Darling, signed

Waiting until strength regained
they set off down the Cooper, but

it does not matter which channel you follow;
always you end up among sandhills and waterless plains
of sharp red rocks and occasional light thorny bushes.
Not sinister country – it is too bright and open for that,
but the space is vast and the sun pitiless:
time becomes an endless continuum and hours pass in torpor.
Torpor, inertia, that is what overcomes the traveller.

Unable to reach Mount Hopeless
they turned back to Cooper's Creek
kept just-alive by Aboriginal gifts
of fish and nardoo seed and water-sips

Wills died first, then Burke
and only King survived, demented
by starvation and loneliness

21 April 1861
208 that morning
William Brahe

1&3 July
found October
Next year Stuart with ten men
and seventy horses tried again

it came down close all around them
dark and stern, along the ranges
lighter hued toward the valley
where a dried out creek crossed the land
the sun set behind the ranges
and for a moment the blue sky
became gold then passed to purple
the oppressive day giving way
to space and freedom and stars

and returned a crippled man, half-blind,
dying in Pommey poverty, leaving behind
a haunting mournful sound:

like pipes of pan at Hanging Rock
Visit from Auntie Rose

The horse shifted in shade; the springcart groaned; a wheel scrunched on quartz-pebbles: hard sounds in sparse, dry bush.

In the cool beneath corrugated verandah, at one end of which stood a tank bleeding rust from several wounds, and at the other a parched privet, two women took stock of distance beyond scattered gidgee.

'Russerl? ' one called. 'Russerl! Bring the glasses, luv!'

A yellow, blunt-headed dog, lying in deep shadow by the privet, glanced up. From within the house a baby, drawn momentarily from sleep, protested.

'Comin', Auntie Rose!'

In here, where moisture wept up the skirt of a Coolgardie safe, the flies were not so thick.

Out there, where there must have been fitful wind, a dustspiral lurked, dodging like a felon between breaks in far scrub. A kestrel in the middle distance worked the gaps above red earth, hanging, quivering, fluttering on. From somewhere beyond that, a crow's desolation carried, arid and saturnine.

The elder of the women so completely occupied the great cane chair that nothing could be seen of it. Her pudding sleeves and hands, from one of which dangled an enamel mug, concealed the armrests; her thighs spilled out at the sides; and her dress, falling to the tops of her boots, obscured the legs. Had she been positioned in the middle distance, she might have been mistaken for a dark termite mound.

She grunted as she leaned to place the mug on a stool beside her. This was the signal that she had had enough tea thickened with condensed milk and brown sugar, and would soon open the rope-noosed sack in which the sherry lay, and next roll the first of a dozen or so cigarettes.

The other woman, who was much younger, and whose face suggested blood relationship, was thickening towards the same corpulence, and had the same hair shadow on upper lip. As the one fossicked for her sack, the other returned her gaze to a letter that had fallen in her lap.

The dog, with scarred head between extended paws, again glanced up, its bulging eyes looking more saurian than canine.
A gangling lad, caught between boyhood and adolescence, in patched pants and singlet, came from the house, holding in each hand a brown tumbler that had been sliced from a beer bottle with hot wire. His hair, which had been cut round a bowl, might have given him the simpleton’s look, had not lancing eyes expressed inquiring intelligence.

‘There’s a man,’ Auntie Rose, taking the glasses, approved.

‘What’ve yer been doin’, luv?’

‘Drorin’.

‘Tell me what,’ the old woman urged above the sherry bottle’s pain-filled cork, which travail ended with dull pop. The heavily-tinctured liquid plashed and lolloped in the glasses; a sharp sicklysweetness entered their nostrils.

‘Roo,’ the boy said.

‘Show me.’

The boy was pleased to fetch a head portrait, in profile, of a far-seeing red kangaroo that he had observed of an evening at the dam. The head was noble, even majestic, in strong, simple outline, and coloured in with what looked like red wash.

Auntie Rose placed a hand on the boy’s head.

‘I always knew yer had somethin’ different in yer, luv, right from the time I set eyes on yer. So it’s a real artist yer’d like ter be?’

The boy looked quickly, shyly down, then up, with flashing adoration.

‘Bridge’, the old woman said. ‘Did yer see Russerl’s drorin’?’

Bridge’ had not yet sipped from her tumbler.

‘I have ter say I wasn’t too pleased with it.’

‘But it’s the spittin’ image,’ Rose protested.

‘It ain’t that. It’s what ’e done it with. Made it red with rust from the tank and started it leakin’ again. I tried ter fix it with a match but the hole got bigger. Lucky it was the top rung, or we would’ve lost our water.’

‘Russerl!’ said Auntie Rose, and gave the boy a smart slap on the head. Tears sprang to his eyes; his nose started to run.

His mother sent him inside to look at the baby. Then she returned to the letter that Rose had delivered. The old woman watched lips picking their way over lumpy words.

‘Yer can’t lose yer tank water. What does Stan say?’

‘He was over the border the last six months.’ Bridge’ plucked up the envelope and examined postmark and date. ‘Nar...iel, Eskdale, Beechworth, Wangaratta, Benalla, Shepparton, Kyabram. Good country, ’e says. Hot, but plenty ’a grass. Sheep got bales on ’em. Posted this at Cohuna, on ’is way to Balranald and Hay, hopin’ to work ’is way home for a spell.’

Rose swallowed sherry, after poking her tongue around her cheeks.
'Yer missin' 'im a lot?'
Bridge' brought liquor to her lips for the first time.
'Acourse. Sometimes. I dunno.'
'I know how yer feel. It was the same with me whenever Shanahan went away. It always got me in the guts the first few weeks. Missed 'is voice, I did, and 'is boots thumpin' up over the verandah. Him drunk as a fiddler's bitch and dancin' a jig with 'is thumbs in 'is weskit. The smell of the bugger. But after a couple of months, well, yer got used to 'im gone. Got ter like it even. Yer miss 'im in bed?'
A butt-end, which had burned out between yellow-stained fingers, dropped to earth among fellows.
'I dunno.' Bridge' sounded weary.
'Yer try ter remember what it was like, eh? And what was there? The snortin', and then the snorin', and you lyin' there awake wishin' it didn't have ter be over so quick every time. Yer lie there leakin' inter yer nightie, and somethin' - a appetite - curdlin' inside. And all yer get is babies.'
Bridge' looked into her tumbler.
'I don't mind that so much. It's when 'e comes home - you only get a bit of 'im. Comes in all knocked up from walkin' fifteen mile from the railway. Gives Russell a fipenny knife or somethin' 'e's found on the track, 'as a bath and a feed, and takes me ter bed. Two days later 'e's out rabbitin' or drinkin' with 'is mates. Then 'e gets a letter from the contractor and 'e's off again for another six months to a year. He aint seen the baby yet. Doesn't know 'e's got one.'

From bleached sky in the middle distance a kestrel suddenly hurled itself earthward and did not rise.
'Somethin' 'appens ter a man in the bush,' Rose said around the sideways lighting of a cigarette. 'E becomes quiet. Even Shanahan lost 'is singin' voice, gradual. The Creature got 'im in the end, as Ma Delaney used ter say. And then 'e had ter go and get 'imself drownded in the Diamantina flood.'

Rose's big hand poured again.
'Yer know what I worked out comin' along in the cart? I reckon men use the bush ter escape us women.'
They heard, coming from the far side of the privet bush, the sound of a door grinding on a hinge. Bridge' looked stricken.
'Gets the trots when 'e's upset. He'll be on and off the dunny all afternoon. If it aint the trots, it's 'is sinus poisonin' 'im up. It's like 'e's punishin' 'imself ter get at me.'
'Does 'e miss 'is Dad?'
'Wakes up sometimes callin' out. But in the mornin' 'e forgets. Moons and drors. Or 'elps me with the house. Likes it when 'e's
Geoff Wyatt

pertectin' me. Aint afraid, neither. Killed a snake that got under the floor. Him and the dog. Loves 'is correspondence lessons,' Bridge' went on. 'Reads good, but we got no books. He'll be in there now, readin' the dunny paper 'e's been over a thousand times.'

As the sun fell towards the gidgee's crimsonblack line, Rose began to look inward and talk abstractedly. She would be slightly shicker now, even though she didn't show it, Bridge' knew from old. Within half an hour, when the sun had gone over, Rose would be calling for Russell to help her up into the springcart, which would tilt six inches to the left, twisting the near shaft and prompting the horse to lean the other way to compensate, as she struggled her weight onto the step. With the boy shoving at her boots, she would half-haul, half-fall, her way onto the plank, arrange herself, and then set off without a word on her ten-mile drive. In the distance, the cart always looked as though it were loaded with produce.

In one of the lighter moments when the boy and his mother had indulged their sense of the ridiculous, he described how Auntie Rose's dress once had fallen over his head and shoulders, revealing a bloomered arse as big as the tent the circus people put up years ago at Cumargen Crossing.

'It's a fight for the kids,' Rose, dropping her last butt, said to herself. 'Why d'yer think they drag us out of the city?'

'Who?' asked Bridge'.

They heard the dunny door bang.

'Shanahan. Stan. Too big for 'em. Can't make their mark in the big smoke. Drag us out 'ere where there's nuthin'. Then they leave us. It's the loneliness gets to 'em - somethin' the Irish know well, as Ma used ter say. The more they feel it, the less they need a woman. A wife, anyway. In the end, all they want is loneliness and The Creature.'

'Stan and I had our own run,' Bridge' reminded them. 'Until The Depression.'

'But why did 'e leave Sydney?'

'Wanted a fresh start.'

'Then why did 'e drag yer out 'ere?'

'He didn't drag me. I came with 'im, when the run failed.'

The boy appeared silently by his mother's side; the dog got up, creaking, to sniff at his legs.

'Wash yer 'ands, Russell,' she said; and, when he had gone off to the basin, confided:

'I don't want 'im to turn out like Stan.'

Rose mused: 'Us women get to like the loneliness too, only in a different way. The men go out, lookin' for whatever it is just over the
horizon. We go inwards, pull our kids in with us, right inside the nest – the favourite one, anyway.'

The boy, all hurt and contrition, smelling of diarrhoea and dunny, and around these, bar soap, a leaking sinus leaving a bubble in a nostril, came again to his mother's side. She put an arm around his waist.

'Go and see if baby's awake,' she said softly. 'But don't touch 'er.'

'Yes mum.'

His trots should ease off, now that the bond had been restored.

In a little while Rose struggled from the cane chair, which tended to cling even when her weight was off it; indeed, had she not thrust it rather angrily from her, she might have waddled with it, a huge growth on her backside, to the springcart.

'Russerl?'

Then, waiting for the boy, she advised:

'Don't you worry, Bridge'. 'E won't never go drovin'.'
His True True Face: Masking and Revelation in David Dabydeen's *Slave Song*

The writings of David Dabydeen, whether poetry, prose fiction or autobiographical sketches, provide an interesting example of the creative use of the technique of masking. The writer/narrator/poetic persona uses multiple masks in order both to suggest the complexity of the identity of the West Indian East Indian, and also, one suspects, to protect certain aspects of self from the kind of 'knowing' described by Lamming as his reason for the retreat into 'the castle of my skin'. It is interesting that the technique of masking which is used defensively - to discourage certain facile readings of the text of the 'self' - appears to be more prevalent in those West Indian Writers (Lamming, Naipaul, Dabydeen) who seem most aware of the non-West Indian contexts in which they live and write. Other writers, such as Walcott, Brathwaite and Lovelace, use the technique of masking differently, and certainly less self-consciously.

What is interesting about the writing of Dabydeen is that he persistently calls attention to the technique of masking in his work, to the point where the technique itself assumes a part of the burden of meaning and comments on or interrogates other aspects of the work. This is perhaps best observed in *Slave Song*, Dabydeen’s first volume of poetry. In this work we are presented with fourteen poems, each of which is itself a carefully constructed mask by means of which the poetic persona inhabits the men and women - slaves and indentured labourers - who worked the sugar lands of Guyana; but these poems, in raw Guyanese Creole, are only part of the text of *Slave Song*. There is a critical/explanatory note on each poem - often including a brief glossary of the more difficult words and expressions - as well as a 'translation' of the poem into standard English. There are also a number of illustrations: historical prints of slave and plantation life which also become part of the technique of multiple masking that controls the meaning and effect of the work as a whole.

This technique sets up several different loci of authority within the volume, several different 'texts': there is the poem itself with its
vigorous creole voice conveying aspects of lived experience and the
feelings and imagination of the slave or peasant in a very powerful
way. This vivid mask of suffering, of 'pure' energy and emotion, is
then modified for the reader first by the mask of the critic/commentator
and then by the mask of the translator, both insisting, it seems, on a
different 'purity', of perspective and of expression. It is equally true,
on the other hand, that the emotional integrity of the dialect voice of
the poem diminishes the authority of note and of translation. The
reader is thus left with a curious sensation of dislocation as the
different aspects of the text suffer a partial eclipse or erasure when
juxtaposed and allowed to interact. This is made clear when we sample
the different levels of text pertaining to the title poem. First a stanza
and refrain from the poem 'Slave Song':

Whip me till me bleed
Till me beg.
Tell me how me hanimal
African orang-utan
Tell me how me cannibal
Fit fo slata fit fo hang.
Slice waan lip out
waan ear an waan leg –
Bu yu caan stap me cack dippin in de honeypot
Drippin at de tip an happy as a hottentot!

It is one thing for the critic, in a paper such as this, to attempt a critical
interpretation of this passage, and something else entirely to find that
the job has already been done for him by the poet - or has it? Here is
part of the 'note' on 'Slave Song':

The slave addresses his Master (mentally of course). He asserts his manhood,
his dignity and his instinct for survival through his surreptitious lust for the
white woman, his Mistress... On one level his lust is obscene and revengeful:
he can cuckold his Master by mentally degrading his Master's wife, dragging
her down to his level of existence; that is he can 'Africanize' her ('totempole
her cunt', 'leave his teeth mark like a tattoo on her throat' - lines 32-3). He
boasts that he can really act out the role of a cannibal (designated to him - line
15 - by his white superiors) by gaining life at her expense. But such lust is also
life-giving in a more poignant way ...

We will immediately recognize this as the kind of critical interpretation
of poetry that we all do - it is part of the way we make out living; yet
we feel somewhat uneasy, perhaps, when the poet deliberately puts on
this mask and grins at us from behind it. It seems mockingly to invite
us to criticize the criticism, along with the poem, and in fact forces us
to recognize the inevitable gap - which our critical commentary tends
to paper over - between the creative utterance and the critical inter-
pretation. Here, for instance, we are forced to reflect on whether the
slave's cry, 'Tell me how me cannibal/Fit to slata fit to hang', can really be interpreted as the somewhat sophisticated boast of gaining life at the white woman's expense that the critical mask offers us in the 'note.'

By interpreting the poem the 'note' distances and changes it, and this is one of the things we are forced to recognize as we contemplate the interaction of the masks of poet/slave and critic. It also makes the reader acutely aware of criticism as a mask: by 'putting the critic on', the poet is poking fun at the critic and his techniques, as well as calling into question the integrity of the text. In the case of 'Slave Song', what is the text? Where are its limits and boundaries? If poem and critical note tend towards the erasure or disintegration of each other, where does one turn to find the locus of significance or meaning within the whole thing? What is the true face behind the different masks? Dabydeen himself has commented on the notes to the poems in Slave Song, and in fact he has upset some readers, by dismissing the thing as a joke:

Many of the notes are spoof notes: they are almost saying that I want to be the critic as well as the poet... it's just that I felt I would do the whole lot, and the poems would almost be minimalist poems. What mattered were not just the poems, but the notes to the poems. None of the poems uses the word 'I'; one inhabits a series of masks, and the notes were my way of saying, 'Look, I am just rendering history; look, I am the critic.' Of course this is a complete illusion, a farce.²

But this raises the question of how seriously one must take these remarks; might they not simply be the features of yet another mask? As a matter of fact some of the language towards the end of the quote above is perhaps revealing; Note the use of 'I' and of 'one'. His remark that none of the poems use the word 'I', immediately followed by his reference to himself as 'one' indicate a certain sensitivity about the self, perhaps; about revealing too much of the true face behind the masks. Then, in the direct speech that follows, he uses the personal pronoun twice, but each represents a separate mask: 'Look, I am just rendering history (poem); look, I am the critic (note)'. Perhaps this is the only 'safe' way in which the 'I' can be used – to inhabit carefully defined masks. This would help explain the urge to pass the whole complex mechanism off as a joke; it is another way of preserving and protecting the self, the true - true face.

