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‘Looking Back is Looking Forward’: Towards a Theory of Tradition in Niyi Osundare’s Poetry  
Christopher Anyokwu

Introduction
It feels somewhat odd, if not a bit heretical, to presume to talk of tradition in the work of a self-confessed socialist-Marxist poet, since, as we all know, the Marxist ideology does not countenance any form of atavism which some might take tradition to mean. This feeling of oddity is partially assuaged by the knowledge that tradition is taken for most people as the take-off point or the entry-point in the discussion of literature and cultural production in general. However, for Niyi Osundare whose work is clearly rooted in and informed by his native Yoruba oral poetics, it will be myopic, in fact, insensitive of anyone not to investigate the place of tradition in his ever-burgeoning oeuvre. Moreover, besides his overwhelming reliance on his indigenous world view coupled with all the ramifying formal and contextual implications of this, his relation to the socialist-Marxist ideology invites us to also interrogate the extent to which the poet has been able to marry these nativist and foreign epistemologies. Does the epistemic wedding spawn good poetry or does it create disharmonious or discordant eclecticism? Does the poet’s neo-traditionalism, indeed, lead to a betrayal of his avowed espousal of Marxism? Seriously speaking does Osundare’s embeddedness in ‘tradition’, finally, result in regression and ahistoricism, or, to put it differently, does it make him a progressive traditionalist? What can we say is the theory of tradition in Niyi Osundare’s poetry?

Tradition
Before we go further in our discursive inquest into the theory of tradition in Osundare’s poetry, there is need for us to furnish an operational definition of tradition. In The Invention of Tradition, Eric Hobsbawm defines what he calls ‘invented tradition’ as ‘a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’. In an attempt to provide a basis for this phenomenon of the invention of tradition, Hobsbawm goes on to argue that:

It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the ‘invention of tradition’ so interesting for historians of the past two century.¹

Hobsbawn rightly differentiates the two categories of tradition and custom, arguing further that custom gives ‘any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history’. While ‘custom’, according to

Hobsawm, ‘cannot afford to be invariant’, ‘tradition’, by nature, is open to invention, or, to reconfiguration. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines tradition as ‘a belief, custom, or way of doing something that has existed for a long time’. All things considered, tradition may be said to designate a pattern of social behaviour whose warrant is usually rooted in the communal folk wisdom. While this pattern of social behaviour covers the entire gamut of social life, we are more interested in how the artist expropriates and utilises the constitutive elements of tradition in his work, both in terms of content and form. What, then, do we mean by tradition in Osundare’s poetry? What are the elements of tradition discernible in his verse? In so far as poetry is concerned, our reference to tradition will necessarily be limited to the artistic dimensions of the past; that which T. S. Eliot has called ‘the existing monuments’ and John Wain, on his part, clarifies as ‘the masterpieces of the past’.

‘Looking Back’: The Usable Past As Common Backcloth

For in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forward; the visionary artist is not only a rememberer, he is also a reminder.

This excerpt exemplifies Niyi Osundare’s philosophy of poetry, if we may so term it insofar as in this brief statement we can flesh out the major ideo-epistemic planks of his literary engagement. The term ‘dialectics’, for instance, is vitally crucial in the overall hermeneutics of Osundare’s work, given his Marxist orientation. And as such, it behoves us to pause awhile to ponder the role of dialectics in his poetry. In A Dictionary of Marxist Thought, ‘dialectics’ is defined in part as ‘the conflict of opposites driving reality onwards in an historical process of constant progressive change, both evolutionary and revolutionary, and in its revolutionary or discontinuous changes bringing forth genuine qualitative novelty’. However, according to Holman and Harmon, ‘the most frequent system is that of Hegel, a modification of which Marx employed, in which the material at issue is analysed in terms of thesis, antithesis and synthesis’. Dialectics in Niyi Osundare’s poetry may be said to refer to the relational type, namely, the movement of history. ‘Oppositions’ and ‘resolutions’ abound in the historical process since nature – both in the phenomenal and human worlds – is intrinsically conflictual and contradictory. It is this contradiction – ridden human experience that Osundare in the excerpt above refers to as the ‘intricate dialectics of human living’. He goes on to stress the existential idea of ‘looking back’ [as] looking forward’. This is where we need to observe the greatest caution if we must pin down the theory, of tradition in Osundare’s work. What, then, does Osundare mean by ‘looking back’? And what does ‘back’ in this regard imply? A very convenient starting-point in our search for the essence of this

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2 Hobsawm, 3.
6 By the ‘Usable Past’, we assume that the past is not a perfect idyll or an elysium which the living poet must deploy wholesale in his appeal to Tradition. Thus, he is constrained to be selective in his expropriation of Tradition.
7 Niyi Osundare, The Eye of the Earth (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1986) xiv. In his paper entitled The Writer as Righter: The African Literature Artist and His Social Obligations, (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2007) 31, Niyi Osundare notes: ‘The past becomes not only a stepping stone, but a vision tower, for “looking back is to look ahead”’ (Ayi Kwei Armah, The Healers (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1979) 172. This goes to show that the conceptual building-blocks of Osundare’s poetics of Tradition actually derived from Ayi Kwei Armah, who, himself was inspired by his Ghanaian oral culture.
8 Tom Bottomore et al., A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983) 120.
‘back’ is to assume that it refers to the ‘past’. And what exactly is this ‘past’ and where do we draw the dividing line between past and present, given the overarching presence of the past? The past may be thought to cover or stretch from prehistory (including mythic time and folklore) through recorded history to colonial and post-colonial era, that is, the recent past. In this vast and varied stretch of time, human society has always been governed and regulated by certain norms of behaviour, belief-systems and cultural practices. And, expectedly, in traditional society, moral codes and ethical standards were clearly enunciated, with virtuous behaviour rewarded and encouraged and, conversely, vicious acts duly pilloried. It is this reward structure or system which undergirded the socialisation mechanism or process in ancient society.

Coming closer to home, in the Yoruba (African) society, virtuous behaviour was and is still highly regarded as such character traits as honesty, hard work, love or compassion, neighbourliness and hospitality, integrity and honour and communalism were seen as the moral building-blocks of society. Deviance or anti-social behaviour such as sexual immorality, dishonesty, laziness and selfishness were discouraged.

At this juncture let us emphasise that while those oral poets and storytellers were composing their songs without the aid of the technologies of writing or audio-visual, they nonetheless availed themselves of literary tropes and figures of thought, speech and sound such as simile, metaphor, personification, onomatopoeia, idiophone, irony, satire, and litotes. The use of these poetic tropes by Yoruba oral raconteurs and poets demonstrates the universality of these rhetorical and stylistic elements as they are found in all oral cultures as well as in chirographic and typographic ones. Additionally, these oral poems, stories and songs relied for effect on such syntactic elements as repetition, parallelism and tonal counterpoint (see Olatunji10, Babalola11, Okpewho12, Ong13 and Osundare14). By the same token, Yoruba being a tonal language, oral practitioners tended to utilise and deploy sound symbols and images to compose and create their songs/poems. Small wonder, then, that we encounter a preponderance of the use of onomatopoeia, heteronyms, idiophones, refrains, folksongs, alliteration, assonances and consonances in the oral pieces of these traditional poets and singers of tales.

Cognate to the deployment of the socio-cultural and ethical values of the oral past and the literary syntactic features of Yoruba (African) oral poetry, in Niyi Osundare’s verse, we also find a lavish or liberal appropriation of such oral artistic categories as the proverb, the riddle, the curse, song, word games or punning, incantation, eulogy or panegyrics and satire. In highlighting the creativity of the orally biased people of Africa, Ruth Finnegan argues:

> This has turned the spotlight on the detailed processes by which people create, entextualise, transmit, perform, or reflect about a multiplicity of forms of verbalized action: something to be considered not just in relation to texts and traditions from the past or to a canon recognized by elite scholars, but also as to how people are actually acting-performing and extextualising-in the present.15

As we know, oral art has its being in performance: it is therefore instantaneist, experiential and ephemeral, but while it lasts, it is characterised by multi-modalities of performance such as...

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as music, words, singing, colour, somatic involvement, dance, material display. A cursory examination of the formal poetry of Osundare will reveal the poet’s overwhelming reliance on and the utilisation of the stylistic elements and the rhetorical features of Yoruba oral poetry (see Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Bamikunle). Niyi Osundare’s extensive use of proverbs is well-known, giving rise to criticism of his poetry, which in turn, elicited a poem entitled ‘Who’s Afraid of the Proverb?’ Osundare equally uses a lot of riddles in his poetry, so much so that most critics consider his verses as ‘riddling’ (see Anyokwu). Moreover, he regards his poetry following the pioneering examples of Okot p’ Bitek and Leopold Sedar Senghor, as ‘songs’, for example: *Songs of the Marketplace*, *Songs of the Season*, *Waiting Laughters* and *The Word Is An Egg*. In keeping with and following closely his native Yoruba oral poetic forms such as *Oriki* (praise poetry), *ofo* (incantatory poetry), *ijala* (hunter’s chants), *ekun iyawo* (bridal songs), *owe* (proverbs), *alo apamo* (riddles and jokes), and *ese ifa* (ifa divination poetry), Niyi Osundare expropriates the constitutive formal features of these oral modes and genres in his own poetry of English expression. Hence, he deploys various strategies of artistic mediation such as blending, compounding, clipping, neologism as well as other reiterative strategies like alliteration, assonance and cramping to effect word play, punning and word games which at once serve both satiric and humorous purposes. Even this conflation of satire and humour derives in the main from the Yoruba oral culture. The Yoruba, like the English neo-classical writers, abhor extremism, favouring instead the principle of the Golden Mean.

Among the Ekiti-Yoruba people, for instance, the practice of *adan* is meant to morally rehabilitate and socially redeem the deviant. Thus, in the *adan* satiric practice, humour is the energizing element, particularly in the lively context of real-time performance as the people seek to correct vice through ridicule. The belief-systems, the metaphysical assumptions and indigenous Yoruba world-view are embedded in the songs, poems, proverbs and the cultural productions of the people. The oral re-enactment of these cultural activities further reinforces and perpetuates the sanction of Tradition. Osundare admits:

> My abiding source of inspiration remains that kind of literature that has no ‘authors’ in the conventional sense: the oral tradition. I was born and raised in a rich Yoruba culture in which poetry is music, the drum is a text, or, better still, panoply of texts; dance is both art and science, and the proverb is philosophy and wisdom without borders. I grew up in a community of chants and songs, ballads and incantations, plain songs and deep songs, panegyrics and flaying satires, and an interminable repertoire of *oriki*, that sub-genre which houses the poetry of praise and attribution, narration and colourful description.

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The Historical Sense: Voice and Memory in Poetic Imagination

‘The visionary artist is not only a rememberer, he is also a reminder.’ 26

In the earlier part of this paper, we look at the first part of the above quote by Niyi Osundare, we examine his notion of dialectics in human society, emphasizing in the process Engels’ philosophy of nature which is said, or supposed to be, patently conflictual and fundamentally contradictory. However, the quote above calls attention to another important aspect of Osundare’s ideology of poetry, namely vision and conscious craftsmanship. The role of inspiration in the creative process is one which has always pitted one group of writers and scholars against another. While one school of thought holds that inspiration plays a decisive role in the creative output of a writer, thus relegating perspiration (cognition) to the background, another school of thought posits that creativity is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration. Although Osundare himself had once argued that, sometimes, a poet might be inspired by some external superior force the fact still remains that Osundare nevertheless believes that, in line with the demythologizing imperative of the Marxist epistemology, the human subject (the poet) is always fully in charge. 27 This is why Osundare, the master stylist, deliberately elects to use the word artist in order to foreground the notion of a maker, a creator, a conscious craftsman who deploys everyday materials found lying about in the object world and presses them to poetic service. This act of creation/creativity confers on the artist some quasi-divine powers and prerogatives, such that we may begin to contemplate the artist-as-god. This portrait of the artist as man-god is analogous to the Nietzschean notion of man as Superman. And since Marxism disavows religion, literary creativity becomes an aspect of a secular faith and the poet invariably assumes the role of a secular clergy. 28

Thus, rather than using Biblical metaphor or terminology, Osundare describes the artist as an agent of progressive change, a prophet-seer, a social crusader, rights activist and moral gadfly. In the bleakest of social anomy, the poet shines the light of hope; he is a veritable beacon of revolutionary optimism, enthuising in man’s undoubted capacity to triumph over life’s vicissitudes. The artist’s vision presupposes forward-looking, a prescient mind-frame which enables the poet to dream alternative possibilities for his society as he contributes his own quota to the Marxist grand agenda of changing the world.

Yet, the visionary poet is a ‘rememberer’, according to Osundare. That is to say, the poet does not discard or discount the past in his attempt to bring about a brave new world of possibility. Even if he wishes to discountenance the past, he cannot. Such is the nature of things that the poet as the imaginative leader of his community and society is also a product of the socio-cultural milieu. His vision is ineluctably bound up with his life-world; and his experience is the incremental accretions of the historical process. The past, therefore, constitutes, for him, as we earlier noted, the common backcloth, the fount of his own creative essence. It is this omnipresent past that he must always ‘remember’ – both to avoid its negative aspects and to reinforce and celebrate its positive aspects. Accordingly, Osundare in *Midlife* writes:

> But what if we forget the past  
> And the past never fails to remember us…?29

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26 Osundare, *The Eye of the Earth* xiv.


This centrality of memory dominates Osundare’s verse. A random sampling will suffice: In his foreline to *Midlife*, Osundare remarks: ‘This volume, therefore, is informed by an inescapably panoramic vision…’. This ‘panoramic vision’ is empowered by memory as the poems in the volume exemplify. The volume entitled *Horses of Memory* is almost entirely dedicated to the exploration of the memorial temper and the monumentalizing penchant of the Yoruba people. Indeed, Osundare, in the Dedication, tells us that: ‘In true commemoration of this man of song and memory [his late father], these poems are composed for orchestration and incantatory spectacle’. The poetry volume *The Eye of the Earth* equally turns upon the poetic evocation of the ‘shades and shadows of a remembered landscape, echoes of an Eden long departed…’ (emphasis added). Further, in the poem ‘Shadows of Time’ (Anniversary of a Future Remembered), the poet chants:

Memory’s minions all:
  trees reckoning rings on the ripening finger
  of mating forests;
  the insolent grey in the jungle of the singer’s beard
  the okro which, counting days, springs steel fibres…

In the poem entitled ‘In praise of little things’, Niyi Osundare intones:

  In praise of the scarlet sigh of dawn
  Silence of sleeping sea
  Infinitesimal grains on the shores of Memory
  Mirage on the asphalt face of Beauty’s road…

In ‘Queen of the Night’, the poet-lover croons: ‘Give me Memory/ Give me a Name’. As Chinua Achebe inimitably glossed, the Igbo (African) philosophy of *Nkolika* (Retelling is Greatest) in *Anthills of the Savannah* is closely linked with the act of recalling or remembering (see Introduction by Homi Bhabha in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*). The African sense of recalling (Memory) is encrypted and encoded in the numerous names people bear as well as in proverbs and wise sayings. This African sense of memory is also borne out by festivals and cultural ritual observances and rites of passage. The visionary artist is thus considered a memory-man or/and a muse of memory who stands sentinel at the bridgehead of a long line of African griots, minstrels, troubadours and oral bards who rely on memory to recount and re-enact past events and sagas. Osundare who sees himself as ‘a Caller at Noon’; as a town crier, deploys his formal poetry to denounce bad leadership, political corruption, social injustice and oppression in Nigeria; and, indeed, to tell the tyrant (i.e. Nigeria’s political leadership) that: ‘The people always outlast the place.’

Niyi Osundare’s poetry of social criticism and social commentary eschews the hagiographic tendencies of the Yoruba *oriki*, as he eulogises those he refers to as ‘positive archetypes’ – distinguished public-spirited individuals like the late lawyer and human rights activist, Gani Fawehinmi, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Femi Falana and Balarabe Musa (see *Songs*...
of the Season). Additionally, the role of memory in poetic imagination is also intimately bound up with what T. S. Eliot has called ‘the historical sense’. In his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Eliot avers that the living poet must obtain ‘tradition’ ‘by great labour’. And, he also notes that tradition ‘involves, in the first place, the historical sense’.  

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. The historical sense which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timelessness and of the temporal together is what makes a writer traditional.

We have argued elsewhere that Osundare’s poetic vision is very similar to that of T.S. Eliot’s in the way that both artists stress the crucial role of history and memory as well as the peasant origins of poetry. As the foregoing discourse discloses, Osundare’s poetry is deeply informed by a keen sense of social awareness, a high degree of topicality and contemporaneity even as the poet takes upon himself the task of a peopled persona, holding brief for the déclassé, the disinherited masses of his country, Nigeria and the world at large. When the poet, thus, speaks, even when he uses the first-person singular pronoun ‘I’, he is simply a paradigmatic representative of a collectivity. In a Whitmanesque sense, therefore, Osundare contains multitudes, just as he tells us in “Peopled Imagination 1”.

Mine is a peopled imagination…
My masks are many; un -
Countable sunlights name every line
of my figured face.

In fact, Osundare’s poetry devolves upon memory and desire, notably in line with his back-to-roots, orally informed poetics.

Ancien Regime: Millstone or Stepping-Stone?
Literary history furnishes a panoply of different literary conventions, movements, epochs or ages, a rather complex and sometimes controversial differentiation exercise purportedly warranted by writers’ changes of tack and/or deviations from conventional practices in the pursuit of novelty. Even T. S. Eliot argues that social change sometimes results in a sea-change in literary-critical tastes, tendencies and pre-occupations. The demarcation of Western literary tradition into, for instance, the Classical and the Middle Ages, Renaissance and the Neo-classical periods, the Romantic Movement and the Modern Age, is believed to be informed by the change in the thematic and the formal features of literature in particular and cultural production in general. Truthfully, there is a sense in which social mobility, class reconfiguration and major political upheavals tend to impinge upon the collective psyche of writers, who, in turn, as arbiters of taste, endeavour to mirror these social currents in their works. And, in seeking to reflect the spirit of the age they end up, at times, jettisoning old or

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38 Eliot, Tradition 14.
42 Niyi Osundare, Horses of Memory (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998) 112.
prevailing literary ethos for new-fangled ones. Even so, nowhere does literary history appear to furnish a clear-cut record of clean breaks, or abrupt discontinuities between a preceding movement and a subsequent one. What exists is rather a gradual de-emphasizing of the old and a corresponding emphasis of the (seemingly) new. The so-called new hardly subsists without expropriating the resources of the old. Nothing exemplifies this truism more dramatically than the English Romantic Movement. In spite of the hue and cry about neo-classical theories of poetic diction, the heroic couplet as well as the citified artificialities of Augustan poetry, some critics contend, even till the present time, that it was still business as usual during the Romantic period. These critics argue that the so-called revolution in poetry inaugurated by Wordsworth and Coleridge with their joint-publication of *Biographia Literaria* was all but a huge and elaborate hoax. In fact, it is argued that William Wordsworth did not actually use language spoken by rural folk as he claimed; and that his poetry is everything but spontaneous and simple. The point is that it is difficult to really discern a clear distinction between one literary movement and its immediate predecessor. What really exist are continuities between the old and the new, with the new as the old reconfigured or refurbished through the incorporation of truly new data emanating from a changed social environment. As Eliot observes, ‘art never improves but that the material of art is never quite the same’ and, also that, ‘the conception of poetry [is] as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written’. Thus, the ‘existing monuments’, or the *ancien regime*, warts and all, can be said to be more of a stepping-stone than a millstone for the living poet. We can demonstrate this nature of tradition by examining the relationship between Osundare and his immediate predecessors.

Osundare’s immediate predecessors, that is, the second-generation of Nigerian (African) poets such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Christopher Okigbo, and M.C.J. Echeruo were criticised rather harshly for their alleged euro-modernist tendencies exemplified through what Chinweizu, and others, calls the Decolonization of African Literature. With their perceived over-valorisation of form and dependence upon private and far-flung symbolism and hard-going poetic style, the Soyinka-Okigbo coterie all but alienated the public, thus turning poetry into a rarefied ‘esoteric whisper’ to be deciphered by ‘a small coterie of specialists’. Jeyifo, thus, argues that the poetry of Osundare’s predecessors was characterised by ‘arcane latinates and [the] learned, allusive pedantry’. It is this unsavoury state of affairs that Niyi Osundare reacted against when he started his career as a poet after the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War in the 1970s.

As though holding brief for his coterie of fellow poets, Soyinka reacted to the strident criticism of his poetry and his fellow poets’ work in his article entitled ‘Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition’. Soyinka argues in his article that even traditional oral poetry is characterised by the use of complex tropes and figures which resist easy comprehension. He notes that traditional poetry may appear simple but never simplistic as the work’s semantic and metaphoric range remain profound. Truth be told, while the Soyinka-Okigbo school might have produced difficult, and, in fact, obscure poetry, the fact remains that theirs was an admixture of both orality and Western-derived poetic method. In the article entitled ‘John Dryden’, T.S. Eliot remarks that Dryden ‘is a successor of Johnson, and therefore the

43 Eliot, Tradition 16.
44 Eliot, Tradition 17
46 Osundare, *Village Voices* 3.
47 Osundare, *Songs of the Marketplace* ix.
descendant of Marlow; he is the ancestor of nearly all that is best in the poetry of the eighteen century […] His inspiration is prolonged in Crabbe and Byron, it even extends, as Mr. Van Doren clearly points out, to Poe’. What this argument demonstrates is that the living poet is an embodiment of the ‘existing monuments’ or ‘the masterpieces of the past’. A close and careful study of Osundare’s poetry reveals his immense indebtedness not only to the poetry produced mainly in the Western English-speaking world but, more decisively, to Yoruba oral tradition. Our understanding of tradition in this context must therefore be nuanced and broadened to accommodate, not just indigenous Yoruba poetics but all written poetries with which Osundare has come in contact and have had a shaping influence on his poetic career.

The Alter/Native Tradition
Niyi Osundare is generally said to have rejected the poetic style of his immediate predecessors, regarding their poetry as ‘cryptic’ and ‘labyrinthine’.50 In his first-ever published poetry volume, Songs of the Marketplace, Osundare sets forth what most critics and scholars regard as the poetic credo or manifesto of the new, post-civil war Nigerian poetry. The opening poem entitled ‘Poetry Is’ is at once a pungent tirade against the Soyinka-Oligbo cohort and an adroit reformulation of Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as ‘man meaning to man’. Since his predecessors were believed to be ‘closet’ poets, writing mostly from an ivory tower, Niyi Osundare decided to compose poetry inspired by ‘the hawker’s ditty’, ‘the eloquence of the gong’, ‘the lyric of the marketplace’ and the quotidian commonplaces of nature. In an attempt to bring poetry closer to common, everyday people, Osundare started publishing poetry in newspapers in simple and accessible language aimed at ‘wooing and winning’ in audience for written poetry. Part of what Biodun Jeyifo identifies as Osundare includes (a) a deliberate demystification of the language of poetry through the adoption of lucid language and metaphoric vibrancy (b) the instrumental orchestration of poetry through the incorporation of musical instruments (c) audience consciousness based on a concentric paradigm, namely: (i) Yoruba native speakers (ii) non-Yoruba Nigerians and (iii) the international audience, mostly Euro-American readers (d) the appropriation of traditional Yoruba oral poetic forms such as oriki, ofo and owe (e) the use of Yoruba folksongs, refrains and lexical items glossed as footnotes, etc. (f) public themes and topicality (g) a high degree of lyricism and musicality to create ‘performance poetry’ and (h) class consciousness with Osundare aligning with the masses. This makes Niyi Osundare’s poetry highly ideological, and, some will argue, revolutionary.

Biodun Jeyifo and Funso Ayefina are of the view that Osundare inaugurated the so-called ‘alter/native tradition’ in Nigerian (African) poetry in the light of the inaccessibility and hermeticism of the poetry of the Soyinka-Oligbo school. According to Ayefina, ‘Osundare is the fulfillment of the public poet – the town crier – briefly glimpsed in the Oligbo of ‘Path of Thunder’.51 This ‘alter/native tradition’ in Nigerian poetry à la Osundare derives in the main from the poet’s relentless quarrying of ‘existing monuments’ for the development of an authentically unique individual voice. Hence, a reading of Osundare’s poetry reveals line echoes and similarities, borrowings, reformulations and reworking. Osundare himself has confessed his immense indebtedness to many older poets, African and

50 This is an oblique reference to Soyinka’s A Shuttle in the Crypt (London: Methuen, 1971) 15, and Christopher Oligbo’s Labyrinths, (London: Heinemann, 1971) 25.
non-African, alike. (Adagboyin\textsuperscript{52}, Soyinka)\textsuperscript{53} Still on the poet’s deployment of material taken from other poets, T. S. Eliot stresses:

A large part of any poet’s ‘inspiration’ must come from reading and from his knowledge of history. I mean history widely taken; any cultivation of the historical sense, of perception of our position relative to the past, and in particular of the poet’s relation to poets of the past.\textsuperscript{54}

In Osundare’s \textit{Midlife}, the poet gives a roll call of some of the older poets and writers who have inspired and influenced his own work.\textsuperscript{55} What seems to give a critical and revolutionary edge to Osundare’s verse is his socialist-Marxist ideology, an ideology whose pervasive influence on Osundare’s verse results in a kind of vernacularisation of socialism even as Osundare, using the Hegelian dialectic, as reflected in the conflictual interaction between the ruling class and the poor masses, elevates conflict to a metaphysical principle that infuses everyday experience. Objects in the natural and the human world are imbued with an ideological significance way beyond their ordinary essence. Thus, these objects become charged with meaning and significance which, ultimately leads to what might be interpreted as the utopianisation of revolution. Osundare’s idealist and theoretical commitment to Marxism, to be certain, finally results, not in praxis but in stasis. This is because his Marxism cannot be said to be a patently secular but a religious utopianism, owing in large part to his animist-cum-organicist orientation.

\textbf{Osundare and the Animist Quagmire}

Although Osundare’s poetry has been termed poetry of social engagement or commitment by most left-leaning critics of his work, they nevertheless usually fail to highlight ‘the accustomed animist ritualism of older poets like Okigbo and Soyinka’\textsuperscript{56} present also in Niyi Osundare’s poetry. It is refreshing to read what Funso Aiyejina has to say about this issue. Commenting on \textit{The Eye of the Earth}, Aiyejina writes:

The presiding autobiographical intelligence in \textit{The Eye} is one which owes its existence and survival to a community of others and consequently, its perspective is communal rather than personal, constructive rather than destructive and giving rather than taking. The animistic energy with which the volume is charged does not originate from the poet as an individual but rather as the sensitive heir to, and interpreter of, a complex tradition and a collective philosophy.\textsuperscript{57}

Harry Garuba in his paper entitled ‘Explorations in Animist Materialism and a Reading of The Poetry of Niyi Osundare’ discloses that:

\textsuperscript{52} Sunny A. Adagboyin, \textit{Niyi Osundare} (Ibadan: Humanities Research Centre, 1996) 75.
\textsuperscript{54} Eliot, Tradition 12.
\textsuperscript{55} Osundare, \textit{Midlife} 44-45.
\textsuperscript{56} Jeyifo, xv.
Niyi Osundare’s poetry presents an interesting textual resource for the consolidation of these explorations of animist materialism. Locating his poetry within the continuum of animist signification presents an interesting challenge for several reasons, not least of all because Niyi Osundare is a Marxist-socialist poet and animism is often regarded a reactionary, metaphysical mystification opposed to the spirit of historical materialism and scientific socialism.\(^{58}\)

While Aiyejina tries to defend his friend and compatriot as well as a fellow poet, Garuba literally answers his own questions. What is left for us to add is that, like water and oil, animism and Marxism do not mix. The term ‘animist materialism’ betrays an oxymoronic and, hence, epistemic violence, which, ironically yet correctly emblematises the state of ideoreligious anomie in which contemporary Nigeria is mired.

Religious promiscuity, a social habit of hunting with the animist hounds and running with the hares of scientific socialism, is standard practice in Nigeria. Perhaps what we have here is a case of Jamesonian Political unconsciousness in which the poet-peopled persona that he is typifies the Nigerian condition. But, seriously speaking, encountering several instances of the Marxist-socialist artist’s deep immersion in his native Yoruba animist world view leaves much to be desired. It is not as though the poet’s neo-traditionalism or his return-to-sources poetics does not make good poetry or great art for that matter. The main problem is ideological. A committed Marxist ideologue ought to foreswear and renounce all categories of false consciousnesses, animism being a cardinal feature of idol worship or the fetishisation of matter. Nothing, indeed, can be more retrograde, atavistic, and essentialising than animist thought. Like Femi Osofisan, his compatriot and fellow Marxist writer, Osundare has always responded in his defence of this strange and worrying practice by arguing that the Yoruba pantheon of deities is deployed merely as poetic symbols and metaphors.

Granted, the use of endogenous Yoruba demiurgic emanations and idealities serves to reinforce the work’s local habitation and cultural matrix. Yet, a sustained dispassionate mythoclastic procedure, on the poet’s part, might have been in order. But what we find in Osundare’s work is a pervasive celebration of animism, making the poet come across as a lapsed Marxist caught mid-stride between his reactionary animist nativism and an idealistic socialism. This ideological double-mindedness will continue to be a major aporetic moment in Osundare’s poetic career, since his theory of tradition derives mainly from both the Yoruba worldview and Marxist-socialist ideology.

Conclusion: The Past is Present

It is reasonable to conclude from the textual evidence furnished by Osundare’s poetry that the past bulks large in his poetry, as nothing proves the veracity of T. S. Eliot’s theory of _Tradition_ more than Osundare’s verse. We have shown how the past that is both traditional Yoruba oral poetics, and written poetries of the English-speaking world principally shapes and fundamentally informs Osundare’s poetry. An attitude of faith in the ineluctability of the past coupled with its inescapable influence on the present can give rise to essentialism or/and undialectical ahistoricism. The presupposition is that it is a natural given or an eternal verity like, say, the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. Is it, therefore, inconceivable or impracticable for it to be otherwise? That is, can tradition (past) not be de-emphasised for the individual talent (present) to take centre stage? Does regression therefore imply progress? What, indeed, is it about human nature and the nature of things generally that makes the past so inescapable, so pivotal to human life and experience? It seems we may never be able to

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provide satisfactory answers to these questions as they seem to be as complex and confounding as life itself. Tradition seems to be in the DNA of the living poet and any attempt to deny this fact is an exercise in self-delusion or willed ignorance. Like the myth of eternal return, tradition will always re-assert itself in the present as whatever is created, composed or, even conceived is basically a re-enactment, a re-dramatisation, and, hence, a perpetuation of tradition. Indeed, as Eliot declaims:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past. 59

Since art does not improve but only its materials do, the living poet can only hope and endeavour to ever so slightly alter tradition by using new data, new ideas and new experiences to reconfigure and revamp tradition to suit the changed social situation. What comes through as change, then, is simply tradition methodised/modified. Indeed, it is tradition that things change and do change.

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Betty Roland (1903-1996), a little-known figure in Australian literary circles, was a prolific storyteller. Whilst there are few zones of literature into which she did not venture between the late 1920s and 1990, Roland is perhaps best remembered as a dramatist. Her Australian outback melodrama, *The Touch of Silk*, was first performed by the Melbourne Repertory Company in 1928, and is still produced today. Reviewers of the time described the play as ‘a beautiful and abiding piece’ of theatre, and named Roland as Australia’s first genuine playwright. *Silk’s* bleak twists and far-reaching insights into authoritarian bourgeois morality, helped to make it the first among a number of successful radio serials for Roland and paved the way for later film scripts. Perhaps because she was a playwright rather than a novelist at the time, Roland has never been grouped with Australia’s celebrated women writers of the 1920s and 30s, such as Miles Franklin, Eleanor Dark and Katharine Susannah Prichard. Roland was, however, engaged in a burgeoning cosmopolitan print-culture that extended well beyond those years as well as Australian borders.