In another section of the interview quoted above, Dabydeen in fact reveals that his concern with the notes is much more than a joke. 'I am concerned,' he says, 'about the critical business that thrives upon the expression of poverty and dispossession, which is what the Caribbean voice ultimately is'.³ This confirms that the poet is calling attention to the somewhat sinister role of the critic and to whose side he is really on when the world is seen in terms of the opposition between slave and
master, black and white, colony and metropole. You will observe in the note to ‘Slave Song’ quoted above that when the critic-mask quotes lines from the poem in illustration of his argument, he quotes the lines from the sanitized translation rather than from the creole language of the poem itself (‘totempole her cunt, leave his teeth marks like a tattoo on her throat’ – rather than ‘totempole she puss, leff yu teeemark like a tattoo in she troat!’). This subtle but deliberate departure from normal critical practice when quoting puts the critic firmly in the camp of master/white/metropole – showing that the critic knows on which side his bread is buttered, and it vividly highlights the political aspects of the relationship between creative artist and critic. Thus the mask of critic here, however it may conceal or protect certain sensitive aspects of the writer’s ‘self’; it also functions to reveal aspects of the nature and politics of criticism – and not only formal criticism, but ordinary reader-response as well; the technique of masking reveals the reader, at least as much as it conceals the writer.

Turning now to the mask of translation, here’s how the passage quoted above from the poem ‘Slave Song’ is rendered by the translator-mask:

Whip me till I bleed/Till I beg./Tell me I’m an animal/An African orang-utan/Tell me I’m a cannibal/Fit only for slaughter or hanging/Slice one lip out/One ear and one leg –

But you can’t stop my cock dipping in the honeypot,/Dripping at the tip and happy as a hottentot!

What is immediately clear is the way in which the translation emasculates the poem; the power and authority of the poem (which even the critic-mask dutifully recognized) is subtly located in the authenticity of the Creole voice, in the desperate breath that carried the sounds, in the vital coarseness of the sexual threat in the refrain. Here in the translation the poem’s emotional power is tamed and trammelled, much like the ‘charter’d Thames’ and ‘charter’d streets’ of Blake’s London, so that we find the translator identified very much with the oppressor, perpetrating a subtler form of the enthrallment of the natural energies of the black man – the chain and the whip replaced by the measured and standardized language and tone. Note the way in which the wild, functional coarseness of the creole refrain becomes simply obscene in this rendering.

Another accomplishment of these interacting masks within the volume is to displace or disguise the creative mind behind the entire contrivance. It is hard to believe in any close relationship – let alone complete identity – between the voice in the poems and those in the notes and translations; where then is the persona, the writer? If the technique of these multiple masks was intended to distract attention
from the vulnerable self of the persona, then in a curious way it has failed: the reader is forced in the end, to be aware of the distractingly manipulative intelligence behind the work. When one reflects, for instance, that the simile ‘happy as a Hottentot’, particularly when applied to a dripping penis, does not seem an image that would be native or natural either to the slave in Guyana or to the aloof translator, one is forced to glimpse a different persona, fleshed out perhaps by one’s knowledge of David Dabydeen the scholar of Africa and of eighteenth and nineteenth-century England, having mischievous fun at the expense of reader, critic and linguist.

Some of the techniques in *Slave Song* are reminiscent of Pope in the *Dunciad*, and Dabydeen exhibits the same complex intellectual playfulness, though towards a different end. It is possible to see Dabydeen as conducting an elaborate post-colonial critique of traditional notions of the integrity of the text, of the relationship between text and critic, and of certain assumptions concerning the supremacy of standard forms of language. It is clear that the critic-mask, for all of its sophisticated use of language and the techniques of interpretation and explication, is constantly being interrogated by the recalcitrance of the language of the imagination as expressed in the dialect. At the same time the attempt to defuse or detoxify the raw energy of the poetic voice calls into question the whole enterprise of literary criticism when applied across racial and socio-economic divides such as those highlighted in this work.

Similarly, the translations offered convey not so much a clarification of the meaning and intent of the ‘dialect-poet-mask’ as an assertion or re-assertion of the power relationships between users of standard and those who speak dialect. And here again the interference works both ways: the translator may feel that he is performing a service for the poem by making it more widely ‘available’, but the experience of the juxtaposition of poem and translation makes clear that what is available is a pale shadow of the real thing – the poem wearing a mask that makes it acceptable, but at the same time attenuates its power and effect. The poem, for its part, interrogates and subverts the translation by its originality and energy. Dabydeen himself has pointed out the power of the Creole:

> Creole has its own native strengths and you can convey certain experiences very powerfully in a way that English could not be used... There’s a kind of crudity in Creole – and my use of it was influenced not by living in a village in Guyana, but by [discovering] in Cambridge that Mediaeval [English] alliterative expression was beautifully barbaric, and this provoked memory of my native Creole, its ‘th ew and sin ew’, its savage energy, its capacity for savage lyricism.5

This awareness of the power of the Creole, set alongside the pallor of many of the translations, surely indicates the extent to which we are
involved, in this volume, in a game of masks intended to heighten our awareness of the power of poetry and dialect and to subvert any colonial assumptions we might have about the superiority of English language and culture – of the ‘text’ of English literature as primary and unassailable.

Another aspect of Slave Song worth mentioning in connection with the use of masks is the half-dozen illustrations scattered among the poems. These extend the technique of the multiple masks in that they provide a curiously incongruous commentary on the text(s), both visually and in terms of the strange dissonance between some of the pictures and their captions. Most of these are engravings dating from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century and depicting aspects of slave and plantation life in the Caribbean. Apart from the historical resonance in these pictures, which fits in well with the theme of slavery, they also suggest a strangely vicarious mentality – looking at slave and plantation life filtered through the pre-conceptions and prejudices of white master which cause the images to be oddly stylized and bereft of overt emotional content.

The picture of the slave tied to a wooden frame for execution is an example of this: the illustration is meant to seem factual, or rather, technical; the faces of the humans are devoid of feeling and the tone of the caption reinforces the mask of emotional detachment. But the illustration appears in Dabydeen’s text opposite the poem ‘Slave Song’ that we have been examining above; and what we tend to see in this context is not so much an execution as a sexual defilement: the standing figure seems about to attack the genitals of the victim – it is a brutal rape or castration (it is unclear whether the figure is male or female), suggesting the punishment awaiting the slave in the poem for daring to dream of defiling the wife of his white master.

The illustration captioned simply: ‘A piece of sugar cane’ is in fact a piece of cane cut in longitudinal section to reveal infestation by some kind of worm or parasite; it is a horribly phallic image of pestilence and decay, and is juxtaposed with the poem ‘The Canecutters’ Song’, where the canecutter is again dreaming of illicit sex with the white woman. Again the picture ‘reads’ like a sternly negative and minatory image not only of the consequences of the dream but of the whole life and livelihood of the canecutter.

There is a similar oddness in the picture captioned: ‘A Female negro slave with a weight chained to her ankle’: the chain is indeed fastened around the woman’s ankle, but the weight is being placed by her on the side of her head. As with the poem/note/translation, the oddness of the image causes the observer to look behind the image itself and to speculate about the motives of the mind that created it. Again it is a question of the mask concealing or obscuring meaning while at the same time revealing aspects of the human agency behind/within it – a
simultaneous attraction and repulsion akin perhaps to Walcott’s reaction in ‘A Far Cry From Africa’, to the mixture of ancestral bloods within him. In any case this double movement indicates perfectly the relationship between blacks and white masters, between metropole and rural periphery and between the reader and the several masks in this work.

In the picture of the ‘Suriname Planter in his Morning Dress’ the caption masks the fact of the other human figure visible in the picture, that of the female slave that gives the planter his status, identity and worth, as she pours him a morning beverage in the background. This slave’s nakedness above the waist also reveals, perhaps, something about the Suriname Planter, whose own masculine chest is glimpsed almost down to the waist. As with the other pictures the physical deployment of the bodies appears at the same time to be mysteriously suggestive and overtly revealing – as with all the other masks, the interest here is in what the image conceals as well as what it reveals.

Much of the effect of Slave Song, then, is to be found within the gaps between the various masks used to project/conceal the persona or the creative mind responsible for it. It has to do, as we have seen, with various aspects and levels of textuality, with post-colonial criticism, with intellectual games; but since Slave Song is the young poet’s first publication, it may have to do as well with a natural diffidence, an uneasiness about the casual revelation of self by someone who has written elsewhere about his tough struggle to make it as a scholar and a writer among the Asian immigrants in London. The apparatus of notes, translations and pictures has to do too with the necessity simply to contain and manage the enormous energy of the poetic voice from the Indian villages of Guyana – a voice hardly heard before, a compound and complex voice for whom the frail poet must serve as messenger, translator, apologist, explicator... It is a voice filled with the quality of ‘dread’, with accumulated animosity, with the desperate need for an audience. The masks are multiple channels for this voice and for the vital optimism of a poet who yearns to be all things for the sake of his people and for the sake of his art:

...I do hope that I can be intensely Guyanese, or intensely Berbician, or English, or European. In other words, one has the possibilities of inhabiting different masks intensely. I’m not just saying, take one mask, put it on, throw it away, then take another one...
NOTES

3. Ibid, p.75.
5. Interview in *Journal of West Indian Literature*, op. cit., p.76.
6. One of them, that of the Suriname Planter, is by William Blake and, along with three of the others is from *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname, in Guyana, 1776*.
8. David Dabydeen interviewed by Frank Birbalsingh op. cit., p.120.
Dorothea Smartt

forget

convenient forgetfulness is my guard against slights and hurts
your vacant this-isn’t-happening eyes
I don’t remember a lot of things
quite deliberately shoving it away inside me
imploding later when I least expect it
I don’t remember why should I
walk with it hold it know it
for all its unpleasantness feel it
choke me smoke me dope me
I don’t remember is
my favourite reply when put on the spot
about how I got broken that time
I don’t remember the sound
the impact of your words shattering me
as you chatted on dismissing a quiet plea
saying again don’t be boring shuddering
as another piece hit the playground tarmac
spreading into a pool of once-me
trampled again and again
by my big sisters silences and refusals
to look me in the eye at least
to share a silent moment of sympathy
I don’t remember my wanting you
to do the enid blyton best friend thing
and rescue me from the little girls that bullied me
or you bringing the taunting to our front-room
laughing at my swan neck and my cowardy-custard ways
only the mirage of my hopeful fantasy
of ever-lasting super-glue love
like the infant fingers of that boy in my class
doing everything together
grown like one like twin plantains
that could never be parted with whole skin
that would not re-member itself
always being in half
I don’t remember being unwanted
the day I ran out the school gate
away from the isolation of everybody else’s eyes
witnessing another humiliation
out the school gate to get away from – who
I don’t remember
Mr Grant with his big six-foot army self
charging after me escorting me
an easy captive in biting April sleet
white as his big hand
leading up to the hair in his nose
a crowd of schoolkids telling me
I was really in trouble now
and the only eyes I wanted to see me were yours
away over at the other end of the playground
you wouldn’t see me there
walking home I could never tell
feeling too shame in your don’t care eyes
convenient forgetfulness stinging
from your mouth to the soothing front-door
our Yelverton Road home
where you were all the world I thought I needed

medusa? medusa black!

Medusa was a Blackwoman!
african dread
cut she eye at a’sistamirror
turn she same self t’stone
she looks really kill?
ask She nuh Medusa would know
she terrible eyes leave me stone coal
Medusa is a Blackwoman lost
looking for love
kept behind icy eyes
fixed inside the barricade
for anybody who come too close
runnin’ from she own
‘case the worse thing happen
an’ she see she self like them see she
the blood haunted
If you black, get back
If you brown stick around...
Is that okay? being black your way
whitewashed an' dyed back black
am I easier to hold in an acceptable role
...and if you white comelong y'Alright
make it go away the nappiheaded nastiness
too tuff too unruly too ugli too black
get back
scrub it bleach it operate on it powder it
straighten it fry it dye it perm it
turn it back on itself
make it go away make it go away
scrub it step smiling into baths of acid
and bleach it red raw
peel skin of life sustaining melanin
operate on it
blackskin lying useless discard it powder it
head? fuck it wild haired women
straighten it fry it desperately burn scalps
banish the snake-woman
    the wild-woman
    the all-seeing-eye woman
dye it
remembrances of Africa fast-fadin'
in the blond highlights
turn us back on ourselves
slowly making daily applications
with our own hand
my hair as it comes
is just not good enough
the blood haunted
if you black get back
if you brown stick around
and if you white comelong y'Alright
say
make it go away make it go away
daa nappiheaded nastiness!
is too tuff too unruly too ugli too black
too tuff too unruly too ugli too Black
get back
Medusa!
Black get back
GERICAULT’S SHIPWRECK

Before classically he had done the portraits of fine mares
   Held in meadows, flowergirls, Napoleon’s feathers;
But then news of an uneasy scandal, legally suppressed,
   Exposed by journalists, human muck washed in;
Three hundred low citizens lost when not one need have been,
   And the captain by Louis restored... got only three years;
Two in the making the canvas for which Paris and London queued
   Had the Governor (Schmaltz his name) at last recalled
From Senegal with his cargo of Gambian gum and cotton; cheap cotton.
   For this propaganda piece the painter changed his way
And in the end, his red locks shaven, sacrificed even his life; At what he found he went insane – men ingesting down
Their own waste, their water, one another: meat. Uncovered his own country’s necrophile state: the poverty
Of a beaten kingdom, bad Paris, plague, demented at last. An awful death, tugged in the stirrup of his mount.
For the Salon of 1819 this monstrous raft all knew about
   Had to be admitted. Title: ‘Scene of Shipwreck’ –
The livid panorama of the exposé of the log of the disgrace,
   The survivors themselves recognisable therein;
The erotics of hope, that rush of suppressed narrative
   The censor may not always stop: the truly, utterly appalling. First note the absence: no Marianne in this glazed, stripped bustle
Breasting the flood in frank, financial gauze.
Rather these are her colonists: branded convicts, veterans of Waterloo
   Under what Henze at least calls a ‘black sun’ and Barnes
Agrees are fatal conditions: time exonerates injustice
   He wishes; but the point is art should not, ever:
Nor does the sea’s cruelty excuse bloody fraternal inefficiency:
   Like so much else, he sees no negroes there as indictment – But four are clearly in view, their confessions and their bodies
   Of bitumen too raw for even the English to champion; Rollers should swallow, ragged teeth clench, breakers enfold, disperse.
   Starring Jean-Charles as the pyramid’s pride,
From a model sharing his dish: strip, reach, stretch, wave rags –
   Their mascot – sinking on their bony shoulders as...
Their rescuer sails on – the speck most studied in Western perspective –
And this is his unstopped story dictated in pain:

‘I, Jean-Charles, slave, am manumitted from my chains
   By my old Good Emperor... by my new Bad King
I, Jean-Charles, because now I need payment cannot find work:
   Expelled like others of my “Afflicted Race”
(The phrase is Wordsworth’s who admired their ‘tropic fire’)...  
   ‘I, Jean-Charles, as I am unemployed, am sent from my motherland
In whose pastures I passed the buffed stud in his martingale
   (For M. Géricault no less), wore a hat of feathers too,
Walked the vendeuses in their and my pinpoint embroidery, heard opera;
   A groom of such class, loving and loyal... am now banished;
Light and adroit so they hoist me... their Toussaint, their bright boy,
   And they have become my (forbidden word) – my camarades.
At the settlement of Saint-Louis in Africa, where I had never set foot,
   My task was to be teaching other blacks to comport like me,
Sufficient numbers and alphabet, how to reap and not retain their crop;
   Thus at the fringe would I perpetuate what the metropole forbids,
Where may enjoy the capital none but the fruits of its hypocrisy.’
   (This moral Wordsworth, Henze and of course Barnes miss... )
‘But young Jean-Louis-André-Theodore, called Géricault,
   As he explains to me once and for all as I strain, reach, freeze,
Intends to show them.’ Soon died of exposure ashore...
   And here the limit of art must be: for verisimilitude
This painter studied fresh cadavers, stole rotten limbs:
   The nude of the dead lad sliding into gilt
Lay this way draped on the slab, groaning back... starved;
   In case he himself forgot he even placed aboard his replica
Fiery young Delacroix, further to advance this new, committed programme;
   And thus he stacked an unimaginable tilted rush
– A salver of those cast-off – discharged into the deep;
   The abandoned, drawn from life, breaking frame, unforgettable.
‘O brothers in law’ (the message should be) ‘if you can’t eat cake
   Eat shit... suitable deaths of hunks on such perilous hulks
Keep all ranks insecure, o liberty! o ineffable disaster!
   Lick the heaving turds from between my cheeks, ah!
My head I laugh off: divide and devour, abolish all famine,
   My only friend!’ (quote from His Majesty at the private showing).
_Méduse_... the rusty jelly sucks at, serpents strike at,
   Stone stares... a raft of untying fretwork, flotsam
For the whole Atlantic to gorge, as it has engorged millions,
   And not to enclose again without records kept.
SOUTH TO SOUTH

Ai ai ai, the pampas and the Great Karoo,
the rodeo in Montevideo and the grapes in the Cape,
the Great Kuiseb and the roaring River Plate,
you say the Atlantic between should be no obstacle,
by latitude we are sisters, right, after all,
and haven’t we both just emerged from such family dishonour?
Ai ai ai, our ancestry and southern flare,
beneath all the posters and the platitudes,
settlers who fled wars and ought to depend no longer
on the great coat-racks of New York and Madrid,
we’re connected bimonthly by Varig or SAA
from apartheid to Antarctica non-stop.
And look what we exchange for our mutual use: small arms,
bully-beef, interrogators, frozen deep-sea fish.
Ai ai ai, the tangos and the mangoes I can’t miss;
I promise you I’ll visit, on one condition:
you visit first.
While I was writing the below:

the soul of a racing driver flushed out of
    his red helmet on an S-bend
    like a speck of excrement;
the procession to the shrine on the cliff-edge
    reached the ruins of Spain
    tumbled over;
twice I stood, cleaned my nib,
    threw the scrap out, returned to the process.

There's no going back now.

My country finally for the first time
    in most of the people's memory
    changed its government
    to great applause, tears and thanksgiving,
which I have seen on TV
    with other events almost given up on:
    exhumed Jews, murdered children,
    bodies of partisans tumbled in ditches,
    the tribesmen in lakes and fridges
    or a speck under the palace floor.

While writing this I did hold back time,
    but could not stop or reverse it –
    in that sense life is not the news –
    and I have been bumped on to change;

and you have been changed too,
    reading the above.
We have been
Pushed to the edge
Of the Sea.
Between the Sea
And the warriors' tanks,
We squat
Perched on the last
Line of the map,
Each in a cubicle
That shrinks to
The last contour of time
In the whims
Of a tricky geometry
And geography.
Our frontier diminishes
By minutes sticking
Us to our roots.
The shared blood
Of humanity spilt
The innocent ears
And the gate of our
Collective prison
Closes against our will.
Stuart Newton

HOLOCAUST

And the trembling of the sleepless night
where everything screams in silence
to the unplayed sound of Shostakovich
gave way to an ordinary day
worn out of time and tinted with mauve
machine-guns toppling them over
a drop sheer as a crude gravestone
nine-hundred and thirty-eight an hour
for thirty-six hours a rate never
equalled or excelled even allowing
for layers of sand being shovelled
and pauses for gold-collecting
and the time Semashko yanked
Lisa's body into position
and Demidenko gently wanked
his bayonet into her womb

Mayim rabbin
lo yukhelu lekhabbot
et-ha-shavah u-neharot
lo yishtefuha

Mayim rabbim
lo yukhelu lekhabbot
et-ha-shavah u-neharot
lo yishtefuha

oh the soul of man is a far country
unapproachable unexplored
nor can the living speak for the dead

But if the Devil is God's own
how can these things be?

LET NONE ATTEMPT TO FORCE THE LORD
TO END OUR PAIN WITHIN THE WORLD
THE MESSIAH WILL COME IN GOD'S OWN TIME

or not at all

Two things were noticed on first approach
at night a red glow in the sky
or in daylight columns of smoke
and then the other, the sickly smell
faintly sweet as if tinged with ghee:
the smell of human fat half a metre high
But that was later

The train shuddered to a grinding halt
doors crashed open and herded out
they stood uncertain and afraid
until they were handed pretty postcards
marked under the picture: 'Waldsee'
to post back to ones they left behind

We are doing very well here
We have work and are well treated
We await your arrival

then marched between the lawns and flower-beds
for delousing in the block marked BATHS
while pretty young things, picture-pretty
in white blouses and navy-blue skirts
played pretty tunes like 'The Merry Widow Waltz'.

'Undress and put your clothes over there'
garment by garment to be returned after repair
'Now that way' crowding into the shower-room
But where are the drains . . . . . . . .?
The massive doors slide shut

Na, gib ihnen shon zu fressen
and into mushroom-vents poured
pretty amethyst-blue crystals

Thirty minutes later the door slides open
on a clammy blood-splattered pyramid
and gas-masked with rubber boots we help
hose down the clammy pile to wash away
the blood and defecations then with hooks
prise the bodies apart for the special squad
to move in with pincers pliers cutters
to collect a golden haul then fork-lift trucks
haul them to the furnace, with a faint sweet smell
and the clinker ground to ash and sold
for fertiliser or scattered in the Sola

But that was in the early days
when there was time for such refinements
the Totenbuch only a few pages thick then
and each name could be recorded on a card
and cause of death listed
from thirty-four diseases
and even time for considerations:
  allowing the furnace-smoke to clear
  before the next batch came too near

but then efficiency fell away
as numbers rose and there was no time
for music or to tend the flower beds
but only time to hustle them like cattle
from the sidings into the huts and work them
till just skin and bone Block 25 became
their only home lying in rags and shit

Lightning flashes through grey-lead sky
sharp peals of thunder, pouring rain
and still the furnace roaring

  fire cannot extinguish the heart of man
  gas cannot stop the breath of God
  for always in the ashes
  there is a spark
  that will unfold a mystery:
  we shall not all die
  but we shall be changed

for the line between evil and good
does not run between states
or classes or parties
but through every heart
and from the world
evil cannot be driven
but from every individual
it can be exiled
You knew how it would be before you came: 
your dreams take root in an alien sky; 
wither; you watch them die; 
and hark back to immensities of beach, 
a light-sluiced tidal flat where mangroves 
grasp the air tenaciously, and slow 
waves creep; a faded dwelling-place, its timbers 
bleaching like an upturned hull; 
lament of gulls, the shriek of lorikeets.
Introduction
Most of the critical attention to Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story* has concentrated on Theodora Goodman's escapades in the *Jardin Exotique* and most critics agree that the other characters and events in the *Jardin* are figments of her imagination. Few, if any, attempt a plausible explanation for her flights of fancy and merely conclude that Theodora, the protagonist, is schizophrenic or mad.

Drawing on Object Relations theories of Margaret Mahler, Melanie Klein and others, this essay will offer some psychological explanations for Theodora's mental confusion. This is not an attempt to reduce the novel to particular psychological concepts, but to explicate it in a way which may complement other critical work. It will hypothesize that what appear to be the adult protagonist's Oedipal conflicts and ambiguous gender and identity are displacements of earlier, fundamentally non-erotic, non-incestuous desires and needs of the developing child for the (m)other, which originate in infancy, and which form the prototype of all subsequent relationships.

Object Relations psychology differs from Freudian psychology in that it shifts the focus of attention from notions of pansexuality, the Oedipus complex and castration anxieties to issues of nurturing and relationships, concentrating on a mother-child dyad instead of a father-child dyad. According to its basic tenets the developing ego must accomplish two essential tasks: separate the self from symbiotic union with the (m)other and reintegrate aspects of self and (m)other which are split during the process of separation of the self from the (m)other. Melanie Klein, Margaret Mahler and others generally write of the child's relationship with the 'mother'. However, in this essay, because of the assumption that the mother-child relationship is the prototype of all other relationships, '(m)other' is used to denote broader implications in interactions of Self with Other.

Margaret Mahler calls the process of separation and individuation 'hatching'. She writes that the human infant progresses from the earliest symbiotic union with the mother, to differentiation of the self from the mother, continues through practising at being independent of
her, on to rapprochement with her and ultimately to consolidation of identity. According to Mahler, ‘optimal human symbiosis is essential for the vicissitudes of individuation and for the establishment of a cathetically stable sense of identity’. Failure in this regard results in an impaired sense of self and activates, metonymically, an endless search to recapture this elusive union with the (m)other.

Splitting occurs pari passu with a sense of differentiation from the (m)other, and is a means of enabling the child to cope with separation from the (m)other. Melanie Klein writes that the child, in phantasy, initially splits the (m)other, and particularly the breast, into ‘good’ as it offers libidinal gratification, and ‘bad’ as it frustrates. Concomitantly, the child, in phantasy, also splits his or herself into ‘good’ and ‘bad’. The ‘good’ child loves the ‘good’ (m)other, and the ‘bad’ child hates and attacks the ‘bad’ (m)other. The infant generally attempts to project ‘bad’ aspects outwards and to introject4 ‘good’ objects. Such defensive splitting can result in feelings of paranoia and persecution from the split-off ‘bad’ object, and excessive idealization of self and object images as a protection against persecution by the ‘bad’ object. As Janice Doane and Devon Hodges succinctly put it, because of simultaneous introjection and projection, ‘objects both construct the subject and are constructed by it.’

As the ego matures, the infant is able to integrate previously split perceptions of itself and the (m)other and to perceive that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ experiences proceed from the same (m)other who is the source of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ alike. Simultaneously, conflicts between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ part of its own self, or the loving and hating parts of the self, are no longer split, and the developing child recognizes that it is the same person, herself or himself, who loves and hates the (m)other, who is both good and bad. Because these processes occur before the acquisition of linguistic ability, the child conceptualises its world and relationships by means of imagos and phantasy.

Since Patrick White often writes in a non-realist or symbolic mode, and because it is generally accepted that divisions and dichotomies inhere in the themes and structures of his work, object relations concepts of phantasy, splitting and reintegration are particularly useful in exploring the nuances of his fiction. As Ilan Buchman explains, phantasy does not replace adult experience, but, instead, ‘brings the intensities of childhood experience to bear on current adult life. It adds depth by evoking the unconscious remnants of infantile experience, without substituting that experience for an adult one’.

SEPARATION
In The Aunt’s Story Patrick White sensitively and imaginatively chronicles Theodora Goodman’s journey through life and illustrates the conflicts she experiences in the process of realising her selfhood.
Writing in the *bildungsroman* tradition, White depicts the vicissitudes of the protagonist’s individuation, from the confines of an oppressive childhood, to freedom in phantasy in middle age, and ultimate incarceration by society for what is considered to be her ‘madness’.

The opening line of the novel provides many clues to the psychodynamics of the Goodman family relationships: ‘But old Mrs. Goodman did die at last’ (p.11). This suggests that someone, perhaps Theodora, through whom the narrative is focused, has been longing and waiting for her mother’s death. A desire for the death of a parent of the same sex may suggest Oedipal conflicts. However, in light of object relations theories, Theodora’s desire for her mother’s death may more fruitfully be seen as an aggressive, retaliatory phantasy against a ‘bad’ and unloving mother. As such, it is an intra-psychic drama of a child who has been narcissistically wounded. Significantly, this wound is due not to loss of the mother by death or absence, but because the mother is emotionally absent even while she is physically present, and therefore incapable of meeting the needs of the developing child.

Mrs. Goodman appears to alienate, rather than bond with Theodora. Consequently, for Theodora, the parental object is split between the ‘good’ father whom she loves and the ‘bad’ mother for whom ‘her love was sometimes smudged by hate’ (p.12). Simultaneously, the image of the female child is split, in Theodora’s mind as well as her (m)other’s, into the conventionally pretty Fanny, who is loved by the (m)other and who has prospects of a bourgeois marriage, and the plain Theodora, doomed to ‘spinstership’, who is constantly criticized:

‘Oh’, she cried, ‘Fanny, my roses, my roses, you are very pretty’... ‘And Theo,’ she said, ‘all dressed up. Well, well. But I don’t think we’ll let you wear yellow again, because it doesn’t suit, even in a sash. It turns you sallow,’ Mother said. (p.27)

‘Turn your toes out, Theodora. And run and do your hair. You look a fright.’ (p.40)

The Goodman mother-daughter relationship is an admixture of mutual love and hate. Their interchange when Theodora wins a kewpie doll for outshooting her suitor, Huntly Clarkson, is evocative of the Kleinian child’s phantasies of persecution by the ‘bad’ parental object:

In her hate she would have hewn down this great wooden idol with the grotesque doll in its arms...
‘Mother, must you destroy?’
‘Destroy?’ asked Mrs. Goodman.
‘Yes,’ said Theodora. ‘I believe you were born with an axe in your hand.’(p.121)

Successful individuation, object relations theorists argue, is dependent upon a predominance of good experiences over the bad in the
Separation and Individuation in The Aunt’s Story

For Theodora, bad experiences appear to exceed the good. Her struggle for a sense of identity is dramatized in her gothic nightmares of someone being struck by lightning, ‘a faceless body that she had not yet recognized....A stale cry came out of the mirror in the passage, choked as if it just could not scream, even in its agony’ (p.77).

Not only does Mrs. Goodman alienate Theodora, but she also prohibits bonding with her father: ‘Your father is not to be disturbed, said Mother, which gave to his door a certain degree of awfulness’ (p.22). Theodora’s frustrations at this enforced separation are revealed metaphorically. As she walks outside the forbidden door, ‘the pines, when the wind blew, flung themselves at the windows in throaty spasms’ (p.23).

Her father’s death scene, with its undercurrents of forbidden desire, has Lawrentian overtones. In D. H. Lawrence’s short story, ‘The Odour of Chrysanthemums’, the dead miner’s wife and mother compete with each other in fondling the dead man, the beloved husband and child. Surrounded by dead chrysanthemums, symbols of repressed or frustrated desire, they vie with each other to fondle him and perform the last ablution for him. In The Aunt’s Story, with the odour of chrysanthemums hanging heavily in the air, Theodora takes the place of her (m)other at her dying father’s side. The filial and the erotic converge, as in her flowing nightgown and streaming hair she kisses him and buries her head in his knees:

She would throw her strength against this stone that he kept rolling on her mouth.

‘And we are close,’ he said. ‘It is not possible for us to come any closer.’

But it was for this that she buried her face in his knees (p.85).

Again, despite the Oedipal reverberations, Theodora’s relationship with her father may more appropriately be seen as a compensatory measure for rejection by a cold and disapproving mother. As Eileen Starzecpyzel observes: ‘mother bond damage, father bond substitution’.

With her father’s death, Theodora loses her only refuge against her (m)other’s relentless cruelty. Nevertheless, she attempts to salvage a tenuous sense of identity in the role of caretaker to her ailing, but cantankerous mother. James Masterson describes similar patterns of behaviour as ‘borderlining’ relationships. In this condition, self images and object images ‘are not fused but separate and split into rewarding and withdrawing part-units....They call for passive-regressive behaviour which requires the forgoing of the true self and self-assertion’. Mrs. Goodman’s thoughts best reveal her sadistic hold on her daughter and Theodora’s masochistic state of indenture:
If we could take the hearts of those who do not quite love us and lock them in a little box... Then I would say: Theodora, now that you are hollow, my words will beat on your soul for ever so that it answers regularly as an African drum, in words dictated by myself, of duty and affection. (p.92)

In her social forays with Frank Parrott and Huntly Clarkson Theodora ‘practices’ at being independent. However, her refusal of Huntly’s marriage proposal suggests that she is not yet independent of her mother. She continues to live in the parental home, gratifying her mother’s whims, and generally behaving in a helpless, dependent, unassertive, and asexual manner. However, while she remains docile and compliant on the surface, Theodora’s phantasies reveal her destructive rage towards her ‘bad’ mother: ‘I am guilty of a murder that has not been done, she said, it is the same thing, blood is only an accompaniment’ (p.123).