The lure of travel haunted Roland for much of her life. Her writing reflects personal experiences in Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union in the 1930s, the UK in the 1950s and Greece during the 1960s, charting the evolution of a personal and political philosophy marked by worldwide social upheaval and major historical happenings. Among these were the Great Depression, two World Wars, the rise of fascism in Europe and the Cold War between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, which lasted for over half a century. *Caviar for Breakfast* (1979, revised 1989) a travel memoir, which retraces Roland’s adventures in the Soviet Union prior to the Stalinist purges in 1935, is the subject of this paper. The book, which serves as the second volume of Roland’s autobiographical trilogy, is presented in diary form, with all the expectations of immediacy and reliability encoded in that mode. When taken together, the trilogy effectively re-enacts the historical subordination of women’s sexual identity in a number of male-dominated societies, giving a fascinating insight into the
values and ideas of the mushrooming modern cultures in which Roland travelled, worked and lived.

A particular complication with the title under discussion, however, is that over 45 years elapsed between the time the events took place and when it was first published by Quartet Books, Melbourne, in 1979. Added to this concern is the second edition, published by Collins Publishers, Sydney in 1989, claims to repeat the same chronological ‘as-and-when-it-happened’ diary mode of the first, when in fact it does not. There are a number of minor differences between one edition and the other consisting of transposed dates and content. Of more significance is where Roland chooses to direct her audience in relation the beginning of her story. The first edition begins in Melbourne aboard the vessel, S.S. Ballarat on 14 January 1933 with Roland and her Australian lover, the wealthy Marxist scholar and communist, Guido Baracchi, bound for London. The revised version on the other hand, opens over three months later on 24 April 1933 with the couple about to sail out of London on the Russian ship, the Felix Dzerzhinsky, headed for Leningrad. In its return performance, Caviar for Breakfast is played out in a disfigured, headless-ghost form, for the account of the couple’s voyage around the Australian coastline towards Perth, does not reappear.

In the introduction to the 1979 edition, Roland makes it clear that the book is ‘based on the diaries that [she] kept at the time’ (1). Her prologue to the 1989 edition confirms this and sets the terms of reference for a story, whose narrative substance rests upon a series of diary entries, ‘as one woman’s view of a stupendous moment in history, aware of its limitations but with faith in its veracity’. Here Roland’s introductory words convey the notion that what is to follow is not a literary enterprise of the imagination one might expect of a work of fiction, but the purveyor of narrative truth. The author is at some pains to insist that her chosen method of composition not only holds together the ordering of events, but is an accurate reflection of her personal feelings and experiences during the time she spent in Russia. As Nicole Moore rightly points out, by presenting her story in chronologically marked steps, Roland ‘maintains its assertion of transparency, seeming to avoid those mediations and absences which flow from remembering and forgetting’. As suggested above, the discrepancies between the two editions of Caviar for Breakfast go far beyond the possibility of a memory grown imperfect with age. It might also be said that as scripted, narrator and protagonist of an old story begun differently anew, Roland provides an inner-world setting that invites distrust of her observations as much as belief in them. As when reading a novel, the obvious discrepancies between the two editions may lead to suspicion about what is real and what is fabricated. They also signify the capacity of any imaginative storyteller to construct a counterfeit, or simulated, sense of reality whether or not s/he works with the diary mode of representation.

6 Baracchi was one of the founders of the Communist Party of Australia in the 1930s.
7 Betty Roland, Caviar for Breakfast (Melbourne: Quartet Books, 1979) 7. Unless stated otherwise, all other references to the text are from this edition and page numbers shown in parenthesis.
9 Moore, The Burdens Twain 6.

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Elizabeth Podnieks, in *Daily Modernism*, argues that, as a literary mode, the diary crosses generic boundaries into autobiography as well as fiction. Moreover, Podnieks believes it is likely that ‘there has never been a time when all diarists truly wrote unselfconsciously, unaware of the implications embedded in the act of writing itself’. By this I take Podnieks to mean the lack of privacy inherent in putting pen to paper in whatever form. That storytellers are known to revise and re-write their diaries in the re-imagined production of autobiographical narratives is hardly virgin territory; Samuel Pepys, Lewis Carroll, Virginia Woolf and Anne Frank being but a few well-known examples. Roland demonstrates a tendency towards revisionist writing throughout her oeuvre, either repeating or transposing details from one text to another as she shapes and re-shapes her personal history. This practice emphasises the considered, present-tense performance of autobiographical narrative production, as opposed to what might more closely resemble the spontaneous capture of moments in time, of the diary mode. As consciously-crafted literary genres, however, autobiography and diary are strategically involved in re-writing processes which offer a sense of intimacy with their subjects. And both share a long tradition of being written with particular audiences in mind.

As to this, Roland’s trilogy is an interesting case in point for it highlights the complex differences and similarities between autobiography and diary as (in)distinct literary genres. In the closing pages of her second volume of autobiography, *An Improbable Life*, Roland re-works and re-enacts some of the events omitted from the opening of the 1989 revision of *Caviar for Breakfast*. Moreover, whilst the time-scheme of the author’s diary is maintained, some of the details of the 1979 edition are contradicted. Speculative though it can only ever be, a plausible explanation is that, in her idiosyncratic way, Roland decided to correct newly remembered inaccuracies in her earlier writing. In both its 1979 and 1989 manifestations, *Caviar for Breakfast* may well have served the temporal-strategy interests mediated by Roland’s discourse as she experienced herself to be in the act of writing. Given the extensive passage of time since her year in Stalin’s Russia, it is quite feasible that Roland’s emotional and intellectual development had become such that to be in a position to change, or rearrange, the story of her past was cathartic. It might be said that, for Roland, as for many literary diarists before her, writing about the past offered a way to escape the pain of it in the present. If we accept this scenario as a possibility, then autobiographical recollection becomes agency, a way of feeding the storyteller’s survival instincts and fuelling a desire for immortality. The scenes absented from *Caviar for Breakfast*, if only to reappear in altered form in *An Improbable Life*, may well offer a key to Roland’s personal psychology and ideological point of view in the overall context of an ongoing quest for self-knowledge. They might also be seen as part of a quest to install her-story as a form of life beyond death. The competing narratives also function to create a disquieting sense of gravity, however, and the reasons for these are discussed below.

11 Podnieks 43.
12 For example, the 19 April diary entry of the 1979 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* states that Roland knew little about the financial agreement between Baracchi and his wife Neura regarding their impending divorce (11). But in *An Improbable Life* she writes: ‘There were a number of things that had to be done and matters that must be attended to. The transfer of all [Guido’s] available assets to [Neura], for one thing. He fully informed me of this and, whatever I may have felt, I was in no position to demur’, (161).

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The opening pages of the 1979 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* tell of Roland’s desperation to escape an unhappy marriage to her husband of ten years, Ellis H. Davies. Davies was twenty-one years her senior, a construction engineer and womaniser, who placed little or no importance on Roland’s desire to be a writer. Albeit dripping with drama, Roland’s remark that ‘anything, anything’ (4) would be better than continuing to be Ellis Davies’ wife, helps to convey her state of mind when she finally decided to leave him. That decision involved taking the drastic step of travelling to Russia via England at a time when few Australians, women in particular, were so inclined.\(^\text{13}\) It also meant she would live there with Guido Baracchi: ‘an Italian, a Roman Catholic (failed!) and a Communist’(5). Roland’s resolve to leave Australia with Baracchi, was calculated in the knowledge she would be ostracised by her family. She also knew that Baracchi was still married to his second wife, Harriet ‘Neura’ Zander, who awaited him in London. Added to this was that, apart from a strong desire to visit the Soviet Union, Baracchi wanted to escape yet another extra-marital affair that had produced a child.\(^\text{14}\) Roland’s willingness to flee her own disastrous marriage to someone who exhibited such obvious moral cowardice could lie in the fact that she possessed ‘a very strong narcissistic streak’.\(^\text{15}\) The author’s self-confessed narcissism, coupled with an equally self-declared confidence in her attractiveness to men, may well have helped to foster the delusion that, in her case, ‘things were going to be different’ (4).\(^\text{16}\)

As mentioned above, a further consequence of the 1989 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast*’s ‘new beginning’ is the omission of the couple’s voyage aboard the *Ballarat* out of Port Melbourne, en route to London. Jettisoned in particular are notes of the visit Roland and Baracchi made to the home of author and ‘dedicated Communist’ (9) Katharine Susannah Prichard and her husband, Hugo (Jim) Throssell V.C., after docking at Fremantle on 5 March 1933. As Roland has it, the visit to the Prichard / Throssell home was extremely tense.\(^\text{17}\) Throssell remained dour and silent throughout the visit, whilst Prichard carried on an animated conversation with Baracchi that excluded her husband. Roland’s relayed memories suggest the marriage between Prichard and Throssell told a story of opposing and incompatible personalities. The author’s negative impressions of the Prichard / Throssell relationship have no physical presence in the 1989 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast*, but are clearly evident in the closing pages of *An Improbable Life*, where she writes: ‘What made Katherine [sic], a dedicated communist marry a man like him? She had no respect for soldiers and, to her, a Victoria Cross was not so much a reward for valour as an indication that the recipient was good at killing other men’.\(^\text{18}\)

Roland turns speculative informant in *An Improbable Life*, by inferring the possibility of an earlier romantic attachment between Baracchi and Prichard: ‘Although no mention was ever made of it, I had the distinct impression that there had been more than mere political

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\(^{13}\) Fitzpatrick and Rasmussen suggest that it is likely the total number of Australians who visited Russia in the 1930s was 200. 1-39.

\(^{14}\) See Sparrow for a more detailed discussion of Baracchi’s predicament which, in Sparrow’s account, was characteristic of Baracchi’s personal history as someone who lacked sexual restraint.


\(^{16}\) Things were not different. By 1942, Roland was in a similar position to the other women whom Baracchi had loved and left: unmarried and on her own with their daughter, Gilda, to support.

\(^{17}\) Roland is not alone in this view. Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, (London: Sirius Books 1981) points to the fact that tensions between the couple as a consequence of financial and domestic difficulties, were commented upon by friends such as Nettie Palmer (1996, 139, 155).

affinity between the two, though Guido had married someone else [...] and Katherine [sic] had gone to Western Australia and married a hero of Gallipoli, Hugo Throssell, VC'.19 Roland’s observations supplant the version of events as they appear in the 1979 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* and, in the process, serve to shift attention to Throssell’s tragic fate. By a remarkable coincidence Prichard shared a room with Roland and Baracchi during a visit she too made to Russia in 1933. In the telling of this encounter, Roland claims she grew to like Prichard, describing her as ‘a serene person with a soft voice and a gentle smile’ (75). With a touch of burlesque humour, Roland recalls a ‘strange ménage à trois’ (75), which saw Prichard sleeping on a mattress on the floor whilst Baracchi and Roland shared the bed, but only after the three had drawn lots and Prichard had lost. As it happened, by another more unsettling chance, Hugo ‘Jim’ Throssell committed suicide prior to Prichard’s return to Australia from Russia. The tragedy of Throssell’s death devastated Prichard and haunted her for the remainder of her life.20 The letting go of the details of the Greenmount visit from the 1989 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast*, expresses the consequences of the violence of romantic love in real life which are not often reflected in Western culture’s pervasive ‘happily-ever-after’, romance literature. As Roland tells it she underwent any number of humiliations at the hands of Baracchi, such as sharing him with other women and, at one point, living with him under a communal roof with his second wife, Neura.21 For all its degrading episodes and disappointments, Roland’s love affair with Baracchi was never really done until shortly before he died. In fact, in a letter to him dated 20 January 1972, over thirty years after they separated, she declared that she still loved him.22 Worth noting, however, is that Roland’s apparent embrace of the attitudinally-gendered ‘stand by your man’ paradigm in Western culture was not sustained once Baracchi failed to remember their daughter Gilda in his will.23

Writing on the life of Baracchi, Jeff Sparrow comments on what he sees as Roland’s tendency to revise her impressions of the time she spent with him in Russia. Much like Nicole Moore, Sparrow does so in the context of a perceived shift in Roland’s political views from Left to Right and back again, that coincided with what he calls her ‘long and bitter estrangement from Baracchi’.24 If I understand them correctly, for Sparrow and Moore, Roland’s chaotic flirtations with Stalin’s oppressive regime could be traced back to her attachment to Baracchi and the flaws she came to see in him. Added to this, they argue, was Roland’s contemporary desire to identify with a post-Cold War readership more sympathetic to a discrediting of Marxist leanings such as those exhibited by Katharine Susannah Prichard.25 Implicit in these assumptions is that *Caviar for Breakfast* should be discounted as offering a consciousness-raising, alternative picture of life in the Soviet Union as Roland remembered it. Such conjecture also seems to discount the possibility that, bringing her personal problems into the public arena may have been a conscious political act performed by an ever-evolving gendered self caught in social structures not of her own making. As

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19 Roland, *Improbable Life* 156.
20 See Modjeska 140 on this point.
22 Australian Manuscripts Collection State Library of Victoria (SLV), Justus Jorgensen Papers, 1924-1975, MS10079, Folder No. 11.
23 Despite his promises that he would remember her in his will, when he died at the age of 88, Baracchi ‘forgot’ Gilda and left his entire estate to his then neighbour’s wife, yet another woman with whom he had become romantically attached. Roland never forgave him.
24 Sparrow 122-145.
25 Sparrow 137-8; Moore 6.
Podnieks writes: ‘autobiography is just as much about the person who writes in the present as the person who lived in the past, for the past per se is never recoverable’. Much like history, the facts of a life can never be fully realised, only partially imagined.

To see Roland’s complex love affair with Baracchi as the only explanation for her fluctuating play with politics in Stalin’s Russia seems too simplistic. Sheila Fitzpatrick, for example, suggests that, unlike the writer Katherine Susannah Prichard and the civic activist and feminist Jessie Street [...] Roland had a shrewd eye for the real-life problems of the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that she joined the communist party in 1934 following her return to Australia, she was no dupe of the Kremlin. Drusilla Modjeska adds to Fitzpatrick’s observations when she opines Roland ‘was not without guts’. The harsh living conditions in the Soviet Union saw the author go hungry and become ‘thin from lack of food’ as a consequence of severe shortages. To cast Roland in a play as the Westerner who ever saw good in Stalin’s oppressive Soviet Union in any ‘real’ sense, would be a mistake. Whatever Caviar for Breakfast may lack in direct political analysis of Stalin’s authoritarian regime, it makes up for in its consistent references to the plight of ordinary Russian people: the dispossessed peasants, the homeless, the beggars who, like prostitutes, were officially non-existent (49, 60, 78). Roland speaks of the optimism that accompanied the abundance of work in Moscow, where there were more jobs available than people to fill them (71). Yet, almost in the same breath, she tells of the disenfranchised who were refused work permits because they did not, or would not, toe the party line, the prevalence of ‘hungry wretches begging on the street [...] because without a union ticket no one can or will employ them’ (73). It must also be emphasised that Roland openly contrasts the social condition of deprived Soviets with the pessimism of the Australian men and women of the Great Depression, those who sat in parks: ‘heads bowed in their hands waiting for the next handout from the soup kitchens; the long queues waiting for the dole’ (71). According to Roland, for all its claims to social equality in the 1930s, the new Soviet Union was a patriarchy where class (and gender) inequality reigned. Simultaneously, she hints that the same could be said for so-called egalitarian Australia and other parts of the Western world such as the United States of America.

Roland tells stories of Americans who were either living or vacationing in the Soviet at the time of her stay there. One such was no other than ‘Joe Kennedy, the elder brother of John, the future president of the United States’ (158). The concern here is that it was in 1933 that ‘the first American Ambassador since 1917 presented his credentials at the Kremlin and US dollars were flowing into the depleted coffers of the State’ (148). This meant that, on hand, were American ‘experts [who taught] Russians how to use the tools of modern industry’ (148). In Roland’s account, these Americans happily surrendered their passports to become Soviet citizens for a time and did so gladly while Russian people were being disenfranchised (37, 95, 148, 184). As Roland clearly shows, when Stalin’s first five year plan ended in 1933, things were not all bad for foreigners who were able to pay their way, but this was not the case for many thousands of Russians unprepared to accept marginalisation because of their politics.

Roland and Baracchi’s stay in Stalin’s Soviet Union went far beyond their original 21 day tourist visas, which neither entitled them to remain longer, nor to search for work. That

26 Podnieks 46.  
27 Fitzpatrick 1-39.  
28 Modjeska 144.  
29 Modjeska 44.

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stay extended to 15 months, however, a fact made possible primarily because Baracchi was wealthy and possessed the necessary ‘hard’ currency’ (32) to pay their way. Foreign cash, particularly US dollars and English pounds, was the *lingua franca* in the Soviet Union at the time (17). It is not unreasonable to suggest that Baracchi’s family wealth was as much the key to his acceptance as a Soviet resident, as was his Marxist scholarship. In Roland’s case, living with Baracchi and posing as his wife, meant she also qualified for a residency / work ‘permit and a ration card’ (33). And whilst they may have experienced fleas, bed-bugs, bad food and discomfort (59), nonetheless they possessed the financial means to improve their lot. Whilst Russians queued for food and were ‘stoically resigned to cold and heat’(45), Roland and Baracchi could buy goods and services with their foreign money. Moreover, the fact that they were strangers in Russia meant that they were treated almost as guests, a courtesy that simultaneously distanced them from the reality of everyday Soviet life and increased Roland’s sense of guilt. The comment that she ‘would feel better if somebody abused [her] for enjoying so many privileges’ (57), is indicative of the everyday moral dilemma she claims to have experienced during her stay in the Soviet Union.

It is no accident that Roland’s memoir takes its title from the fact that caviar, considered a luxury in Western society, was plentiful in the USSR. It was not marmalade but caviar that found its way to the morning toast enjoyed by foreign tourists, if not by the Russian people whom she describes as lovable, patient, kindly, unfailingly courteous and warm hearted. Roland confesses that the stigma of her bourgeois background was always hanging over her when in Russia (88). But she is also concerned to note that the Russian government was intent on exporting wheat to buy machinery while its people starved; that churches were now the haunt of beggars whose only crime was that they resisted collectivism and that May-Day celebrations had an ugly side that saw the poor ‘rounded up off the streets by the militia [who herded] them into the trucks as though they were cattle’ (146). For her, this was evidence that those who chose not to live by rules which demanded they work for the State and not for themselves, were condemned to poverty and hunger. Some of her most evocative writing is dedicated to questionable conduct on the part of Stalin’s new regime:

I had no idea there were still so many little churches. Their fairy tale cupolas decorate the skyline of a distant hill and are scattered among the sea of concrete surrounding us – tiny jewels in an otherwise drab landscape. There is one on the corner of the *pereulok* (small street or lane) that leads to the house in which we live. It is faded and neglected and is the haunt of beggars, wretched tattered creatures who stare as one goes by and sometimes beg for bread [...] They are the dispossessed – peasants who have resisted collectivism and have been evicted from their villages. Beggars, like prostitutes are officially non-existent, but the girls in the New Moscow bar and these poor wretches in the church belie the claim. (60)

Never the shrinking violet, Roland delivers her lines directly from centre stage, not from the wings. Deliberations such as these give short shrift to notions of equality under Stalin’s regime and instead level a charge against officials who tormented those easily bullied, or humiliated. Not by chance do these lines sit cheek to jowl with the story Roland

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tells of Baracchi’s, ‘towering temper’ (58) when she received the attention of other men. Problematically, however, when writing of such instances Roland dips into Baracchi’s Italian heritage, choosing to model him as a violent cultural stereotype: ‘He was all Italian at [such] moment[s] and looked capable of murder’ (59). As a consequence, Roland’s credibility as an unbiased narrator is diminished. The feasibility of her fear of Baracchi’s fits of rage is substantiated, however, by an analysis of his handwriting, which, for reasons known only to Roland, she commissioned in 1957 whilst living in London. The Chirologist’s report considers four different letters from Baracchi to Roland written between 1934 and 1971. Whilst he qualifies his opinion as a possible consequence of Baracchi’s prevailing ill-health, the Chirologist nonetheless states his expert view that the writing belongs to a man of erratic temperament, someone who could be impatient, aggressive and had a desire to dominate. From Roland’s narrated perspective, Baracchi’s conduct with regard to money matters and the social power it held in particular, also suggests that his politics were more symbolic than real. As she writes: “Guido, despite his idealism and belief in the equality of men, is extremely touchy about money, especially his money” (157, italics in the original text). As Roland tells it, the possibility that the Russian authorities would not allow him to take his money with him when Baracchi left the country, drove “him to the point of apoplexy” (171). Such comments can be read as attempts by Roland to discredit Baracchi. Equally, however, they can be seen as a desire to separate herself from what she came to regard as a socialist politics of hypocrisy that preached equality whilst embracing the rich and rejecting the poor. The act of remembering forms part and parcel of the shifting system of values that affect the way see the world over time and space. Given the plurality of forces in play, the social contradictions represented in Roland’s retrospective narrative could well have led to disenchantment with communism which, over time, became indistinguishable from her disillusionment with Baracchi. In fact Roland’s compelling desire to write her life as a new cycle of existence only begins to make sense at the nexus of then and now socio-cultural politics, the politics of identity and the politics of romance.

Caviar for Breakfast contains elements of instability and violence, both personal and political, which reek of a romantic drama in which the two principal members of the cast are Roland and Baracchi. Although no longer a member of the Australian Communist Party when he travelled with Roland to the Soviet Union, Baracchi did so with a highly developed political agenda in mind. This included the smuggling of documents from ‘the Party Secretariat in Australia with instructions to deliver [them] to the Comintern in Moscow’ (13), a task he accomplished with Roland’s help. It was she who took the risk, secreting a ‘long manilla envelope [amongst] silk stockings and other feminine belongings in [her] trunk’ (13) until they reached their destination. Roland’s scallywag sense of humour comes through when she writes: ‘political pariah though I am, I nevertheless have my uses, and my unmistakably non-proletarian appearance renders me unlikely to attract the attention of Customs officers or other Government busybodies’ (13). According to the dramatically-

31 The three page report of Chirologist, A. Humphry Reeve, is among the papers of Justus Jörgensen, the founder of Montsalvat, an artists’ colony near Melbourne, Victoria about which Roland writes in The Eye of the Beholder(1984). Much like Baracchi, Jörgensen had a profound influence on Roland.

32 Australian Manuscripts Collection SLV, Justus Jorgensen Papers, 1924-1975, MS10079, Gold Envelope - Folder No. 11.

33 Baracchi was expelled from the ACP in 1925 for his right-wing leanings and again in 1940 as a consequence of his objection to the party’s Stalinisation.

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inclined, if perhaps politically naive, Roland, the errand had a ‘certain cloak-and-dagger element to it which [Baracchi] enjoyed immensely’ (13), albeit at her expense. Explained early in the narrative is that Baracchi travelled to the Soviet Union illegally without a visa and ‘with his name omitted from the Felix Dzerhinsky passenger list’ (13). Although it was he and not Roland who was the distinctive Communist empathiser, this meant that, officially, Baracchi had ‘never been to Russia’ (148). Thus, any risk associated with the contents of ‘the long Manila envelope’ was Roland’s alone to take.

The symbolic equivalents and contradictions that comprise the values and implications of living under culturally specific patriarchies have, historically, defined women by sex-based, economic factors. Roland proved useful to Baracchi in a number of ways during their time together in the Soviet Union. The fact that she could type, had brought with her a portable Remington typewriter, and could write good English as opposed to ‘American jargon’ (35), served Baracchi and the new regime, well. Soon after their arrival she had a job with an English language newspaper, the Moscow Daily News, where she hoped to gain insight into many aspects of Soviet society that would otherwise not be possible’ (36). The editor was Michael Borodin, whom Roland describes as ‘an old Bolshevik, one of the great figures of the Revolution’ (36), but whose influence was fading. Another was ‘Red’ Rose Cohen, ‘the wife of a prominent Party official’ (37) and another old friend of Baracchi’s. Borodin was arrested and charged with treason in 1937 and died in a prison camp in Siberia. Rose Cohen was also arrested and executed in 1938. Sparrow notes that Roland’s papers indicate that ‘when she and Baracchi tried to leave the Soviet Union, the authorities repeatedly tried to dissuade them’ and in fact offered them Soviet citizenship. Sparrow is of the view that had they accepted that offer and decided to stay, they may well have shared a similar fate to Borodin and Cohen and many other foreign residents who did not survive the Moscow trials, which were a part of Stalin’s Great Purge. It is difficult to reconcile such a life and death situation with Sparrow and other scholars’ view of Roland as politically unaware, at such a tumultuous historical moment.

The timing of Roland and Baracchi’s stay in the Soviet Union was immediately after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany and just prior to the Stalinist Purges, which began in 1935. Roland refers to such horrors directly when she dedicates her book to the memory of the writer Winifred (known as Freda) Utley, a Trotskyist of British descent, Utley’s Russian partner Arcadi Berdichevsky who perished, and to other friends who suffered a similar fate. Roland and Baracchi were befriended by Utley and Berdichevsky and lived for a time in their Moscow apartment. As Sparrow notes, Berdichevsky was ultimately arrested for his association with Utley and her Trotskyite activities. He was sentenced without trial to five years in a concentration camp where he died in 1938. According to Sparrow, the news of Berdichevsky’s fate, about which Roland learned in correspondence from Utley in 1939, ‘ended [her] enthusiasm for the Communist Party’ forever. Worth noting is that, according to Sparrow, ‘aside from a few brief comments on his association with Freda Utely, Baracchi never wrote his own account of his and Roland’s experiences in the Soviet Union’.

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34 Sparrow, 137.
35 Sparrow, 137.
36 Sparrow, 186.
37 Roland, 189-91, Sparrow, 136.
38 Sparrow, 137.
39 Sparrow, 141.

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died in 1975, some four years before *Caviar for Breakfast* went to print. This being the case, there is something uncomfortable about the fact that the story of Baracchi in the Soviet Union is only ever enacted through Roland’s imaginative recollection of a long-past lived reality. To put it another way, Roland only ever re-imagines, and re-writes Baracchi’s story through her experience, a manner of narration that involves a degree of (dis)possession. As the narrating diarist Roland enjoys a privileged position. It is she who holds the power to decide what will be said about herself or another and what will be kept secret. In this process, subjective representation becomes an end in itself, one that is both simulated and manipulated and a way to hide as much as to reveal.

During an interview with Nicole Moore in 1991 (published 2007), Roland confessed she held the view that to (re)produce a story using the diary mode is always a manipulative exercise. Words written down in a diary served as a reminder of what you may have meant. But a diary, she said, is ‘a very incomplete thing. It’s a terribly good thing for jogging your memory, but it isn’t ready to go into a piece of work, you have to embroider it, and recast it and change it’.40 Here Roland suggests that, when writing *Caviar for Breakfast*, different words had to be found, with different functions and different purpose in the present as a way of explaining and making links to the past. Roland’s revelation turns on its head her previously stated assertion of faith in her story’s veracity.41 Instead it challenges the ideological concept of truth, which underpins the diary mode’s traditional authority. It may be true that, as a system of discourse, the diary is culturally encoded to give the illusion of authenticity. But it is also fair to say the diary’s restraints are such that details are often lacking and only tantalising fragments of past experiences can remain on its pages. Much like the discursive, constantly changing status of history, what someone may choose to diarise as experienced reality at one time, cannot deal truthfully with the concerns of another in any absolute sense. Coloured as they inevitably are by situations appropriate to the present, recalled experiences can only ever be tentative or uncertain things that are permeable to all sorts of interpretations, unbidden thoughts and feelings. By their very nature, the contents of a diary set up a tension between past and present, sense and reference, which serves to demonstrate the complexities between the two poles. The ‘real’ is a conceptual notion, as indeed is time, and this may well be what Roland is hinting at when she refers to the ‘limitations’ of her diary in the introduction to *Caviar for Breakfast*. And in fact the two manifestations of the book possess a sense of mobility, re-presenting the past in two shifting presents to suggest that, in any life, the past is never absolutely over or completely dealt with, that the past always intrudes on the present and vice versa.

Sheila Fitzpatrick notes that a photocopy of a 163 page book manuscript titled *Caviar for Breakfast*, with the chapters dated as one would a diary, is to be found amongst Roland’s papers held by the National Library of Australia, Canberra.42 Fitzpatrick goes on to observe that the photocopied chapters closely approximate the content of *Caviar for Breakfast* which, as we have seen, was first published by Roland as a diary in 1979, then in a revised edition in 1989. Both editions can be considered creative works of non-fiction which use the authoritative system of signs of the diary form to order past events into a meaningful

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41 Roland, *Caviar for Breakfast* 2nd ed. ix
42 Fitzpatrick cites Roland Papers National Library of Australia, MS6772, Box 5, Folder 6, which contains a photocopy of a book manuscript consisting of the chronological record of events on which *Caviar for Breakfast* is based.

structure. This calls into question the relation between a life lived and its artistic transformation in literature. By extension, it also raises the question of whether *Caviar for Breakfast* as an accurate reflection of reality or the realistic representation of it. But this is not to say that the ‘original’ diary does not exist. Nor does it mean that Roland’s journey to the Soviet Union did not take place. What it does suggest is that in the performance of storytelling, Roland produced an imaginative, if not entirely imaginary, account of that journey. In the process she positions herself at the heart of the narrative to account for changes in her personal and political views over time and space. Some of these views are demonstrably contradictory. Yet there is little doubt that the shifts in the politico-temporal terrains of *Caviar for Breakfast* give voice to Roland’s struggle to generate meanings of social significance as an Australian woman who lived, loved and travelled with Guido Baracchi in Joseph Stalin’s Russia in the 1930s.

Betty Roland was in her late 70s by the time the first edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* was published in 1979. By then Baracchi and many of the people Roland had known and loved throughout her life had become a chorus of ghosts. Some had died from natural causes, some had committed suicide. Some had perished in the Stalinist purges. One had been murdered. Others had simply forgotten her. In a letter to her friend Rose Ribush dated June 20, 1983 Roland, then nearly 80 years old, laments that there had been little reader interest in *Caviar for Breakfast* and to all intents and purposes the book was a failure. That failure could be attributed to the fact that the story she tells is not simply one of bargain tourism but of the violence and contradictions that accompany the origins of any new state, whether personal or political, past or present. Roland’s story stages an encounter between her disillusionment with Communism’s violent contradictions that readily translates into the personal story of the violently ambivalent emotions of her disastrous relationship with Guido Baracchi. None is more content than the other for each evokes the despair of those without power over their own lives, women (and men) who are impotent to defend themselves against ideologically driven social systems with the authority ‘to approve or condemn’ (Roland, 1979, 38). Any reading of *Caviar for Breakfast* involves engagement with re-enacted elements of reality represented by the assemblage of stories about people and events narrated within the cultural values associated with the material which defines it. Despite its anchorage in the diary mode, the book can be seen as a creatively fashioned travel memoir dressed up in self-conscious, autobiographical clothing. At its core are the interplay of past times, people and places as reconceived in the present by Roland’s storytelling artistry, the artful mimesis of what she claims as her actual lived experience. As a representation of reality, autobiography is a literary mode haunted by the fact that there is always a mismatch between an original and its copy. It is just as impossible for the written (or spoken) transcription of a life to enjoy a one-to-one ratio with ‘what actually happened’ as it is for a ghost to re-enter a world that fully resembles that in which it lived. Yet who else but the teller decides when and where to begin, or end, her story? Who else but the teller decides who or what will take centre stage and who or what will remain hidden in the wings? Who else but the storyteller has the power to replay the past, change the part she played in it and make herself up all over again as tangible evidence of existence?