Theodora’s matricidal phantasies merge with her mother’s ‘actual’ death. Nevertheless, since her prime role in life was that of daughter, with her mother’s death, she loses even this precarious sense of self: ‘she could not say with conviction: I am I’ (p.13). As Phyllis Edelson observes, ‘Mrs. Goodman’s death sets her both free and adrift’, and she embarks on a journey, not with a destination in mind, but with the goal of ‘reconstruction of self’.11

PHANTASY

In the Jardin Exotique the splitting of characters accelerates into an explosion of various doubles of Theodora and members of her family. Characters merge, change and exchange roles with dizzying rapidity, and perspectives become kaleidoscopic. As John and Rose Marie Beston observe, they ‘all have multiple identities, sometimes simultaneously’.12

The appearance on the scene of the young girl, Katina, triggers the onset of Theodora’s metamorphoses into several selves. She ‘had become a mirror held to the girl’s experience. Their eyes were interchangeable, like two distant unrelated lives mingling for a moment in sleep’ (p.142). As Theodora’s desired Other, Katina is a displacement of the desired (m)other. But instead of recognising Katina as the Other, Theodora assimilates her image, thereby blurring the boundaries between self and (m)other in narcissistic merging. Their ‘interchangeable eyes’ and mingling of selves suggest Theodora’s recurring desire to merge with the (m)other.

Katina is a multivalent symbol, an overdetermined or condensed image of many of Theodora’s repressed desires. She serves as a double for the absent Lou, a niece with whom Theodora shares an intimate love; and her licentiousness with General Alyosha Sokolnikov, a father figure, may be read as a projection of Theodora’s desire for intimacy with her own father, even though that desire is prompted by maternal
rejection. Her terms of endearment for the ageing roué carry sexual innuendoes:

‘Then you do not love me? A little?’...
‘Of course, I adore you. If I did not, I would not kiss you. There!’
‘It is usual also, I believe, to call one’s lover by endearing names’...
‘I shall call you,’ she laughed...
‘I shall call you my Monstera deliciosa.’ (p.219)

Theodora projects her wishes on to Katina, and Katina makes the overtures, both to Alyosha and also to Theodora: ‘We would sit without our dresses, and eat pistaches....And I would kiss you, like this, in the particular way I have for aunts’. Theodora herself remains primly correct, and protests: ‘Go, Katina! It is far too hot’ (p.143).

Theodora’s repressed desires are realised in and through Katina, who becomes both the object and the vehicle of her desire:

In the sun, Katina herself was a small round white flint. That I could pick up and fling, wrapped in my love, Theodora felt, into the deathless, breathless sea....In her arms the child’s body, still limp with sleep, was like her own nakedness. Their hearts beat openly and together... (pp.143-144)

White’s stream of consciousness technique often reflects, mimetically, the blurring and transcending of boundaries between ‘illusion’ and ‘reality’, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, self and (m)other. The reader is never certain whether Katina actually spends the night with Theodora, lying down in nakedness, or whether the incident represents a projection of Theodora’s own desires.

A psychological chameleon, Theodora also assumes or introjects the personalities of General Sokolnikov’s ex-wife, his sister and his lover. This is not without its compensations. In conventional society Theodora, a female with masculine attributes, who has a moustache and is skilled at shooting, is derided as ‘the bloke in skirts’ (p.67). But in the Jardin, in Theodora’s phantasy, this is redressed by merging with the persona of Ludmilla, the General’s androgynous sister who ‘took snuff, and spat in the corners, and wore boots like a Cossack under her long skirts’ (p.149). She is rewarded with the (however fleeting) love of the General: ‘But when you are your two selves among the saints, then Ludmilla, I love you best’ (p.152).

As a dual self, Theodora/Ludmilla also feels she is ‘on equal terms with the saints’ (p.151). By means of phantasy, Theodora assumes a position of power and omnipotence. She sits ‘with her legs apart, like a man,....the world was a little crystal ball that she could hold in her hand, and stroke and stroke’ (p.151). But she experiences a return of the repressed when the General evanesces into her mother as s/he belittles her:

‘You would not know,’ said the General... She walked with her hat in her
hands, the big straw with the unfortunate sallow ribbons, she walked to where her mother sat, saying in her small, horn, interminable voice: Here is Theodora, we were discussing whether, but of course Theodora would not know... (p.153)

Theodora not only projects undesirable aspects of herself on to others, but she also introjects what the bourgeois society she lives in considers to be desirable or 'good' aspects of others, in order to win approbation. She identifies with Mrs. Rapallo’s daughter, Gloria, who marries well, becomes a Principessa, and remains generous and enchanting. This also compensates for Theodora’s guilt at disappointing her mother by not contracting a bourgeois marriage with Huntly Clarkson. But Mrs. Rapallo finally confesses that the Principessa is a figment of her imagination (p.242). Consequently, Theodora’s sense of atonement is short lived, and her ontological insecurities persist:

I am yellow and thin, with a slight moustache. I am single, for the same reason, because I am ugly, and because I have never been in a position to buy a husband. (p.207)

Her severely damaged self-esteem is filtered through the prism of her patriarchal society in which female beauty and money are essential commodities for procuring marriage partners.

The beautiful Lieselotte is another of Theodora’s avatars or projections. When the precocious and promiscuous Katina, whom Theodora loves, makes overtures to Wetherby, who is Lieselotte’s lover, both Theodora and Lieselotte feel spurned and threatened. For Theodora it brings back memories of rejection and emotional persecution by her (m)other. As a projection of the ‘bad’ part of Theodora, Lieselotte enacts the violence which Theodora feels. Like Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, in a fury sparked by jealousy and hate, Lieselotte hurls a lighted lamp at Wetherby, thus vindicating both Theodora and herself.

Theodora’s escape into many forms and her inability to consolidate a sense of self or to form a stable relationship even in her phantasies, are suggestive of Sade, who ‘urges transgression of the limits separating self from other, man from woman, human from animal, organic from inorganic objects’.\(^\text{14}\) She appears to be loved by a monkey (p.211), claims to be Epaphroditos, the lover of Aphrodite (p.198); declares she is a nun (p.188); an ointment (p.163); is suspected of being a Communist (p.165); becomes a nautilus thief (p.212); a Pale Horse (p.203); a man (p.165); and the General even thinks she is an illusion (p.204); and/or that she is dead (p.204).

As Edelson observes, Theodora appears to be shopping around for a self.\(^\text{15}\) Her frenetic appropriations of various forms and personae suggest anxieties over separating self from (m)other. Her blurring of boundaries between self and (m)other, inner and outer worlds, reflects
a persistent longing for regressive union with the (m)other.

**MADNESS OR INDIVIDUATION?**

In the final section, Holstius appears as the 'good' or idealised parent, who calms Theodora's fears, as her father did. He is prophet and healer, phantasmic, ephemeral, other-worldly. He is symbol of the benevolent father-figures in Theodora's life, such as The Man who was Given his Dinner, who appears on her twelfth birthday, whom she 'loved' for it 'made her warm' (p.45), and also of her own father, who taught her to ride and shoot. His clothes have the familiar texture of childhood and smelled of horses, and leather and guns’ (p.278). He serves as a literary device to link past and present, to tie up loose ends, and to see that the promise to return, made by the Man who was Given his Dinner, to the little girl Theodora, is kept, in fairy-tale fashion.

The narrative suggests that, through the agency of Holstius, Theodora accepts or integrates various conflicting aspects of her life. Holstius appears as the Great Physician, who heals Theodora, ratifying her acceptance of dualities and reintegrating various elements of her past life and experiences. Doing so also brings the narrative to an end. 16

They entered into each other, so that the impulse for music in Katina Pavlou's hands, and the steamy exasperation of Sokolnikov, and Mrs. Rapallo's baroque and narcotized despair were the same and understandable. And in the same way that the created lives of Theodora Goodman were interchangeable, the lives into which she had entered, making them momentarily dependent for love or hate, owing her this portion of their fluctuating personalities, whether George or Julia Goodman, only apparently deceased, or Huntly Clarkson, or Moraitis, or Lou, or Zack, these were the lives of Theodora Goodman, these too. (p.284)

The crucial point, however, is that while Theodora appears to integrate previously split aspects of self and (m)other, she ultimately fails to recognise and accept the boundaries which separate the self from the (m)other. In her phantasies she merges with and becomes one with a host of (m)others. Otto Kernberg writes that in acute personality disorders,

> there is a severe defect of the differentiation between self and object images, and regressive refusion of self and object images occurs in the form of primitive merging fantasies, with the concomitant blurring of the ego boundaries in the area of differentiation between self and nonself. 17

Thus, despite the affirmative images, the novel's conclusion remains ambiguous because ultimately, Theodora is overcome by society and relegated to an insane asylum.

In its oxymoronic conclusion the novel implies that Theodora
emerges as an integrated personality, because of her absorption, via phantasy, of ambivalent characteristics. However, her psychological integration appears to be more a matter of narratorial assertion rather than of demonstration, and demands an act of faith on the part of the reader. What the novel demonstrates is that in the final analysis, Theodora’s phantasies of merger with the (m)other are regressive. The lunatic asylum itself becomes a metaphor for confinement within a (threatening) maternal womb. Thus separation and individuation for Theodora remain illusive and elusive.

The Aunt’s Story offers insights into much of White’s later work, in which the quest for an integrated self or a stable sense of identity continues to be a major theme. In later novels psychological integration often occurs in the protagonist’s death-bed phantasies, suggesting that the process of separation and individuation, is never complete. It remains a potentiality rather than a reality. The Whitean protagonist is engaged in a life-long struggle for individuation, which is seen in object relations terms as ‘constituting a more or less successful process of distancing from and introjection of the lost symbiotic mother, an eternal longing for a symbiotic fusion with the ‘all good’ symbiotic mother, who was at one time part of the self in a blissful state of well being’.18

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Eighth Annual Conference of the American Association of Australian Literary Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas, in April 1993. This essay is also an excerpt of a chapter from my Doctoral dissertation.

1. Patrick White, The Aunt’s Story (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). All page references are to this edition and are included in the text.
3. See Hanna Segal, Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1988), pp.3-5, 11-23. Melanie Klein spelled ‘phantasy’ with a ‘ph’ to emphasize the uniqueness of her view of the infant’s complex unconscious life. Most other theorists use the word ‘fantasy’. Throughout this paper ‘phantasy’ will be used except in verbatim quotations from other theorists.
4. This term refers to a process by which the functions of an external object are taken by its mental representation.
7. Narcissistic wounds are the result of the failure of maternal love.
13. Theodora/Ludmilla is among the first of many androgynous characters in Patrick White's fiction. Some others are the twins Arthur and Waldo Brown in The Solid Mandala (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), and Laura and Voss in Voss (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), who are presented as the masculine and feminine aspects of each other, and Eudoxia, Eddie, and Eadith in The Twyborn Affair (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), who are one and the same person.
16. Despite the ambiguity surrounding Theodora's individuation, the implied integration of split aspects of self and (m)other at the end of the novel produces a surface gestalt of artistic unity, similar to a process which Anton Ehrenzweig calls 'synchronism', which is a global view which involves the concept of undifferentiation. It also lacks self-criticism and disposes of mundane sortings of experience which fail to satisfy the id. Anton Ehrenzweig, The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1993), pp.6-12, 16-20, 34.
Superstar
Yesterday, today and tonight

Jee-sus Christ
Jee-sus Christ
Who are you?
What have you sacrificed?

I’m going home on the 5.35 train after work and I can hear it again. The music, I mean, with the full orchestra, as it was at the State Theatre last night. With the full orchestra it’s great – the slow, surging swell of the phrases, the pauses. You put the words in yourself, automatically, of course.

I’m fine now, but at lunch time I was a bit depressed. The people crowded the Melbourne streets, but they might have been fishes in a bowl, moving mindlessly, mouths opening wordlessly. I could not reach them; but it was a mood I knew well and it didn’t trouble me unduly. Anyway, I was aimless myself. And the song was going around mechanically again, stuck in the same groove:

Jee-sus Christ
Soo-per Star
Do you think you’re what they Say you are?

At Elizabeth Street I turned left and began tossing up whether I would continue walking the two blocks to St Francis’ Church. I felt this vague need to go to the church. Insecurity? I don’t know. I thought: might as well go as not. Possibly it was a sub-conscious reaction to that episode in the pub yesterday with old Ross. Shook me up, that did. I mean, we’d been young zealots together. I’ve been thinking about it ever since.

YESTERDAY
‘I heard this doctor bloke on the radio the other night,’ he said. ‘ABC program. About 11 o’clock. He’s one of these bright Catholic laymen, you know; one of the renegade lot.’
‘Renegade? You mean: out of the Church?’
‘No; not out of the church.’
‘You mean rebel, then?’
'All right. A rebel. Anyway, he talked a lot of clever stuff and it was all bloody nonsense. Smarmy bloody nonsense.'

We put our glasses down.

'You're probably right,' I said. 'You know, there's many a nun in a Carmelite convent who could teach these intellectual Catholics the facts about spirituality. Confidently, I mean; knowing what she's talking about.'

We drank again, each forming his own thoughts I not being sure how he would present his – if at all.

Then he said it.

'You know, I've no regrets about not being a Catholic any more. In fact, I don't care if I even talk about it. I left the Church because I've got to be absolutely honest with myself. Maybe I'm neurotic about being honest with myself. Anyway, I'm confirmed in my position every time I listen to these smarmy Christians.'

He looked at me and smiled, waiting for a reaction: so I tried to keep cool; I knew I was getting worked up.

'This is no good,' I said, 'we're just arguing with bloody adjectives.'

He laughed. 'Yes; with bloody adjectives.'

There was another pause.

'You know,' I said, 'Chesterton was right about one thing.'

'Chesterton! Chesterton was a child.'

'Chesterton,' I persisted, 'said some people can see a pattern as black on white but find it impossible to see the pattern as white on black. Like a chessboard.'

TODAY

At Bourke Street the light was green so I kept walking. I'm past 30 now and over the last 10 years, working in town, I've got to know St Francis' church well. Familiar as Myers store, across the road. Similar in a sense: another market for lunchtime shoppers.

These were years of doubting. Doubts rolled up like breakers, threatening to engulf me. I always surfaced, but then new waves began to take shape. I had this compulsion to pay due heed to plausible sceptical arguments. Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, said Newman. True enough, but then I wasn't sure what was a difficulty and what was a doubt. Of course, the problem could have been psychological: a sort of anxiety neurosis. I picture a panel of learned academics and authors, slightly disdainful, slightly bored 'understanding' me.

A bearded scholar looks up over his glasses.

'Not a neurotic. I'd say an obsessive.'

Or is it 'intellectual misfit?' That was the opinion of Laurie Kurford, a colleague at work, as he eyed me with mild distaste in a moment of anger.
Another colleague, the lovely Moira Purnell, with the raven hair, also eyed me up and down, but more kindly.

'Don't think too much,' she said. 'That way lies madness.'

Perhaps I do think too much. But what can I do about it?

There is a passage in *War and Peace* when Pierre and Prince Andrew (Bolkonski) walk around the 'Bald Hills' estate having a long talk about the purpose and meaning of life, not unlike Ross and I in the pub yesterday. At one point, Bolkonski says: 'You can't help thinking. I go to bed after two in the morning, thoughts come and I can't sleep but toss about till dawn because I think and can't help thinking...'

That's me. I'm a Bolkonski. As soon as I wake up I start this conversation with myself. Often it progresses to a debate. Then to advocacy, to an address to a jury.

Also I have this rich imagination. Comes from my mother. She was a great one for 'just seeing' situations.

'I can just see her laughing at us.'

'I can just see him getting sloshed.'

'I can just see him going off with that woman.'

Well, all that stuff is behind me now. Youthful faith has gone, both the elation and the anxiety — the rich emotional pleasure and the complementary bleak emptiness.

YESTERDAY

'Look,' I said to Ross, during that pub conversation, 'don't think I'm shocked about you leaving the Church. I might be disappointed, but I'm not shocked. Anyway, it's none of my damn business.'

'You're right,' he said. 'It is my business. That's something Catholics don't learn. But why disappointed?'

'All so conventional. You could have done some original thinking. Some people can doubt, you know, just as well as you.'

'Understand this,' he said. 'I'm not opposed to people believing. Probably it gives comfort. But the believer has no right poking his nose into other people's lives.'

'But he doesn't. He's ordered not to.'

'Not to judge. But he still intervenes. But as I said, I don't mind an ordinary bloke being a Catholic. Good luck to him. People need consolation. Some get it out of religion.'

'But Christianity — Catholic Christianity — isn't just any religion.'

'It is, you know. Read about the Mithraic beliefs. Read about Buddha. He was also born of a virgin with some sort of divine conception.'

TODAY

Frankly, I'm not sorry about the end of the youthful faith period. I'm no longer desperately defending, keeping an enemy without the gate.
Did I say ‘enemy’? Dear Lord, if only I had known. That was no enemy. That was sound and fury, signifying nothing. The Wizard of Oz.

Can I tell you about this vision I have? I’m in the 21st century in a tourist space craft, cruising calmly through the universe. I’m taking a walk down the top end of the centre aisle when the door to the flight deck swings open. I peek in. Nobody there! No sign of anybody. Instantly, I realize we are not going anywhere. We are just going. I look back to the passengers. All very content. Chatting, reading, drinking, sleeping. Do I tell them what I know? If I do – then what? Terror could come aboard, with havoc and chaos. It could be the ultimate horror story. I close the flight deck door and return to my seat.

I call this an unthinkable thought. There are more, but that’s another story.

Sometimes, I calmly consider the possibility that God does not exist. ‘Am I losing the Faith?’ I said to a priest in confession once.

He sighed wearily. He looked up to heaven.

‘You’re here aren’t you?’, he said, with an air of confession fatigue. ‘If you’d lost the Faith you wouldn’t be here.’

Once I thought that unless you had settled the question and put it out of your head you could not be a Catholic. Well, I don’t put it out of my head. But I take it as read on the evidence, which is damn strong. You want to hear it? Some other time. Evidence, note; not proof. Of course you can’t prove God exists. That’s a contradiction in terms. How do you prove that Existence exists?

No; my big problem was the divinity of Christ. I’ve sorted that out, too.

\textit{Jee-sus Christ}
\textit{Soo-per Star}
\textit{Do you think you’re what they}
\textit{Say you are?}

How bloody stupid, asking a question like that. Jesus said he wasn’t what they said he was. He wasn’t Elias. He wasn’t John the Baptist. Why doesn’t the \textit{Superstar} mob ask themselves who \textit{they} thought he was. I’ll tell you why – because they are fooling around with a caricature. Pity, that, because there’s another Christ out there and whatever he is he is not a caricature.

He is \textit{there} as much as Mount Everest is there. Even if he is a fictional character he is still \textit{there}, owing existence to one or more people, just as Hamlet owes his existence to Shakespeare.

You see? I’m off again. This is what I was thinking, meandering along Elizabeth Street, with the song going around on a turntable. Like a record, my mind is also revolving, thinking, debating, as it does ten thousand times a day. Amazing what you can pack into a few minutes.

Hamlet. Now there is something. A masterpiece. But consider that

But Jesus is much bigger than Hamlet. Bigger, indeed, than any character captured by the printed word. Who else claims equality with the creator and acts the part convincingly, with complete authority. I mean, it’s the ultimate role and he doesn’t blow it. Consistent in every line, he strides through four gospels; absolutely the same person, unmistakable.

So what are the options? You can forget dementia.

History alone will scrub that. History is merciless. Routinely it obliterates even the best and the brightest, let alone the mad. Yet the man who said he was God has survived for 2000 years and enjoyed huge success.

If it isn’t true, we are left with the PR option. Somebody put it together, working up from the simple tragedy of a gifted Galilean who got on the wrong side of the Establishment. Hard to believe. Harder than John’s opening chapter... ‘the word was made flesh’.

Never mind Shakespeare’s ghosts, haunting battlements and banquets. Look at the Gospel narratives. Talk about being hung for a sheep, rather than a lamb! Consider the action. Walking on water. Multiplying loaves and fishes. Routine healing of incurable ills. Raising the dead, himself included. Slipping in and out of the flesh. Finally, disappearing in a cloud. Who in his right mind would invent that stuff and hope to get away with it?

Could Shakespeare make it work? Would he even dare?

But you must not think this is terribly profound. As I say, I’ve been thrashing this stuff out for a long time.

Given that mood in the streets at lunchtime it all flowed out. All part of my big reaction to Ross’s defection, I suppose.

YESTERDAY

‘Look,’ I said to old Ross in the pub. ‘Look here – having regard to the human condition, Christianity is either the most fantastic good news or it’s all a bloody shame – the most beautiful, sublime folly.’

‘Well, I don’t need it,’ he said. ‘And I don’t care if I actually talk about it. I still respect some of the Christian writers, of course.’

‘Thomas à Kempis?’

‘Yes, Thomas à Kempis.’

‘Teresa of Avila?’

‘No; not her. I think I would prefer The Little Flower.’

‘Newman?’
'Newman and Pascal. I respect their minds. But all this paraphernalia, and the authority of the Church –'
'Well, the Church is a society and a society always expresses itself in rituals.'
'– and as for that bastard Muggeridge. He was telling the world about his conversion while it was still going on!'

TODAY
And there I was, like an old cart horse following rutted tracks, inside St Francis' Church. For the 1pm mass, the normal half empty church. A typical scoop from the street outside. I looked around at the congregation and speculated on the texture of their faith. Some people pass their whole lives warm and secure in the womb of Mother Church.

The mass started, with the priest in black requiem robes. Unusual. I didn't try to follow the mass. Well-worn phrases dropped lightly, like summer rain. I just acknowledged the words of penance, praise and petition: no bending of the mind; no calling back of wandering thoughts. Of its own volition one 'thought' was present, a naked thought, unclothed by words or images. I didn't have to hold it in focus.

Then they were standing for the gospel reading.
'...When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been four days in the grave. Since Bethany was near Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs away, many of the Jews had gone out there to comfort Martha and Mary over the loss of their brother. Martha, when she heard that Jesus had come, went out to meet him, while Mary sat on in the house. Lord, said Martha to Jesus, if thou hadst been here, my brother would not have died; and I know well that even now God will grant whatever thou wilt ask of him...'

Martha! Magnificent woman. Reproaching Christ. Straight off she comes out with what's on her mind.

Where have you been!

Some people, more timid, would bottle it up and nurse a grudge. For most of us, of course, when someone's dead, they're dead: not much you can say. All you can do is try to come to grips with it. Four days in the tomb. Four days to think about it. And four nights. Yes, it must have sunk in. He was dead all right. Yet here she was, still battling on.

Marvellous to watch the double play, the drama: Christ working at two levels.

'...Thy brother, Jesus said, will rise again. Martha said to him, I know well enough that he will rise again at the resurrection, when the last day comes. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and life; he who believes in me, though he is dead, will live on, and whoever has life, and has faith in me, to all eternity cannot die. Dost thou believe this? Yes, Lord,
she told him, I have learned to believe that thou are the Christ; thou are the Son of the Living God; it is for thy coming the world has waited.'

Strong stuff. Then the priest moved to the sermon part.

'I would ask all of you,' he said, 'to pray for the soul of Kevin Pomeroy, who died an hour ago, aged 16.'

That's what it was all about. Poor bloody kid.

'On occasions like this,' the priest went on, 'it is well to remember that our own end may come at a time when we least expect it. Kevin Pomeroy, I know, had no inkling at 11 o'clock this morning that at this time he would be before his creator.'

An accident, then. The family, no doubt, had been on the phone to the monastery, seeking prayers for his recovery. Then, at the last minute, a change. The requiem mass. A pious family, obviously; they would ring the monastery as naturally as they would ring for a doctor. Children of the Faith. And what, I asked, was I?

My faith was beyond analysis; a mysterious by-product of the collision of forces soliciting me on the one hand to believe and on the other hand to reject belief. An agnostic believer? No; the available terms were just not adequate to contain the situation.

'It is a great benefit,' the priest went on, 'to die with the sacraments. Not everybody is granted this privilege. I know of a case of a priest living with 150 other priests. He died suddenly and no-one in that monastery was able to give him the last rites.'

'We should remember, too, that God has a purpose in permitting sudden death like this. It is one way of recalling to our minds that here we have no abiding city.'

I hoped someone from the Pomeroy circle was present because it was comforting, presented like this. It tied up; they and the boy, Martha and Mary and Lazarus. I was glad now that I was there.

When the time came for communion I joined the others, queuing in the main aisle. My lips were working. Some part of me was praying, talking. But only a simple phrase came out, very peaceful, not really a petition: 'Have mercy on us, O Lord. Have mercy on us, O Lord.' Over and over again.

Back at the pew I tried to make some appropriate post-communion prayer, but again only a single phrase came out: 'Thy truth. Thy truth.' 'Thy' seemed right – not a pious affectation. Tears began to start. I felt cleansed. Pacified.

The priest called for hymn No. 89. I reached for the hymn book in the slot in front of me and flipped through the pages.

*Nearer My God To Thee.* Protestant, isn't it? The people sang as if they knew it well, but this was the first time I had actually heard the words and the music, though the title was very familiar. Beautiful. Measured, confident phrasing. Praying with music. Perhaps this was how it was on that cold night, on the tilting deck of the *Titanic.* The
brave notes of the ship's band. Did they play well? Curious incident.

Inspiration for a thousand jokes. Who knows – maybe it wasn’t pathetic. Maybe they were comforted. And by the way, what do you think about when you are only minutes away from certain death? There I was, off again with that imagination. Wasn’t I supposed to be praying?

The last thing I remember of that mass was the priest turning at the altar as he was about to leave and again requesting prayers for the ‘good and noble soul of Kevin Pomeroy’.

TONIGHT

Going home in the train tonight the lunchtime mass is only a record in my memory: no lingering fragrance of that emotional wellbeing remains. I have searched the evening paper. No mention of a fatal accident involving Kevin Pomeroy. And the damned tune is still going around on the turntable in my head.

_Jee-sus Christ_
_Soo-per Star_

Hold on. I’m off again. I’ve had a thought. I’m out there at the execution, at the foot of the cross with the rest of the mob. A tough bunch, most of them, with upturned faces. Seen it all before. They’re jeering. You can hear it clearly above the groans and screams and orders.

‘Come on then! Give us a trick. Give us a miracle.’
That’s the gist of it.

‘Come down from the cross. Then we’ll believe.’
They look at each other and laugh.

In the Roman Empire crucifixions are a dime a dozen; almost a signature; and these low-rank legionaries have coped this duty scores of times. And they get all types. Would you believe, this one thinks he’s a king? And they laugh, too.

‘The King! The King of the bloody Jews!’

Some watchers are silent, thinking. Here he is, then. The boss. Struggling and squirming and heaving great gasps, like a fish out of water. Well, well. So it has come to this. So now we know. What a let down. Sorrow? For him? No; anger. Who the hell did he think he was anyway?

Pardon, where was I? The point? Yes, well, they put the same question to Superstar. Who did he think he was?

_Do you think you’re what they say you are?_

Come to think of it, they didn’t get a response either – the mob at the execution, I mean. He responded by not responding.

The turntable has stopped now.
Imagine Australia. First the geography of Australia. Yes, there it is, an island centred upon a glowing desert heart. What of its population? A fringe of coastal encampments with a scattering of people across the plains and deserts.

Now add in the early European explorers. There they go, waving goodbye to their women in the coastal towns and snail-trailing across the map, heading inland into the mysterious emptiness, looking for water and finding desolation.

Overlay this map with one which shows holy sites, as identified over the years by Christian theologians. There’s God in the centre, somewhere around Uluru, Ayers Rock. And there are the tracks of the pilgrims, men who’ve shaken themselves free of the snares of the cities, who’ve left their women behind and who’ve headed inland to find God. Snail trails across the map. In white Australia, amongst Christians, the centre has been consecrated to God and the periphery, the outside has been rejected as hedonistic, pagan, corrupt, a place where one might lose one’s soul.

But is this really so? You’ll notice I’ve not mentioned women. Whether it’s accurate or not, women have traditionally been portrayed as living on the periphery, in the cities, and lacking the resources and independence to travel inland. Their God would have to come to them. And that’s what happened. Women have sought and found God where they are, in the towns, the suburbs, the backyards and the kitchens. The margins of Australia are indeed sacred to those who have eyes to see – the only trouble is, no one has yet told Australia’s male theologians and cultural commentators.

Can we claim geography is a determinant of a nation’s spirituality? To a considerable extent, yes, along with history and religious tradition. Imagine if the explorers had found an inland sea and fertile plains – would men have still constructed for themselves a harsh and punishing desert God? Or would the God they worshipped have more in common with the God who is implied in the fictions of women
writers such as Thea Astley, Elizabeth Jolley and Barbara Hanrahan, women who write about the tropics, the suburbs and the gardens? Would men be writing about the wilderness as sacred, or would they be open, like the women are, to the paradise about them?

What has all this to do with literature? Quite a lot, I would suggest. The books that tend to be included in the canon of a country’s literature are still those that deal, however obliquely, with God, with metaphysics and with the question of how we should behave towards one another. On the surface, these could be books by men or books by women. In practice, however, it’s been male authors, authors like Marcus Clarke, Joseph Furphy, Christopher Koch, David Malouf, Randolph Stow and of course Patrick White who have been valued for what they have to say about the big issues. By and large books by women have been ignored. Certainly the odd poem by Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson, Oodgeroo or Gwen Harwood has been cited for its contribution to the debate but the poets themselves are not regarded as religious writers whose bodies of work speak about God. As women have been marginalised in Christianity, so women as religious writers have been marginalised.

My cause, then, is to bring to notice women who are religious writers, although it might be necessary to reassess what ‘religious’ means in an Australian context. I want to open up the reading of Australian women’s fiction in a way that it might not have been read before – as religious text. To this end I’ll focus on three contemporary writers, Elizabeth Jolley, Thea Astley and Barbara Hanrahan, and contrast their insights with those purveyed by Australian men who have written on spirituality over the last twenty years or so.

What does one expect to read about in a religious text? God is the obvious response. The way God is imaged. Where God is found and how one should relate to God and God’s creation. Death and the ongoing life of the soul. These are areas about which Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan write, although they are not trained theologians. Indeed it’s possible that the freshness of their vision is due to the fact that, although all have a Christian upbringing of sorts, none of them has studied theology. As for most women, until relatively recently, theological training was not open to them, had they wished to pursue it, so they have had to develop their own understandings of God based primarily on personal experience. Whereas male writers on spirituality have tended to rely not on their own experience but on their intellects and the writings of other theologians, women have had the advantage of having to invent God and the world anew, each one for herself. Men have fallen into the trap of repeating each other without regard to the way in which society has changed, while women have been more responsive to the needs of the times.

To my way of thinking, theology is a continuing conversation about
God or the divine; it is continually re-shaping itself, taking account of the day-to-day occurrences of our lives, always in flux. If such a definition is acceptable – theology as a continuing conversation about the divine – then it would seem that some of Australia’s leading women fiction writers are superior theologians to those men whose job it is to theologize and whose pronouncements serve to validate a particular type of spiritual experience, the desert experience, as the Australian norm, the only proper way to talk about God. Until it is accepted that other spiritual experiences are equally valid the religious dimension of many women’s books will remain unnoticed and they will not be taken seriously as contributors to the population’s metaphysical understanding of itself.

So let me now address women’s figuring of the sacred, in particular their images of God, the places where they seek God, the ways in which they find God, and their expectations of redemption and resurrection.