43 SLNSW, ML1303/96, Box 1 of 4.  
44 Roland, 38.
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An Inquiry of Intentions in Kim Hye-yŏng’s ‘First Meeting’: A North Korean Short Story in Korea Today (2007)
Alzo David-West

Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle.
– Wimsatt and Beardsley

Introduction
In 2007, Korea Today, a multilingual North Korean magazine available on the official Naenara (My Country) web portal, published in the course of January to May a short story in English titled ‘First Meeting’ by Kim Hye-yŏng (Kim Hye Yong). No information about the author or the work was provided nor any explanation as to what criteria merited world exposure of the 6,755-word narrative to a global audience in the international lingua franca. By the nature of the allegorical-political storytelling style, culturally specific expressions, and nationally peculiar ideological-rhetorical form, it is apparent this is a work that was not originally written for readers outside North Korea. As with other short stories printed in Korea Today, ‘First Meeting’ is a case of symbolic and tendentious fiction that could be readily dismissed as affected, moralising, and laughable garbage by one unacquainted with North Korean social-political culture and the national literature. But even such an acquaintance does not guarantee the short story will be seen as anything other than insipid and insufferable propaganda (a medium for ideological policy dissemination) and artistically dubious. Indeed, the problem here really is one of a normative orientation to the North Korean literary text-object and an unwillingness to perceive what more the text is capable of self-disclosing in the act of reading.

Notwithstanding its service as a medium for official party-state policy, ‘First Meeting’ represents an interesting case for literary-critical inquiry, as the work consists in the main of two structurally competing narratives. Intentionally, it is an exhortative narrative about affectionately embracing the authority of the Workers’ Party of Korea and the Korean People’s Army in the military-first (sŏngun) era, initiated in 1998. Incidentally, it


2 Korean names and words in the paper are, for the most part, transliterated according to the McCune-Reischauer system, except for the names Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un, which follow the North Korean romanisation system. All family names precede first names, following the Korean practice. The family name 신 is transliterated as ‘Shin’ (South Korean pronunciation) not ‘Sin’ (North Korean pronunciation), since the latter transliteration invites a negative reading. As a Korean-language edition of ‘First Meeting’ could not be obtained, transliteration was aided by comparing equivalent names and words in the English and Korean editions of the official Korean News website at http://www.kcna.co.jp.

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is an *unstable narrative* with elements that run counter to the authority, in the voices of its portrayed narrative figures, set in a fictional North Korea around 2000 to 2006.

One must pause for a moment and consider the significance of saying the North Korean short story in question is ‘portraying’ (vs. reflecting) ‘narrative figures’ (vs. persons) in a ‘fictional North Korea around 2000 to 2006’ (vs. in North Korea around 2000 to 2006). In spite of the temptation to state that the incidental narrative involves a reflection of certain persons or groups in contemporary North Korea, such a claim is, strictly, an association, an extrapolation, or a presumption. Instead, literatures gives one semantic correlations of *images* (artistic-intuitive representations) and/or *symbols* (allegoric-discursive propositions) that abstract, accentuate, displace, generalise, interpret, and rearrange selected life material, which create in consciousness an aesthetic *sense* of reality to greater or lesser degrees. While

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all literature takes its material from four-dimensional reality, literature is not reality. Contrivance is not existence. With the critical principle that ‘First Meeting’ is fundamentally a contrivance (an artificial, human-crafted, construction), a counterintuitive reading reveals that the artificial literary object discloses figural interactions in its incidental narrative that are discordant with the intentional narrative – that defy the apparent regime of intentions the work is meant to propagate. The significance of these discordances may say something about real people and real life in the real North Korea, but that ‘may’ demands concrete sociological proof and a different kind of literary investigation than this inquiry is designed to undertake.

**Intentions and Effects**

As is well known, North Korean literature is written under the authority of the Korean Writers’ Union, the literary organ of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), with an overtly didactic and socio-functionalist intention to aesthetically, ideologically, morally, and politically inculcate official values into the wider society in the survival interests of the ruling party-army caste. North Korea having inherited traditional and modern Korean social didacticism and having assimilated the totalitarian policy of Stalinist-Zhdanovist socialist realism in 1945 to 1960, the legacy is a regime of intentions under which literature must subserve. As the late leader Kim Jong Il states in *On Juche Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

7Trotsky (148) says art obtains its material from the ‘world of three dimensions’ and the ‘world of class society’ through the ‘experience’ of the artist. While humans do, indeed, perceive material in three spatial coordinates (left-right, near-far, up-down), the factor of experience reveals that material exists positionally in a fourth coordinate (time); hence a four dimensional reality in actuality.

8The category error of identifying literature (contrivance) with reality (existence) occurs in Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012). Unfortunately, this work by a non-literary specialist consists largely of long-quotation and summary and commits the most elementary errors of literary criticism and sociological criticism. See further discussion in Alzo David-West, ‘Serious Problems in Sonia Ryang’s *Reading North Korea*: A Critical Review Article,’ *Mulberry* 62 (2013) 99-111.

9The critical reading strategy of counterintuitive reading is partly influenced by Stephen Epstein, who says: ‘Given the revelation of social fissures in North Korean literature. its reception by its audience merits continual consideration; if we focus solely on how the regime wishes its fiction to be interpreted, we run the risk of taking its profession of monolithic solidarity at face value, precisely as its fiction warns us against doing’; ‘All [North Korean] stories promise a better tomorrow, even at the expense of raising contradictions between a text’s details and its final message’; and ‘Ambiguities leak into these recent [North Korean] texts even when they may not in any way be intended by their authors.’ See ‘On Reading North Korean Short Stories on the Cusp of the New Millennium,’ *Acta Koreana* 5.1 (January 2002) 33-50, 35-6, 48, 48n28; emphasis added.

Literature (Chuch ‘emunhakron, 1992), the ‘spirit in literature aims at embodying in it the idea and intention of’ the WPK; ‘Only when literature is created and built under the Party’s leadership can it safeguard and carry out the leader’s ideas and intentions and the Party’s policy on art and literature without the slightest vacillation in any wind’; and ‘Political guidance of literary creation means controlling and leading literary creation to establish a correct political principle in line with the Party’s ideas and intentions.’

Correspondingly, the ‘writer’s ideological intention’ is beholden to the policy line that ‘all writers must regard the Party’s intentions and policies as being absolute,’ for writers are ‘faithful assistants to the Party,’ and they ‘must be sensitive to the Party’s plans and intentions more than anybody else.’ Bureaucratically and administratively, the literary policy is superficially clear and straightforward, and the first official requirement for a work of literature to be appraised or judged as valuable in North Korea is ‘when it is clear in its ideological intention.’

Predictably, the result of the dictatorial regime of intentions is a formally state-controlled and socially conformist literature. Bureaucrat-dogmatic intentionalism does not, however, give the WPK authority a magical, mysterious, or oracular power over any approved literary work. After all, what official party sanction indicates is that the bureaucracy is more normatively disposed than others to clearly seeing its own absolutist intentions represented in the work — the bureaucracy does not see the work as it is, objectively, in the reading spaces outside the ruling circle. What this situation gives rise to is the problem of the intentional fallacy, that is, the problem of purpose/intention versus function/meaning of the North Korean literary text. In an instructive statement applicable to all genres of literature, William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley explain:


12 Kim, On Juche Literature 171, 248, 263, 264; emphasis added.
13 Kim, On Juche Literature 164; emphasis added.


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The poem is *not* the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.\(^{14}\)

Here, the suggestion is that through mass social acts of reading and reception, the objective function and meaning of the work take on a life, an existence, of their own, as the object is *grasped, interpreted, and judged* by the varying sensitivities, sensibilities, and standards of the people themselves, not the author(ity).\(^ {15}\) When a work is published, ‘the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art,’ Wimsatt and Beardsley note.\(^ {16}\) Suggestively confirming that reality *even* in North Korea, Kim Jong Il admits, ‘[W]e are yet to say that our people read with relish *all* the novels written by our novelists,’ a confession whose ‘yet’ encompasses a period of forty-four years of mass public reading, from 1948 to 1992.\(^ {17}\) North Korea was founded as a state, under Soviet Army auspices, on 9 September 1948.

While it would be a false hypothesis to declare *a priori* that North Koreans readers simply suffer with state-sanctioned national literature – official and academic sources actually suggest a dynamic coexistence of receptive and dismissive reading in the country – what the intentional fallacy points to is that WPK accordance of primary value by measure of *its own* conscious ideas and intentions is a phenomenologically occlusive

\(^{14}\) Wimsatt and Beardsley 5; emphasis added.

\(^{15}\) *Sensitivities* are ‘capacities to react to certain properties and magnitudes’ and are physical or perceptual ‘functions relating intensity of reaction to magnitude of stimulus.’ ‘Differences of sensitivity can affect both one’s disposition to see the work in a certain phenomenal way and one’s dispositions to judge it positively or negatively.’ *Sensibilities* are abilities, dispositions, or propensities ‘to identify certain features, properties, or relations of a work as being aesthetically significant, i.e., as either being value-making or value-lowering,’ as ‘sources of value or disvalue.’ Significantly, ‘not all interpretational disputes [of a work] will amount to differences in sensibility,’ but ‘may indicate a disagreement over content’ as ‘interpretational content disputes’; for ‘differences in sensibilities do not necessarily imply differences in the way the nonaesthetic features of the work are being experienced.’ *Standards* ‘codify and express at least some of one’s sensibilities.’ Complicating the problem of the ‘aesthetic properties’ and ‘ultimate value’ of an object or work is that ‘shared sensibilities (like shared standards) do not guarantee agreement’ over what satisfies people. John W. Bender, ‘Sensitivity, Sensibility, and Aesthetic Realism,’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59.1 (Winter 2001) 73-83, 74, 75, 77, 79, 81.

\(^{16}\) Wimsatt and Beardsley 3.

\(^{17}\) Kim, *On Juche Literature* 209; emphasis added.
orientation. In other words, bureaucratic-administrative obsession with conscious intentions neglects the actual, real, objective literary function of the work and the imaginary reconstitution and activation of the actual, real, objective literary meaning in the non-party and non-authorial reader’s aesthetic (sensory-emotional-cognitive) consciousness – in mental acts of reading that cannot truly be regulated by anyone or any institution. (Presumably, the inability to regulate the reader’s living, personal-social mind is one of the reasons why the WPK is obsessed with its own intentions.) What, in any case, is the result of the literary processes that occur beyond meta-authorial (party-state) intent and authorial intent? As Edward Bullough puts it, “The function of Art … may reveal itself in consequences independent of those consciously aimed at, in effects not intentionally striven for, but arising incidentally.” One may say function mobilises the unconscious problematic of the literary text.

Significantly, the unconscious, incidental, and accidental effects constituted by the intentional fallacy in North Korean literature will demonstrate themselves differently to different readers, native and foreign. While illusory effects can manifest in the reading process – through purely subjective and arbitrary psychological associations – legitimate effects are objectively generated by the structural-semantic relations of the literary text itself under the illumination of different reading practices and reading strategies deployed spontaneously (typically by the non-specialist reader) or systematically (typically by the trained literary critic), though mistakes are possible in every case by any reader since human knowledge is approximate. Non-arbitrary reading will, nevertheless, allow the literary work as an object to reveal real aspects, features, sides of itself otherwise overlooked under the regime of intentions. By way of an analogy to crime scene investigation, consider how infrared light can be used to detect traces of blood, washed and diluted by the perpetrator, that are invisible to the unaided human eye.

Now, the analogy is not trying to say sideways that every work of North Korean literature has a concealed trail of blood behind it. Some works might, as WPK writers are known to have been politically attacked, purged, and exiled in the past, for example, the

19 ‘[N]o institution can undertake to regulate opinions upon every subject. Only the most important ones can be attended to, and on the rest men’s minds must be left to the action of natural causes.’ Charles S. Peirce, ‘The Fixation of Belief,’ Charles S. Peirce, http://www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html (accessed 30 May 2013).

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case of Yi T’ae-jun (1904–1974?). But that is a subject for a political criminology of North Korean party-literary administration, not the critical analysis of literary text form-content and its objective revealing in subjective social consciousness. What is of interest here is how the regime of intentions is contradicted by the actual, real, objective elements in the work itself – ‘First Meeting’ – through the literary-critical strategy of *counterintuitive reading*. How does one proceed with this interpretative method? Firstly, it begins with suspension of normative prejudices and presuppositions of North Korean literature; direct aesthetic contact with the material, feeling it with the senses, emotions, and intellect; and selfless immersion in the literary experience of the story-world. Secondly, it involves impartial description-interpretation of *internal evidence* (e.g. characters, form, plot, and setting) in view of the *circumstantial evidence* (e.g. country, period, politics, and venue of publication) that unite with the literary object. Thirdly, it infers the extra-literary intentions from the narrative data and their internal arrangements, afterwards locating what objective text elements, images, and symbols exist in contravention to the inferred party intentions.

**Synoptic Description**

Description is necessarily interpretation. Human consciousness does not have access to pure objectivity, to pure facts (invariable, uniform datums) – consciousness can only know facts as they evidentially show themselves within the limits of empirical sense and mental experience; thus, an inherent act of interpretation in any act of attempted description. This is especially so for literary facts, which are always mentally

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23 The following description approximates to the idea of selfless immersion in the story-world: ‘When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no I. There is consciousness of the streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken, etc., and non-positional consciousness of consciousness. In fact, I am then plunged into the world of objects; it is they which constitute the unity of my consciousness: it is they which present me with values, with attractive and repellent qualities – but me, I have disappeared; I have annihilated myself [this is overstated – AD]. There is no place for me on this level. And this is not a matter of chance, due to a momentary lapse of attention, but happens because of the very structure of consciousness.’ Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘The Transcendence of the Ego,’ *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretations* ed., Joseph J. Kockelkens (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) 324-38, 334-5; italics in original.


25 ‘If we cannot recur to the first cause, let us content ourselves with second causes, and those effects which experience shows us; let us gather true and known facts; they will suffice to make us judge of that which we know not; let us confine ourselves to the feeble glimmerings of truth with which our senses furnish us, since we have no means whereby to acquire greater.’ Baron d’Holbach, *The System of Nature, or, Laws of the Moral and Physical World*, Vols. 1-2 (New York: G. W. and A. Matsell, 1835) 246, Google Books, http://books.google.com/books?id=Gz8RAAAAAYAAJ (accessed 30 May 2013).
reconstructed in the reader’s consciousness. A literary description is likewise, more specifically, a secondary conscious interpretation following a primary unconscious interpretation. (That is to say, as soon as one reads a work, the mind automatically engages in the interpretative process, and upon the initial structure of spontaneous interpretations are formed the more self-aware and considered class of interpretations.) Subjectivity in consciousness does not, however, render all literary descriptions invalid. A subjective description-interpretation can be true if it corresponds to the objective literary artefact. Correspondence is possible because the literary work is made for subjective human feelings and the mind: the work is meant to show itself objectively in human terms, in images and symbols, that humans will understand. That goes for North Korean literature as well. In spite of the politically authoritarian situation in which the literary texts are produced, they are humanly teleologically posited artefacts (serving some aim, end, goal, or purpose within a human social system); they are always human works, even if many may lack a sense of lifelike (verisimilar) realism of portrayal.

The most basic descriptive-interpretative procedure in trying to achieve an understanding of ‘First Meeting’ is in identifying its main features in a synoptic description that sorts out essential details. There is no need to reconstruct every feature of the narrative, as that will only lead to an imitation, which is unnecessary when the work is already at hand. Unlike the imitation, synoptic description gives one a general, true picture of the story to aid in its general and particular comprehension. With that, one may point out that, narratologically, ‘First Meeting’ is organised into four sections: (1) ‘Spring Water’ (2,632 words); (2) Dream and Reality (1,562 words); (3) Reason and Moment (926 words); and (4) Evidence for Love (1,635 words). The story is also told by an omniscient narrator, begins in the middle of things (in media res), and provides backstory information through vivid and extensive flashback sequences in the protagonist’s mind, creating a narrative movement that shifts between present and past along the plotline. Indeed, a significant portion of the story (2,953 words, or 44 percent) consists of the

26 Wolfgang Iser explains that, in the process of mentally reconstructing a literary text, ‘the text establishes itself as a correlative in the reader’s consciousness,’ and since ‘literary texts do not serve merely to denote empirically existing objects,’ but take objects out of their pragmatic contexts and shatter their original frames of reference, ‘the reader is given no chance to detach himself as he would if the text were purely denotative.’ Consequently, ‘the reader is absorbed into what he himself has been made to produce through the [text] image,’ which ‘takes us out of our given reality.’ With the literary text, ‘we have been temporarily isolated from our real world.’ The reader ‘stands outside the text,’ but the reader’s ‘viewpoint’ is ‘manipulated’ and ‘guided’ by the text in the reading process. Needless to say, the text will not affect all readers the same way, nor will the text grip every reader. See The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 107, 109, 140, 152. See also Wolfgang Iser, ‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,’ The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 274-94.
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27 All quotations from ‘First Meeting’ use in-text citations, referring to Korea Today with initials ‘KT’ and to the respective issue numbers and years of the monthly magazine. The electronic version of the serialised short story was accessed and saved in August 2008. URLs are no longer available at the Naenara (My Country) web portal at http://www.naenara.com.kp.

protagonist’s ‘recollection’ or ‘memory of the past’ (KT 607 [2007]; 609 [2007]). After all of this information is sorted and distilled in chronological order, the synopsis is as follows:

Shin Ch’ŏng-mi (Sin Chong Mi) is a young university graduate and female reporter for the literary department of a state publishing house in Pyongyang. Six years prior, she was a mill weaver and amateur poet in a provincial town. Publishing a patriotic poem, ‘Spring Water,’ she received a critical letter from Kim Sŏng-u (Kim Song U), a Korean People’s Army serviceman from a village in Chongsu County. In spite of her initial feeling of insult, the two become penfriends and maintain five years of affectionate correspondence, during which Sŏng-u sends a grey fountain pen as a present, though neither exchange pictures. After Ch’ŏng-mi graduates from university, she and Sŏng-u arrange to meet at a train station before his departure for a tour of duty; however, a little girl with appendicitis, whom Ch’ŏng-mi takes to a hospital along the way, causes the young woman to arrive too late to see the serviceman. Despite the failed meeting, more affectionate letters continue. But one day, Sŏng-u says his parents at the home village have arranged for him to be married. He stops writing, and a year elapses. With the fountain pen and her idealised memory of Sŏng-u, Ch’ŏng-mi pines depressively over him, all to the consternation of her best friend since university, her roommate Hye-suk (Hye Suk; no family name given), who cannot convince Ch’ŏng-mi to move on. Subsequently, the publishing house dispatches Ch’ŏng-mi by train to Chongsu County to cover the Okkye-ri literary circle. After ten days on assignment, she is on her way back to the train station, when she encounters and assists a physically disabled man in a wheelchair. While helping him, Ch’ŏng-mi drops her pocketbook. The man, able to reach for it, sees and recognises her name, but does not say anything. He grows cantankerous, and as Ch’ŏng-mi pushes his wheelchair, she overhears one of two women passersby refer to him as Sŏng-u. Startled, Ch’ŏng-mi drops her pocketbook. The man, able to reach for it, sees and recognises her name, but does not say anything. He grows cantankerous, and as Ch’ŏng-mi pushes his wheelchair, she overhears one of two women passersby refer to him as Sŏng-u. Startled, Ch’ŏng-mi releases the wheelchair and rushes to the train station. In agony, she wonders if Sŏng-u’s disability revolted her; she recalls his critical letter from six years ago; and presuming he sacrificed his legs for her sake during his tour of duty, she eventually finds him at his home. They look at each other’s faces; she breaks down in tears; he tells her in shame he is sorry for ruining their first meeting as a cripple; and she embraces him.

Aesthetically, the reader cannot help but react to and evaluate a story like this. It is either (a) a lovely, touching, sentimental story or (b) a stupid, idiotic, moral story. If an aesthetic evaluation should be made, it will depend on which objective features of the work the reader normatively focuses on in order to make the judgements artistic/inartistic,
beautiful/ugly, genuine/fake, good/bad, realistic/unrealistic, true/false, etc.\textsuperscript{28} Simply, it is necessary and desirable in practical, human, aesthetic life to judge art and literature in such terms. Otherwise, art could not be made and enjoyed. Art and its experience have a normative quality. By contrast, an impartial description-interpretation cannot take an explicitly normative position, but accept as \textit{objectively there} and \textit{objectively factual} what the literary work reveals as a literary work. Descriptively, the tale is a combination of all features objectively, not arbitrarily, registered by aesthetic sense. Nonetheless, a literary-critical description can concede that, in comparison to real life, the story is not realistic and, in comparison to the experience of other literary works (North Korean and non-North Korean), the story is clichéd. But one must move onto the issue of structural relations.

\textbf{Structural Relations}

In view of the synoptic description, it is evident that ‘First Meeting’ is moved and guided by a purpose (\textit{telos}) that becomes intelligible in an order of words (\textit{logos}), the motion of which is expressed in the integration of idea-image form (\textit{eidos}) and a story (\textit{muthos}) that composes a relatively self-contained world (\textit{kosmos}), which coheres in the interaction of time (\textit{khronos}), place (\textit{topos}), nation (\textit{ethnos}), customs (\textit{ethos}), citizens (\textit{politikos}), and desire (\textit{eros}). Since all of this is abstract, it will help to visualise it in a diagram (Fig. 1).

\textsuperscript{28} Importantly, \textit{evaluation} is not synonymous with \textit{criticism or theory}. Criticism translates literary images and symbols into the language of logic and concepts. Evaluation measures the aesthetic significance and artistic truth of a work. Marxist/mimetic-cognitive critics (e.g. Aleksandr Voronsky) and phenomenologist/reader-response critics (e.g. Wolfgang Iser) recognise that criticism and evaluation are distinctive procedures. Theory is a criterion-governed cognitive framework that provides general categories for the translation of a work into concepts; it is governed by the problems of structure, function, and communication; and it maps, charts, and explains the observed data of the literary work in human life. See Wolfgang Iser, \textit{How to Do Theory} (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) viii–x, 5-6, 8-9, 12, 167; and Voronsky, \textit{Art as the Cognition of Life} 207, 212-3.


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principle of desire (eros). Here, the fictional citizens function as figures, or figuras (eidolon), ideal symbolic types, specifically, as nationalist allegorical personifications. Crucially, the struggle is guided by the Korean People’s Army (KPA) serviceman Kim Sŏng-u, whose role in the story is that of a North Korean positive hero. His name is apparently a contraction and blend of the words ‘Kim Jong Il’ and ‘sŏngun sasang’ (military-first ideology), signifying great-leader and party-army-state authority in his characterisation and stated criticism: ‘I don’t know poetry. / Yet, I love poems. / I don’t know how to write poems. / Yet, I am good at criticizing poems,’ he writes versically (KT 608 [2007]). As for Shin Ch’ŏng-mi, she is a non-hostile protagonist whose ideological-political outlook is reformable, something that occurs through Sŏng-u’s positive criticism. Her name appears to literally mean ‘Spirit’ (shin) ‘Blue-Green’ (ch’ŏng) ‘Beauty’ (mi). Consonant with her literary design, the character-figure is essentially a sentiment – a non-physical expression (spirit) of morally virtuous (beautiful) youth (blue-green). Meanwhile, Hye-suk, a non-hostile antagonist, operates as a foil that contrasts with and emphasises the moral virtuousness of Ch’ŏng-mi. Hye-suk’s name appears to mean ‘Intelligent’ (hye) and ‘Skill’ (suk), manifesting practical wisdom, which contends with virtuous emotion under the political authority in citizen life (Fig. 2).

29 ‘Discoursive’ pertains to communication/speech, whereas ‘discursive’ pertains to logic/reason.
32 Suggestively, Sŏng-u is also the first name of the late Chang Sŏng-u (Jang Song U, 1935-2009), who was a member of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, as well as a general and vice marshal of the Korean People’s Army. Chang was the eldest brother of the Chang Sŏng-t’ae (Jang Song Thaek, b. 1946), the late Kim Jong Il’s brother-in-law, and part of the Kim family circle, which presides over North Korea on behalf of the ruling party-army caste.
1. **Political Authority**  
Kim Song-u  
(*Kim Jong Il-Sŏngun ideology*)

2. **Virtuous Emotion**  
Shin Ch’ŏng-mi  
(*Spirit Youthful-Beauty*)

3. **Practical Wisdom**  
Hye-suk  
(*Intelligent-Skill*)

Fig. 2. Allegorical relationship of authority, emotion, and reason in ‘First Meeting.’

The symbolic oppositions constitute a nationalist allegorical struggle with a strong Neo-Confucian resonance, recalling Chu Hsi’s and Chŏng Tasan’s opposition of the ‘moral mind’ and the ‘human mind,’ as well as Chu Hsi’s view that the ‘intelligent person’ has a closed mind since it is ‘already full of ideas, full of convictions.’

34 (The struggle of virtuous emotion and practical wisdom also recalls the ancient ethics of Aristotle; however, Neo-Confucian ethics is the historical root in the North Korean case.) Besides the three main character-figures, there are twelve secondary and minor figures (KPA ensemble conductor, KPA newspaper reporter, literary department chief, little boy, little girl, student, teahouse waitress, two women in Pyongyang, two women passersby in Chongsu, and woman at grocery in Chongsu), invoked figures (Air Koryo pilot, Ch’un-hyang, Kim Song-u’s parents, and the KPA Song and Dance Ensemble), supernumerary figures (crowds and pedestrians), and ambient figures (cicadas and grass insects) in the literary demography. All of these presences have deep symbolic meaning for the story, with special significance borne by the invocation of Ch’un-hyang – referring to the traditional Korean folktale of a romantically devoted, faithful, and suffering courtesan (*kisaeng*), a state-owned slave in the feudal Chŏson era (1392–1910) – whose name appears towards the end of the story.

35 More vital, though, is the non-antagonistic contradiction in the discursive struggle of Ch’ŏng-mi and Hye-suk. Non-antagonistic contradiction is Josef Stalin’s 1936 principle for ‘friendly,’ non-hostile, class relations in...

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life under national state-socialism. The principle is the basis for Andrei Zhdanov’s 1946 theory of conflictlessness (bezkonfliktnost’), which North Korea adopted with the implantation and indigenisation of Stalinist-Zhdanovist socialist realism in 1945 to 1960.

Discourse on Desire
Desire (eros) manifests in ‘First Meeting’ as two competing notions of ‘love’ the two major female character-figures propose. The contest is fundamentally a ‘friendly’ struggle between Ch’ŏng-mi’s and Hye-suk’s competing ideologies of love. During Ch’ŏng-mi’s correspondence with Sŏng-u, Hye-suk realises the two have not exchanged photographs. She cries out in amazement: ‘[Y]ou mean you’ve loved a man you’ve never seen? What an affair!’ (KT 608 [2007]). The narration explains that Ch’ŏng-mi did not require Sŏng-u’s picture because she thought ‘facial beauty’ a ‘vulgar requirement’ and a ‘defilement’ of ‘pure affection,’ and she believed this was his idea as well. Subsequently, when Ch’ŏng-mi graduates and decides to marry Sŏng-u – it is not mentioned if Sŏng-u has expressed an interest in wedding Ch’ŏng-mi, but their prolonged correspondence signifies an extended courtship ritual – the blind decision confounds Hye-suk even more, and she urges Ch’ŏng-mi to seek a ‘more reasonable, scientific love’ (KT 609 [2007]). Ch’ŏng-mi, who had demanded if Hye-suk thinks love ‘merely a game,’ shouts back: ‘I don’t want such love!’ which would be ‘comfortable’ and expected of a ‘reporter.’ Hye-suk withdraws and acknowledges that a ‘feeling of fascination cannot be checked by any strength of reason.’ At this point in the discoursive struggle, love has not been fully defined. Instead, a pair of notional oppositions is explicitly advanced: (1) pure affection vs. reasonable, scientific love and (2) feeling of fascination vs. reason. What these oppositions reveal is that Ch’ŏng-mi is an erosic idealist, and Hye-suk is an erosic rationalist in their divergent attitudes to love.

By internal chronology, the first definition of love in the story is put forward as a self-consolation after Ch’ŏng-mi fails to originally meet Sŏng-u at the train station. She says, ‘Love means mutual belief and understanding. With belief and understanding, I will be able to wait for ten or twenty years. Such waiting is just happiness’ (KT 609 [2007]). Here, Ch’ŏng-mi’s definition qualifies her notion of pure affection with committed faith, and her proposition that long-waiting is happiness flows from her implied preference for

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37 The word ‘erosic’ is used in distinction from the word ‘erotic.’ Influential conventions of speech in English claim the latter as a euphemism for ‘pornographic’ or ‘sexual.’ By contrast, ‘erosic’ as applied here denotes the quality of affective-intentional desire expressed in different forms and types of human love.

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love of struggle over love of comfort.\textsuperscript{38} That said, when Sŏng-u eventually terminates the penfriendship and ‘month after month’ elapse after Ch’ŏng-mi writes back to him in ‘trust and hope,’ Hye-suk angrily declaims that love does not come true by ‘coercion or appeal,’ whether it is Sŏng-u or Ch’ŏng-mi who is doing the coercing or appealing (KT 610 [2007]). (Symbolically, this is an extraordinary statement.) Ch’ŏng-mi is unable to ‘refute’ her more rational friend, and the narrator says the young woman’s heart is broken because ‘her belief of love was destroyed.’ The statement, however, is unreliable. Ch’ŏng-mi’s belief is not annihilated or extinguished, and that is seen a year later when the two young women discuss at a teahouse. Hye-suk, now engaged to an attractive music conductor for the KPA after an over three-year romance, is ‘lost in love’ (KT 607 [2007]). She offers her own definition of love: ‘Love is a feeling of fascination with beauty. This fascination gives rise to inexhaustible passion and devotion that makes one not hesitate even to die. Fascination, passion, devotion! So the strength of love is so great, isn’t it?’ (KT 607 [2007]; emphasis added). Clearly, this is \textit{in incompatible} with Ch’ŏng-mi’s definition of love – which is ‘mutual belief and understanding’ premised on ‘pure affection’ free of ‘facial beauty’ (KT 608 [2007]). Hye-suk’s idea of love is based on physical attraction, as confirmed in the narration: ‘Hye Suk’s lover was a conductor of the Korean People’s Army Song and Dance Ensemble. His appearance, talent and passion were \textit{smart enough to attract} women’ (KT 607 [2007]; emphasis added). Thus, while an ‘envious’ Ch’ŏng-mi initially remarks, ‘You’re right,’ she goes on to say, ‘Love, along with the history of mankind, has given birth to numerous philosophies. I am not sure whose assertion is an absolute truth. Still, I think, it can be said that the intensive expression of all the philosophies is “\textit{Devotion is love}”’ (emphasis added).

Discoursively, the ‘friendly’ non-antagonistic contradiction between Ch’ŏng-mi and Hye-suk boils down to the rhetorical problems of argumentation and definition, namely, \textit{arguing in a circle vs. arguing in a line} and \textit{circular definition vs. logical definition}.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Ch’ŏng-mi (circular erosic idealism)}

- Love = mutual belief and understanding based on non-physical pure affection
- Devotion = mutual belief and understanding based on non-physical pure affection

\textbf{Hye-suk (logical erosic rationalism)}

- Love = a feeling of fascination with physical beauty
- Devotion = a product of the feeling of fascination with physical beauty

While circular thinking does not add up to much logically—it assumes as true what it must prove—circularity is undefeatable because it needs no proof. Therefore, it is a matter of faith. Ch’ŏng-mi’s thinking given to faith, it is not surprising how she reacts when Hye-suk angrily implies, after her friend’s comment on devotion, that Sŏng-u’s love was hypocritical. Now, Ch’ŏng-mi aggressively declares, ‘No. You’re wrong. I’ve never suspected our love. … It filtered as a pure feeling into us and enabled us to back up and lead each other. I think it impossible for me to fall again in such noble and sacred love’ (KT 607 [2007]; emphasis added). Against this assertion of pure, suspicionless, noble, sacred love, Hye-suk is consternated that Ch’ŏng-mi requires no ‘further evidence’ to prove that Sŏng-u still loves her. When Ch’ŏng-mi attempts to justify his termination of the correspondence by saying, ‘Perhaps there is a cause beyond his control’ (she somehow forgets his statement about a family-arranged marriage), Hye-suk retorts, ‘No. No barrier can check true love. Can love be changed by environment?’ (emphasis added). Perhaps because there is a lapse in rational argument here, Ch’ŏng-mi is unable to counter. But after the two friends leave the teahouse and Hye-suk offers to introduce her friend to a ‘fine man,’ a ‘pilot with the Air Koryo,’ Ch’ŏng-mi utters, ‘What an absurd idea!’ smiling vaguely. In Ch’ŏng-mi’s point of view, ‘everything’ is ‘simple and clear to her[self],’ and she wishes Hye-suk would see things likewise. After Hye-suk beamingly meets and departs with her fiancé, upon which Ch’ŏng-mi recalls her friend’s words, ‘What on earth has he devoted to you?’ the narration reads that Ch’ŏng-mi is ‘swept’ by ‘[g]roundless sorrow and [a] feeling of denial’ (emphasis added). Characterologically, Ch’ŏng-mi’s psychology is fideistic, fixed, and intractable. If her mind is interpreted naturalistically, not allegorically or literarily, she would approximate in real life to the dogmatic person, the obsessive person, or the self-deluding person.