**God**

Australian male writers on spirituality, although they are Christian, seem heavily influenced by the Hebrew Bible in their conception of God. Their God is an authority figure, one who dwells elsewhere and who can be approached only after one has endured the purifying fires of hardship, the metaphorical trek into the desert. In such an imagery one can see not only geography but also white Australian history at play, British convicts expelled into the wilderness of Australia, cast out of civilization into the punishing hands of the military, the judiciary and the church. Much more likely that men would associate God with notions of punishment and retribution than the loving kindness of the New Testament Christ.

Women however seem more drawn to a God who exhibits the attributes of Christ, even if they refrain from personalizing God as a gendered being, as one who lived on this earth. Of the three writers I’m looking at here, Elizabeth Jolley’s God is probably the most amorphous, possibly due to her Quaker upbringing and her subsequent reluctance to name God. In Jolley’s writing the divine presence is evidenced most often in the rhythms and forces of nature, the rising of the sun, the turning of the seasons. Thea Astley’s intimation of God is more conventionally Christian, thanks to her Catholic upbringing, but again her God is not a punishing male God – in fact she satirizes people who create God in their own limited image, expecting ‘him’ to wreak havoc on wrong-doers (as in *A Boatload of Home Folk*). Astley’s God is unconditional love and forgiveness, and similarly Hanrahan’s God is the source of love and creativity. The divinity envisaged by these writers is the source of life, love and goodness – in this it is true to the redemptive strand of Christianity,
but it is foreign to Australian Christianity as propounded in men’s theological texts.

It’s worth noting that neither Astley, Jolley nor Hanrahan seem to doubt the existence of God; some of their characters might but what comes through in their writing is an assurance that there is a positive spiritual presence behind our lives. This presence is looked to for present succour, not for future justice. It is not envisaged as a figure of retribution, a final arbiter of good and evil who will at some great judgement to come condemn sinners to perdition and justify the rest of us. The God of the women is with them in their perplexity and calls them not to suffering and sacrifice but to a celebration of the blessings of creation and to the practice of loving kindness, one to the other.

Looking for God
In 1973, in her first book *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, Barbara Hanrahan wrote:

> But where were the hills of the history book, stitched with the pathways of Burke and Sturt and Leichhardt? – the hills of the sun-burned earth and budgerigar grass, the azure skies and fiery mountains we sang about at school before the flag spangled with all the stars of the Southern Cross I was never sure of seeing? Where were the old dark people I did not link with the lost couples on suitcases at the railway station? Where were the crocodiles and brolgas, the billabongs and snakes? Where were the flowers that wilted in blistered clay, the rusty waves of spinifex that looped the cliff? . . .

I looked about me for the sunburned land. In vain.1

Barbara Hanrahan was raised in suburban Adelaide and used to go on occasional visits to her relatives in the nearby Adelaide Hills. These were the places that had meaning for her. Not the desert of the real explorers or of Patrick White’s fictional Voss. And these were the places where Hanrahan found her God, within the rituals of the family and in the fruitfulness of nature, in the back garden and amidst the semi-tamed slopes of the Adelaide Hills. Place as a determinant of religious experience.

Similarly Thea Astley was raised for the most part in Brisbane and has lived a considerable portion of her life in the Queensland tropics. Where does she send her characters, both the serious seekers after the divine and the self-seekers? North, to the tropics. Only those characters who are sensitive to the needs of others achieve understanding and that understanding incorporates an appreciation of the sacredness of nature and the way it betokens God’s goodness. This is not to say, however, that nature in Astley’s mind is a moral force in its own right. Male theologians tend to cast nature either as hostile to man or as an agent in his conversion, land as temptress betraying the earnest pilgrim or land as loving woman leading him to father God. But as Astley,
Jolley and Hanrahan have declined to gender God, so they have declined to gender nature or to personalize it by crediting it with a moral impetus of its own.

Elizabeth Jolley lives on the other side of the continent, in Perth. To the east and the east-north-east of Perth are the Nullarbor Plain, the Great Victoria Desert and the Gibson Desert providing ample opportunity for her to write about the God of the dry and stony places. But she resists the temptation and locates the holy in suburbs very much like the one in which she lives. Thus we have the elderly Mr. Scobie setting out for a walk, a walk which might well be read as a pilgrimage of healing, in contrast to Voss's purgative trek inland:

> Quietly Mr. Scobie set out for his walk. He walked along the quiet side roads and through lost lanes grown over with grass and weeds, hung over by green branches, long leaved and sighing, and interwoven with trailing stems and shining leaves holding white and blue flower cups. The sun was warm on his back and he heard the rich voices of the magpies. There was a little wind bringing a fragrance of damp peppermint and eucalyptus laden earth. An unexpected light shower had refreshed the garden. He stopped from time to time to lean on the side gate of some old house to look into the green shade of a deserted back garden. He saw lemons ripe on the trees. He smelled the sweetness of lemon flowers and of roses. He was comforted during his walk by the early morning serenity and the possession of the sun’s warmth. He felt as if he was walking inside a halo of blessings.

Mr. Scobie eventually finds the answer to his riddle, and the answer is death, the great comforter. And it should be noted that death as portrayed by Jolley, Astley and Hanrahan is not something final and to be feared. For a character like Mr. Scobie death brings understanding, while two of Astley’s minor female characters in *Beachmasters* look forward to the day when they will be devoured by nature, totally absorbed into the earth, and Hanrahan’s characters regard death as the entrance into another stage of being. In these women writers there does not seem to be the fear of self-annihilation that there is in male spiritual writers who see the giving-up of self as the ultimate sacrifice, a sacrifice required by God, after which there is no more to be said. For women death is an enfolding back into the life-force which offers a promise of continuity, even though it is beyond present understanding.

When one recalls the Christian backgrounds of Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan and then looks at the ways in which they – or their characters – seek God one has to remark on the absence of formal prayer and the rejection of churches and their representatives. Jolley’s cathedrals are the tree-lined streets, while in Hanrahan the most evil characters are often those who portray themselves as the most Christian. Astley, in her later, more feminist-influenced books, rejects the patriarchal church for its oppression of women and tosses its representatives off her characters’ properties, as in *It’s Raining in*
Mango. One presumes that these reservations about the institutional church have not helped the recognition by men of Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan as spiritual writers.

But God is still present and God’s love is celebrated in the most familiar of places and through the most mundane of rituals, not in churches but in the homes, as women tend each other and their families.

The holy permeates the physical world – there is no need to cast off the flesh in order to become aware of God. Indeed the idea of shutting oneself away from the experiences of life is antithetical to these women’s ideas of salvation. It is in trying to love other people, in caring for and comforting them, that we find God. Thea Astley may have been read primarily as a satirist but the foundation of all her writing is a belief in God’s unconditional love and the responsibility that is incumbent upon people to imitate this love. Of course people will fail because they are human but that does not relieve them of the obligation of seeking out God in others and loving the God they find. Salvation is communal, not solitary – as in *Vanishing Points* where the man’s desire for the hermetical life is criticized and the woman’s choice to work with and for others is seen to bring joy in this world and the promise of love in the next.

**Transformation, Redemption and Resurrection**

As women see the continuing presence of the divine in life so they recognise the ongoing nature of God-experiences, transformative moments where, for an instant, the divine order is revealed. A Christian might argue that each time one participates in the Eucharist one opens oneself out to such an experience. But there is a difference, for the Eucharist (at least for Protestants) is a commemoration of a once-off event, of Christ giving up his life for others on Calvary and his subsequent rising from the dead. An essential element of the Eucharist is sacrifice, the losing of life in order that life might be gained in eternity. The transformative moments in women’s fiction, however, represent repeated entries into the fullness of life as it is lived on this earth. This is no better demonstrated than by Elizabeth Jolley’s account of Miss Hailey’s pine tree dance in the grounds of the nursing-home where she lives. All the significant moments of life are glorified:

Miss Hailey danced a pine tree dance. She danced a dance of the majesty of the pines and of their transfiguration in the changing light of the morning sun. She included in the dance a mysterious hill. She tiptoed round its base indicating with expressive fingers and an arching of her eyebrows that, though life was active at the foot of the hill, no one knew the secrets of the hill itself. She danced the promised vision of an open door leading in to a small but neat house. She changed her dancing to a kind of hornpipe depicting three coloured tents nesting close to the house. The movements of the dance became more
explicit as the actions of everyday life were enacted, first there was the feeding
of the hens, then the planting of the vegetables. Stretching up she picked ripe
fruit from imagined branches. She danced a rustic and natural childbirth setting
the whole scene in a primitive wash-house. Because this part of the dance, with
all its meaningful movements, was so satisfying she danced a second natural
childbirth demonstrating the effort and the exhaustion and the rewarding joy of
the new mother when a child is born. She danced a celebration of the new life,
that of the child, and of the people engaged in their new found way of living.
The celebration included her own joy at being about to take part in the new life.
Her dance began to include more movements of excitement. She whirled round
madly and, with a final fling of exuberance to end the dance, she flung her
sponge bag into the massed foliage of oleander and other flowering bushes
which crowded the high edges of the verandah.

Miss Hailey, out of breath but ecstatic, gripped the rail with both hands.
'Hailey's Dance. An idyll’, she murmured. 4

Does the fact that these women’s spirituality incorporates numerous
incidents of awareness of God’s immanence make it any less holy than
desert spirituality which is focused on one solitary climactic moment of
understanding? I think not. I would suggest that the essentially joyful
nature of women’s spirituality is a sign not of the triumph of pagan
but a more accurate reflection of the redemptive nature of Christianity
than the spirituality constructed by male theologians with their over­
valorization of suffering for its own sake.

The literary figure most sacred to the men who write about
Australian spirituality is Patrick White’s Voss. He is regarded as the
archetypal explorer of Australia’s inner landscape. Whether or not
White intended it that way, Voss is held up as the perfect expression of
that form of Christianity which requires the self ‘to be emptied of any
pretension toward deity and to experience “death” or “torture” in a
form of self-giving’. 5 Perhaps men find it harder to give up personal
authority than do women, hence this insistence upon self-abnegation
as the way to God. Perhaps women have already won that battle –
witness Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan’s insistence upon loving kindness
towards others without de-valuing the self.

It is over the need for sacrifice that these women part most clearly
with Christianity, for they have cast off the need to approach God
through Christ. Their belief in a loving God does not encourage
contemplation of a God who would send his son into the world to be
crucified for the sins of men. Because God loves unconditionally we
shall all be taken up into God upon the death of our bodies – and for
Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan God is the source of all life. Like Barbara
Hanrahan’s grandmother Iris, we shall all be reabsorbed into the great
life-force, even where we stand:

Black shiny hair full of diamond-bright sparks, threaded with satın ribbon;
sleepy almond eyes, forget-me-not blue; all the wrinkles gone away and she’s
the goddess of the rainbow. She floats, she dissolves. She is just a great white
cloud spread across the sky. Iris floating free over all the gardens of Rose Street.\(^6\)

**Conclusion**

Australian women fiction writers are sacralizing Australia, not the desert but the places men have ignored or condemned, the coastal cities and the cultivated areas, the places where the fruitfulness of nature runs rampant. The old maps which confine God to the centre of Australia are no longer adequate, but still the male theologians track around in ever-decreasing circles, unable to see that women have opened up new territory. Those men who are looking elsewhere are looking to Aboriginal spirituality to bring them a new understanding of Christianity.\(^7\) But they fail to see that much of what they are commending, the need to recognise and respect the inter-relatedness of all aspects of the cosmos, to accept life as given, to cultivate a mystical awareness of the environment and to celebrate creation is already being lived by the women in their midst. As ever, men are looking elsewhere for their solution to life’s mysteries, while the women have found the divine and are exploring it in their religious documents, their fictions.

**NOTES**

3. ‘They do not understand, these newcomers,’ [Madame Guichet] would say to Chloe sipping coffee on the little Channel verandah of the Dancing Bears, ‘that they must allow the island to devour them. They try to eat it. That is their mistake.
The two women knew they would never leave.
5. Cavan Brown, *Pilgrim Through This Barren Land* (Sutherland: Albatross, 1991), p.120.
Six Matching Cups and Saucers

She looks a nice girl, he thought to himself as she sipped a glass of orange cordial and tried to make an evaluation of her plus points as she sedately walked from visitor to visitor serving drinks. Actually, he hadn’t known that he was being taken on another visit this evening, when his sister came from work and told him to get ready because they were going to visit the home of one of her colleagues. She heard that Mrs Selvarajah had a nice daughter in her twenties, who had recently graduated from university. Her name was Revathi and she was quite good looking. Malar had seen her at one of the campus functions and had thought her ideal for her brother Ravi who was working in Australia.

Ravi was looking for someone who was a ‘happy blend of both east and west’. He wanted a few children to reduce the void which existed in his house when he returned home from work in the evening. The problem was that most of his friends had their own lives to lead ... it was very seldom that they invited him for dinner ... the only time he met them after work was when there was an office party or when they held a rare dinner party in their homes. It was time to find a bride. Most of the relationships he formed in this new country were more or less impermanent ones. Sandra, his last girl friend had moved out of his house, because she didn’t want to make a lasting commitment in her life ... she wanted more breathing space. Now letters were also arriving from Sri Lanka, from his anxious parents and sisters, urging him to make a decision to marry.

They told him time was catching up on him and that it was important that he find a nice girl to settle down with. Already, they had informed him that they had visited a few suitable families in search of a nice, educated girl for him. Of course they told him, that they remembered that on his last visit to Sri Lanka he had told them that he wanted a girl who would not demand too much from life. Someone who would be simple, good looking and also have some qualifications which could equip her to face life in a new country. He also told his family, that he wanted a girl who was a good cook since many of his friends had married girls who were making extra money by catering for dinners and lunches.

Malar was sure that Revathi would be suitable. She had also heard
that she helped her mother with the household chores and that would certainly be a plus point in her being selected by her brother. There were many Lankan families who liked eating thosai and iddli since it brought back fond memories of the country they had left behind. Many of them were working long hours ... sometimes shuttling between two or three work places in order to supplement their incomes and educate the children. So they really didn’t have time to make this traditional fare. Revathi’s culinary abilities would certainly be appreciated in the new country.

There were also other ways in which the income could be increased. For instance, Ravi had told Malar to look for a girl who had skills in computer science because she could obtain a part time job if she had this skill. Malar, on the other hand wasn’t sure if Revathi was computer literate but then she could become computer literate if she followed a course in one of the computer schools which had mushroomed rapidly in the city. There were all kinds of diplomas one could obtain before one went abroad. This would not be a problem.

Ravi had told Malar, that his new bride would have to shelve any ideas of continuing with her studies once she came to the new country. He just couldn’t afford to pay his wife’s tuition fees. After all, he had to think of his own studies too. He was very keen on finishing his post-graduate degree since he would face better prospects, like a higher salary, once he completed his education. At the moment, he was working on a tight budget, somehow managing on the small allowance he got each month as a research assistant. He was trying to get a scholarship but there was too much competition at the moment. He would have to wait for the next academic year to gain an additional stipend. After hearing about his financial difficulties, Malar hoped that Revathi would not say that she wanted to study in Australia, if so there would be problems. Malar didn’t want any such obstacles to prevent the marriage from taking place.

As Ravi, sipped his drink he tried to conjure up a picture of Revathi working in Australia. He imagined her deftly baking the thosai on a hot griddle and then driving his Lancer to hand over the order of thosai. He later imagined her being an efficient housewife and mother, rushing off to bring the children from school, washing piles of clothes and doing all the catering. She was good looking too. She would look nice in jeans and a warm anorak, she would look equally good in a saree. He could imagine her sitting on the manaverai decked in flowers, draped in a rich gold and red saree and wearing the thali which he had specially made in case he found his ideal partner.

He sensed that there was a streak of wilfulness in her but then he knew how to tactfully change even the most independent woman. He had to admit that his tact wasn’t long term because most of his relationships had petered out after some time. He sighed when he
thought of Sandra. He wouldn’t have minded sealing that relationship with marriage, but then he only realised later on that he was just one of her many relationships ... no one stayed that long in one place. Even most of his colleagues, were always on the move, they changed their work places, travelled to other countries and moved from town to town. There were others however, who remained in one town for many years, growing roses on their fences and watching time move by. His own supervisor had remained in Sydney for many years. Now he was planning to go on a cruise on a luxury liner with his wife, Amy. There was no time to think of eternity. In fact, he had urged Ravi to find a suitable girl in Sri Lanka because he felt that Ravi often looked lonely when he used to meet him in the library, classroom or corridor. Once, he had asked him to dinner, and introduced him to his wife Amy. They had had a pleasant dinner and spent many hours seated on the veranda talking about life and work. After, that, Ravi used to invite the elderly couple for meals in his house. He used to also invite some of his colleagues and their wives. After they left however, a deep silence would fill the entire house and he would feel lonely. Perhaps this was the reason for his accepting his family’s invitation to visit Sri Lanka and look for an ideal wife.

He had managed to buy an air ticket at a subsidised rate and had handed the keys of his house to one of his colleagues. Everyone was aware that he had a specific mission for this unexpected journey back to his home country. ‘Hope to see you return accompanied by the girl of your choice,’ his supervisor had told him at the airport.

Now, as he observed the girl he was hoping to marry, he was wondering what her qualities were like. It was like getting to know a stranger ... one had to make room in one’s life and even change one’s routine existence, dull and monotonous though it may be. His sister however had told him that marriage meant companionship ... there would be someone to be with him and care for him. He hoped that Revathi would turn out to be compatible since he was getting a bit weary visiting so many prospective brides. It was the same routine on each occasion they went to these homes, and there was always the subtle scrutinising which went on during these visits. One’s identity and status would be analysed through the intricate discourse which took place. Ravi had always made it a point to show the other party that he was well off in Australia. He made references to his Lancer and his house. Of course he never made any direct references to his financial problems since it would prove to be an obstacle in the marriage proceedings. So he decided that silence was better ... the girl could find out the true situation once she came to the new country. Then it would be too late to change one’s decision.

He had many friends whose marriages were not so happy. Often, the main problem was that there was a lack of understanding between the
couple. They hadn't really been given the opportunity of even having a proper conversation where they could have found out their perceptions about life itself. Instead, the stress was often on the external trappings which consisted of traditional marriages. For instance, attention was given to jewellery, the bridal trousseau, wedding invitations and booking a hall for the wedding. There was also the discussions which went on about the dowry. Often, the girl would have to provide substantial sums of money to give her a sense of status among her in-laws. Land and jewellery could also be included in the bargain. Ravi was against obtaining a dowry since he felt that the girl he married would an investment in itself.

The evening was viewed as a great success by both parties since they both seemed to agree on everything, Revathi’s parents were keen that the marriage be held soon. Then, she could accompany Ravi on his journey back to Australia. The only problem was that the couple themselves hadn’t had an opportunity to speak to each other. Revathi, had sat on one of the couches and had looked away from Ravi. There was a fixed smile on her face, as if she had rehearsed this moment many hours before their arrival. The only time her smile seemed genuine was when they rose to leave. ‘We’ll meet again,’ Ravi’s father had smiled at Revathi’s parents, as if to say that they had liked the girl for their son.

Revathi, wasn’t very sure of her feelings about the arrangement, but then she had to think about her parents. They were already becoming anxious that their elder daughter had not found a suitable partner as yet. This was indeed, a wonderful opportunity for them to get their daughter ‘settled’.

Mahesh aunty had said, ‘Well, if you’re inviting the young man and his sister you’ll have to get a brand new set of tea cups and saucers. You can’t serve them tea in odd cups and saucers that don’t match. Remember, it’s a formal occasion and the young man must get a good impression of the family... you know, standards, quality, breeding ...’

‘Can’t we manage with what we have? We’ve got some good porcelain and china pieces left ...’ Revathi’s mother said plaintively. ‘I have, let me see, some fine Noritake china – Blue Beauty, Longwood Angel and Exclusive by Laklain.’

‘Six of each,’ Mahesh aunty persisted.

‘Well, no, but if the young man and his sister have a matching pair, the rest of us could manage.’

‘No, no, no, it will be so embarrassing ... everyone must drink out of the same kind of cup,’ said Mahesh. ‘Hardly any time left to prepare for the visit, house to be tidied, especially all these books and papers ... the floors polished ... got ready, let’s go to town at once. Have you got a suitable silver tray?’

‘Yes, I’ve got that ... there’s a sale on at Ceylon Ceramics, I’ll see
what I can get at a reasonable price. Ceylon Ceramics have some pretty designs.'

'Not green and dark brown, like the cups at the University canteen,' said Revathi's sister who was visiting from Canada.

'Well,' said Mahesh aunty, 'get ready quickly, no time to lose. Let's catch a three-wheeler. Now it's not only tea, what about the rest ... fruit cake, chicken or cheese sandwiches, biscuits and plantains ... You'll have to serve something for them to eat too.'

'I'm not a good cake maker. I don't have a good oven. I'll get some love cake from Cargills and we'll make chicken sandwiches.'

'You must have some variety.' Mahesh had suggestions as usual. 'Two kinds of cake' she said firmly. 'Fruit cake too.'

'Patties?' said Revathi's mother tentatively.

'You won't have time for that. Serve biscuits and cheese. The most important thing however is matching cups and saucers. Six cups. Six matching saucers. If you want the proposal to be a success.'

In a few weeks time, Ravi found himself seated next to Revathi, in a gold upholstered couch. The smell of roses arranged in clusters seemed to engulf the couple who sat like static robots avoiding each other's gaze. 'What a nice couple they make' Mahesh aunty declared to the onlookers who sat around decorated tables observing the silent couple. Once or twice, Ravi attempted to talk to Revathi, but found it almost impossible since she answered him in static, monosyllables as if she was reluctant to talk to him in public. It was as if she was seated next to a stranger in a bus. The sense of being with a stranger grew as the time passed. Suddenly everything looked unreal and superficial, the chandeliers looked like luminous toadstools floating on clouds of air, the guests who were decked in their finery, looked distant and uninvolved as if they were mere spectators at this wedding. Photographers were walking around on the polished floors, directing the couple to smile and show that they were in love, that they were not mere strangers, pleasing the others who watched them at a distance.

That night, as Revathi was led into the marriage suite which was given as an additional incentive to newly wedded couples, she experienced a sense of panic. She was now with a virtual stranger. Her mother had told her to leave those matters to the bridegroom, as if Revathi was expected to remain uninvolved. There was no talk of going to a doctor or counsellor before the marriage ... everything was kept concealed. Revathi was developing a severe headache as she found herself in the arms of a stranger who was her husband. Yet, she thought of her parents who had really wanted her to agree to this marriage because they didn't want her to be alone one day. Grim and austere pictures were painted of what life would be like twenty years later, when time had passed. 'Better agree to this proposal daughter,' Revathi's mother had advised her. Revathi had wanted to protest
vehemently about marrying Ravi, by talking about Mahesh aunty who was single and independent and very happy too, but she decided against arguing when she saw the expression of sadness on her mother's face.

She knew that it would be a great relief to everyone if she married Ravi. Now there was no time to change her mind, she had to get used to living with Ravi. She hoped that he would allow her to be independent, free to discover other options like pursuing her education which was interrupted as a result of the marriage.

The next morning, everything seemed like a dream. Images vague and nebulous filled her mind as the light flitted in through the gap in the curtains and she saw herself staring into the face of her husband. His eyes seemed to flicker with a spark of recognition as he glanced at Revathi. 'Shall I get you some coffee,' he said as he walked to the door, still a stranger.
In the middle of a dream I am being roused: ‘Shruti... Shruti...’ My name sounds like a wail. Above mine, an ancient face leans, with eyes that have been sucked into their sockets; cheeks, caved in. A frayed hand grips my shoulder and shakes it hard: ‘Shruti, Shruti... I forgot my medicines...’

I cover the knobbly fingers with my own: ‘No ma, you didn’t...! gave them to you myself – with Horlicks.’

One or two blinks, and then back to her bed she shuffles. I, to my dream of other nights, to a time when I slept with the moon and stars looking down at me. Inhaling jasmine perfumed air. Through shut eyes I would know when the first light had seeped through the darkness. In the trees, the birds chorused. Air, chilled and crisp, sifted through my sleep-warm bed. An hour later the aroma of hot milk would arouse me. Time to get up for school. I smile now, sleepy as I was then, as the image of mama slides before my eyes: Standing beside my bed in one of her high necked dressing gowns, holding a glass of milk flavoured with crushed almonds and cardamom. This, she awoke me with every morning.

I try harder and harder to hang on to this vision. For many mornings now she looks at me through vacant, faded eyes. ‘Who are you?’ she says, ‘Don’t I know you?’ Her eyebrows bridge together as she tries to place me.

‘It’s me ma, Shruti...’

From my mind I try to skim the knowledge that I no longer belong to her world.

‘Shruti...’ She tries it out, pleased by the sound.

‘Shruti... haven’t I heard that before?’ She is like a child who can’t quite grasp an idea.

‘Yes ma, it’s me...your daughter...Shruti...’

A calm then descends, her face clears, like a suddenly cloudless sky.

‘Ah yes...Shruti...’

In a room that smells of used clothing, propped up on a mound of pillows, mama lies. A glassful of yellow teeth sit on the table beside her. Close to her ear she clutches a worn-out radio emitting squeaky, scratchy sounds. She listens intently. Until six months ago, I could hear the newsreader’s voice at the end of the corridor; at that time she listened to
Days Past

four bulletins a day.

'Shruti...' she once said, 'The English news reported four dead after the temple explosion in Bhatinda...but the Hindi newsreader said 20 had died...which do you think I should believe?'

Another recent morning she greeted me, dressed in a silk saree. It was mid-June and the air was swollen with heat. On mama’s forehead and upper lip, moisture beads coalesced.

'Ma, why are you wearing such thick clothes?'

That she was not complaining irritated rather than pleased me.

'But Shruti...you know I have no other clothes...' Her expression and tone expressed her utter confusion.

I led her to the cupboard. One look inside at the piles of cotton clothes, and the wizened face collapsed, a hundred more lines appeared. 'Oh Shruti', she sobbed, 'I forgot...I keep forgetting...'

In the kitchen I collect plates for breakfast, looking away from decayed surfaces, the dirt that encrusts them. My eyes settle instead on the wood of a lost time, rich and glossy from constant care. I imagine the whiff of the lemon polish that used to tinge the air. Yet I cannot ignore the cobwebs matting the corners of walls; the stained cracked kitchen sink. Tup, Tup, the tap dribbles. Blotching the embroidered traycloth there are tea stains, that I try to cover with cups. It doesn’t matter, though: She doesn’t notice these details anymore. At one time she would remind us, her children, time and again, 'Maintainence is the key to longevity...'

On the first of every month the silver and brassware was polished; shoes and handbags aired. The family always slept on stiff white sheets. For every meal the table was set formally; placemats, silverware, and even starched napkins. Paying attention to these details seemed effortless for her, like sleeping or eating.

After breakfast mama bathes. I fill her bucket with tepid water, set her towel and clothes so that she can reach them easily. From her shrunken body, clothes are removed: she is half her size now. Age, and a dwindling interest in food has seen to that. I wait outside, alert for the sounds from the bathroom. When mama emerges, I massage coconut oil into the roots of her hair, gradually working it into the strands, that have faded from ebony to ash to the white threads that now lace her scalp. Finely etched lines divide her face into countless parts, her skin is yellowed, like a dirty tooth. The flesh on her face and body seems to have fallen out of its bony frame: her neck now sags, like an unfixed curtain.

When I was as old as my daughter is now, I used to admire the tautness of mama’s midriff, her crisp cotton sarees. Just as I loved watching her sit before the tall straight backed mirror in her bedroom, using the silver backed combs and brushes that belonged to her mother, and now belong to me. The kajal box always lay in the right hand corner of her top drawer. In it lay the sooty waxy kohl she made at home, by
burning a cotton wick in mustard oil. When she applied it, her eyes would assume a luminous quality, a clear steady gaze. Calm that would be disrupted by turbulence in an instant: Mama angered very quickly.

Still clear in my mind are the frequent clashes that took place between our old cook, Sitaram, and her. She would constantly supervise his cooking, insisting that he do things exactly her way; put ginger in a curry that he believed ought to have garlic, or pepper where there should have been chilli. He never seemed to cook anything the way mama believed it ought to have been cooked. In the middle of a meal she would suddenly pick up the dish of meat, and rush into the kitchen. Papa and I would continue eating, and talking in loud voices, in an attempt to ignore the angry exchange going on in the kitchen:

'It is two day old, this meat,' she shouted, 'where did you buy it...?' And Sitaram’s equally heated response, ‘It is absolutely fresh madam, no one can sell ME old meat...’

With Papa, too she would erupt. On the way to the market one day, papa realized that the petrol level in the tank was low. He started veering the car towards the closest petrol station, only to be stopped by mama.

‘No pa, don’t go there, Kamal always gets cheated...they mixed kerosene in the petrol last time she was here...’

Papa’s expression was disbelieving. He continued driving in the same direction. ‘I don’t trust Kamal,’ he said, ‘I always buy petrol here.’ From the back seat I could sense mama’s anger, that seemed to rise from somewhere deep within, and erupt with a force that was frightening. As soon as papa stopped the car and handed the attendant the keys, mama stepped out of the car, slammed the door shut, and began marching home.

Now, mama is so quiet, so passive. People frighten her. She can’t place them or remember their names. So she sits quietly, numb in their presence, afraid that whatever she says will reveal her state of mind. When mama does talk her speech is incoherent and she drifts wildly, from one subject to another. ‘I think I should call up the post office – for the letters you know...letters...Shruti, should I eat a toast now, or later?’

Last evening I was entertaining some friends when mama strutted in, clad in a long black coat, a red muffler, carrying an umbrella. ‘Shruti’, she said, ‘I’m off for a walk with your father...’. The moment had transformed her into a young wife again, dressed for the morning walk she and papa went for, twenty years ago.

Sometimes I wake at night to see her sitting up, clutching her bed; her eyes luminous with terror. She can’t remember where she is, what day or time it is. Her mind travels only backwards now, to her days as a young girl: the rides in her father’s glistening Jaguar are vivid, as is an image of herself in a pink dress, at her tenth birthday party, and the face of the teacher who taught her to say ‘She sells sea shells on the sea
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shore...’ without stumbling. But she can’t remember what she ate for breakfast that morning, whether she had a bath or not, and what her grandson’s name is.

Mama’s connection only to the past makes me wonder how she views the future. What does it look like in her eyes? What are its elements? The image that forms in my mind is threatening, like a giant cloud of dust. It’s garbled, and jars like spliced photographs that have been stuck together at random, or different kinds of music being played together. Discordant, clashing.

Looking at her I think of conversations that have not been had, lost time. I want to ask her what her favourite subject at school was, or what I was like as a baby. But she has no answers anymore: they are trapped, entangled inside her.
Miriam Tlali

Tears

Very often, I have had to shed tears. As a child, I had to shed them for my grandmother who had to till the soil with me on her back; to scrape the earth with her bare hands and build a mud-house in which to cook for us. For my father who died when I was an infant. I shed tears too when, later, my mother informed me that when I was born my father was disappointed because he wanted a son.

I shed tears for my beautiful mother who had to struggle alone. For the loneliness of my elder sisters and I, as we waited and scanned the horizon hoping that ‘Me would appear...a lone bread-winner carrying parcels containing provisions (especially limpompom - bon-bons).

Now that I am a mother, I shed tears for my children when I realize that I would never be able to live with them and know fully the joys of motherhood. I often shed tears for their destiny, and the fact that I can do so little to protect them and provide for them. I have often shed tears for the fate of all black children. For those we love so much who have left our land and cannot return. For our denigrated humanity which we must retrieve.

Mihloti...teardrops...Masolinyana (my name)...
The tears burn my eyes and drip down on the paper before me. I have to shed them.
ELLEKE BOEHMER

27 April 1994

Freeze-dried drama. About a week after it all happened I see the Benetton ad on the London Underground. A black hand takes a baton from a white hand. Both are fuzzed by motion. Across the bottom right-hand corner is the date, 27 April 1994. Green numbers on yellow, red, black, blue, enough colours to rival the new flag. The United Colours flag. A man leans up against the edge of the ad frowning. There are no trains and the air is smokey. I am very far away from where I was last week. I don’t know how commuters read this image. This is not how it was at all.