**Stroke of Grace**

Later, en route to Chongsu County on her journalistic assignment, Ch’ŏng-mi does say to herself, ‘Love is something grateful and yet spiteful as it gives rise to both joy and agony. Is parting this painful? Why did we meet each other?’ (KT 609 [2007]; emphasis added). But these musings are not expressions of doubt or uncertainty. The character-figure is justifying her idea of pure, suspicionless, noble, sacred love with the ideas of love of struggle and long-waiting is happiness. Significantly, in the last section of the story, ‘Evidence for Love,’ there is the turning point, a momentous stroke of grace against Hye-suk in the discursive contest. After Ch’ŏng-mi runs away from the wheelchair-bound man when she overhears a passerby refer to him as Sŏng-u, she falls onto a bench at the train station and condemns herself, shuddering and shivering in regret and shame, internally monologing, grabbing her chest, and struggling with her conscience (that is, introjected ethos): ‘It was too abrupt for me to know what to do. Anyone would have done so in such a circumstance. … No, you lie, her mind said. If you saw him standing on his feet, you would never have turned back. So you evaded him’ (KT 611 [2007]). (The

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idea is that Ch’ŏng-mi is turned off by a physically disabled man; again, Ch’ŏng-mi does not remember what Sŏng-u had written about a family-arranged marriage.) Afterwards, Ch’ŏng-mi recalls Sŏng-u’s verse letter from six years ago, and she suddenly has an epiphany:

Truth is judged by act, not word. / If you are really the ‘spring water’, / Prove yourself / At the critical moment / When the motherland calls for you.

Right! Truth is revealed only before the enemy’s gun barrel aimed at one, before a firing pillbox and before a grenade just about to explode, that is, at a critical moment.

The slightest hesitation or vacillation at such a moment would lead one to criminal, shameful and treacherous actions. But Song U did not hesitate to risk such a moment, sacrificing his legs. [Sŏng-u had said there was a ‘tense situation’ during his tour of duty – AD]

What then did I do? She asked herself. It was my mission to lead people to the path of feats [as Ch’ŏng-mi wrote in her patriotic poem ‘Spring Water’ – AD]. But, before anyone else, I shrank away from the moment, contrary to my will to well up as spring water anywhere the country wanted.

Chong Mi once again shuddered with self-hatred. So Song U must have recognized me when he picked up my dropped pocketbook. That’s why he looked so agonized. Why didn’t I recognize it?

She dropped her face on her hands. She did want to think of nothing else.

After a while, she stood up and headed for the road along which Song U had just disappeared.

Hye Suk! She said inwardly. You said that only infinite passion and devotion were the evidence of true love. You asked me what he had done for me. Love for me made him even sacrifice his precious legs to defend the homeland, the valuable gift for me his love. And such behaviour was the evidence of his ardent love for me. I, too, would dedicate my life to him as the evidence of my love for him, that is, the one for his spiritual world, not his appearance. (KT 611 [2007]; italics in original)

This is a fabulous rhapsody, and it inspires Ch’ŏng-mi to seek out Sŏng-u, whom she finds with the help of a woman, at a grocery, who exclaims to Sŏng-u, ‘Here’s a girl as beautiful as Chun Hyang. Look out!’ But how has Ch’ŏng-mi arrived at her conclusion that the long-silent, hitherto unseen Sŏng-u loves her? Basically, (1) she manufactures her evidence by deductive justification; (2) she misrepresents what Hye-suk had said; and (3) she reinvokes the principle of non-physical pure affection, the basis of the synonymous love/devotion. In other words, with errors of reasoning, Ch’ŏng-mi reproduces her circular faith argument to claim a discoursive victory over the absent Hye-suk. However
sophistical the stroke of grace may be, the narrative point is that Ch’ŏng-mi was always right to love and struggle on the basis of pure affection and belief in Sŏng-u, without any physical ‘vulgar requirement.’ And that is what makes her ‘beautiful’ in the North Korean story-world.

**Party Intentions**

Compared to a number of other short stories in *Korea Today*, ‘First Meeting’ is relatively more individuated, as it involves two distinctive female character-figures who are in love relationships, who discourse, and who express feelings such as affection, agony, aggressiveness, amazement, anger, anticipation, anxiety, concession, consternation, defensiveness, depression, disagreement, disappointment, friendliness, happiness, insult, joy, nervousness, self-hatred, surprise, sorrow, and stubbornness. Of course, all of this is a semblance, since the figures are, quite clearly, consciously designed as nationalist allegorical formulas to address ‘different ideological beliefs’ and ‘internal contradictions amongst the working people.’ Fundamentally, the North Korean short story is about ‘a loyal person, a most beautiful and noble typical person of the Juche type,’ whose ‘traits’ of ‘loyalty and filial piety become an article of his faith, conscience, morality and everyday concern’ and must be ‘vividly and adequately’ shown, regardless of ‘whether this [typical person’s love and works are] appreciated by others or not.’ (Chuch’e means ‘subject’ and was first used by Kim Il Sung in 1955 in reference to the ‘Korean revolution.’) In 2005, the [North] Korean Central News Agency reported, ‘For the Party

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40 Notably, the word ‘appearance’ in the long quote appears four times in the story, that is, three times in the first section and once in final section: (1) ‘His [Hye-suk’s fiancé’s] appearance, talent and passion were smart enough to attract women’ (KT 607 [2007]); (2) ‘After examining her [own] appearance in the mirror, she [Ch’ŏng-mi] hurried down the stairs’ (KT 608 [2007]); (3) ‘This [fountain pen] made her [Ch’ŏng-mi] imagine his [Sŏng-u’s] appearance as the most ideal, warming up her heart’ (KT 608 [2007]); and (4) “I, too, would dedicate my life to him as the evidence of my love for him, that is, the one for his spiritual world, not his appearance’ (KT 611 [2007]). The first case makes Ch’ŏng-mi ‘envious’; the second causes her ‘disappointment and doubt’ when she sees a man ‘well past forty’; the third is ‘warming up her heart’; and the fourth comes after her ‘self-hatred’ when she sees Sŏng-u is ‘disabled.’ In other words, Ch’ŏng-mi’s love/devotion was never really, truly, the ‘pure affection’ or ‘pure feeling’ without physical ‘defilement’ and ‘vulgar requirement’ she had declared it to be. Her ideological-political outlook is completely reformed when she accepts Sŏng-u as he is.

41 The other comparatively less individuated *Korea Today* short stories the author has in mind are Jo Phil Su’s ‘After Gunfire Dies Away’ (617-620 [2007]), Han Song Ho’s ‘Guide’ (631 [2009]), Sok Yun Gi’s ‘Second Answer’ (633-635 [2009]), and Kwak Song Ho’s ‘Matches’ (654 [2010]). Relatively more individuated than these works are Pak Il Myong’s ‘Small House in My Village’ (629-632 [2008]), Jang Ki Song’s ‘Right to Return Home’ (643-644 [2010]), Pak Yun’s ‘Like Father, Like Son’ (655-658 [2011]), and Kim Hung Ik’s ‘Women of This Country’ (659-665 [2011]). Most similar to Kim Hye Yong’s ‘First Meeting’ is Kim Hung Ik’s ‘Women of This Country,’ which is set five decades earlier in the Korean War era. All the short stories are allegorical, moralistic, and tendentious.


43 Kim, *On Juche Literature* 145, 150; emphasis added.

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Juche is Songun and Songun is Juche,’ meaning the term is now synonymous with Kim Jong II’s military-first ideology.)

What is the general intention of a North Korean literary work with a typical figure? Officially, it is to exert a positive influence, ‘to give an answer to what is beautiful, noble or tragic and what is mean, vulgar or comical,’ thereby ‘arming people’ with approved ‘progressive ideas’ and ‘knowledge about life,’ providing ‘noble ethics and beautiful emotions’ and ‘instilling beautiful and noble emotions,’ according to Kim Jong II. Formally, ‘First Meeting’ satisfies all these general intentional criteria, and in the figure of Ch’ŏng-mi, who is an intellectual by North Korean standards, her story follows Kim’s dictum: ‘The beautiful deeds of the people of our era can also be found without interruption among Party workers, public security men, intellectuals, young people and students in all parts of the country.’

Quotation of Kim Jong II does not, however, settle the inquiry of intentions in the North Korean short story. Besides the logical invalidity of appealing to authority, Kim’s statements are too general for a work-specific analysis. One must inductively infer the extra-literary party intentions of ‘First Meeting’ from the evidential structure and elements of the narrative itself with the knowledge that, in North Korea in the military-first (sŏngun) era, loyalty consists in being faithful to Kim Jong II and the party-army leadership. (Kim Jong II died of heart failure on 17 December 2011 and was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong Un.) While there are several articulations and moments in the story that are denotative of its apparent intentions, the most cogent of these is in the following scene, after a KPA newspaper office reporter delivers a letter to Ch’ŏng-mi one evening when she is still in university:

Back to her room after seeing the [KPA newspaper] officer off, she tore open the envelope in haste, revealing an orderly folded letter and a dazzling, grey fountain pen.

That night she could not sleep. The fountain pen – quite different from

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45 Kim, On Juche Literature 7, 12, 17; emphasis added.

46 Kim, On Juche Literature 151; emphasis added.

[the] usual ones in brilliancy, colour, weight and shape – seemed to reflect something meaningful to her. It created a ceaseless, strange stir in her mind.

She supposed that the fountain pen mirrored Song U’s strong wish for successes in her school record and literary creation. At the same time she went so far as to regard it as a sign of meaning his pledge that might be of great importance in her life.

So she didn’t dare to use it. She kept it carefully in her trunk [under her bed]. Whenever she was unable to control her longing for the man, she would take [it] out and look at it as if she had faced him. This made her imagine his appearance as the most ideal, warming up her heart.

One day when she sat alone looking at the fountain pen in the room, the door was flung open and Hye Suk entered.

Taken aback, Chong Mi hurriedly hid the fountain pen between the leaves of a book. Her act, however, caught Hye Suk’s eyes.

With twinkling eyes, Hye Suk rushed up and pushed her to reveal what she had just hidden.

‘Show it, quickly.’
‘Stop! Don’t tickle me! What do you want?’
‘Your lover’s picture, isn’t it?’
‘What?’
Chong Mi fell and sat down.

Hye Suk was stunned to look at the fountain pen rolling out from between the book leaves.

‘I thought it was a picture,’ Hye Suk expressed her disappointment.
‘I, too, haven’t seen a picture of his,’ Chong Mi mumbled with an awkward smile. (KT 608 [2007])

Classical libidinal psychoanalysts would have interesting things to say about this passage. But since the object here is literature, words, images, and symbols – not psychology, drives, traits, and complexes – it is incumbent on the literary critic to focus on the literary object. Literarily, it is evident that in the epistolary courtship of Ch’ŏng-mi and

47 Literary criticism centres on the written fictional text, not the deep brain-mind functions that underlie the writing/reading or production/reception of literature; otherwise would be to enter the field of psychology or one if its subfields. '[C]riticism has to be based on what the whole of literature actually does.[…] Once we admit that the critic has his own field of activity, and that he has autonomy within that field, we have to concede that criticism deals with literature in terms of a specific conceptual framework. […] The first thing the literary critic has to do is to read literature, to make an inductive survey of his own [literary] field and let his critical principles shape themselves solely out of his knowledge of that field. Critical principles cannot be taken over ready-made from theology, philosophy, politics, science, or any combination of these. To subordinate criticism to an externally derived critical attitude is to exaggerate the values in literature that can be related to the external source, whatever it is. It is all too easy to impose on literature an extra-

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Sŏng-u, the pen has a metaphorical relation to Sŏng-u. Specifically, for Ch’ŏng-mi, the pen is a tangible symbolic extension of the KPA serviceman, and by this association, she directs an intensity of affection to the writing implement that is arousing and satisfying of her desire (eros). Ch’ŏng-mi is also a book reader (she becomes ‘engrossed’ in reading in the story), suggesting the book in the above scene is a metaphorical extension of herself. Thus, when the pen (Sŏng-u) is placed in and falls out from the book (Ch’ŏng-mi), this can be interpreted as part of a symbolic sex act. Adding to the suggestiveness are the anxiety, nervousness, and surprise when Hye-suk enters the room, a set of reactions that communicate the sense of having walked in on a most private and intimate moment.

When one recalls the earlier-discussed structural relations of customs (ethos), citizens (politkos), and desire (eros) in ‘First Meeting,’ in conjunction with the allegorical names of the character-figures, it is inerable the symbolic sex in the quoted passage intends to instil into the mind of the North Korean reader customary dispositions of citizen-loyalty to the authority by means of heterosexual affection and desire. Sŏng-u is a male soldier representing the political authority of the WPK and the KPA (the former enrols him in a military academy, and he is affiliated with the latter). Ch’ŏng-mi is a female intellectual representing masses of ordinary citizens: blue-collar workers (mill weaver), artists (poet), youths (university student), and white-collar workers (reporter). When Sŏng-u gives Ch’ŏng-mi the pen and she becomes captivated by it, their gestures are a symbolic expression of a mass-political controlling function in the story-world. The authority patronises the citizens, and the citizens desire the authority. The symbols thus translate as a power/dependence and dominant/submissive relationship of masculine-authority/feminine-citizens in the social-life conduct of the nation (ethnos). Symbolic sex becomes political sex, so to speak.

If the inference is correct, it confirms the intention to emotionally programme WPK-KPA-approved attitudes, ideas, and values into the reader. For example, when the said passage is read immersively, the awkwardness of the events (composed of the functional relations of characters, objects, setting, and situation) can make the reader

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48 The metaphorical relation is interpreted with metaphor understood in the ‘narrow sense’ of the ‘conscious denotation of one thought content by the name of another which resembles the former in some respect, or is somehow analogous to it’; ‘conceptual and nominal substitution’ in which ‘one [concept] is semantically made to stand proxy for the other’; ‘circumlocution of one idea in terms of another,’ all of which ‘presupposes that both the ideas and their verbal correlates are already given as definite quantities.’ Ernst Cassirer, ‘The Power of Metaphor,’ Language and Myth, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover, 1953) 83-99, 86-7; italics in original.
giggle, as it did with the author of this paper. Aesthetically engaged in the selfless moment and because of the constitution of human consciousness, the reader forgets or cannot see that Č’ŏng-mi’s captivation and Hye-suk’s sudden intrusion are didactic, socio-functionalist, and inculcating in their literary intention. In the case of the North Korean reader, unless he or she is a critical, disabused, dismissive, protesting, or resisting reader, that individual ‘could’ respond likewise, absorb the facts of the literary experience, and, mentally affected by them, act in real life on the normative relations to the authority that are aesthetically received – with or without conscious awareness – and reinforced by supplementary means of compelling in the social environment.\(^{49}\) Relevant to the aesthetic engagement, Kong Dan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig document how ‘political thought is a strong emotional attachment’ in North Korea: a male North Korean in his thirties, who defected in the early 1990s, reports ‘he was moved to tears by a North Korean film, heavily laden with propaganda; when he saw the movie again after fleeing to South Korea . . ., the work struck him as absolutely silly.’\(^{50}\) But the matter now goes beyond literature and into the areas of social psychology and political psychology, subjects outside the scope of this inquiry. Suffice it to say, in the *intentional exhortative narrative* of ‘First Meeting,’ the party seeks to instil at least three authoritative injunctions: (1) Have faith in the regime! (demonstrated by Č’ŏng-mi’s devotion to the unseen Sŏng-u); (2) Do not criticise the regime! (demonstrated by Č’ŏng-mi’s discourse with Hye-suk); and (3) Support the regime! (demonstrated by Č’ŏng-mi’s embrace of the handicapped Sŏng-u). Yet there is no guarantee that the intended message of the short story will be received or ‘correctly’ interpreted by the reader, and that problem is compounded by defiant, contravening elements in the *incidental unstable narrative* and its figural interactions.

**Contravening Elements**

When Kim Jong Il invokes the word ‘intention’ in *On Juche Literature*, he does not explain what the term means; however, the original Korean, *ŭido*, consists of two semantic-etymological parts meaning ‘idea/meaning/wish/desire’ (*ŭi*) and ‘diagram/to plan/picture/drawing/chart’ (*do*).\(^{51}\) Basically, an intention is a *consciously directed*...

\(^{49}\) The sociological concept of the ‘means of compelling’ is from Georgi Plekhanov, and it is found in the following reciprocally interactional process: (1) state of productive forces, (2) process of production, (3) economic relations, (4) relation of social forces, (5) form of organisation of society, (6) means of compelling, (7) particular character traits, and (7) role of individual in history. See G. V. Plekhanov, ‘On the Role of the Individual in History,’ *Marxists Internet Archive*, 9 October 2007. [http://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1898/xx/individual.html](http://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1898/xx/individual.html) (accessed 30 May 2013).


mental act consisting of an aim and anticipation to achieve some sort of goal."52 Despite the WPK criteria for North Korean literature to be ‘clear in its ideological intention’ and for a writer to ‘provide[ ] absolute conclusions,’ the problem of ‘disparity’ between ‘creative purpose’ and ‘images’ is an officially acknowledged dilemma in Kim’s writings from 1973 and 1992.53 Significantly, it is also recognised ‘that a naturalistic element, though contained in only one part of a work, may make the whole work go against the original creative intention,’ and ‘even the smallest gap in the plot will cause the whole work to crumble.’54 Complicating matters is that North Korean writers are instructed to bury the intention in life and make the intention reveal itself naturally, subordinate the intention to the physiology of the work, and interpret the intention in a lifelike way, because if the intention is ‘overstate[d]’ or ‘well manifested … but not lifelike,’ mass readers will find the work and its representations unattractive and unenjoyable.55 There is a real dilemma here because, under the authoritarian party-state system, the literary work is mandatorily politically controlled, politically correct, and politically appraised, even if Kim admonishes party critics to do ‘literary criticism but not sociological criticism or political commentary.’56 Combined with the contradictory demands in the world of party-writers and the world of party-critics – in competition with the contradictory demands in the world of non-party readers – the North Korean literary work emerges as an inherently unstable object in spite of the effort to assert authoritarian political control (censorship and repression) over it. Considering the complex reality of the literary object in North Korea, intentions may subsist in a work and can, potentially, be inductively inferred from the literary data, but this does not mean intentions are simply available in the aesthetic experience of a work. Too much is going on structurally in the work and psychologically in the act of reading to permit a smooth linear conveyance of meta-authorial intentions: There are objective relations in the text that can defy intentions, and there are objective reconstructions in the mind that can modify intentions.

Discordances with the intentional exhortative narrative in ‘First Meeting’ occur at several important points in the incidental unstable narrative of the short story. One can argue deductively that the internal discordances are already imputed in Ch’ŏng-mi’s emotional appeal to faith – for example, one 2002 study of North Korean short stories from 1998 to 1999 assumes the substitution of ‘emotional catharsis for verifiable proof’

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52 This general definition of ‘intention,’ derived from the hanja (Chinese characters) of ŭido, compares to the definition of the ‘artist’s intention’ in American analytical aesthetics as follows: ‘The artist’s intention is a series of psychological states or events in his mind: what he wanted to do, how he imagined or projected the work before he began to make it and while he was in the process of making it.’ Monroe C. Beardsley, Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism, 2nd edition (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981) 17.

53 Kim, On Juche Literature 144, 164; and Kim, On the Art of the Cinema 128; emphasis added.

54 Kim, On Juche Literature 43; and Kim, On the Art of the Cinema 84; emphasis added.

55 Kim, On Juche Literature 39, 123, 171.

56 Kim, On Juche Literature 240, 248, 249.

involves a ‘lack of confidence’ – but this argument does not properly address the matter.\textsuperscript{57} A position of faith (emotional or pragmatic) is not necessarily a position of discordance or unconfidence.\textsuperscript{58} Since the deduction and the assumption are questionable, it is more reliable to show real, particular instances in ‘First Meeting’ when text elements, images, and symbols contravene the official WPK intention to instil certain fundamental political-ethical commandments into the reader. In this author’s present point of view, the six most obvious contravening elements are found on the figural and narratorial levels:

(1) **Sec. 1, Hye-suk, Narrator:** “I can’t understand indeed. He [Sŏng-u] talked so much about justice and conscience. How could he change like that?” Hye Suk was angry.’ (KT 607 [2007]; emphasis added)

(2) **Sec. 1, Narrator, Hye-suk:** ‘Then what Hye Suk had just said rang in her ear. / “What on earth has he devoted to you?” / Groundless sorrow and [a] feeling of denial swept into her [Ch’ŏng-mi] as she stepped toward her bed.’ (KT 607 [2007]; emphasis added)

(3) **Sec. 1, Ch’ŏng-mi:** ‘Love, along with the history of mankind, has given birth to numerous philosophies. I am not sure whose assertion is an absolute truth. Still, I think, it can be said that the intensive expression of all the philosophies is “Devotion is love.”’ (KT 607 [2007]; emphasis added)

(4) **Sec. 2, Narrator:** ‘Hye Suk asserted love could not come true by dint of coercion or appeal by any one side. Chong Mi could find no words to refute her opinion.’ (KT 610 [2007]; emphasis added)

(5) **Sec. 4, Narrator, Woman:** ‘The woman who guided her [Ch’ŏng-mi] there first stepped in the yard, jokingly shouting, “Here’s a girl as beautiful as Chun Hyang. Look out!”’ (KT 611 [2007]; emphasis added)

(6) **Sec. 4, Narrator:** ‘With no word exchanged, they [Ch’ŏng-mi and Sŏng-u] kept impatiently looking at each other. In the woods near the river, grass

\textsuperscript{57} Epstein, ‘On Reading North Korean Short Stories on the Cusp of the New Millennium’ 36.

\textsuperscript{58} Faith means (a) to assume something as trustworthy because it is impractical to always verify it or (b) to take something on trust because it cannot be proved. Importantly, faith is not exclusive to emotional convictions or irrational convictions. In natural science, for example, ‘success in practice’ generates a pragmatically motivated ‘faith’ in the scientific procedure: ‘We are entitled to have faith in our procedure just so long as it does the work which it is designed to do – that is, enables us to predict future experience, and so to control our environment,’ even if present success ‘affords no logical guarantee’ that the procedure will be continuously successful. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952) 50, 94, 118.
insects and cicadas were droning in turn as if to rebuke the man and the woman for doing so.’ (KT 611 [2007]; emphasis added)

Whatever the official intention to include these passages in ‘First Meeting,’ they are, in the context of the story as a whole, functionally oppositional to the desired social conformism. Remarkably, one finds that Hye-suk, because of her practical wisdom, will not change her mindset and is implacably politically resentful of the Kim Jong Il party-army regime (represented by Sŏng-u), to the point of declaring, symbolically, that the party-state authority cannot force its official morality and ethics on the masses of citizens (represented by Ch’ŏng-mi). Indeed, in the story, Hye-suk never actually changes her views. Ch’ŏng-mi, for that matter, despite her invocations of affection, feeling, and devotion is ‘not sure’ whose statement about love is ‘absolute truth,’ a highly destabilizing remark that articulates ideological uncertainty in a narrative supposedly grounded on acceptance of the ‘Party’s intentions and policies as being absolute’ and in a political state where chuch’e ideology (interchangeable with sŏngun ideology since 2005) is ‘absolute truth.’

Moreover, Ch’ŏng-mi is approvingly compared to a feudal-era courtesan and state-owned slave, indicating that the artists, students, youths, and workers represented by Ch’ŏng-mi bear the status of the socially exploited and oppressed in an abusive, illiberal, and unequal society. Punctuating the internal subversions, the only non-human figures in the story — insect figures — voice a low continuous protest, ‘droning’ a ‘rebuke’ against the unnatural union of the citizens and the authority, who are ‘impatiently’ staring. Unlike any of the other figures, the insects in ‘First Meeting’ are in the most objective symbolic position to voice the internal criticism. In the story, they exist within its world (kosmos), within its time (khronos), and within its place (topos) — proximately to the nation (ethnos), customs (ethos), citizens (politikos), and desire (eros). Narratologically, the insect figures, as an idea and a point of view, are not politically co-opted, and they have the advantage of perspective in this particular North Korean story-world.

If the incidental unstable narrative in ‘First Meeting’ can reveal itself in this way or in similar ways, it objectively tells the reader to doubt, disbelieve, and reject the victory Ch’ŏng-mi claims in the intentional exhortative narrative when she finally embraces Sŏng-u. Presumably, the six aforesaid contravening elements were incorporated to (a) give a ‘lifelike’ sense to the artificial story so that non-party North Korean readers would find it more attractive and enjoyable and to (b) underscore the moral strength of pure virtuous emotion that overcomes all obstacles that accompany vulgar practical


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wisdom. But that idea takes the normative view that ‘First Meeting’ is simply Ch’ŏng-mi’s story, and only readable that way, when this is also Hye-suk’s story, which is carried through in her counter-discourse and partly expressed in the six above-quoted statements. Here lies the great instability of the narrative, its great internal discordance, which exceeds the ‘friendly’ non-antagonistic contradiction that premises the struggle. On one level, this is a story that tells the reader to have faith and find happiness in suffering for the WPK-KPA regime because it supports and defends the people. On another level, this is a story that tells the reader that the WPK-KPA regime is coercive, that it exploits the people, and that it has inadequately proven its worth. Demonstrably, the literary text has set itself against itself, and there is no way around the problem, especially when the work reaches non-party readers, for whom the function of the text, not its intention, will exert the greater effect.

Conclusion

Aprioristic approaches and naive induction with its intuitive practical judgements take as unquestionable that North Korean literature is ‘Party-oriented propaganda in literary form’ in which ‘dissenting views’ are ‘unheard of.’

The problem is that the objective reality of the literary text is never so plain, simple, and one-sided. When one claims that a work of art or literature produced under authoritarian conditions exists only as a unidirectional and fully controlled channel of policy dissemination, such an assertion closes up the real, evidential disparity in the intentions, functions, and incidental or accidental and unconscious effects of the work, which is always reconstructed in the consciousnesses of those it engages or disengages. But why is there a general tendency to react to North Korean literature as pure propaganda and not experience the work as a work?

Intentionally, North Korean literature incorporates a convergence of aesthetics, ethics, and politics that has been generally disvalued as crude, oppressive, and unnatural in the influential Western sensibility since the epoch of anti-feudal capitalist-democratic

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61 Counter to the general tendency, a 2012 comparative literature dissertation by Immanuel J. Kim argues for ‘legitimizing the need to read the [North Korean] works for [their] literariness rather than as merely another component of state propaganda.’ He says, ‘The Party can only disseminate the propaganda, but it cannot control the readers’ subjective taste,’ and ‘What the outside world often overlooks is the entertaining aspect of North Korean literature,’ even if ‘not all North Korean fiction is entertaining.’ See ‘North Korean Literature: Margins of Writing Memory, Gender, and Sexuality,’ diss., University of California-Riverside, 2012, 246, 247, 255, eScholarship, University of California, http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/9s80978x (accessed 30 May 2012). One should note that Kim’s study is not strictly literary criticism, but a form of political-philosophical discourse criticism by way of literature.
revolution in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{62} Contrarily, though, highly valued Western literatures from before that period were produced in absolutist-authoritarian social environments in which the convergence was deemed normal.\textsuperscript{63} Yet these esteemed works are often spared an unliterary classification. Who today, except for a doctrinaire commentator, would regard as mere propaganda Virgil and Spenser because they wrote panegyrics to an emperor and a monarch? Distance has made the ancient and early modern texts more objective, permitting greater sensitivity to and appreciation of their many-sidedness as literature.

If there have been North Korean Virgils and North Korean Spensers, it is the job of the literary critic to find them and objectively interpret and evaluate their works as literary artefacts. That said, approximating to the position of distance and applying the method of \textit{counterintuitive reading}, following a selfless immersive reading, this inquiry has shown through an examination of the exhortative narrative and the unstable narrative


\textsuperscript{63} Elizabethan courtier and knight Sir Philip Sidney famously writes in a ca. 1579 work posthumously published in 1595 that the task of poetry (i.e. imaginative literature) is to ‘delight, to move men to take that goodness into hand’ and to ‘teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved,’ in other words, to ‘show the way’ and a ‘sweet prospect to the way.’ The poet, ‘pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue.’ See ‘The Defense of Poesy,’ \textit{The Norton Anthology of English Literature}, Vol. 1, 8th ed., ed. Stephen Greenblat (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006)953-74, 959, 962, 963.

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in Kim Hye-yŏng’s relatively complex short story ‘First Meeting’ that the intentional fallacy is operative in the North Korean literary work, which has objective elements and functions that contravene, defy, and protest the official regime of intentions demanded by the party-army-state authority. Going by a sixtieth anniversary Korea Today editorial board statement in December 2009, describing the mission of the magazine, one can retroactively ascertain that Kim’s story was serialized in 2007 in a general effort to globally showcase North Korean party ‘policies’; the ‘achievements,’ ‘creative life,’ and ‘happiness’ of the people; and national ‘history, geography and culture.’64 ‘We’ll do our best to help you know the realities of Korea,’ the statement added.65 By the implied political standards, ‘First Meeting’ was appraised as entirely favourable to the official and correct image of North Korea. While it may not have been the aim of the editors, by publishing the tale of Ch’ŏng-mi, Hye-suk, and Sŏng-u, they gave the international community an opportunity to experience a nationalist allegory whose discoursive struggle tendentiously valorised political authority and virtuous emotion, yet, in spite of the valorisation, showed that practical wisdom was a rationally dissenting opponent and that a symbolic rebellion against circular-emotional desire for the authority was incidentally voiced in the story-world, from its narrator, to its character-figures, to its ambient figures.

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65 Korea Today Editorial Board.

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True Nations and Half People: Rewriting Nationalism in Alasdair Gray’s Poor Things
David Leishman

Over the past two decades it has become something of a commonplace to refer to Scotland in the plural. Indicative of this trend are the 2004 collection of poetry entitled Scotlands: Poets and the Nation and the Scottish cultural journal, Scotlands, which ran from 1994-1998, and whose 1997 volume encouraged the representation of varied visions of national experience and identity as reflecting the multiplicity of the nation itself: ‘new views of Scotland, new Scotlands’. This purported coexistence of manifold Scotlands feeds into a postmodernist paradigm of identity, by, for example, playing on the sense of ontological uncertainty thrown up by Brian McHale’s description of postmodernist fiction opening up a ‘multitude of possible worlds’. The plurality of vision in such statements also shows up a dedoxifying impulse closer to the postmodernist agenda that Linda Hutcheon situates as the heritage of the 1960s counter-cultural movements. It is indeed in Lyotardian terms that Susanne Hagemann defines the liberating significance of these multiple Scotlands: ‘The meaning(s) of Scotland, and of Scottish fiction, cannot be contained by a finite number of grand narratives.’