On their plinths stand the stern worthies of another time, Victoria, Grey, Brown. Their eyes are without eyeballs. They are in another world. The sun shines, it is dry and clear, a perfect day. All along the pavement, and the marigold beds, and the public toilets, stand people evenly spaced. We face the City Hall, last used for symphony concerts. A man on a park bench plays ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing’ on a mouth organ. It is a thin tune, not out of place. Could anything be out of place, now, on this day, in this recharged, turned-about country? We face forwards, waiting patiently as statues for history to happen. As it will. As it must. We trust this. We can trust this now. Now we can use this plural – we.

The camera crews make much of the statues, the Royal Hotel across the street, the buildings marked Colonial, and the queue. They are in quest of stories, quaint oppositions. Tomorrow in the paper there will be the anecdote about the elderly man in Cape Town who came out to support Jan Smuts.

Someone from the Los Angeles Sentinel plucks me out of the queue for five minutes. They want a testimony, the tale of a conversion. Like, I am white, but have come this distance to vote. Or, my father supported apartheid, and here I stand, unarmed. What I say is, this is a dream come true. My friend says, it is all I ever wanted. Desmond Tutu is saying, it is like falling in love.

And truly it is all of these things, but it is also none of them. Because, just looking at the scene, the sunshine, the line of people, their bright t-shirts, the sunglasses brilliant with light, the ice-cream man going up and down with a white and blue cooler box calling ‘ice-cream’, outdoing the man going up and down inaudibly
murmuring the name of a party: just looking at this scene there is in fact nothing to it, nothing much to it. There is no visible drama here. That was yesterday, the toyi-toying crowds, Cry Freedom. Not today. It has been a long road but the fact is – today we are simply voting. Making our x’s in South Africa.

A man says, we are standing here like skittles, someone like Barend Strydom could easily come and pick us off, we are sitting ducks. This is of course true. However here is another strange plain truth. We make a queue more orderly and evenly spaced than at a bus stop in England. Somewhere, somehow, people have learned this patience.

Just in front are a mother and a son and her mother. The younger woman wears crisp new green cotton in honour of the day. The older woman keeps her arms folded. She tells me her grandchild is six months short of his eighteenth birthday, he cannot vote. I can, she says, without expression, without doubt.

As his mother turns away to buy cold Coke the boy slyly slips her ID out of her pocket. Then he asks, with consternation, where is your ID? She spends minutes looking, patting herself, crying Ai, Ai. But when he hands it back to her, she simply hugs him. She doesn’t laugh. The older woman looks on, silent and baleful.

The breeze brings a faint smell of the sea and the toilets. My friend has wandered off to read Henry Miller in the shade of the frangipani trees. I keep her place in the line. This is OK, People keep peeling off to go on short strolls, to stretch their legs, buy hot dogs. Two portly men in shiny shirts come up to talk. They have heard there is better voting up at the High School on the Bluff. You’ll have less of a wait. No one takes much notice. We have been here for hours, for decades.

I have heard talk in the past of the banality of evil. In this place we have seen enough of what that might mean. You can swim here, but you cannot swim here: we may not swim together. That well-known grammar of illogicality.

Today another banality must be put on record, a banality that is beautiful, that is benign. There is this ordinariness of queueing, of passing the time, of dodging a neighbour’s toppling ice-cream, and her apologizing to the woman whose shoes are now stained.

Finally there is the little electric fan, a blue plastic propeller in a frail metal cage, that looks as if it might not last the day but is still working. This is to dry the invisible ink on our hands, the ink to prevent fraud. And there are whispered reports here at the end of the queue, before we file in, of voting chaos, and ballot boxes gone missing. Someone has heard it on her transistor radio. But at the comical blue fan talk stops. The woman guarding the silver metal box says ‘push’, as in child-birth, because the wide slot is overstuffed.

Above these ramshackle plywood booths, I try to get a glimpse of the stuccoed City Hall ceiling, which I remember as grand, imperial, but
there is no time. My ice-cream stained hands stick to the pencil. The stickiness I think will transmit to the next person.

‘Push’, the woman says again.

There are voters behind, voters ahead. It is so ordinary, it is so miraculous. A warm breeze blows in from the sea through the open door.

My friend steps out into the sun. Beer? she says, Down at the beach or up on the Bluff? We have a few hours before the creche closes for the day. I say, The beach.

The queue is garishly sun-lit, sedate and still very long. This is the beauty of the banal.
The Fate of the Word

I believe that I have been asked to find out, to ponder over what the fate of the word is in my country, South Africa. Well, it is said that, that which does not come to an end must be ominous. What starts as being ominous is also ominous; what continues being endlessly not ominous is ominous; in other words, the essence of life is the fact of it always being under change.

As freedom fighters, in the long dark days of apartheid we knew this; we had to know this; and all who did not know this, came round also to know that that which does not come to an end must be ominous. What this also means is that, human beings are and must be intrinsically optimistic, hopeful and must not only know but understand that in fact they are the agents of that which characterizes life, and is of the essence of life.

It is my view that the large body of South African literature – whether it is that which is written in African Languages; that written in black Afrikaans, or black English or that written in white Afrikaans or white English, the San San, or the Khoi Khoi literature, or any other which qualifies as South African, is essentially and eventually part and parcel of human literature. It is even as some of it degrades human nature. It will have said what was thought and done in that time.

It is said that you can point at a person and take that back, but that you can never take back what you have said to others. If writers had something to say and have said it, the world will never forget it. The word then, is always ominous. I know what those who deal with the word said before the white man arrived in South Africa, they said: he who walks the night with me, I thank at dawn; I also know what those who lived at the time of the coming of the white man and the long period of nightmare of his stay said. They said: No easy walk to freedom. Then, also, another recent milestone is when you discover that freedom is not an event but that it is a process: Change is pain, the word maker has said. These are the milestones of South African literature. If life in South Africa is at the crossroads, yes, then South African literature is at the crossroads. I do not think that to mean crises, nor do I think it means dilemma. I do think though that it means challenge. It is a challenge to the South African word maker.
We must as South African writers ponder: the past, the present and the future. We must reflect, on the expressions – of the eyes, faces, gaits and silences of the citizens of this land. They, as agents of change, brought about a shift from the past, and live in a new present which spells and articulates the possibilities of a new future which is different from the many futures of their past. The energy of the high drama of struggle, and the energy to resist it, have both affected the citizens, to the point where even their own chemistry has been transformed.

There is a new feel in the land. What is it? A rainbow nation – is that an event? One nation, many cultures: who did not know this, about this old country? Why is this a discovery? But also, what does it mean if we know that, these are articulated and stated against the backdrop that apartheid is three centuries and a half old; that, the San San, the Griqua and the Khoi Khoi have almost been wiped off the face of the earth; that even as revolution, of uniting the different South African black tribes is more than eight decades old, in Kwazulu Natal the spectre of tribalism rears its head; that some Afrikaans speakers, who are white, seek a Volstaat and elsewhere there are rumblings from among the English who still claim to be the tribe of the world, and others in South Africa who are restless about the fact that the new dispensation may not be giving them a deserved attention.

What do all these realities say about human beings; about human relationships; about human nature? Given the seeming ability of human beings, of human nature, of human relations, to leap and qualitatively develop to being the noble ideals of human civilisation, which we all cherish, what remains then to be said about human beings; about war, about the future of life if backwardness, and reaction seems to stay with us even after such mighty happenings as the emergence of a new South Africa? I say this, keenly aware also, that the legacy of apartheid in South Africa, which is a heavy burden, a humiliating experience, a ruthless and brutal journey for black South Africans, will not vanish, but will be here with us for a very long time indeed. Yet, also, a cursory look and listening to the world outside of South Africa where blacks live – a look also and listening to the African continent – even as we are on the eve of the 21st century, – says nothing is said from those lands, from those peoples, from that experience, nothing is explicit about where we are headed, or whether, as the old word said long ago: we will love our neighbours as we love ourselves. The dilemma then is, the South African crisis then, is also the world crises is also the crossroads of the world. South Africa has then, dared, and pioneered!

There is a lot that is brand new in South Africa but there is also, a lot that is old, all of which manifest and express themselves at present. The nation, the people who claim to be of the rainbow nation, are at
the crossroads, and yet also they are not. In one sense the black people of South Africa are at the crossroads. The natives, kaffirs, the bantoes, the blacks, the Africans, of the humiliated African continent, which is savage, pagan, crude, cruel, awkward, famined, which commits genocide in broad day light, the Africans, are at the crossroads. But so are white South Africans: the masters, the bases, sirs and madams, the master race, the special – African tribe of European descent on the African continent, the race which owns knowledge, privilege, and are of and by civilisation, are also at the crossroads. South Africa is at the crossroads. The new South Africa, the country of many Cultures, the rainbow nation, all of these phrases, engineer the country out of a prophesied doom, into a possible life span. Elsewhere in my writing, I have contested the view that the birth of the new South Africa was a miracle. It is not a miracle. In as much as the birth of a child is a result of the mating of a male and a female. Yes indeed, for many years, and much more so in 1994, the nation must have gone on its knees, raised its hands, closed its eyes, – and prayed, in as much as it did chant, dance, clap hands, sung, that South Africa must be saved!

There is a lot that is brand new in South Africa. But there is also, as I said, a lot that has been here, which is old and stubborn, backward, evil and inhuman, which stares and stares us in the eye all the time.

We did as a nation pray for the leaders, for peace, and when we did, we were weary indeed of blood letting and of war. We borrowed from, as we also became creative with human knowledge, – civilisation – asking it to become a catalyst in our seeking wisdom for peace to fall on our land. We laboured for this peace. We died for this peace. We wept for this. And some as we talk now, will never ever be the same again. Their sanity snapped, was severed, by the weight of that time when everything was uncertain. When it seemed that, as people we would, as we had done before, break limb with impunity and tear life apart with raving anger.

It would not be true, it would not be honest to think that that spectre is behind us. No! And that is another reason why there will be no miracle. We laboured and are still called upon to further labour, to build peace, to build the land, and build friendships and possibilities of becoming members of the community of nations.

Therefore then, the issue for us is about how we can take the leap out of the morass and quicksand of racism, of prejudice and of injustices. I know that South Africa will contribute, in theory, significantly to civilisation in the resolution of these problems. I hope, in doing so, it will contribute to the emancipation of the Africans and the African continent, by not compromising on the fundamentals of the philosophy of ubuntu, as also, Africa will not be shy to learn, to be influenced, and to engage with the ideas of other people. Ubuntu says
simply: human beings are human beings. Meaning: you cannot treat human beings as anything else but as human beings.

The South African nation has now been freed as it also has been bound. It is my hope that all South Africans are now free to be who they want. That means that none of us in a group, or as individuals will even attempt to try and tell others who they should be. However, there are certain facts which are begging for recognition and attention: the Amazulu, Amaxhosa, Basotho, Mapedi, Amaswati, Amashangane, Mavenda, Amandebele, Batswana who form the basic of the Africaness of South Africa, and who collectively form the majority of people, but also, who, because they were the most oppressed collectively, ask, and must ask: what is freedom?

The parties and celebrations are over, and the day has dawned as it always has in the many pasts. On the one hand, reality is the same, on the other our reality is different. It is the same because we are bound by being South African, who are a diverse people, but who also are, because of this diversity, conscious of being different; but, our reality is also different because where it meant African and different it also was synonymous to saying, outcast, downtrodden, glorified slave.

A writer must know all these things I have said, and more; but then that knowledge does not make a writer, nor is that knowledge useful if it is left as knowledge. How does the writer utilize this knowledge? It is in my view, the role of the writer, to confront the contradictions of life; to know and understand and recognize them. It is also the task of the word maker, to shore them and to create the light at the end of the tunnel, - if there is, or, to say, it is so dark, so dark, that hope can only be in the spirit of human being.

I am here, trying to find a way out of the crossroads. I may have put the useful rules in place, I may not have done so, but at the end, I have said I hope, that, because at the crossroads it is a melting pot, - that is the stuff of the richness of life. Also, I want to have said that, what does not come to an end, is ominous, and therefore that as people, we must not only accept change, but also become its agents and its catalysts. I hope I have escaped the clichés which are normally said about writing. The South African situation is about making the new, the foundation of the future. So many things which we were afraid of no longer matter now. A little Afrikaner girl, who lives where blacks must not live in South Africa, made it her business to see Mr. Mandela thrice and thrice she shook his hand, and declared, I love that old man. Her forebears heard her say so, and she is still alive? A little black boy once asked me at a school where I gave a lecture: why did the white people lock you up for nine months? I said whatever I said in answer, and his reply as he sat down was: we must never allow white people to do that again. It is my wish to write a novel, a play, a poem or make a film which these two very civilized young ones - one, a white little girl,
the other a little black boy – will read. I want to be that young and so optimistic!

Earlier on, I said that a lot has changed in South Africa. However, change like everything in life, as I said in the beginning of this my statement, is not permanent. It cannot be if change is a constant of life, and if also, change is an issue of human beings, that is of human nature. There are many dark moments which still await our great and easily, most beautiful land in the world, where, some of the bravest sons and daughters of the human race live. We are just about to open a long closed door – the past! And – we are going to ask – about the bloody past, about some moments which will illustrate the degeneration of the human mind and state to being basic, simply cruel, and utterly incredible in callousness and disregard for life. We must learn, know, and come to accept that so is another side of the human race. It is cruel. It is unkind. It is merciless. It hates. It is full of intrigue and conspiracy. It cheats and betrays. It is evil. We must come, once more, to learn and to know these things about ourselves. If we forget that, then, as this world has done, over and over, we will repeat these evil deeds – for, what is the difference between apartheid and the middle passage – of what significance is the difference?

There is another patch – a dark patch, which we must as a people traverse: one day, the little black boy here, will be a man, and the little white girl a woman. We must give them the vocabulary to speak to each other. As it is now, they may not have it later because vocabularies are a result and issue of experience. It is true that that white little girl must be able to love all human beings, maybe because they are tall, maybe because they are black, but most important and most certainly as human beings, because we have no choice but to live with and around other human beings. We must have a let-live relation with them. She, and my little black boy must know this. He must know this. He must know that because he will not allow himself to live under apartheid ever, that does not mean that white people have no right to live. Ah, these then are my beloved country people who are pioneers in the 21st century!

The dark patch for them then, is when they are eye-ball to eye-ball and they do not have the vocabulary, – to say what they think and feel; and to talk of what they see and hear, when there is too much which remains inexplicable. That is the perilous moment. I expect that for a while in South Africa, there will be these dangerous encounters. South Africa, through its diverse landscape: its mountains, ravines, bush, jungle, vast and empty patches, and through its wide seas and blue sky, its pitch dark nights, and at times quiet rural footpaths, has to find a place for itself on the African continent. Everything of itself, has to, if it will be at peace with itself at all, fit and locate itself in Africa; that is what its freedom, which it fought for, for so long, must mean and that
is what binds it. It is this process of self-identification, and the seeking of an identity which must also define the freedom of my country. It is only when we examine who we are, that we can then embrace freedom. That is the dark patch we were afraid of – I asked a Griqua lady recently: Where do Griquas come from? From, she said, the San San, the Khoi Khoi, the white and the black. This is a dynamic which caused us great pain, but it must now, release us, we must emancipate ourselves from it – we must, go! And that in a sense is the fate of the word, that, it has the potential to be final, but also, to be dynamic. That, in my view, is the new find of South African literature.

I thank you. Cape Town 6.9.95
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No later than 31 May 1996.
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MIRIAM TLALI was born in Doornfontein, Johannesburg. A novelist, short story writer and playwright, her novels include Amandla and Muriel at Metropolitan, her first novel, which was originally banned in South Africa. It has subsequently been translated into five languages. She has recently been involved with the Women's National Coalition, a movement created to draw up a South African Women's Charter.

JENA WOODHOUSE graduate of the University of Queensland. Poet and novelist she now lives and works in Greece. Her novella Metis, The Octopus and the Olive Tree won the Office of Multicultural Affairs Award for the best multicultural book for Junior readers, 1994.

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