But we can wonder how this postmodernist cultural expression of the nation intersects with its political destiny. If the grand narrative of a definable canonic Scotland has come to be rejected in favour of one of shifting multiplicity, then should the many variant forms and expressions of Scotland and Scottishness not work to undermine the potency of Scottish nationalism at a political level? I would argue that political nationalism, despite its varying forms, at some basic level lends itself to a totalising logic, which pre-supposes the validity of the national polity and its concomitant national experience. Indeed, the postmodern has been seen by some as being ‘deeply ambivalent’ to traditional ideologies of nation and nationalism.

Alasdair Gray, as Scotland’s pre-eminent postmodernist author and one of the most outspoken advocates of Scottish nationalism from the 1970s onwards, is quite naturally tied up in the contradictions that accompany such a postulate. Gray himself rejects the term postmodernism, preferring to describe himself as ‘an old-fashioned modernist’ albeit one who is preoccupied with the possibility for communal existence within a ‘corporation governed, a multinational, world’. While his fictional work has been described as being ‘trapped’ by the dialectics of contradiction that it reveals in, he has, as a politically engaged author, nevertheless sought to surpass the aporia of his fiction through political activism. In particular, he is well known as staunch advocate of Scottish nationalism and produced in

1 Alan Riach and Douglas Gifford, eds. Scotlands: Poets and the Nation (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004).
8 However, it has been noted that even Gray’s nationalism is not exempt from knowing irony as he advocates a ‘Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Republic’, which appears to borrow its name from the retail establishment of the same name. See Caroline McCracken-Flesher, Culture, Nation, and the New Scottish Parliament

1992 a pro-Independence pamphlet (revised with an updated title in 1997). In 2004 he supported the Scottish Socialist Party’s ‘Declaration of Calton Hill’ alongside fellow authors Iain Banks and James Kelman, which wished to counter the official Royal opening of the Scottish Parliament with a rival celebration dedicated to the establishment of an independent Socialist republic. In late 2012 a media frenzy erupted when Gray was accused in the press of being anti-English, following the publication of an essay entitled ‘Settlers and Colonists’ in which he criticised the domination of English administrators in the Scottish arts scene, whom he dubbed ‘colonists’ due to what he perceived as their insufficient involvement in promoting Scottish culture. In the context of the run-up to the 2014 independence referendum, Gray, through his comments on the negative influence of an English cultural elite who “depressed” rather than “encouraged” art in Scotland, quickly became the focal point for claim and counter-claim about a latent bigotry at the heart of Scottish nationalism.

In characteristic paradoxical manner, Gray as both novelist and polemicist embodies the inherent tensions that exist between political discourse with its totalising instincts and postmodernist metafiction which, through constant textual duplicity, undermines the ideologies it foregrounds. To return to Gray’s fiction, it has been suggested that the deliberate strategy of ambiguity in such work ultimately leaves little room for the ideological beyond a constant reaffirmation of the power of the creative imagination. This could be understood as an example of the mere aesthetic innovation and experimentation that Fredric Jameson postulates as the cultural counterpart of late capitalism’s sterile drive for ‘ever more novel-seeming goods’. But does the textual play of the fictional worlds Gray creates then necessarily compromise the discourse of national identity and nationalism in his work?

The Birth of Nations

It is certain that Gray’s fiction contributed significantly to a fundamental reappraisal of Scottish national identity. As an inspiration for contemporary Scottish authors who chose to reject a monolithic vision of Scottishness and who instead began to ‘imagine and disseminate

(Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007) 243. We can note, however, that the term appears in Gray’s work more fully as a ‘Scottish Socialist Co-operative Wholesale Republic’ (my italics). See Alasdair Gray, Old Men In Love (London: Bloomsbury, 2007) 259.


as many different ‘Scotlands’ as possible’, Ian A. Bell cites Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*, \(^{16}\) beginning with its celebrated statement concerning Glasgow’s need to be used by an artist to exist imaginatively for its inhabitants. \(^{17}\) In *Poor Things*, Gray’s illustration in portrait form of the character Bella Baxter openly suggests the character can function as a national allegory. \(^{18}\) This is not only, in typically self-deprecatory terms, due to the ‘pretentious nickname’ (110) of ‘Bella Caledonia’ which functions as a title for the Victorian-era portrait, but also due to its detailed background which reveals an anachronistic, fused panorama of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scotland complete with a wealth of anomalous geographic details such as the cooling towers of the Grangemouth chemicals works. The blurring of chronology is significant, since Camille Manfredi sees the entire novel as announcing the birth of a new ‘Lady Scotland’, a nation which accepts its hybridity by turning to the future without renouncing its past. \(^{19}\) A slightly adapted version of the same illustration, with a Glengarry replacing the more anglicised Gainsborough hat, was later created by Gray as the emblem of the independent Scottish web magazine *Bella Caledonia* edited by Mike Small and Kevin Williamson, itself also directly named after Gray’s character as an allusion to the ‘innocent, vigorous and insatiably curious’ intellectual movement the publication wishes to foster. \(^{20}\) The web magazine, which promptly jumped to Gray’s defence in the anti-Englishness debate, openly supports the creation of an independent Scottish socialist republic of the sort that the author has advocated.

In light of such examples which reaffirm Gray’s interest in and contribution to national discourse, it would seem relevant to confront a number of the potential contradictions in seeking to determine a coherent ideological position from the fiction of a playful postmodernist whose tendency to use elusiveness, distancing effects and self-contradiction has been well-noted. At one level, Gray’s fiction embodies the postulate that all ideology is a heterogeneous collage and that the work of fiction, in particular, can never be reduced to a single ideological tenor due to the subjective, linguistic processes of what Pierre Macherey calls ‘figuration’. \(^{21}\) However, at another level Gray’s work is a perfect example of the historiographic metafiction that Linda Hutcheon discusses as a key mode of literary postmodernism, \(^{22}\) a fictional form which reasserts its profoundly ideological tenor through its self-reflexive interplay between text and world, thus rejecting the notion of textual immanence unsullied by political, material or historical concerns. \(^{23}\)

Gray’s novel *Poor Things* underlines, in one key passage, the connection between history, cultural production and national consciousness through the exchanges between Bella and a Russian acquaintance.

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\(^{17}\) Ian A. Bell, ‘Imagine Living There: Form and Ideology in Contemporary Scottish Fiction’ *Studies in Scottish Fiction* 221.


\(^{22}\) Hutcheon, *Poetics* 40.

\(^{23}\) Hutcheon, *Poetics* 179.

He [the Russian Bella has just met] said Russia is as young a country as the U.S.A. because a nation is only as old as its literature.

‘Our literature began with Pushkin, a contemporary of your Walter Scott,’ he told me. ‘Before Pushkin Russia was not a true nation, it was an administered region. Our aristocracy spoke French, our bureaucracy was Prussian, and the only true Russians – the peasants – were despised by rulers and bureaucracy alike. Then Pushkin learned the folk-tales from his nursemaid, a woman of the people. His novellas and poems made us proud of our language and aware of our tragic past – our peculiar present – our enigmatic future. He made Russia a state of mind – made it real. Since then we have had Gogol who was as great as your Dickens and Тургенев who is greater than your George Eliot and Tolstoi who is as great as your Shakespeare. But you had Shakespeare centuries before Walter Scott.’ ...

To stop him thinking Bell Baxter a total ignoramus I said Burns was a great Scottish poet who lived before Scott, and Shakespeare and Dickens et cetera were all English; but he could not grasp the difference between Scotland and England, though he is wise about other things. I also said most folk thought novels and poetry were idle pastimes – did he not take them too seriously?

‘People who care nothing for their country’s stories and songs,’ he said, ‘are like people without a past – without a memory – they are half people.’ (115-6)

On the one hand this passage illustrates Anne-Marie Thiesse’s comments on the coterminous rise of the novel and the nation, and this passage has been summed up by Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon as indicating that, for Gray ‘history is the story of the imaginary works by which it is created, or fabricated’. But does this reflection on cultural nationalism and nation-building not also necessarily compromise the validity of the nation thus created by reinforcing Gellner’s arguments about its inherent artificiality? From this perspective, works like Poor Things, but also Lanark and A History Maker, could appear to merely exemplify Fredric Jameson’s view of a ‘dehistoricized and dehistoricizing’ postmodernism which seeks to abandon the very concept of truth.

Alternatively, could we consider that the nation and nationalism represent particular forms of metanarrative that are more impervious to postmodernist duality and doubt than others? Does Gray’s work present any insight into how these forces might be reconciled? Without wishing to deny the aporia inevitably associated with the postmodernist mode, Gray’s fiction, and Poor Things in particular, can offer a tentative resolution. In particular, by returning to the vision of the hybrid self as key stage in the construction of the nation it may be possible to go beyond Gray’s dialectics of contradiction and its rather unsatisfying conclusion of the primacy of imagination over politics, which otherwise would seem to confirm the criticism of a maddeningly elusive postmodernist trope where all is but ‘wheels within wheels, veneer beneath veneer’.

27 Jameson 12.
28 The phrase, coined by Thom Nairn, was used in particular to characterise the vertiginous playfulness of Iain Banks’s The Bridge. Thom Nairn, ‘Iain Banks and the Fiction Factory’ The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies eds. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh, University Press, 199), 131.

Hybrid Selves and Half People

The front matter of Poor Things includes a Harpers and Queens review which describes the novel as a ‘stitched together’ entity which incarnates ‘that “Frankenstein method” known as post-modernism’ (n.p.). Similarly, the hybrid textual form of Poor Things, which, as has been amply noted, fuses multiple contradictory narratives, metadiegetic levels and paratextual addenda, mirrors the hybridity of the key characters themselves. This status is clear whether our considerations are onomastic (Bella Baxter / Victoria McCandless) or physiological (Bella is presented as a reanimated maternal corpse spliced with the brain of her own fetus; Godwin Baxter is also said in one contested account to owe his existence to the ‘Frankenstein method’ in the absence of a biological mother, (274). The symbol of Godwin’s scientific prowess is again one of perfect hybridity: as a portent of his creation of Bella Baxter, Godwin first displays two black and white hermaphrodite rabbits created by his grafting together of two ‘equal and opposite’ animals: one black, one white; one male, one female (22-3). Their new existence as stitched-together sexual opposites, and their subsequent disinterest in procreation, point to a disruption of the ‘natural’ orders of gender and biology and also to a wider rejection of binary oppositions. This rejection of ‘either / or’ logic in favour of ‘both / and’ reasoning is characterised by Linda Hutcheon as a key trope of postmodernism, while David Lodge sees the figure of the hermaphrodite as ‘one of the most emotively powerful emblems of contradiction’ typical of postmodernist writing since it ‘affronts the most fundamental binary system’. The textual and corporeal hybridity thus foregrounded in the novel have as their corollary the multi-layered mental states displayed throughout the novel as the main characters show themselves at various times, whether through infirmity, passion, disease or ambition, to be incoherent, insane, misinformed, delusionary, dishonest, or amnesic. Just as the narrative of the novel is dual, confused and contradictory, so are the discourses of the individual characters. Of course, the constant references to Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, while firmly situating the hybrid nature of the characters in Poor Things at a physiological level, also place such multiplicity at a (meta-) textual level, by revealing the stitching and scar lines which holds the body of fiction together and by calling into question its ‘natural’ birth following the labors of a lone author. Ultimately the splits, contradictions and grafts of the hybrid characters are compounded by the unreliable master narrative provided by ‘Alasdair Gray’, as erratic as it is eclectic with its multiple metadiegetic levels, disputed narratives and irreconcilable paradoxes. The narrative and textual contradictions are therefore such an inherent part of the work that they delegitimise a problematics of wholeness and unity, which could have appeared to be the natural corollary to the figure of the hybrid. As a consequence, the ambiguous physical selves, reconstructed identities, dual narratives and split psyches of Poor Things appear as the norm rather than the exception.

If we accept this postulate whereby it is now improbable claims of wholeness, unity and purity which are discredited, the Pushkin quotation concerning national literature and nation-building reproduced above takes on a more ironic interpretation, since its injunction that a nation depends on its cultural production to exist insists on just such an axiology of veracity and completeness:

29 Hutcheon, Poetics 49.

‘Before Pushkin Russia was not a true nation ... He made Russia a state of mind – made it real ... People who care nothing for their country’s stories and songs,’ he said, ‘are like people without a past – without a memory – they are half people.’ (115-6, my italics.)

Whereas Poor Things deploys great efforts to underline that all identities are contingencies, ever-partial constructions gleaned from contradictory sources and competing discourses, the Pushkin quotation purports to imagine the contrary: the unchallengeable wholeness of the nations and individuals who know their homeland’s culture. In the context of Gray’s novel we should not be too quick to accept such a presumptive statement as an unproblematic defense of cultural nationalism à la Herder.

For Linda Hutcheon, postmodernist hybridity and unreliable narration represent a loss of faith in liberal humanist values where the perceiving subject was seen as a ‘coherent, meaning-generating entity’. Hutcheon situates this loss of faith in the wake of Lacan’s work on the deceptive nature of the ego and of the construction of the individual through language, but we should also point to the writing of Cairns Craig who has analyzed the themes of national hybridity and dialogic identity in relation to Scots philosopher John Macmurray. Indeed while Craig rails against certain uses of the theme of hybridity which rely on a straw man of purity / unicity to exist in opposition to, his key point is that the condition of hybridity (individual, national) is so pervasive as to be a sine qua non of human existence: ‘... if all cultures are grafted, crossed, mixed, then there is nothing but hybridity and the term itself becomes redundant’. Returning to Poor Things, if Gray’s postmodernist hybrid forms disallow unity and coherence at the individual level it would follow that collective identities, such as nations, must also be tainted by that destabilisation, in direct contradiction to the purported national wholeness displayed in the quotation concerning Pushkin’s Russia. It is not then false nations that are composed of ‘half people’, but all nations, beginning with the Scotland of Poor Things, since they are predicated on a fundamental instability which in turn weakens nationalism’s claim to be a rational political ideology. In brief, why should we presume a unique coherence for the nation when duality, hybridity and instability are the norm for individual identity?

**Fictional Nations?**

For Hutcheon, one positive consequence of a national vision which admits postmodernist hybridity would be a questioning of binary structures such as self / other in the construction of identities, leading to a consideration of ‘plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion’. Despite Cairns Craig’s claims that much discussion of Scotland’s ‘mongrel identity’ since the 1960s has implied that ‘the fundamental weakness of Scotland’s cultural history is its hybrid formation’ it would seem that the phrase ‘mongrel nation’, oft repeated in Scottish politics, literature and social activism, is commonly used as a badge of pride.

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31 Hutcheon, *Poetics* 11.
33 Hutcheon, *Poetics* 61.
34 Craig 233.
Such a rejection of essentialist, exclusive and ethnico-religious identities represents a strong component of mainstream national discourse in Scotland, to which Poor Things, with its foregrounding of cultural nationalism – ‘A nation is only as old as its literature’ (115) – certainly contributes. This focus on the cultural component of identity is of course intensified by the powerful denaturalising effect of the novel’s Frankenstein motifs which serve to draw attention to the contestable issues of generational continuity, ancestral origin and blood purity on which ethnic nationalism is premised.

At another level, however, the integration of postmodernist duplicity into a problematics of national identity, abetted by the Frankenstein motif, leads us closer to Gellner’s postulate that nations are not merely cultural conventions but are artificial constructs fashioned out of ‘patches and scraps’. Taking the example of A History Maker, Gavin Miller discusses how a foregrounding of juxtaposition, in particular in association with ‘an endemic loss of temporality’ or ‘loss of historical experience’, can, to some degree, be assimilated with Fredric Jameson’s views of the postmodern, where parody has given way to mere de-politicised pastiche. Consequently, when Camille Manfredi underlines the role of novels and novelists in the construction of Scottish national identity and quotes Timothy Brennan’s conclusion that nations, as ‘imaginary constructs’, depend on ‘an apparatus of cultural fictions’, this again shows up the contradiction contained within Poor Things’ Pushkin quotation. On the one hand we are meant to take the description of Pushkin’s peasant-nanny teaching the future author the folk tales of his homeland as an illustration of the precepts of Herder’s romantic cultural nationalism, whereby awareness of a people’s distinctive national spirit may be gained through the rediscovery of lost organic folk repertoires. On the other hand, the quotation leads us back to the inauthenticity of Gellner’s ‘patches and scraps’ or Jameson’s description of a debased historicism, characterised by ‘the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past’. It is, of course, highly problematic that Herder, the ‘father of cultural nationalism’, was inspired to his conclusions by the artifice and collation of James Macpherson’s fabricated Celtic epic Ossian cycle.

Commentators have noted another particularly Scottish dimension to the simultaneous development of the nation and the novel by highlighting the importance of Sir Walter Scott and the rise of the historical novel, since it this form which gives narrative continuity to the disparate events of history. For Cairns Craig, the nineteenth-century novel, ‘whose emplotment enmeshes their multiplicity of characters into a single, overarching narrative trajectory’, mimics the attempts to form bonds between the individual and the national

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36 It can be noted, albeit at an anecdotal level, that the anti-Islamist English Defence League has not spawned a comparably successful movement in Scotland. At the time of writing (January 2013) both websites (http://www.scottishdefenceleague.moonfruit.com/, http://scottishdefenceleague.webs.com) claiming to host the Scottish Defence League’s webpage were inoperational, a situation in notable contrast to the apparently thriving site belonging to the English Defence League which boasts regional divisions, members’ forum, news updates, merchandising etc. http://englishdefenceleague.org/.


39 Jameson 17.


41 Jameson 18.


43 Thiesse 134.
group. However, what impact on national consciousness might be presumed for late twentieth-century postmodernist fiction which replaces such a ‘single, overarching narrative’ with multiple, conflicting narratives?

One such impact will be brought about by the irreconcilable nature of the parodic voices of postmodernist fiction, where multiple, resolutely ambiguous narratives foreground historiographic and epistemological concerns of truth, reality and referentiality. Contrary to Jameson, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernist theory does not necessarily lead to a handicapping depthlessness or relativism; rather than reject a sense of the historical real, postmodernism simply reaffirms the inevitable mediation of discourse in our search for that real, thus underlining the power of the voices and texts by which we make sense of the world. The distancing effects in Poor Things (aporia, irony, duality, pastiche, self-reflexivity) problematise the relationship between the ontological spheres of fact and fiction. They whet our appetite for order and truth while drawing our attention to the paradox of searching for veracity, unicity and authenticity in a work of fiction. The front matter of Poor Things makes this point plainly by allowing a spurious erratum (which feigns to ensure factual accuracy) to partially mask the reprint of a series of (also occasionally spurious) journalistic reviews, many of which continue this interplay between fact and fiction: ‘Although it is pointless to accuse a novelist of getting his facts wrong… The Times’ (n.p.); ‘“You need not believe this…” This phrase echoes around the entire edifice, for in the novel every assertion is contradicted, every argument challenged ...’ (n.p.). The paratextual apparatus continues in this paradoxical vein in ‘INTRODUCTION by Alasdair Gray’ where the local historian and the literary author swap roles (XIII), the McCandless story being defended by the latter as a ‘complete tissue of facts’ (XIV, my italics).

How can we take seriously, then, the lament that those nations which are forgetful of their culture – their folk authenticity, their peasant soul, their organic literature – are ‘not true nations’? The discursive trickery of Poor Things, as we have seen, does not allow the affirmation of simple truths any more than it allows the simple denial of falsehood. We also know that such binary oppositions are in any case undone throughout the novel. Thus cultural integrity cannot be admitted as a benchmark against which some nations can be judged as authentic or complete. Rather than being a simple affirmation of adherence to the principles of cultural nationalism, the ‘true nations’ quotation must be read ironically in light of the epistemological instability that the novel projects. Indeed, the quotation is undermined by the very narrative within which it is presented: a fine example of postmodernist aporia.

Ultimately then, the ‘true nations’ passage short-circuits the precepts of cultural nationalism, leaving us with another, more profound, question: how can a (national) truth be constructed within the historical realm and vice versa, Marie-Odile Pittin Hédon notes that this further

Nationalism and Beyond: Aporia and Political Discourse
In its evocation of the extra-literary socio-political context, Poor Things makes prodigious use of historical ‘realemes’: historically coherent and verifiable references and representations (lithographs, prints, biographic details, the evocation of historical characters such as Hugh MacDiarmid). While these purportedly serve to inscribe the fictional work within the historical realm and vice versa, Marie-Odile Pittin Hédon notes that this further

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45 Hutcheon, Poetics 128.

layer of metaleptic complexity leads to greater ontological destabilisation. In a simultaneous movement, historical veracity is built up (suggesting if not a teleological world view, at least a humanist faith in referentiality and causality) and then undermined by the novel’s contradictory structure and narrative conceits. If we accept the metafictional import of Poor Things, all histories, identities and narratives – whether individual or national – are messy, unstable constructs. All this sits uneasily with the ideology of nationalism which relies on a minimum of coherence in the narratives that make sense of the nation’s historical past and of its present-day shared sense of self: the twin components of Renan’s ‘national soul’.

Without wishing to minimise such manifest paradoxes, there are several reasons to argue that the novel represents a politicised form of postmodernist writing: Jameson himself, although remaining highly suspicious of the existence of such writing, admits that such a form of ‘new political art’ may just be possible if it allows individual and collective subjects to ‘regain a capacity to act and struggle’ by giving them awareness of their positioning within the confused spatial and social dimensions of the global capitalist system. Thus, as Aaron Kelly notes, by confounding postmodernism’s tendency to close off knowledge about the late capitalist system by retreating into ‘jaded ... circuous reworkings’, Gray may be seen as what Randall Stevenson terms a ‘post-postmodernist’. More specifically, we would assert that the contradiction and hybridity of Poor Things remain not only politically engaged, but compatible with the ideology of political nationalism. Linda Hutcheon, for whom postmodernism is at all times “resolutely historical, inescapably political” argues the multiple narratives of postmodernist writing allow the previously silenced voices of History to break out in the face of the traditional dominance of a hegemonic, centralised discourse.

If we consider the liberation of marginal discourses that challenge the doxa in ethnic, cultural or geographic terms, it is plain to see that nationalism can be a logical companion of postmodernism. Of course, much writing on postmodernism argues the opposite position by insisting that postmodernism is emasculated by its complicity with Western capitalism. At the same time, the nation, in the postmodern age, is at prey to new transnational forces, thus weakening further the relevance of national claims. For Aaron Kelly, the situation is worse still, in that the postmodern mode and its play of difference ‘ramfeezles’ our political consciousness: its narrative multiplicity obfuscates political counter-narratives rather than unleashing them. Certainly, if we take Lyotard’s description of a suspicion of grand narratives as the defining characteristic of the postmodern mode, then we may conclude that nationalism is just one further example of a grand narrative that postmodernism is set to rail against. However, I would argue that it is Hutcheon’s interpretation which provides a more satisfactory reading to Poor Things, since in the novel the Scottish nation is not presented as an isolated metanarrative that one could challenge and overthrow to reveal a potential absence of nationalism. In the Pushkin example or in the book’s Scottish setting there is no

47 Jameson 54.
49 Hutcheon, Poetics 4.
51 Eleanor Bell ‘Postmodernism, Nationalism and the Question of Tradition’ Scotland in Theory 85.
52 Kelly 433.

national neutral position; nationalist forces are always in effect, in one form or another. For Scotland in particular, if we search for the ‘default setting’ whereby the metanarrative of nationalism is successfully challenged and the political validity of a distinct Scottish nation disallowed, we do not arrive at the absence of all nationalism, but the implicit reversion to a nationalism of a higher order, i.e. where the political / cultural unit to be defended becomes that of the Anglo-British imperial polity. Thus while Mathew Wickman notes that in A History Maker Gray offers an indictment of postmodernism’s place in history as the cultural production of an epoch where the forces of capitalism feel they have ended history and secured their domination like ‘owners of earlier empires’, 54 it is precisely issues of historiography in a context of Empire-building which dominate the narrative project of Poor Things, while Camille Manfredi remarks a similar critique of world empires in Gray’s 1982 Janine, Something Leather and A History Maker. 55

We are specifically reminded of this by several elements of the text which carefully situate the main narrative at the cusp of the nineteenth-and twentieth-centuries, thus coinciding with the historical dominance of the Victorian / Edwardian British state over a vast colonial empire. The character of General Blessington, with his associated stories of imperial military forces subjugating the native peoples in Africa and Asia, incarnates this era of a triumphant British Empire-state (206-7, 297-99) in which Scotland and the Scots were to play a key supporting role. As Wedderburn succumbs to madness he assimilates the British Empire with the Babylon of biblical prophecy, but he takes pains to situate Glasgow as the heart of this empire, an image which suggests both Scotland’s strategic importance and functional subordination (96-7). Respecting the same hierarchy, Bella Baxter describes herself as ‘citizen of Glasgow native of Scotland subject of the British Empire’ (47). The nineteenth-century with its rise of British expansionism is precisely the period when Scottish nationalism, in modern terms of a parliamentary political movement demanding independence, shines by its absence, as has been noted by the likes of Christopher Harvie. 56 Instead, conforming to the Unionist / Imperialist paradigm offered by Blessington, Wedderburn and Bella, the Scottish nationalism of the mid nineteenth-century was, in Graeme Morton’s phrase, ‘Unionist-Nationalism’, a celebration of independent Scottish character and history which was seen as having resulted in a successful Union of equals. 57

Cairns Craig makes a similar point about imperialism when he describes Poor Things as an illustration of how Scotland’s lack of coherent national narrative in the nineteenth-century is tied to the spilling over into different territories and cultures that the novel’s imperial strands display. 58 Due to this overarching presence of an Anglo-British imperial identity in the novel, the destabilising of the grand narrative of ‘minority’ nationalism does

56 ‘After 1815 semi-independent Scotland had been absorbed effortlessly into ‘British’ expansion. Scottish nationalism was pre-empted by British liberalism. Later on, as the second wave of ‘peasant’ nationalism broke on Europe, imperialism created a further identity, compensating for the weakening of the national institutions.’ Christopher Harvie, Scotland & Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics 1707-1994 (Second Edition) (London: Routledge, 1994) 72.
57 Morton does note, however, that this Unionist-Nationalism was already in decline by the 1860s, to be replaced by a growing focus on parliamentary nationalism through the campaign for Home Rule. Graeme Morton, Unionist-Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland 1830-1860 (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999) 188.
58 Craig, Modern Scottish Novel 237.

not represent mere postmodernist *ramfeezlement*, but serves to better reveal the hegemonic discourses against which it competes on unequal terms.

**The Rise of Sham-Gothic: Memory and Memorial**

One of the other facets of the ‘true nations’ passage is that it underlines the power of a national depository of culture and literature to shape experience and history. In the passage in question this relates to the folktales Pushkin is said to have learned from his nursemaid, whereas the whole of Gray’s fictional world is subsumed within a metaleptic narrative concerning the purported finding of McCandless’s memoirs by Michael Donnelly, the assistant of Elspeth King, who was at the time curator of Glasgow’s social history museum, the People’s Palace. This key narrative, which forms the introduction, describes how the discovery, preservation and transmission of cultural artefacts depends on the existence of a fragile infrastructure of memorialisation including museums, art galleries, universities and libraries, all of which have a role to play in maintaining and diffusing the images and texts which Gray claims are the basis of his story. 59 We can note that the People’s Palace, which has a particular prominence in the introduction and which is situated on Glasgow Green, 60 was opened in 1898, and is therefore an institution dating from the same high-water mark of British imperialism as the main events in the novel (albeit centred on the 1880s).

The process of memorialisation, so important to the formation of national narratives, can also of course involve the establishment of monuments. It is not only a way by which the historical figure can be durably inscribed into the collective memory, it can also be a means to canonise and actualise a nation’s cultural and literary sources: the fictional word literally becoming part of the material fabric of the nation. 61 *Poor Things* shows a keen awareness of

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59 The introduction, which mentions King and Donnelly by name several times, highlights the institutional dimension to this fragility through allusions to the cost of staging exhibitions, the lack of funding for social history and Michael Donnelly’s departure from the People’s Palace as part of the controversy surrounding Glasgow’s year as European City of Culture in 1990. The cultural debates of 1990 were also concerned with the decision of Glasgow’s Director of Museums and Galleries Julian Spalding not to appoint Elspeth King as keeper of social history in Glasgow, despite her 16 years as curator of the People’s Palace. This led to a media furor about the state of arts administration in Glasgow involving claims of prejudice targeting King’s gender, class and Scottishness. In this sense it was an early example of the issues that prompted and surrounded Gray’s ‘Settlers and Colonists’ essay. See James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks: Essay Cultural & Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992) 33, 47; John Weyers, ‘Why Elspeth King paid the price for a palace revolution’ *The Herald*, 29 May 1990, n. p., 10 May 2013 http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/why-elspeth-king-paid-the-price-of-a-palace-revolution-1.575009.

60 In *Poor Things*, Glasgow Green is given as the location of the home of George Geddes whose ‘job is to fish human bodies out of the Clyde’ (32). It is thus to Glasgow Green, future site of the People’s Palace, that Bella Baxter’s body is conveyed for autopsy before her resuscitation. This connection reinforces the significance of the People’s Palace in the novel.

61 Such processes continue in post-Devolution Scotland with a quotation by Alasdair Gray appearing on the Canongate Wall of the new Scottish Parliament: ‘Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation’. (Scottish Parliament Website. Visit and Learn page 14 October 2011 http://parlaimaid-alba.org/visitandlearn/21012.aspx). Yet the canonisation of Gray’s knowing fiction could not have given rise to a more complex network of referentiality as the verb is worked into the very matter of the nation and its political establishment. In particular, the stone plaque cites not ‘Alasdair’ but ‘Alisdair’ Gray beneath the lines of prose, leaving us with the canonisation, not of an author but of a phantasm. In any case, Gray himself denies authorship of the lines and has attributed them on more than one occasion to a ‘Dennis Leigh’ who is in fact Canadian poet Dennis Lee; see the essay written by Gray which takes the phrase as its title: Alasdair Gray, ‘Work as if You Live in the Early Days of a Better Nation: an Essay’ *The Herald* 5 May 2007, n. pag., 12 September 2011 http://www.heraldscotland.com/work-as-if-you-live-in-the-early-days-of-a-better-nation-1.827519; Dennis Lee, *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (1968), (Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1994).
this process, notably in the chapter ‘By the Fountain’ which revolves around the ‘Loch Katrine memorial fountain’ (44) which since 1872 has stood in Glasgow’s Kelvingrove Park (overlooked by Godwin’s home in Park Circus). This celebration of municipal water engineering (it is thanks to an aqueduct and tunnel system that Loch Katrine provides Glasgow with fresh drinking water) is also closely tied to the figure of Sir Walter Scott since atop the fountain can be found a personification of Scott’s ‘The Lady of the Lake’ which was itself inspired by Loch Katrine. Scott, situated in the ‘true nations’ passage as the contemporary of Pushkin, is, by analogy as well as by association, presented in the novel as a key vector of national consciousness himself. However, we should remember that this is the period when Victorian Scotland erected monuments which sought to celebrate ‘Scottish’ icons such as Scott (1844) or Wallace (1869) while presenting them as the guarantors of Unionism. Since a strong Union was reliant on a narrative which celebrated the coming together of the Home Nations, both Scotland and England were shown to be confident of their distinctive past, history and national character, with figures such as William Wallace re-evaluated in a manner supportive of such a British / Unionist perspective. According to this interpretation, only by securing Scottish independence in the fourteenth-century could Scotland and England enter the 1707 Union as equal partners. Thus Wallace was promoted as a key figure of Unionism and, through Burns’s Scots Whae Hae, was feted as the inspiration for Scottish regiments now proudly fighting alongside English forces within the British army. Such nineteenth-century visions of Wallace specifically countered the anti-English sentiment of the key text of Wallace mythography, Blind Harry’s fifteenth-century epic poem.

The Loch Katrine memorial fountain is also introduced in Poor Things through the prism of social injustice, as Archibald McCandless evokes problems of sanitation and hygiene linked to Glasgow’s water supply (44). So too is the Scott Monument which Victoria McCandless decries as another example of British ‘sham gothic’ architecture, exemplified by ‘Glasgow University, St. Pancras Station and the Houses of Parliament’ (275), since its ‘useless over-ornamentation’ is built on ‘needlessly high profits: profits squeezed from the stunted lives of children, women and men working more than twelve hours a day, six days a week in NEEDLESSLY filthy factories … ’ (275). While Victoria rails against the ‘Victorianism’ of the text which has attributed an origin to her individual identity only by deforming and ‘ornamenting’ the truth, she also extends her attack to the process of memorialisation at work in Victorian Britain where the loci of power, learning, culture and transport all materialise imperial dominance through obscene pomp, while simultaneously masking the human costs of the industrial economy.

critics have retraced the complex intertextuality of the variants of the motto in Gray’s work (see Stephen Bernstein, Alasdair Gray (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999), 173; Dimitris Vardoulakis, The Doppelgänger: Literature’s Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 294), and its slapdash memorialisation and complex referencing merely serve to highlight how problematic it is to institutionalise malleable cultural discourses.

62 Morton 155-188.
63 Morton 173, 176.
http://www.scottishaffairs.org/onlinepub/sa/devine_sa57_aut06.html
65 See also the illustrations where the fountain (presented under its alternative name of ‘The Stewart Memorial Fountain’), Glasgow University and The Midland Hotel (St. Pancras) all appear (295).

Thus Scottish nationalism is in no way an overarching metanarrative which the paradoxes and ironies of the text combine to disrupt and destabilise. Rather in the novel it is but an example of one minority narrative competing for prominence alongside other, more powerful narratives, such as British imperialism, British Unionism, British Labourism or the forces of capitalist enterprise. Indeed, it is only through the novel’s processes of narrative destabilisation that Scottish nationalism manages to break through the fissures in the dominant discourses which tend to keep it in check. For example, the closing pages of the novel take the form of a letter sent by an optimistic Victoria McCandless to Christopher Murray Grieve on Britain’s socialist future following Attlee’s victory in the 1945 general election: ‘A workers’ co-operative nation will be created from London, without an independent Scotland showing the way.’ (316). This closing passage underlines yet again the cacophony of competing discourses through its political irony as well as through its complex paratextual positioning which appears to offer narrative resolution while simultaneously denying this. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight the reader is prompted to view Victoria’s political certainties about the successes of the future workers’ co-operative as rather naive and is thus enjoined to reconsider the competing discourse of an ‘independent Scotland’ which she dismisses as an unnecessary stage in History. Thus a conclusion which appears to reject Scottish nationalism is, in effect, an invitation to reconsider it.

Rewriting the Nation
Through such examples it can be argued that Poor Things, for all its postmodernist contradiction and complex ontologies, has a mimetic function. It is not a novel which purports to hold a mirror to base reality but rather to the competing, irreconcilable discourses by which we attempt to make sense of this reality. Through the novel’s layering of discourses, a dominating nineteenth-century British imperialism competes with a twentieth-century progressive left wing Unionism, which competes in turn with International socialism and minority nationalism. This confirms Bakhtin’s view that the hybrid constructions of the polyphonic novel are not merely abstract semantic or rhetorical constructions, but have a social function, incarnating the clash of different representations of the world. These ideas are picked up by Marc Angenot for whom the disparate collages, the ambiguity and duality of the modern novel, represent the ‘cacophonic rumour of global social discourse with its discordant voices, its undecided legitimacy, its echoes and its parodies’. As such, the novel’s function is not normative, to determine right from wrong or to judge Scottish nationalism superior to British Unionism, but to draw our attention to the rhetorical framework that structures our world and to remind us of its inherent artifice, its sensitivity to perspective, its limitations and contradictions.

The archetext of Poor Things is Frankenstein, which provides us with a central figure of hybridity and ambivalence: the composite body is both self and other, it is both alive and dead. The composite textual entity that is Poor Things with its severed and sutured plots can be seen as foregrounding an ambivalent fascination for the totalising grand narrative which is

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66 This final fictional letter, which appears as a quasi-postscript, is presented as a historical document within a spurious annex of ‘Notes critical and historical / Notes historical and critical’ which accompany (and sometimes supplant) the various competing fictional accounts of the same events and characters.


both rejected and reaffirmed, as we attempt to order experience by fusing the cacophonic
discourses and scattered incidents of existence into a congruent, intelligible history. This
ambivalence is an example of what Hutcheon calls the contradictory postmodernist response
to emplotment,\(^69\) which clearly illustrates a wider critique of social discourse. This is certainly
relevant when it comes to the rhetoric of national identity, which, in the light of \textit{Poor Things},
can be seen as an incomplete, contradictory process of subjective ‘searching for meaning’
rather than an objective, verifiable ideology conferring an unchallengeable finality.

Furthermore, to think in terms of the nation involves ascribing a common identity and
a historical narrative to a country-wide collective of disparate persons, each with their own
idiosyncrasies and paradoxes, who, in addition, have lived through different historical
periods, each with only imperfect knowledge of themselves, their fellow countrymen, their
institutions, their culture. This wild collection of individual destinies can only be presented in
a coherent manner as the trajectory of a unified nation by the acts of framing, editing,
compiling, foregrounding, erasing, simplifying and revising – the very authorial processes
which lie at the heart of \textit{Poor Things}’ narrative complexity. On the one hand, we can think of
the essentialising tendencies of certain Scottish cultural critics who have offered up
unsubstantiated affirmations of ‘the typical Scot’ defined by his ‘inferiority complex’\(^70\) or
whose atavistic character is determined by his ‘ancestral tradition’ as a Gael.\(^71\) From a more
progressive perspective \textit{Poor Things} underlines the historiographic tensions evident in the
periodic re-appraisal of historical events, traditions and figures by successive eras, just as
Tom Devine charted the varied trajectories of Wallace before and during the Union.\(^72\) More
recently, the heated debate about Alasdair Gray’s purported anti-Englishness perfectly
epitomises the same narrative impulses we see at work in \textit{Poor Things}: how was an initial act
of discourse (Gray’s ‘Settlers and Colonists’ essay) stripped down, recalibrated, interpreted,
prompted into new contexts, condemned, defended? Which individuals were considered (or
considered themselves) legitimate commentators on Gray’s position or on the nation as a
whole (we can note the strong presence of literary figures on both sides, such as Allan Massie
or Kevin Williamson)? What could one ultimately conclude from the contradictory positions
voiced argued in a stramash of articles if not the fact that Scottish national identity (as all
others) is not a coherent objective truth but a skein of rival narratives? Just as Gray’s novel
cannot be reduced to the primacy of one viewpoint over another, so the nation is never the
resolution of the debate, but the very act of debating.

So the conception of the nation as cultural phenomenon and as a product of
competing discourses ties back into \textit{Poor Things}’ own self-aware problematic of identity
which centres on this same paradox: how does one represent a single, coherent narrative from
multiple, contradictory sources? The novel’s key concern, easily transposed to that of
national identity, is again one of narrative authority: who has a right to speak on behalf of
others? Who determines which narratives should be saved for posterity? Which narratives
will be considered a valid historical record? Which are to be judged inauthentic? If, in the
interests of plurality, we allow multiple narratives to co-exist then what further texts are
needed to justify their mutual (in-)compatibility, their hierarchical positioning, their

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\(^69\) Hutcheon, \textit{Politics} 68.
writing in 1983, such tendencies still abound in the popular press and pop psychology. See, for example, Carol
Craig, \textit{The Scots’ Crisis of Confidence} (Glasgow: Big Thinking, 2003).
\(^71\) Kurt, Wittig, \textit{The Scottish Tradition in Literature} (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1958) 337.

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contextualisation. If we paraphrase Roland Barthes, to represent the nation is to constitute the nation. The paradox of the nation is that it can only exist as anything edging towards a knowable entity when it is being described by a single, totalising, voice. The problems of authorship and authority *tout court*, are indissociable from this approach whose ideological inconsistency is all too commonly finessed. To reduce the multiplicity of the nation to a unifying, unproblematic national narrative would be to give in to the reactionary totalising tendencies which confer necessary order but which in doing so silence marginal voices and unorthodox narratives. On the contrary, Ian Bell gives a salutary reminder of how ‘Scottishness’ is a cultural concept that only exists through the multiple, contradictory definitions given by any number of novelists, historians, politicians, pundits and so on:

We must remember that, no matter what they may say to the contrary, none of these various commentators can ever legitimately claim to be disinterested or to speak authoritatively on behalf of everyone involved.73

*Poor Things* literalises these very issues: that of the hybrid construct whose vitality is born of contradiction and that of the presumption of ‘speaking authoritatively’ on behalf of others.

Conclusion

The ‘Lady Scotland’ whose trajectory to awareness is documented in *Poor Things* may be taken as a symbol of the nation, but only if we take her as a representation of Nairn’s modern Janus as quoted by Bhabha:74 the incarnation of a hybrid nation which is two-faced, irreconcilably drawn between past and present, fact and fiction, biology and culture, nature and artifice, agent of change and passive object. Philippe Hamon talks of how the distancing effects of irony and parody problematise a work’s ideological tenor, moving normative values and meaning-generation away from a totalising author and back to the subjective reader.75 With *Poor Things*’ discourse on nations presented within a thematics of hybridity and nourished with a keen sense of postmodernist artifice and aporia, individual readers are left little choice but to play an active role in determining meaning. By being forced to unpack the paradoxical construct of the nation, they are forced to engage with their own participative role in shaping the individual discourses, values, histories and narratives by which they collectively wish to be represented. Thus the duality and hybridity of *Poor Things* do not discredit nationalism, despite having furthered the sense of manifold Scotland, each containing within themselves competing discourses and populated by unstable and unknowable individual identities. On the contrary, the novel can be seen as promoting a new form of self-reflexive national rhetoric, a postmodernist nationalism aware of the tensions, contradictions and dangers that political nationalism carries within itself. Following David McCrone, Gavin Miller describes Gray as promoting a form of post- or neo-nationalism.76 In its rejection of essentialism and unicity, Gray’s work presages a nation which is only true in that it freely admits its duplicity, which is only unique in that it is the contingent product of multiple, shifting variables. By highlighting the seductive appeal of the grand narratives

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73 Bell 202.
which structure political thought and social belonging, it admits its filiation with such narratives. While the national metanarrative is destabilised to the extent that it can no longer claim natural supremacy over any of the other constructs or discourses with which it competes, the postmodernist national identity is aware of its being grounded in history, rhetoric and culture. It is thus extremely suspicious of the reactionary tendencies, the essentialist mythologies and unitary truths of an earlier age of nationalism. As such it is a fitting nationalism for the Scotlands of the twenty-first century.

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Cosmopolitanism and Subversion of ‘Home’ in Caryl Phillips’s A Distant Shore
Alan McCluskey

The works of Caryl Phillips have largely been approached from post-colonial theoretical perspectives, a trend which appears entirely appropriate given their recurrent themes of immigration, ethnic discrimination and the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, in some of Phillips’s more recent work, such as A Distant Shore (2003), one can observe preoccupations with issues that strongly resonate with the modern cosmopolitan literary tradition. The analysis below contends that A Distant Shore represents a change of direction in Phillips’s oeuvre towards a formally less experimental but thematically more cosmopolitan form of writing that sets out to subvert and redefine the idea of ‘home’. In the novels that precede it – Higher Ground (1989), Crossing the River (1993) and The Nature of Blood (1997) – Phillips employs experimental narrative structures that interweave disparate voices from different places and historical periods. While each voice in these works relates a separate set of experiences caused by different historical circumstances, they echo each other in their themes of exile, displacement and emotional trauma. In Higher Ground we hear the stories of a West African ex-slave, an incarcerated African American convict, and a young Jewish Holocaust survivor. In Crossing the River we observe an emancipated slave on a doomed ‘civilizing’ mission to Liberia, an elderly African American woman fleeing slavery, and an ill-fated love affair between an African American Serviceman and a British woman during World War II. With The Nature of Blood, Phillips more controversially juxtaposes the experiences of, among others, an emancipated African slave and a Jewish Holocaust survivor, both of whom struggle to adjust to life in societies in which they are considered outsiders.

A salient effect of these juxtapositions is to draw attention to familiar patterns in history that cause human suffering: prejudice, xenophobia and a reactionary fear of the other. In an excellent comparative essay on Higher Ground and The Nature of Blood, Stef Craps notes that the narratives of both novels exude humanist and cosmopolitan principles because they ‘invite the reader to recognize a common human essence that persists across space and time’. Although Craps does not examine A Distant Shore in his essay, these arguments are equally applicable to the latter novel, which also juxtaposes stories of human isolation and trauma. However, it is a much more formally conventional piece of work, with the two chief narrative threads converging largely on a single historical moment, mostly within the same geographical space. Furthermore, the novel is predominantly concerned with depicting a particular type of suffering resulting from static and reactionary conceptions of belonging at the individual, familial, and national levels. Indeed, the discussion that follows contends that an important effect of this focus is to critique the various scales of place-based loyalty in order to promote a critical cosmopolitan conception of home – what Phillips himself has called a ‘more fluid’ idea of human

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identity. This is achieved by undermining the very impulses that inform all exclusive notions of community, from the national to the regional and tribal levels.

Before the manner in which the novel achieves this is explained, the capacity in which the term ‘cosmopolitan’ will be used is first discussed. Although work in the field of cosmopolitan thought has gained force in recent years, it has been embraced and applied in a broad variety of disciplines, from sociology and political philosophy to cultural theory and literary criticism. The term therefore remains somewhat nebulous and at times frustratingly elusive. What is more, this elusiveness appears to be not just a bewildering concomitant of cosmopolitan thought, but an integral component of the theory itself. We can, of course, identify a number of traits and preoccupations that distinguish cosmopolitanism from other fields of thought.

Almost all major scholars that have written on the subject in recent years have recognised that cosmopolitanism is closely associated with certain concepts of belonging or mutual identification. As Sheldon Pollock writes, it involves practices of inhabiting ‘multiple places at once, of being different beings simultaneously, of seeing the larger picture stereoscopically with the smaller’.

For David Held, the cosmopolitan must wield the ability to ‘mediate traditions [and] stand outside a singular location (the location of one’s birth, land, upbringing)’.

Meanwhile, Kwame Anthony Appiah defines the cosmopolitan sensibility as ‘an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend [human lives] significance’.

Amanda Anderson helps explain the importance of vision in cosmopolitan practice by arguing that through ‘the cultivation of detachment [and the] aspiration to a distanced view’, the cosmopolitan can be liberated from the normative pressures of society that suppress an independent creative spirit and sense of individualism. This prioritisation of distance is echoed by Bryan S. Turner, who contends that ‘ironic distance’ from one’s social or cultural context is an essential step towards gaining the kind of universal vision that gives cosmopolitanism its socio-political valency. ‘The principal component of cosmopolitan virtue’, he argues, ‘is irony, because the understanding of other cultures is assisted by an intellectual distance from one’s own national or local culture’. Such ironic distance has significant socio-political bearing because it ‘produces a human skepticism towards grand narratives of modern ideologies’.

Rebecca Walkowitz mirrors Turner in his contention that aesthetic strategies of perceptual and attitudinal distance can be of significant socio-political

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8 Turner, 57.
value. Describing what she calls ‘critical cosmopolitanism’ (a term also used by Walter Mignolo in his more socio-politically-oriented intervention), \(^9\) Walkowitz maintains that the field’s aesthetic priorities of eclecticism and distance can be linked directly to cosmopolitanism’s socio-political preoccupations in that they stem from ‘an aversion to heroic tones of appropriation and progress, and a suspicion of epistemological privilege, views from above or from the centre that assume a consistent distinction between who is seeing and what is seen.’ \(^10\) Writing specifically on A Distant Shore, Walkowitz believes Philips achieves such a critical cosmopolitan vision by conspicuously subverting ‘several scales of belonging’, \(^11\) from the immediate local community, to larger regional and national levels of commonality.

This is a contention that raises some interesting parallels with, as well as differences from, Stephen Clingman’s prolific critique of the novel. Approaching the text from a slightly different theoretical viewpoint, Clingman argues that A Distant Shore ‘shows transnational faultlines within national space’. \(^12\) These faultlines refer to the clashing of two highly dissimilar modes of seeing and belonging that is brought about through the somewhat unlikely friendship that develops between Dorothy, a middle-aged private school teacher from northern England, and Solomon, an asylum seeker from a war-ravaged African nation. Clingman argues that, given their radically different experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds, the unusual friendship constitutes the disruption of two singular national narratives which would otherwise stifle alternative modes of seeing the world. While this analysis offers a valuable insight into the transnational and cosmopolitan direction of the novel, the discussion that follows argues that Phillips’s critique of belonging also operates beyond the national-transnational model Clingman proposes in order to more thoroughly collapse exclusionary attitudes of community.

Although cosmopolitan thought does not dismiss the concept of the nation state as a socio-political apparatus that can facilitate its conciliatory aims – Gavin Kendall for instance argues that ‘the state [is] an institution that can be productively coopted into the cosmopolitan project’ \(^13\) – it takes issue with the ethics and philosophy that underlie nationalism. To return to the words of Bryan S. Turner:

Cosmopolitanism does not mean that one does not have a country or a homeland, but one has to have a certain reflexive distance from that homeland. Cosmopolitan virtue requires Socratic irony, by which one can achieve some distance from the polity. \(^14\)

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Certainly, cosmopolitanism shares some of the conciliatory aims of transnational theory; but its critique of exclusiveness goes further than the latter’s preoccupation with undermining reactionary nationalism. Indeed, the current discussion argues that *A Distant Shore* interrogates prescriptive ideas of belonging and mutual identity by exposing and subverting the kind of behaviours that foster their development, rather than attacking the nationalist model in the abstract. Indeed, the crucial distinction between this approach and Clingman’s is that the latter appears to presume xenophobia and other exclusive forms of social behaviour are attributable to nationalism instead of other, smaller scales of collective identity. Perhaps the trope that fits on the smallest scale of all, and which forms the primary focus of the current discussion, is that of ‘home’.

For Avtar Brah, the concept of home is intimately bound up with the socio-political issues associated with belonging and exclusion in a given material context. As she writes in her frequently cited work, ‘The question of home … is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of “belonging.”’\[15\] This view of ‘home’ opens up the concept from its rigid associations with place and origin much in the same manner as Paul Gilroy seeks to expand the rigid adherence of identity politics to geographical ‘origins’ in order to encompass more tangible considerations of material movement and experience. In his celebrated work *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Gilroy critiques the fact that ‘modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes’.\[16\]

Inasmuch as it rejects the notion that belonging is necessarily tied to a fixed geographical space, cosmopolitan thought dovetails with both Brah’s and Gilroy’s theorisations. However, it bears reiterating that cosmopolitanism is also typified by a motivation to go further and extend this critique so as to more actively pursue the cultivation of *distance* from static modes of belonging and seeing. As Kendall argues:

> Ideally, the reflexive cosmopolitan feels little or no ethical and political commitment to local and national contexts and in fact is likely to show an irony, almost bordering on suspicion, toward their own national myths and discourses. This demonstrates a broad willingness to step outside stable, privileged and established power categories of selfhood.\[17\]

This critical cosmopolitan orientation to belonging has also been openly expressed by Phillips. Speaking in an interview with Paula Goodman, he states quite explicitly that his writing has persistently involved an attempt ‘to try to convince myself that it’s not necessary to have a very concrete sense of home. That actually, those of us who don’t

\[17\] Kendall 122.
have a concrete sense of home are okay’\(^{18}\). ‘And I want to write, and say’, he continues, ‘that it’s okay to have a multiple sense of home. It’s okay that home can’t just be summed up in one sentence … it’s time to let go of the necessity to be rooted, because with it comes all sorts of unpleasantness.’

The current analysis seeks to illustrate how this subversive handling of home and belonging becomes a primary preoccupation of \textit{A Distant Shore}, one which Phillips achieves largely by exposing the kind of reactionary impulses that lie behind xenophobia and discrimination of the other.

\textbf{Exile and the Subversion of Place-based Belonging}

Dorothy is in many ways worlds apart from the younger Solomon, an African immigrant she comes to befriend. However, the paths of the two protagonists converge on an emotional and psychological level when both become ‘exiles’ from their respective countries of birth: Solomon literally has to flee his home country to escape death, while Dorothy becomes culturally and socially estranged from the ‘old England’ she has erstwhile called home. Yet, despite the characters’ patent dissimilarities, Phillips draws our attention to the fact that their lives offer a number of parallels. These parallels are subtly evoked through narrative juxtaposition (a familiar technique used by Phillips throughout his oeuvre that prompts the reader to search for some of the universal themes and patterns that underlie human experiences of suffering).

In the case of Solomon’s narrative, we witness an exile that has been imposed by the violence of a brutal civil war in an unnamed Sub-Saharan nation that resembles Rwanda or The Congo. Sparked by ethnic divisions, the war that engulfs the country compels all to pledge allegiance to one of the two tribal groups and join in the violence. At this stage in the narrative, Solomon is known by another name: Gabriel. Young and impressionable, Gabriel appears to subscribe to the parochial clan loyalties observed by the mass of the population, and enthusiastically joins the local militia fighting the government forces. What is perhaps more significant about this moment in the character’s development is the degree to which he observes a rigid and myopic notion of belonging, one which is bolstered by an essentialist view of humanity. As he informs us:

\begin{quote}
We were the smaller tribe. We worked hard and we did not harm anybody. We tried to do what was best for ourselves and what was good for our young country. We wanted only to live in peace with our brothers, but it became clear that this was impossible. My father told me that they were jealous of us, for our people ran many businesses; not just in the capital city, but in our tribal land in the south. We formed the backbone of the economy, and therefore we had much influence. (137)
\end{quote}

Thus, by repeating the reductive and simplistic logic through which his father accounted for the causes of the conflict, Gabriel’s first-person narrative also illustrates the extent to which social divisiveness is entrenched within the prevailing culture.

\(^{18}\) Goodman 93.
Importantly, Phillips draws our attention to the fact that such an essentialist form of identity emanates from and is nourished by certain impulses that are universally recognisable: jealousy, suspicion and fear. Of course, there may be a germ of truth in Gabriel’s insistence that the majority tribe waged war because they were ‘jealous’ of the economic success of the minority, but in making this parochial utterance the protagonist exacerbates the perception of irreconcilable division between the two ethnic groups, thus further necessitating the need to deploy the binary distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’. However, after enduring a number of traumatic and painful experiences both in his native country and Western Europe, we begin to see this short-sighted vision undergo significant change, which, as will be explained, appears to culminate in a nascent critical cosmopolitan vision.

These experiences begin when the civil war takes a turn for the worse and Gabriel witnesses the rape of his two sisters and brutal murder of his mother. Realising he must leave the country or face death, he turns to an uncle with strong economic connections. Somewhat shamelessly, the latter has set up a trafficking racket that charges exorbitant sums aiding refugees to escape the country, and Gabriel’s ethnic or familial ties do not help him avoid being similarly exploited: ‘I want nothing more than to take you in as family’, his uncle tells him, ‘[but if you want to get out of the country you must] bring me two thousand dollars … This is all I can do for you’ (88). In this instance the sense of ethnic unity and loyalty that has erstwhile informed Gabriel’s worldview, and motivated his committed participation in the civil war, is irrevocably compromised. This is not the last time he is exploited by members of his own ‘ethnic group’. Arriving in London after a hazardous journey across the English Channel, he is cheated by Emmanuel, a fellow countryman he meets in a bar (175).

It is ironic then, that when Solomon gets into trouble with the authorities in England – accused of statutory rape and subsequently held in a detention centre – he only receives help from those of a dramatically different ethnic, national or socio-economic background: there is Jimmy, a beggar who takes pity on Solomon (now named Gabriel) and helps him make a few pounds selling magazines to passersby; then there is Katherine, a legal aid lawyer who goes out of her way to help him escape jail and a group of angry locals. And finally, there is Mike, an Irish lorry driver who picks up Gabriel hitchhiking and brings him home to Weston, where he provides the latter with food, shelter, and eventually a car and job.

The introduction of Mike’s highly unconventional ‘home’ seems to be the only moment in the novel in which the term is used positively, with Gabriel poignantly describing the place as his ‘blessed home’ (292). The house itself officially belongs to Mr and Mrs Anderson, who use it as a dynamic, open space for people ‘who [are] in need of temporary accommodation’ (292). In this sense, the notion of home is redefined as an inclusive, egalitarian space inhabited by people out of the virtue of individual choice rather than the coincidence of birthplace. Such an open, inclusive notion of home strikes a chord with the communal places of freedom David Harvey labels ‘spaces of hope’ (i.e. of collective social empowerment and transformation). Central to this cosmopolitan conception of home is its generous...

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handling of the stranger, who is treated not with ‘tolerance’, but with cosmopolitan conviviality.

Such a distinction strikes a chord with Jacques Derrida’s attempts to articulate a new, cosmopolitan form of hospitality: one that is not conditioned and regulated by rigid etiquette or mores. In his much-lauded work on the subject, he argues that ‘to be what it ‘must’ be, hospitality must not pay a debt, or be governed by a duty: it is gracious, and ‘must’ not open itself to the guest [invited or visitor], either ‘conforming to duty’ or even, to use the Kantian distinction again, ‘out of duty’.20 This inclusive hospitality to the stranger complements Kendall’s more theoretically explicit attempts to define cosmopolitan values: ‘Cosmopolitanism is a new type of social solidarity; one where strangers are recognized and incorporated, where one’s own assumptions and stories are comparable to all others, and where a variety of dimensions of social statuses are opened up, instead of closed off.’21 This social inclusiveness, with its open vision of human interaction and relationships, is clearly echoed in the novel, with Gabriel telling us that everybody else in the house ‘came and went: businessmen relocating and who were in need of temporary accommodation while looking for a home for their families; executives at conferences; working-men between contracts; or specialists who were required to operate a piece of machinery’ (287). But perhaps the most significant feature of the house that crystallises its cosmopolitan subversiveness is portrayed by the forms of address by which the residents know Mrs and Mr Anderson. By having all the residents of the home address these two figures as ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad’, Phillips conspicuously decouples the signifiers from their traditional association with blood bonds, thereby suggesting their applicability to all relationships of care, even those between strangers.

However, the apparent unconditional hospitality the ‘family’ shows Solomon is placed under strain when the house is vandalised by a group of xenophobic hooligans, an action which intimidates the other residents. Although ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad’ still accord Solomon the same degree of hospitality, we observe a clear change in their attitude that signals the presence of fear. This fear is subtly conveyed when Mr Anderson attempts to ‘explain’ to Solomon why the vandals have targeted the house. Interestingly, the rationale Anderson evokes in doing this is one that appeals to a notion of space: ‘You see, Solomon, this isn’t a very big Island and we don’t have that much room’ (289). Such an exclusive conception of space, with its primary motivation of fear and paranoia of the other, presents a sharp contrast to the inclusive conviviality of the boundless space of ‘home’ Solomon praises earlier in the narrative.

Anderson’s disclosure also reveals the way in which, by explaining the xenophobic attitude of fear held by the locals, he partially adopts its logic (employing the symbolically divisive ‘we’ that Gabriel himself subscribed to earlier in his native Africa). Phillips therefore presents the reader with a compelling insight into the ways in which xenophobic impulses can spread in a community, even to those who profess not to ‘personally’ subscribe to them.

21 Kendall 157.

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This somewhat paradoxical method by which xenophobia can be observed and propagated is also illustrated in the rambling sequence of arguments used by Mike to ‘explain’ the reason why some in the community resent immigrants. While insisting that ‘I’m not prejudiced’ (290), Mike proceeds to play devil’s advocate by iterating some of the reasons he thinks multiculturalism has ‘failed’ in the region. In so doing, he applies a number of crass and absurd stereotypes that reveal not only his own ignorance of the topic, but also simultaneously (and ironically) the very attitude of suspicion of otherness that would make the failure of multiculturalism inevitable:

[These] Indians, they still make their women trail after them, and they have their mosques and temples, and their butcher shops where they kill animals in the basement and do whatever they do with the blood. I mean, they’re peasants. They come from the countryside and most of them have never seen a flush toilet or a light switch … It’s these kinds of people that cause others to have bad attitudes and to do things like they’ve done. (290)

This paranoid, xenophobic utterance forms a stark contrast with the inclusive, convivial concept of ‘home’ previously associated with the house and its residents. Significantly, the words also mark the point at which Solomon is compelled to move away from the community and into the ‘new settlement’ of Stoneleigh, the place where he eventually comes to make the acquaintance of Dorothy, another resident and ‘exile’. However, moving neighbourhoods does not allow Solomon to escape the xenophobia that forced his flight from the Anderson residence. Neither does the move to Stoneleigh offer Dorothy a sense of home. Like Solomon, she finds it difficult to adjust to the hostile villagers who inhabit the older region of the settlement and appear to resent the addition of a new element to their ‘community’. On walking through the village for the first time, she comments that the people ‘stared at me like I had the mark of Cain on my forehead’ (6). The landlord of the local pub then gives her a chilling introduction to the insular mentality of the villagers by way of an anecdote. Recounting the story of Dr. Epstein, a General Practitioner of Jewish extraction who moved to the village with her two children a few years earlier, the landlord explains how she ‘didn’t last long’ (8) in the village because the locals ‘didn’t take to [her]’ (9). In a manner similar to the evasive ambiguities with which Mike expresses his adherence to the xenophobic status quo, the landlord starts by first distancing himself from the hostile reactions of the ‘community’, which ‘made her life a misery’, declaring: ‘Don’t get me wrong, I liked Dr. Epstein. Nice woman’ (9). However, this appeal to an otherwise inclusive attitude is again heavily qualified by the expectation that the other attempt to adopt the manners of the majority. According to the landlord, the Epsteins’ antagonistic reception was their own fault: ‘They weren’t even trying’, he explains, ‘You know what it’s like, you’ve got to make an effort’ (9).

However, in spite of having ‘lived around these parts’ all her life, Dorothy’s move to Stoneleigh ultimately ends in much the same manner of exclusion and isolation suffered by the Epsteins and, indeed, Solomon. Returning to the area following a painful divorce from a long marriage, Dorothy is clearly lonely and emotionally vulnerable, a state which she appears to tolerate by leading a life...
governed by ascetic routine: ‘I long ago forswore the vanity of trying to disguise the grey [of my hair] and leaving it natural leaves me stacks of time. Even though I no longer have to be at school at eight in the morning, I’ve kept the habit of being an early riser. I’ve generally had a bowl of cereal and some orange juice by the time the cars are pulling out of the driveways and the kids are running off to catch the school bus’ (20).

Such conditioned, normative habits appear to complement the conformist attitude she initially appears to share with the rest of the ‘community’, with the fixed patterns of living forming a prescriptive model which she expects others to follow. Shortly after making the acquaintance of the newly-arrived Solomon, she sees the latter washing his car outside his house and comments censoriously to herself: ‘I want to tell him that in England you have to become a part of the neighbourhood. Say hello to people. Go to church. Introduce your kids to the new school … I’ve yet to find the proper moment to talk to Solomon about the way he flaunts himself in his driveway with that bucket of soapy water and his shammy’ (16).

In spite of this vaguely (and almost comically) xenophobic attitude, Dorothy and Solomon nonetheless strike up a brief but meaningful relationship that brings comfort to both. As we have observed, such comfort is sorely needed to assuage the loneliness both characters suffer. However, while Solomon’s loneliness is brought about by the anxiety associated with being physically uprooted from his place of birth, Dorothy’s solitude is caused by a sense of detachment that occurs almost within an entirely static space: ‘England has changed’ (1), she tells us. However, we later learn that this failure to assimilate into the community is not only a problem brought by the changes in the physical composition and appearance of the society and its spaces. Like Solomon, who describes himself as ‘a man burdened with hidden history’ (300), Dorothy is haunted by a troubled past. As the plot unfolds, the narrative gradually strips away the layers of routine and small-town fastidiousness that regulates her life to reveal a number of unsettling psychological scars. Evoking the story of Eva Stern in The Nature of Blood, whose narrative traces an unsettling descent into madness and suicidal depression, Dorothy’s mental deterioration develops as a clear consequence of her inability to overcome the events she endured in her past.

Approximately halfway through the narrative, Dorothy discloses to the reader the suppressed trauma she bears after witnessing and wilfully ignoring her father’s prolonged sexual abuse of her younger sister. One effect Phillips creates by waiting so long to reveal the character’s tortured past is to force us to consider the extent to which the experience informs her blinkered, conformist worldview. We re-examine the seemingly sentimental references to her father she has made earlier in the narrative, seeing their significance to her psychological state in an entirely new light. Her habit of regularly evoking her father as she pursues her mundane day to day tasks therefore adds a layer of emotional distress to her voice that was hitherto unheard, and is all the more disturbing because of its restraint. The physical space of the village also comes to take on a more sinister aspect, being a repository for the character’s most painful memories.

Indeed, when we examine closely the personality and beliefs of her father, we gain an important insight into the origins of Dorothy’s xenophobic attitudes: ‘Dad’, she tells us, ‘has some opinions about coloureds’ (64). Shortly after this recollection,
she pictures her father reacting to the news of her friendship with Solomon: ‘Dad has his one ugly word, and I could have predicted it before he even opened his mouth. Slag. He doesn’t even want to look at me any more, that’s how bad it is’ (65). Clearly the outburst she imagines her father making is saturated with the same antipathy to otherness exhibited in various degrees of intensity by Dorothy and others in the community. But the degree of anger in which the utterance is made, with its grotesque presumption of sexual obligation to her own ethnic group, connotes a provocative link between the ‘conservative’ values of xenophobia and the unpalatable impulses associated with incest.

Phillips therefore appears to suggest that the desire for England to remain unchanged – an England that is static and exclusive of the other – follows an impulse that is, like incest, inherently insalubrious. Indeed, in his essay ‘Extravagant Strangers’ (1997), Phillips critiques the kind of incestuous image of a ‘pure’ England as a ‘mythology of homogeneity [that] excludes and prevents countless numbers of British people from feeling comfortable participating in the main narrative of British life’22. However, in Dorothy’s case it is a myth that she, at least on some psychological level, appears to have endorsed and invested herself in emotionally. Indeed, attempting to subscribe to this myth no doubt contributes to her failure to feel attached to the England she sees changing around her. The perceived gulf that then emerges between this mythical temporality of a ‘pure’ England and the ever-shifting present eventually leads to a chronic sense of isolation and the onset of psychological illness.

As with Eva Stern, Dorothy’s narrative ends in complete mental collapse, which, as in The Nature of Blood, Phillips also renders through the highly effective utilisation of syntax. In Eva’s narrative, Phillips deploys parentheses to ‘bracket’ particular strands of consciousness and denote the character’s psychological compartmentalisation. By bifurcating her self into different personas, Eva attempts to limit the psychological damage she incurs in the harrowing concentration camps, a strategy that leads to schizophrenia and eventual suicide. Phillips employs similar syntactical techniques to depict the mental anguish Dorothy suffers when Solomon is murdered by racist thugs. However, instead of the bifurcation of self we witnessed Eva undergoing in the camps, Dorothy’s narrative becomes syntactically broken up between outside voices and her own. Hers is therefore left quite literally as a single, isolated voice, detached from the changing world outside. The following scene takes place at the novel’s end, with Dorothy, distraught and now without friends after Solomon’s death, being visited in a mental hospital by her ex-husband. In order to fully capture the effect Phillips achieves here, a lengthy quotation is required:

Why am I laughing? I stop laughing. He’s got to go now. I mean, this is embarrassing. I stare at him, which clearly makes him even more uncomfortable … The nurse puts down her book, and I notice her fold over the corner of the page to mark her spot before she closes it shut. … (‘Dorothy’.) I turn and look at him. He’s smiling. He only said my name to get my attention … (‘Dorothy’.) Again he stops. If he thinks I’m going to help him out,


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then he’s mistaken. I’ve got nothing to say to him, especially if he wants to sound like a broken record … He should go now. I shouldn’t have to tell him this, or make a fuss in any way, but he’s leaving me no choice. (310-11)

By establishing an unconventional relationship with Solomon, a man whom her father and most of the community disapprove of in their vision of a static, traditional England, Dorothy begins to reject a restrictive and paranoid manner of existence. In the sense that she has subverted the rigid precepts of national and regional community, one could say that she has attained and practiced a form of cosmopolitan autonomy – or as Pierre Macherey would put it, speaking not exclusively about cosmopolitanism, the character succeeds in ‘ruptur[ing] … the historico-social totality’23 of her context. Of course, the tragic trajectory of the narrative, which results in the violent severance of their friendship and Dorothy’s descent into mental illness, places such a singular triumph within a poignantly restricted frame. This subversion of place-based belonging resonates with Gabriel’s own experiences in the Anderson household and, indeed, in England more generally. By interrogating exclusive conceptions of belonging, particularly that of ‘home’, Phillips appropriates the signifier in a manner that advances a more fluid, more inclusive, and more cosmopolitan idea of the term.

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‘Cosmopolitanism and Subversion of “Home” in Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore.*’
Alan McCluskey.
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Mobility and Anxious Cosmopolitanism: Jamaica Kincaid’s Among Flowers
Pramod K. Nayar

Eden is never far from the gardener’s mind. It is The Garden to which we all refer … and it is forever out of reach … Vermont, all by itself should be Eden and gardenworthy enough. But apparently, I do not find it so. I seem to believe that I will find my idyll more a true ideal, only if I can populate it with plants from another side of the world. (Kincaid 189)

The ‘transnational’ in its adjectival form describes ‘processes between or beyond national boundaries involving several nations or nationalities.’ As a noun, it describes ‘someone operating in several countries’ (American Heritage Dictionary). As Donald Pease notes in his introduction to a volume on transnationalism and American studies, when used as a noun, ‘transnational’ refers to a condition of ‘in-betweenness … flexibility, non-identification, hybridity, and mobility.’¹ Since it lacks a ‘thematic unity’, it refers at once to ‘factual states of affairs’ as well as to ‘the interpretive framework through which to make sense of them’ (4). Pease further notes that the term frequently ‘bears the traces of the violent sociohistorical processes to which it alludes’ (4). As an interpretive framework, then, the ‘transnational’ re-evaluates social and cultural formations within national imaginaries by showing/tracing how identities, people, objects and ideas were never bound within national borders, or even national identifications. The transnational may be studied in its localized sites and domains. The analysis maps the flows, mergers and confluences of the transnational within these local sites. One such site is the subject of the present essay: travel and mobility. Rüdiger Kunow in the same volume proposes that since mobilities constitute cultural relations, then mobility must become ‘part of … the critical lexicon wherein a field of study defines itself as cross-cultural, comparatist, and transnational.’² However, what cannot be left out of the study of the transnational is the anxiety and tensions attendant upon the cross-cultural encounter and the awareness of socio-historical processes that influence these encounters. It is this anxiety of the transnational that I examine in a text that foregrounds mobility and cross-cultural interaction.

In 2001 the well-known author Jamaica Kincaid embarked on an expedition, with collector Daniel Hinkley and a collector-couple, Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones, to the Himalayan regions of Nepal to collect flowers for her garden back in Vermont, USA. The trip was funded by the National Geographic, which later also published her travelogue, Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya. Kincaid writes with an


awareness of the socio-historical processes and events of botanical imperialism. She is also, simultaneously, aware of the privileged mobility she enjoys as a First World traveler in a Third World nation. Her travelogue exhibits a cultural insiderness that redefines her mobility as a ‘different’ (being Black) First Worlder in a Third World context and setting. This cultural insiderness is a characteristic, as has been recently argued in the case of Indian travelers of the colonial period, of the philosophical-ideological accompaniment to the transnational condition – of cosmopolitanism.3

However Kincaid’s narrative offers a slightly different kind of the confident, even strident, cosmopolitanism celebrated in the fiction of Salman Rushdie or the critical theorizations of a Homi Bhabha. This essay traces the emergence of an ‘anxious cosmopolitanism’ in Kincaid’s text. It is a cosmopolitanism that emerges in the cultural expertise and privileged travel of the First Worlder in a Third World region, but it is also riddled with tensions that suggest Kincaid’s anxiety around her legacies of horticultural empires and her privileged position. Further, anxious cosmopolitanism in Kincaid is the result of an attempted distancing from both her legacies and her present identity as a First Worlder expert in gardening.

Before examining the discourse of uncertainty a preliminary discussion of the discursive contexts of anxiety is in order.

Motility and the Apparatus of Travel
Kincaid is assured by her fellow traveler Dan Hinkley before they set out that the expedition will be an ‘adventure’ (7). The term first occurs on page 1 of her narrative when she describes an earlier journey (through China) as a plant-hunting and seed-collecting adventure.’ The term’s evocation of a history of such adventure-travel is a crucial preliminary moment in the discourse of uncertainty that Kincaid eventually articulates. The term is elaborated in conjunction with a quasi-fantasy, again recalling a history of such journeys:

This account of a walk … can have its origins in my love of the garden, my childhood love of botany and geography, my love of being isolated, of imagining myself all alone in the world and everything unfamiliar, or the familiar being strange… (7)

Kincaid’s articulation of an imaginative geography echoes other famous articulations, notably that of Jim Hawkins in RL Stevenson’s Treasure Island and of Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s problematic colonial text about Africa, Heart of Darkness.4 Hawkins says:


4 I use the term ‘imaginative geography’ in Edward Said’s sense, referring to the practice of ‘designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is “ours” and an unfamiliar space beyond “ours” which is “theirs”’ so that ‘both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ours’ (Said, Orientalism, New York: Vintage, 1994 [1978]) 54. Kincaid
I brooded … over the map [of Treasure Island], all the details of which I well remembered. Sitting by the fire in the house-keeper’s room, I approached that island in my fancy, from every possible direction; I explored every acre of its surface; I climbed a thousand times to that tall hill they call the Spy-glass … Sometimes the isle was thick with savages, with whom we fought; sometimes full of dangerous animals that hunted us; but in all my fancies nothing occurred to me so strange and tragic as our actual adventures.⁵

And Marlow in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* confesses:

> when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there.⁶

Thus ‘adventure’ in Kincaid’s account of her trip has contextual resonances with earlier colonial narratives of exploration.

Her fantasies of travel and adventure among plants constitute her imaginary reordering of the world as a resource for her Vermont garden. The reference to her earlier trip suggests that she is not a novice in this kind of travel. She is a seasoned traveler. The appending of the map in the preliminary pages also recalls earlier narratives, both fictional and real, of travel, discovery and adventure right from Europe’s Early Modern period to the Victorian Age. She is also an experienced traveler backed by an organization, the National Geographic Society, and she travels in the company of a veteran plantsman and botanist. The inoculation program makes sure she has prepared her body against the onslaught of ‘diseases for which I had not known antidotes existed … and diseases I had not known existed’ (5). The visual on the cover, where Kincaid the author-traveller poses with a backdrop of the massive Himalayas, recalls the adventurer-explorer narratives of the nineteenth century.

Yet in the rest of her narrative Kincaid effectively elides this apparatus of travel. Kincaid focuses on the experience of travel, and not on her motility. Motility is ‘the way in which an individual appropriates what is possible in the realm of mobility imagines herself alone in a world divided into the familiar and the unfamiliar. In a particularly illustrative segment capturing the imaginative geography of Kincaid’s childhood and adulthood she speaks of her thoughts on Kathmandu: ‘to think of Kathmandu again: when I suddenly was in the middle of that part of it, the Thamel, I was reminded of feelings I had when I was a child, of going to something called “the fair,” something beyond the everyday … I did feel as if I was in the unreal, the magical, extraordinary’ (17-18). The fantasy of a different, unfamiliar land is not therefore a feature of childhood alone – it works its power into adulthood as well when territories, real and imagined, merge as Kincaid experiences Kathmandu’s landscape.

⁵ RL Stevenson, *Treasure Island*.
⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. 

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and puts this potential to use for his or her activities. All the features described in the preceding paragraph constitute her motility. This crucial component of the apparatus of travel is something Kincaid downplays and, I suggest, abrogates so as to deny her cultural authority as an empowered First World traveler. It is with this abrogation that Kincaid crafts for herself the anxious cosmopolitanism of the transnational age.

The Uncertain Traveller
The first thing that strikes one on reading Among Flowers is Kincaid’s complete lack of epistemological, discursive and physical certitude as a traveler in the Indian subcontinent. This image of the uncertain traveler is inaugurated even before her departure to Nepal.

Kincaid’s text opens with a series of events that undermine the eager expectations of the imminent expedition. Her passport is lost, 9/11 intervenes and she over-strains her foot while training (4-6). Her son Harold stands weeping in the doorway when she leaves (7-8). The stresses from these emotional events are also mingled with her own eagerness to go on the plant- and seed-collecting trip: ‘I always want to be somewhere where seeds are being collected, I want to be in the place where the garden is coming into being’ (7). Yet she experiences a disquiet as she drives off because she suspects that ‘the experience I was about to have would haunt many things in my life for a long while afterward, if not forever’ (8).

What emerges in these opening moments is a travelogue dedicated less to pleasure than to anxiety, and given more to uncertainty rather than to confidence. The Caribbean-born, US-resident author of influential postcolonial texts – texts on gardening such as My Garden and travelogues like A Small Place – is an uncertain traveler.

Her first night in Kathmandu she spends looking out for bats: ‘I was very afraid of them’ (18). Her awareness of bats comes from textual knowledge: Roy Lancaster’s travelogue of Nepal where he says that ‘they [the fruit bats] look like weathered prunes’ (19). This description troubles Kincaid: ‘the idea that bats could look like something to eat was unsettling’ (19). She labours under the impression that these bats ‘swooping around in the deep blue-black night air’ were ‘hoping to realize the sole purpose of their existence: settling into my hair’ (19). When she finally sees one, she ‘made a tiny squeal’ (15). Kincaid’s way of dealing with this anxiety is to put things into ‘perspective’: ‘What is a lone rat scurrying in a small restaurant in a crowded city next to a small village situated in the foothills of the Himalaya full of Maoist guerrillas with guns?’ (19)

Kincaid foregrounds several things simultaneously in the space of one paragraph. First, she presents herself as a traveler who has a minimal, and therefore inadequate, knowledge of the regions she is traveling in. The hyperbole – that the bats exist in order to infest her hair – is self-conscious: she now presents herself as prone to ridiculous anxieties. Finally, when she seeks to demonstrate a measure of control over these natural sources of anxieties, she deploys a textual-rhetorical control: Kincaid erodes the threat of the bats by gesturing at a far greater threat, a human one, that of the Maoist guerrillas.


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Writing about neocolonial travelogues, Mary Louise Pratt has argued that the genre exhibits a lack of cultural authority, where the difference from earlier, colonial travelers is in ‘what one is entitled to claim to know about others.’ From very early in her narrative, as indicated above, Kincaid refuses the position of the confident ‘observer.’ Instead, she presents herself as a person who has consumed images of Nepal, but declines to possess any real cultural authority to pronounce anything more than highly subjective, nervous judgments on the spaces she is travelling in. That is, Kincaid carefully refuses the authority of the First World traveler, or her antecedents, the colonial plant collecting travelers, by depicting herself as an uncertain, partially informed, textually reliant, near-hysterical traveler. If, as Jill Didur proposes, Kincaid’s text is a ‘counter-colonial narrative’, then this ‘counter’ component emerges in epistemological and discursive instability that Kincaid’s text foregrounds.

Kincaid now proceeds to fill out this early sketch of herself as the nervous traveler. She is grateful of the crows she sees on her second morning in Nepal that their species’ ‘band of gray … makes the crow seem less menacing, more friendly, as if it is not capable of the devious cunning of the crows I am used to seeing here in North America’ (19). At breakfast she wonders what the Maoists would be up to: ‘since they couldn’t kill the king, would they kill me instead?’ She goes on:

From time to time I lost a sense of who I was, what I thought myself to be, what I knew to be my own true self, but this did not make me panic or become full of fear. I only viewed everything I came upon with complete acceptance … I loved my tent and would probably have died for it, and am now so glad things never came to that. (20-1)

This sense of self-alienation, of a loss of the sense of the self, makes her more accepting, Kincaid claims. Hyperbole returns to the narrative when she believes she would have died for her tent, but admits that she is glad the events didn’t demand it. She expresses a lack of interest in the royal palace she passes by, looking, instead, for the fruit bats on the trees. Unfortunately, ‘everyone, even the driver, could see them, but I could not’ (21-2). There seems to be no respite for the uncertain traveler: she admits she does not see the bats because her eyes are influenced by ‘a combination of the anxiety, wonder, and strange happiness’ (22). Her anxiety levels soar when she enters the aeroplane which ‘resembled something my children would play with in the bathtub … like an old-fashioned view of the way things will look in the old-fashioned future’ (22). While airborne ‘it seemed to me as if we were always about to collide with these sharp green peaks; I especially thought this would be true when I saw one of the pilots reading the day’s newspaper’ (22). Dan assures her that ‘the other times he flew in this part of the world, the pilots always read the newspaper and it did not seem to affect the flight in a bad way’ (22-3). Then, in a natural sequence of events and narrative, Kincaid ‘worried about it [the plane] landing, as I had been worried

about it getting up into the air and staying there’ (23). Upon landing the presence of soldiers immediately reminds her that this was ‘evidence of the dreaded Maoists’ (23).

The incipient nostalgia for the comforts she has left behind follows close upon the anxiety at the new place: Kincaid recalls her ‘fantastically equipped kitchen’ and the local supermarket where she could ‘choose to buy or not buy, strawberries in summer, winter, any time I liked’ (24-5). (That said, it is interesting to note that Kincaid strives to prove that her anxiety is not simply due to her immersion in an all-new environment: she is an anxious person anywhere. Thus she tells us of her doctor in the USA, ‘a man named Henry Lodge, who I often believe exists solely to reassure me that I am not about to drop dead from some imagined catastrophic illness,’ 24.)

Later there occurs what appears to be the most horrific manifestation of Kincaid’s colonial legacy in the postcolonial world. Kincaid is describing the local men who help them on their expedition:

There was Cook; his real name was so difficult to pronounce, I could not do it then and I could not do it now. There was his assistant, but we called him ‘Table’, and I remember him now as ‘Table’ because he carried the table and the four chairs on which we sat for breakfast and dinner. There was another man who assisted in the kitchen department and I could not remember his name either, but we all came to call him ‘I Love You’, because … he overheard me saying to my son, Harold, ‘I love you’, and when he saw me afterward, he said in a mocking way, ‘I love you’… There were many other people, attached to our party, and they were so important to my safety and general well-being but I could never remember their proper names … This was not at all a reflection of the relationship between power and powerless … This was only a reflection of my own anxiety, my own unease, my own sense of ennui, my own personal fragility. I have never been so uncomfortable, so out of my own skin in my entire life… (26-7)

In terms of narrative strategy, foregrounding her anxiety, constantly reprising it for us, ensures that Kincaid’s utter lack of attention to the surroundings and locals gets both subsumed and forgiven. By drawing attention to the inadequacy on her part, by emphasizing that the lack of interest in the names of the local was not an embodiment of their – tourist-native, First World-Third World – power relations, Kincaid puts in place a discourse which she hopes is not of First World carelessness, arrogance and authority. Rather, Kincaid abrogates her cultural authority – of indifference to the native-as-ciphers in her narrative, but also the right of the First Worlder to ‘name’ the native just as Robinson Crusoe once did to/for ‘Friday’ – within inexplicable anxiety (‘my own personal fragility’, as she puts it). In a sense this is the climactic moment of the uncertain traveler/narrative.

But Kincaid also embodies the individualized leisure travel of the privileged Black First Worlder here, and thus departs from the routine stereotype of the compelled African traveler image (as Tim Youngs has argued about African American travel writing10). She does this partially when she gains financial authority – she

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overtips the porter who carries her luggage at Kathmandu because she was ‘so grateful to be [her]self’ – as a First Worlder, paying in dollars, over the native (11). She also simultaneously asserts this privileged First World traveler when she bestows, along with her companions, fresh (nick)names and identities upon the local guides and helpers.

It is this simultaneity of roles, of the anxious traveler and empowered First World traveler, that make Kincaid’s work such a fascinating text in terms of its narrative strategies and politics. We see this simultaneity expressed, again, in the register of anxiety. After she is taken to see a local school, Kincaid, along with her fellow-travelers ‘felt’ sending money or books for the school ‘would be a good thing to do when we came back to our own overly prosperous lives.’ Kincaid says this ‘feeling’ stays with her until much later when she writes her travelogue, ‘a strong feeling.’ But, she admits, she has ‘done nothing to make this something beyond [her] feelings’ (29). Kincaid here gestures at her empowered First World traveler and her anxious traveler roles that together make for a considerably ambivalent text.

(Horti)Cultural Insiderness

Thus far we have seen how Kincaid resists the tag of an empowered First World tourist by presenting herself as an anxious and uncertain traveler. The discourse of anxiety that permeates Among Flowers is, I shall now demonstrate, complicated by another discourse, that of cultural insiderness.

Kincaid admits to losing her sense of self, distance and direction. She is troubled by a ‘confusing notion – sky or ceiling’ (34). Later she offers a catalogue of her confusions: ‘my understanding of distances collapsed’, ‘The Himalaya destroys notions of distance and time’, ‘my senses were addled’, ‘I could not make sense of, tell direction for one’ (36-8). Soon after this account of her disorientation she writes:

I was making this trip with the garden in mind; so with everything I saw, I thought, how would this look in the garden? This was not the last time that I came to realize that the garden itself was a way of accommodating and making acceptable, comfortable, familiar, the world, the strange. (44)

She carries memories of her Vermont garden, and when she collects plants and seeds, she ‘began to see [her] garden again’ (113). This itself, as Jill Didur rightly points out, marks out the garden as a space where the foreign is domesticated. But what is more significant is that the enclosed Vermont garden functions as a mental landscape of comfort, a dream secretum iter (the garden of retirement in English poetry) and fantasy hortus conclusus (the enclosed garden) in the radically different and disorienting landscape she now inhabits in Nepal. The disorientation in space that Kincaid experiences produces and heightens her anxiety, and she attributes it to the land: ‘the Himalaya destroys notions of distance and time’ (37). This anxiety, induced by her displacement from the Vermont garden to the ‘wild’ Himalayas is compounded due to/by the human presence therein. Kincaid writes: ‘when we stopped for lunch, they crowded around and stared at us in silence. They watched us as we ate our lunch. It felt odd...’ (38). The reversal of the scopic regime of the European explorer (documented in every travelogue from Columbus downwards) that Kincaid records here is also the context of her discomfort in the land she is exploring. Her emphasis on

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being observed and monitored gestures at the Himalayas being a laboratory where strange new arrivals – the Americans – are subject to the same kind of testing, observation and internment as some exotic species.

This mental or imaginative *hortus conclusus* of a Vermont garden comes into existence even within the Himalayan setting as a mode of domesticating the exotic. Christa Knellwolf has argued that colonial exoticism worked by decontextualizing native/local cultures and relocating them into new ones so that the threat of the local, unknowable and mysterious ‘foreign’ could be controlled within museums, exhibitions and gardens.\(^{11}\) By juxtaposing her image of her Vermont garden alongside the irreducible physical setting of the Himalaya, Kincaid at once decontextualizes and recontextualizes the exotic. She begins to see her garden again when she picks up her exotic seeds in what might be read as an act of grafting, in terms of both botany/horticulture and her own mental topiary.

This domestication of the exotic is, I argue, an instance of cultural insiderness where Kincaid is able to visualize and mentally relocate the Nepali plant life into a familiar setting because she understands plants, planting and plantation. Kincaid does not here function as a naïve tourist wonderstruck at the variety of plant life she witnesses in the Himalaya. She functions as a knowledgeable planter and gardener. This is an index of her location as a cultural insider to planting – and Western plant-collection and planting. Such cultural insiderness alleviates her anxiety, and repositions Kincaid vis à vis the landscape she passes through.

Kincaid’s cultural insiderness is first made evident when she displays considerable textual knowledge about Nepal. Drawing upon what Mary Louise Pratt terms *antecedent literarios*, or prior/earlier literary productions, Kincaid cites Roy Lancaster, Joseph Hooker and other plant hunters (18-19, 31, 96-7, 103, 106, 115, 119-120, 132). Kincaid says about Smythe’s work:

> That night … I began reading *The Kanchenjunga Adventure*, Frank Smythe’s book … I was drawn to it as if a spell had been cast over me; first the book and then the mountain, and all the way on my walk, there was nothing I wanted to see more … For my twenty some days I spent walking among the hills of the Himalaya, I lugged this book around; and for many days after I got back, this book was like a child’s comforter to me. (31)

Didur argues that Kincaid cites predecessor plant collectors in order to set herself apart from these predecessors, operating on what Didur terms ‘different economic and cultural imperatives of European exploration and colonialism’ (182).\(^{12}\) But it is precisely this textual knowledge that first offers her the imaginative geography of the place she is about to go to, and thus *prepares* her for the exotic. At one point she says of a particular species: ‘I had seen pictures of it, but before this, it held no interest to me’, thus suggesting that textual knowledge enables her to deal with the ‘real’ (135).

Cultural insiderness is also exhibited in Kincaid’s very evident expertise in botany. Her knowledge about the plants positions her as a knowledgeable plant-

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\(^{12}\) Didur, “‘Gardenworthy’” 182.

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collector, even in an alien landscape, and even when the plant species she encounters
do not quite fit her existing categories and frames of classification. Here, for example,
is Kincaid’s account of her encounter with annuals:

I recognized them from shape and texture, only I had seen them in another
color, deep purple. I had seen those same flowers in a nursery in Vermont and
in a garden in Maine but only in deep purple. To see them now in pink while
remembering them in purple enhanced my feeling of anxiety and alienation …
Now as I trudged along … I was thinking of something I had known in passing …
trying to latch on to it as if it were one of the certainties in the whole of life.
(41-2)

Admittedly, Kincaid here is persuading us to discern her alienation in the midst of the
flowers. The disconnect between her textual, but also previous experiential knowledge
and her present setting is what Kincaid wants us to note. Despite this alienation and
anxiety, she comes to the flowers with considerable authority, speaking of annuals,
their care and their growth in the same breath as she explains her anxiety at a new
species. She also adds a serious qualifier even as she highlights her anxiety: ‘all the
time I was walking around in Nepal I was mostly thinking of my garden’ (42). Later,
when walking through a village she ‘recognizes plants from Mexico’, and is reminded
that ‘the Garden of Eden is our ideal and even our idyll, the place where food and
flowers are one’ (64-5).

What I am proposing here is that Kincaid’s anxiety about being in a
disorienting place with Maoists for neighbours is negotiated through her cultural
insiderness with botany (so perhaps we can think of it as horticultural insiderness).
Kincaid therefore draws upon her motility to engender mobility. This is the mark of a
certain kind of agency where Kincaid is able to negotiate with the Himalayan
landscape, her fellow travellers and even the locals to some extent, based entirely on
her expertise. Further this assertion of cultural and quasi-scientific authority as a
botanist and horticulturalist is a self-fashioning with considerable ideological
purchase. It enables Kincaid to assert individual agency and to quietly erase the
financial and structural institutional authority bestowed on her by the National
Geographic society. Motility, therefore, is what constitutes Kincaid as a (horti)cultural
citizen, and one who is able to traverse multiple cultures.

Being an extremely self-reflexive amateur botanist Kincaid is also aware of the
politics of gardening, and thus again exhibits a certain cultural insiderness of the
knowledgeable. In an extended meditation on gardening she writes:

I have made a garden in a part of the world where the flora is interesting and
full of wonder enough. I only have to turn to a page in the travels of William
Bartram and there I will find any number of plants … that enthrall me. But
something that never escapes me as I putter about the garden, physically and
mentally: desire and curiosity inform the inevitable boundaries of the garden,
and boundaries, especially when they are an outgrowth of something as
profound as the garden with all its holy restrictions and admonitions must be
violated. The story of the garden, when it is told by the gardener, is an homage
Here Kincaid invokes politics and myth in order to reference not only the Biblical Eden (the space of primal transgression) but also national and geographical boundaries that were violated by enthusiastic plant collectors in the colonial era. In addition to setting her narrative as a counter-colonial one, Kincaid firmly situates her garden, gardening and plant-collecting expedition as stemming from a passion that had nothing to do with colonial cultures of collecting. She sets herself, about half-way through the narrative, as cleverly knowledgeable about the plants she sees – there is very rarely complete awe or wonder in her narrative.

It is just this one aspect, her garden, and concomitant meditations upon Edenic spaces, the secretum iter and the hortus conclusus of her Vermont setting, that mediates between Kincaid and the immediate landscape of Nepal. There is little reference to any interaction or negotiation with the local cultures, other than botanical ones, in Kincaid.

**Anxious Cosmopolitanism**

Jill Didur argues that Kincaid demonstrates a diaspora ethics that seeks to establish an ‘equivocality between her own experience of colonialism and the experience of subaltern Nepalese in the twentieth century’. Whether Kincaid establishes an ‘equivocality’ is an arguable point. As already noted her travel was funded by the National Geographic. It appears as though Kincaid quietly glosses over the problematic associations of the organization with colonialism and ethnographic profiling of races, now well documented in several studies. Even the journalism (that is, non-scientific and non-anthropological work) that the National Geographic published was, as Carlos Tatel reading the visuals of the magazine in the age of American expansion has shown, ‘very anthropological, containing cultural meanings’ that were suited to American political, militaristic and cultural projects of the age. Such representations, in science, anthropology or travel accounts, notes Tatel, contributed to the ‘imagining and imagining of the non-Western world’. It constructed ‘Otherness’ in different registers, whether in science, medicine or literature.

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But what Kincaid does achieve is a special sense of cultural insiderness that situates her beyond and simultaneously within colonial travel traditions. Zoran Pečić describes Kincaid’s travelogue as exhibiting a ‘hybridity’ when she simultaneously ‘invok[es] and subvert[s] the colonial travel narrative.’ The ambiguity of being aware of her own colonial legacy of exploitation and gardening, and her sense of dislocation and alienation, says Pečić, locates her ‘in an uncanny space between the familiar role of gardener and the unfamiliar position of the world traveler.’ This hybridity is essentially a self-conscious cultural insiderness where Kincaid is aware of the legacy of colonial travel and is unable to abandon it, and instead sets out to convert what is a clear First World to Third World expedition into a personal one, erasing therefore the structures and ideologies that frame her entire travel.

We have seen how Kincaid presents herself in two important ways: as an uncertain First World traveler and as a (horti)cultural insider conscious of her legacy of colonial plant collection. I now propose that these two identities remain in tension to produce an anxious cosmopolitan identity in Kincaid’s narrative. ‘Cosmopolitanism’, as Amanda Anderson theorizes it, is the sense of detachment from several places. My spin on Kincaid’s cosmopolitanism proposes several additional layers to this ‘detachment.’ First, as noted before, her detachment from her home in the USA is physically and emotionally anxiety-inducing. Second, her awareness of her location in the history of colonial botany makes her anxious to ensure her detachment from this context of her travel. Third, her cosmopolitanism founded on a (horti)cultural insiderness, to which I shall come soon, is also anxious because she wishes to personalize her expertise and thus move it away from the history of horticultural empires. Her anxious cosmopolitanism, in other words, is a politically aware cosmopolitanism. It is the cosmopolitanism of a neo-colonial subject empowered by First World funding but conscious of her expertise as being made possible due to, not her racial but her socioeconomic and national affiliations (American, First Worlder). Her anxiety resides in the forced detachment she practises and exhibits from all her legacies: as Caribbean (with its fraught history of plantation and slavery), as a diasporic migrant in the USA with its history of racism, as a First Worlder embarked on a journey to a Third World region, where the two regions are connected in an iniquitous relationship. I use the term ‘anxious cosmopolitanism’, therefore, as a departure from the confident, even strident, cosmopolitanism of a Rushdie or a Kureishi in the postcolonial canon. Kincaid does not quite celebrate her cultural insiderness that facilitates her cosmopolitanism because her self-reflexivity tempers it with a historically inflected awareness of her privileged role. I now turn to the moments in and moves through which Kincaid’s anxious cosmopolitanism emerges.

Kincaid’s performance as cultural insider becomes more complicated when she undertakes two key acts, acts that Peter Hulme identifies as central to the footsteps

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17 Pečić 153.
genre of travel writing itself. First, Kincaid demonstrates a felt responsibility to the places she is passing through, the worlds of the Nepali borders and the people there. Second, she also is conscious of the predecessors who had travelled on these same routes (Hooker, Lancaster, Smythe). These moments, Hulme notes, often come as epiphanies, and in Kincaid are moments of intensity. I shall now trace the emergence of Kincaid’s anxious cosmopolitanism in terms of these moments and moves in her narrative.

First, it is Kincaid’s very (horti)cultural insiderness that also enables her to perform a major fashioning of identity. Having presented herself as a very conscientious and enthusiastic gardener Kincaid justifies her collection expedition as a ‘natural’ transgression by the gardener (especially in the passage quoted above) even as she refrains from presenting herself as a confident colonial collector. That is, Kincaid wishes us to see her acts of boundary-crossing and fascination for exotic plants in the Himalaya not as part of an older colonial project but as the inevitable result of her interest in gardening and planting. With this Kincaid shifts the grounds of discourse away from imperial-colonial plant collection – exemplified by Joseph Hooker and in the collections of Kew and other gardens studied by Lucille Brockway and Richard Drayton – to a more personalized, individual enthusiasm for plants. This shift is what characterizes the postcolonial plant collector who, aware of the legacies of colonial botany, steers as far away from it as possible. The exotic is the nervous exotic – she does seek plants for her garden, but she distances herself from the wonders of the exotic by focusing on her subjective experiences of anxiety rather than wonder. The fact that she downplays her National Geographic affiliation and sponsorship also suggests an attempt to steer away from the prototype of the First World traveler (over whom, given the history of colonial travel, hangs a shadow of suspicion).

This last point, of Kincaid downplaying her ‘lineage’, so to speak, is also an act where cultural insiderness with colonial history and plant collecting situates her in the wake of predecessor travels which she tries to disown. She is, as she admits, replicating the trails and travels of Hooker, Lancaster, Smythe and other colonial explorers. This positions her firmly as a cultural insider, within a problematic history. Thus Hooker had explored the plant species of Borneo and other places to document the potential of importing them into England as well as to ‘report on the capabilities of Labuan, with reference to the cultivation of cotton, tobacco, sugar, indigo, spices, guttapercha, etc.’ And now Kincaid hopes to acquire material to populate her American garden.

A second move, and moment, in Kincaid is the recognition of the local. At an early moment in the narrative she writes: ‘I saw the people and took them in, but I made no notes on them, no description of their physical being since I could they could not do the same to me’ (77). This suggests an awareness of the incessant ethnographic documentation of almost every colonial traveler of the nineteenth century. Her refusal to perform ethnographic acts – documentation – of this kind immediately sets Kincaid in contrasting positions with the colonial legacy of travel. Another significant moment occurs when Kincaid’s ‘local’ responsibility becomes visible towards the end of the narrative. Kincaid writes:

It was brought home to me again, that while every moment I was experiencing had an exquisite uniqueness and made me feel everything was unforgettable, I was also in the middle of someone else’s daily routine, someone captured by the ordinariness of his everyday life. (166)

Her quest for flowers and the exotic, like that of her predecessors’, Kincaid realizes, is also woven into the very ordinary lives of the people she passes by (and will never meet again, or know with any degree of intimacy). She follows in the wake of Lancaster and Hooker, but is more conscious of the Maoists today, the poverty of the villages she passes through, the load carried by the porters, etc. She is at once, therefore, loyal to the trails of her predecessors and attentive to the present world she passes through. It is this present ‘ambulant gloss’ (Peter Hulme’s terms) on the colonial traveler that ultimately constitutes Kincaid’s politics, that of an anxious cosmopolitanism. This ‘ambulant gloss’ on predecessor texts/travelers where she exhibits a certain amount of overlapping allegiances across global and local, First World and Third World, is a crucial moment in the making of Kincaid’s anxious cosmopolitanism.

Kincaid’s multiple allegiances that she faithfully documents offer us a dynamics of identity-making. Kincaid (i) refuses to be just a cultural insider to the tradition of colonial botany, (ii) is a willing cultural insider to plantation and gardening and (iii) as a footsteps traveler remains firmly sensitive to the (postcolonial) present. Pointing to both the past record of colonial travel and the present –she opens with 9/11 and foregrounds the Nepali Maoists’ animosity towards Americans – Kincaid distances herself from both. This is the politics of Among Flowers. Kincaid arrives as a footsteps traveler in the wake of confident, mercenary colonial explorers, but seeks to establish herself as an anxious individual, eager only to find materials in her individual capacity, for her private garden. It was not, like Joseph Hooker’s, a national project. Now, natural history, of which plant collection, cataloguing and exhibitions were integral constituents, preceded ethnographic and racial classifications, and emphasized ‘nature’ over ‘culture.’ The exotic was therefore the savage, primal and pre-modern other.21 By resisting focusing exclusively on the plants as exotic, by demonstrating knowledge about the plants while also being alert to the ‘culture’ – human presence, habitation, Maoists – around these scenic landscapes, Kincaid announces her clear departure from her predecessors. Kincaid tracks down

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21 Knellwolf 16.
plants, encounters ‘nature’, but at no point does her (horti)cultural insiderness prevent her from aligning nature with culture.

Kincaid both recalls and enacts the history of plant-collection and thus embarks – and this is the third move/moment – on a process of what Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz term ‘memory citizenship’, where ‘memory-work’ or ‘performances’ of memory, regardless of citizenship status, situate the individual within the past, within histories of nations, races and ethnicities. Migrant archives of memory, they argue, constitute a new engagement, multidirectional and transnational, with historical pasts. Kincaid’s constant return to Lancaster, Smythe and other colonial explorers suggests a conscious memory-work that situates her as a citizen of a particular kind of past and history, but does not guarantee a comfortable citizenship. It is a performance of memory that makes her a subject of the kingdom of colonial botany. Yet, her transnational mobility makes this citizenship complicated. She does not forget, she performs her memory citizenship and yet she constantly undermines this citizenship.

In the fourth and perhaps her most important move, Kincaid explicitly references her cosmopolitanism, having arrived at this via a not very comfortable route of uncertain travel, cultural insidership and memory citizenship. Kincaid admits being like any other American tourist, seeking souvenirs of her visit (167). In the passage I have cited as the epigraph to the essay, Kincaid foregrounds her garden ideal. But what is important is that she sees her Vermont garden as a cosmopolitan space, ‘populate[d] … with plants from another side of the world.’ The process of ‘populating’ this potential garden is one of anxious cosmopolitanism.

Amanda Anderson in her work on cosmopolitanism has argued that cosmopolitanism is often the consequence of a tension between elitism and egalitarianism. While there is an expression of planetary expansiveness in cosmopolitanism, writes Bruce Robbins, it is combined with an ‘unembarrassed acceptance of professional self-interest.’ Such a cosmopolitanism resists national histories, parochialism and insists on a ‘worldliness.’ These tensions result not in detachment but in ‘overlapping allegiances.’

First, Kincaid’s memory performances as well as her First World tourist roles bestow upon her a citizenship that is elite. Yet, her alertness to locality and local dynamics make her quasi-egalitarian. Her interest in populating her Vermont garden is described in a tone that articulates in equal parts, First World empowered/enabled desire and localized anxiety:

We had in our possession seeds that, if properly germinated, would produce some of the most beautiful and desirable flowering plants to appear in a garden situated in the temperate zone; at the very same time we were in danger of

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24 Cited in Anderson 74-5.
being killed and our dream of the garden in the temperate zone, the place in which we lived, would die with us also. At the very moment we were projecting ourselves into an ideal idyll we were in between life and death … We walked away from the experience of spending the night with seeds of flowers we loved while all the time vulnerable to people who might not like us and decide to do something about it. (169-170)

Kincaid acknowledges that the purpose of this plant-collection is to build a garden in the temperate climes of ‘her’ country. This dream/ambition is however also tempered in the very next sentence with an intense awareness of the immediate location (the world of Maoist Nepal). This is the simultaneity of home and world, distanced from both.

Later, in a market she sees fruits that she recognizes: ‘food that I, a person who grew up on an island not far from the Equator, was familiar with’ (178). She however wishes to leave, ‘our destination was home and the comfort and beauty of our gardens’ (181). Ironically, when unable to leave because the airport is under siege and growing desperate, Kincaid and her companions ‘were thinking of ways to get back here, ways to look at the landscape and find plants that would grow in our gardens’ (184). 

Kincaid constantly moves between First World safety and the security of her ‘temperate’ garden and the anxiety of populating it with plants from other parts of the world. Her allegiances are therefore multiple: First World, colonial history, postcoloniality and responsibility. What I am calling ‘anxious cosmopolitanism’ is the uncertainty that is at once derived from and haunts these allegiances. One does not ever get the sense that she is comfortable merely collecting seeds in Nepal, surrounded by poverty, for her Vermont garden. Neither does one get the sense that she is at home in the Third World landscape. Her longing for Vermont and its secure secretum iter – as opposed to the dangerous, ‘wild’, Maoist-infested landscape of Nepal – and her ‘ambulant gloss’ of predecessor travels seem to suggest a cosmopolitanism born out of an intense awareness of her legacies, discrepant locations and ethical responsibility.

With her empowered transnational mobility – even when she is marooned at the airport, where Maoists and soldiers are facing off, she is able to think of a return visit – and her imaginary geography of a globalised garden Jamaica Kincaid represents a new, if anxious, cosmopolitanism of the First World.

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'Mobility and Anxious Cosmopolitanism: Jamaica Kincaid's Among Flowers.' Pramod K. Nayar
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In public and academic discourses, it is the metaphors of flow and fluidity that has most visibly dominated descriptions of the historical phenomenon we think of as contemporary globalisation. It has become axiomatic to speak of national borders dissolving and leading to the worldwide circulation of goods, people, information, images and cultures. For sociologist Manuel Castells, for example, writing as early as the 1980s, what makes contemporary globalisation as effected by developments in information technology distinctive is the way a ‘space of flows’ has emerged alongside the older ‘space of places’.

1 Arjun Appadurai’s memorable use of ‘scapes’ (e.g. mediascape, technoscape, ethnoscape, ideoscape) to characterise a complex, interrelated and shifting global cultural economy has been influential in arguments about the diminished significance of the nation-state as a conceptual and organisational paradigm in thinking about modernity and culture.

2 Zygmunt Bauman has called the current state of global modernity ‘liquid,’ justifying his description on the grounds of modernity’s ‘self-propelling, self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive “modernization”, as a result of which, like liquid, none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long.’

3 Metaphors of flow and liquidity imply, of course, lack of friction and obstruction, ease of communication, and flexibility of subjectivity. It is easy to be seduced by such tropes; the problem, as Anna Tsing has pointed out, is when this metaphorical language is adopted uncritically and universally rather than viewed as part of specific and localised claims about scale commensurate with, if not undergirding, certain investments in notions of globality and locality.

4 Indeed, critical detachment from the rhetoric and poetics of flow in discourses of globalisation is also necessary, I argue, in order to be able to attend more carefully to questions about representations of embodiment and materiality that would otherwise be elided in considerations of globalisation. What happens to the explanatory force of accounts of smooth globalisation when the body comes into the picture? What does it mean to be, not just a global subject, but an embodied global subject?

These are questions that bilingual writer and film-maker Xiaolu Guo provokes in her debut novel in English published in 2007, A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers.

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5 Xiaolu Guo, A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers (New York, Anchor Books, 2007). The novel will be referred to as Dictionary for the rest of the article. Guo was already an established author in China before she started writing in English and translating and reworking her Chinese novels into English. She moved from China to the U.K in 2002.

'Becoming a Global Subject: Language and the Body in Xiaolu Guo’s A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers.' Angelia Poon.

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Guo’s novel is striking for its preoccupation with bodies, materiality, and tactility. The narrator and protagonist of the novel is a character named Zhuang Xiao Qiao who calls herself ‘Z’ for short in the face of English speakers unable to pronounce her name and unwilling to try, a common enough move that is shorthand for the hegemonic tendency of globalisation to simplify or subsume cultural and linguistic differences for the sake of dominant groups. Z moves to England for a year to learn English as part of a not entirely self-willed process of transforming herself into a global subject and embedding herself even more firmly and irrevocably in the social, economic, and linguistic networks that characterise modern day globality. Building upon this basic plot premise, the novel explores the phenomenological way language intersects with the body as it represents Z’s embodied bilingual subjectivity while she learns English and encounters the West. What does it mean in visceral and corporeal terms to learn a new language and how is the acquiring of cultural knowledge figured in bodily images in the text? As Z seeks to figure out her place in the world – the relationship between home and away, and Chinese and Western cultures – as part of her global subjectivity, the word-flesh nexus assumes symbolic and narrative importance and the body becomes a slippery and paradoxical signifier of liberation and entrapment, self-sufficiency and deficiency, as well as communication and non-communication. Again and again, the text teases and flirts with the boundaries of language and the material body to test the possibilities of intimacy and communication in a globalised world. At the same time as it discloses how the body is constructed by language, the novelistic text also raises the prospect of the linguistically-resistant body, of how, in short, the body can exceed and evade language to offer instead its own inarticulable yet reassuring and expressive meaning.

Written in struggling English that improves as the narrative progresses, Guo’s novel constructs a ‘private personal voice’ for narration and resembles a notebook or diary registering narrator-protagonist Z’s increasing competence in the language; it is divided into what appears to be multiple and separate entries that are a hybrid of sketch, note, and missive which Z addresses to her lover or ‘you’ but which are also occasions for ruminating upon cultural differences, specific words, aspects of grammar and other vagaries of the English language. Each entry is prefaced by the dictionary definition of a word; thus we may read the text that follows variously as an inflection, a repudiation, and/or an elaboration of the word. Unfolding in linear fashion, month-by-month over the space of a year, the novel contains scraps of texts including the instructions on a box of condoms, newsprint, and excerpts from ‘you’’s diary, echoing perhaps the multifarious ways in which the global subject at this contemporary moment seeks to construct coherent meaning from a mélange of fragments. For its narrative architecture, the novel draws upon elements of various literary

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6 See Shumei Guo, ‘New modes of Women’s Writing in the Age of Materialism,’ trans. Gerald W. Cheung, Yomei Shaw and Terry Siu-han Yip, Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature: Issues in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong ed. Kwok-kan Tam and Terry Siu-han Yip (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010). Guo has noted how, from the 1990s onwards, many Chinese women writers started to reject the ‘grand themes in socialist representation’ by turning to a more personal mode of writing that dwelled on the body and ‘the unique life experience of an individual’ (160).

7 I use the term ‘private personal voice’ as described by Susan Lanser in her book Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992). Private voice refers to ‘narration directed toward a narratee who is a fictional character’ as opposed to public voice which is ‘narration directed toward a narratee “outside” the fiction who is analogous to the historical reader’ (15). Personal voice is used to refer to autodiegetic ‘narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories’ (18).
forms including the travel narrative with its description of cultural encounter and exchange, and in a more temporally-compressed manner, the bildungsroman or the education novel, that ‘symbolic form’ of modernity8 described by Franco Moretti which negotiates and manages such central tensions as ‘mobility and interiority’9 and ‘individuality and socialization.’10 Rachael Gilmour defines Guo’s novel as ‘translational,’ of a piece with texts that bear the ‘traces of multiple languages’ and which ‘foreground and dramatize the processes of translation of which they are both product and representation.’11 According to this reading, Guo constructs her protagonist’s subjectivity from between languages, demonstrating in the process, the instabilities of translation.12 Indeed, the text pays considerable attention to the problems of intercultural understanding and the practices of transculturation. Through this focus, it gives the lie ironically to its own title since it proves the very idea of conciseness – ‘Concise meaning simple and clean’ (8) (italics in the original) – to be a chimera, an impossible ideal.

Dictionary begins with Z describing her feelings on board the flight from China to England and explaining how the impetus for her learning English in the first place comes not from her but her parents, one-time peasants in a small village who stumbled into the shoe-making business and found new wealth and a new sense of global relevance. Z’s physical journey to England to learn a second language may easily be read as being at one and the same time a journey of self-discovery that comprises a sexual awakening, a heightened sense of her Chineseness, and an increase in Western cultural knowledge and cultural capital. In this sense, the transformative journey to the West may appear allegorically to underscore a common enough Eurocentric historical narrative that it is the West which inaugurates China into modernity, a narrative which postcolonial criticism has sought to challenge in multiple contexts in the last few decades. Under Western tutelage, the Chinese subject learns how to be modern and global. This finds an echo in the novel as Z’s lover serves as her teacher who, among other things, actively encourages her to travel and enrich her repertoire of experiences. ‘You,’ the lover whose Hackney home Z moves into, is a fount of knowledge in more ways than one, including linguistically, culturally, and sexually. Yet the text deliberately troubles this linear reading of progressive development, identity and embodiedness through its exploratory depiction of the possible, multiple meanings of corporeality – meanings it offers, sometimes only to dismantle.

To learn a language means to acquire a body. In her book, Haunted Nations, Sneja Gunew takes up this proposition, drawing upon Michel Foucault’s notions of a technology of the self to explore the ‘somatic effects and affects’13 of learning and speaking English which

9 Moretti 4.
10 Moretti 16.
12 In her article based on an interview with Guo, Zhang Zhen describes the writer in similar terms. See Zhang Zhen, ‘“I’m a Modern Peasant”: Encountering Xiaolu Guo,’ World Literature Today 82.6 (2008) 45-48. Guo’s transnational status means she will ‘inhabit’ a homeland by ‘moving between languages, between words and images’ (48).
produces particular subjectivities within specific colonial, immigrant, or ‘more diffused globalized’ contexts. English studies, comprising both the language and its literary tradition, is a technology and disciplinary regime which animates, choreographs and regulates bodies in specific ways, a point she illuminates with regard to three writers (including the late colonial and postcolonial scholar Edward Said) who articulate their relationships to English in visceral and intimately-felt terms. Languages, she notes, ‘all function as somatic or corporeal technologies.’ In Guo’s novel, this insight is transmuted into images of the self doubled and troubled. Thus Z struggles to express the ontological experience of being caught between two languages when writing in her diary, ‘I try expressing me, but confusing – I see other little me try expressing me in other language’ (33). The experience, she muses, ‘Is like seeing my two pieces of lips speaking in two languages at same time. Yes, I not lonely, because I with another me. Like Austin Power with his Mini Me’ (33). With a popular cultural reference to the well-known Hollywood movie starring comedic actor Mike Meyers, Z presents herself as unevenly split, bodying forth her lack of articulacy in her second language in the image of a diminished and diminutive self.

Later in the novel, this interlanguage struggle assumes visual and material form when it ‘erupts’ textually, appearing twice as a confessional passage written in Chinese followed by its English version. In the first instance, Z expresses her intense frustration at how difficult it is to learn English, a process she casts in terms of a violation and an overwhelming of the self, ‘I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me’ (143). In the second, she laments the different culturally-derived notions of freedom that she and her lover have. In both cases, the very presence of the Chinese words makes it seem as if Z’s Chinese self has burst forth from the strictures that have hitherto held it at bay and in these moments, the English text, juxtaposed against the Chinese one, is explicitly and visibly forced to serve as a translation. Self-consciously highlighting the process of translation, the text seeks to embody something of the viscerally-felt violence and ontological disruption that occurs with the acquisition of a second language. The moment, captured in print, assumes a liminal status – between languages, between bodies, and between selves. In this way too, we see how the representation of the emerging bilingual self may be said to trouble one of the most fundamental assumptions in (monolingual) fictional autobiography where the establishment of a stable identity is rendered equivalent epistemologically, thematically, and emotionally to the coming into one’s voice in one language. Yet, in a characteristic gesture suggesting the tortured complexity of the situation and the impossibility of easy solutions, Z rejects the possibility of abandoning English and remaining monolingual. She undercuts any sense that her Chinese self is more authentic by suggesting that perhaps the Chinese language was not that naturally acquired either given her memory of ‘the pain of studying Chinese characters’ (143) when she was younger.

14 Gunew 62.
15 Gunew 63.
16 Here, I would dispute the English translation in the novel of the Chinese words 天生 as ‘simple’ in the line ‘But is my own native language simple enough?’ (143). A more accurate translation would be ‘natural’ or ‘that which one is born with.’ These two moments in the novel where Chinese and English are juxtaposed offer the possibility of differing levels of understanding to the reader depending on whether the latter is a monolingual English reader or one who can read both English and Chinese. They reinforce the text’s concern with communication, meaning and the possibility of translation.
Just as the text makes clear that the increase of one’s lexicon in a foreign language is an ontological experience, so too does it confirm the converse – that the perceived loss of words is something felt corporeally. Thus Z’s lover ‘you’ expresses his frustration as an increasingly reluctant teacher of language, ‘It is too tiring to live like this. I cannot spend my whole time explaining the meaning of words to you, and I can’t be questioned by you all day long’ (141). It is a role he experiences in terms of a physical violation of private space and his own person as he tells her, ‘I am losing my words’ (141). Z’s acquisitive appetite for learning is an act of aggression as she robs her lover of his language as well as the experience of his own body. Z realizes this ironically only after reading Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* where she ‘can’t breathe freely because there are hardly any stops’ (147). In terms that inextricably braid language and the body together by capturing the corporeal effects of words, she adds, ‘The writing is so forceful, is nearly painful for me to read. I suddenly understand that you must be suffered a lot from me, because I am so forceful and demanding on words too’ (147).

Thus although the connection between language acquisition and corporeal transformation is variously reiterated throughout the narrative in Dictionary, perhaps the most explicit rendition of the connection lies in the narrative coalescing of Z’s journey west to improve her English with her realisation of her sexuality. Having met ‘you’ and moved in to live with him, she describes their mutual physical attraction and how they ‘have so much sex’ (57). Confessing how she initially felt shameful about sex because it is such a ‘taboo’ subject in China, she then assesses how far she has come, ‘Now I naked everyday in the house, and I can see clearly my desire’ (57). Sex with her lover is compared to appropriation and possession. Admitting her addiction to his love-making, she writes, ‘My whole body is your colony’ (104). Reinforcing the image of her lover as both a teacher to her of words and her own sexual body, Z also relates how he had once used a small mirror to show her her clitoris, a word she duly mispronounces as ‘liquorice’ (109). Knowledge about the sexual body directly intersects language learning when Z discloses how she once sat for three hours in a cafe by herself, schooling herself in English from reading the stories in a porn magazine (94). In another instance, she learns the language from the instructions for use printed on a box of condoms. The functional import of the instructions – clinically and seriously worded – is subverted as the words produce unintended effects. To Z, the instructions are instead replete with other meaning, suggestive of sexual possibilities and illustrative of Western culture. She writes, ‘Words on the instruction are more exciting than sexy magazines on shelves of corner shop in our street’ (59).

Yet any sense that Z’s bodily transformation as her English improves consists solely of sexual awakening and liberation is rendered problematic by the way sexual liberation almost always shades into exploitation in the novel’s depicted version of an interconnected global world. When her Japanese friend gives her a vibrator for her birthday, for example, Z is initially perplexed by what looks to her like a ‘plastic cucumber’ (131). Pondering over its ‘Made in China’ sign, she imagines the Chinese peasant women who work as cheap labour in the factory manufacturing such products, not knowing at all what they are assembling: ‘And those peasant womans will never use the vibrator in this life. All they want to know is how much they will earn toda[y] and how much money they can save for the family’ (131). The unevenness of globalisation is registered not only in terms of economic and capital disparity but in a visceral way, closer to the body, in terms of sexual desire and pleasure. The sense of melancholia evoked by this awareness of the difference in the way globalisation determines...
how the female body experiences basic needs and sexual pleasure is heightened ironically by the comic disconnection displayed when Z’s Asian party guests disagree with her Western guests over whether or not Asians have a sense of humour. Z’s heightened awareness of the way bodies are variously valued and positioned surfaces again later in the novel when she watches a peepshow in the red light district, justifying her consumption of porn as part of a quest for further cultural knowledge about the West. As Z gets increasingly titillated, inserting coin after coin at the peepshow to watch more and more of the prostitute’s body as it is revealed to her, she cannot help but wonder, ‘What is her name? What her life like? Is there man in her life or lots of mans? Where she from? Serbia? Croatia? Yugoslavia? Russia? Poland?’ (109).

Z’s experience at the peepshow serves to illuminate as well a central tension in the novel between the idea of corporeal transformation through language and the fantasy of the body as free from language – not the word made flesh or the flesh made word but word and flesh as separate and distinct. While Z watches a performance involving two prostitutes, a male and a female, she finds herself seduced and enthralled by the eloquence of the copulating bodies, their balletic and fluid moves in the throes of sexual ecstasy representing seemingly perfect communication and conveying the clear meanings of desire and pleasure. She confesses, ‘While I am standing there watching, I desire become prostitute. I want be able expose my body, to relieve my body, to take my body away from dictionary and grammar and sentences, to let my body break all disciplines. What a relief that prostitute not need speak good English. She also not need to bring a dictionary with her all the time’ (110). In expressing her desire to present her naked body and let it stand on its own, she presents her body as its own self-evident means of communication, at once message and medium, signifier and significated. Yet, the moment is short-lived since, ultimately, it is not Z but ‘you,’ her bisexual sculptor lover, whose desire for the body to exceed words and language eventually proves stronger. Responding to Z’s question about why he is always so interested in the body, he replies, ‘Because you will never get bored with the body [...] Eating, drinking, shitting … The body is key to everything’ (240). As an artist, Z’s lover creates sculptures of bodies and body parts which he leaves strewn all over the garden of his house in Hackney. Z’s lover celebrates the plasticity of the body; his friends, Z discovers, speak casually about transsexual surgery and sex change operations which allow them to sculpt the body and the self. To Z, her lover’s bisexuality, his vegetarianism, and his love of plants are a defiance of the traditional Chinese gender norms she grew up with. ‘You’ is, if not really an anarchist, certainly a hippie with anti-establishment sentiments who also considers physical labour honest and ennobling.

At the same time, his hatred of his all-female family (his mother and sisters), his own flesh and blood, symbolises both a self-loathing and a desire to be autocthonous that is congruent with his sense of the body as complete in itself. Z seems troubled by this position as it goes against a Confucian and Chinese understanding of the importance of the family as a fundamental unit of society, filial piety, and the obligation to maintain familial ties. 17 To her, the very ideograph ‘家’ (‘jia’) encapsulates the idea of many people in a family who are one. The Chinese word has three equivalent meanings in English corresponding to family, home,

and house. Z writes, "家" a roof on top, then some legs and arms inside. When you write this character down, you can feel those legs and arms move around underneath the roof. Home, is a dwelling house for the family to live’ (100). Thus despite her fraught and often acrimonious relationship with her mother, there is no question of a severing of ties. If ‘you’ sees the body as elemental, beyond all ties to blood, as well as anterior to and purer than language, Z is ultimately more ambivalent about the body and the possibility and desirability of complete autonomy.

Z’s ambivalence towards the body comes into focus again when she sees how her lover’s physically exacting job leaves him exhausted and in pain while she feels unable to help him. Her predicament of inevitable and dejected detachment recalls Elaine Scarry’s argument about the inexpressibility of pain in her foundational text, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*. Pain, Scarry observes, may be a sufferer’s certain reality but it is the ultimate test of the bystander’s imagination, even perhaps the example *par excellence* of what it means to be in doubt. Thus she writes, ‘Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.’

How one begins to express and communicate the body in pain is at the center of the imaginative act of representation to which literature belongs. In *Dictionary*, Z’s lover’s pain cannot be expressed in words; it can only, for him, be relieved by sex. His stubborn adherence to a life of manual work because of his belief in the labouring body means that the inexpressible body in pain serves as the obstacle in his relationship with Z, denying the working of language for communication and shared intimacy. Rejecting the mind-body split underpinning the Cartesian model of the self in Western philosophy, ‘you’ derives his idealised view of physical labour from a working class, socialist tradition that he thinks should resonate with Z because of China’s history and culture of communism. But as her command of the English language improves, Z longs instead to be an intellectual, her desire for this perhaps reflecting a Confucian reverence for learning and education. The Chinese words for an ‘intellectual’ or ‘zhishifenzi’, translated literally from the Chinese means a small part or element of knowledge. The Chinese words imply liberating and abstracting the individual, allowing her to transcend the individual body and person altogether to be subsumed as part of the larger entity known as knowledge. Z can conceive of knowledge and language, however flawed, enabling a transcendence from the body. To her lover, Z’s new found intellectualism is merely distasteful as he tells her, ‘I wish I’d never given you books. Now all you do is sit there reading and writing. You’ve become so *bourgeois*’ (139) (italics in the original).

In the novel, if the bodily sculptures her lover makes represent to Z an extension of her lover’s indecipherability and the material objectification of their inability to communicate with each other, her answer to this may be found in her expressed desire for a secret and private language. Thus she recounts wistfully the death of the last speaker of ‘Nushu’ (97), a four-hundred year old secret language that only some Chinese women can speak, that she reads about in a stray newspaper article. To have one’s own private language, that no one else knows and understands, Z thinks, is to possess a fullness and self-absorption that betokens self-sufficiency rather than lack of communication. With her own language, she will have ‘privacy’; she adds, ‘You know my body, my everyday’s life, but you not know my “Nushu”’

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That is her counterpoint to the voiceless and inscrutable body sculptures her lover creates. As the novel progresses, it is clear that Z and her lover’s narrative trajectories are clearly opposed. As the former moves closer to becoming a writer, ‘you’ seems to withdraw further into himself and to desire a solitary and isolated existence far from the city. By the end of the novel, Z has to leave England because her visa to stay on has been denied. It is a separation she feels intensely, ‘deeply, in [her] bones’ (279), writing, ‘People say nowadays there are no more boundaries between nations. Really? The boundary between you and me is so broad, so high’ (279). She resigns herself to the fact that they have to lead ‘parallel lives, no more crossing over’ (282).

Upon her return to China, Z settles in Beijing, feeling alienated from the fast-changing city and its ersatz, derivative Western quality even though her proficiency in English now allows her to take better advantage of the city’s globality and global pretensions. As her friends and family remind her, ‘But you can speak English, that alone should earn you lots of money! Nowadays, anything to do with the West can make money’ (282). The novel decisively repudiates this triumphalist telos and tone however, concluding instead with Z receiving her lover’s last letter to her from Wales, the place he has finally moved to. Reading his letter, she muses:

> Your words are soaked in your great peace and happiness, and these words are being stored in my memory. I kiss this letter. I bury my face in the paper, a sheet torn from some exercise book. I try to smell that faraway valley. I picture you standing on your fields, the mountain behind you, and the sea coming and going. It is such a great picture you describe. It is the best gift you ever gave me. (283)

In her final lines of the novel, Z tries to capture the materiality and tangibility of her lover’s body – even if it is just its trace – through his letter and his words. She pictures him at home in the natural place he has chosen for himself: solitary yet whole and self-sufficient. The image is one that appears to celebrate the idea of the ‘immanent body’ or ‘being-in-itself.’19 It suggests the saturation of the body in space, a kind of phenomenological plenitude that recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s description of the body in relation to spatiality (and temporality): ‘Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space.’20 Z observes that the image of her lover at peace with his surroundings and at one with himself is the most beautiful gift he has ever given her. Yet, it is only possible because his body is beyond her, and beyond her reach. Z, the female global subject, is the one who is left alone and lonely at the end, not her lover. She has only a memory of their shared intimacy in the past, of how it had rained when they went to Wales together and how that rain had covered everything.

Through Z’s most poetic and eloquent English, the novel’s conclusion underscores at once the power of words – its expressiveness – as well as its paradoxical powerlessness since words only ever stand for things and are based on the fundamental absence of the body. The novel thus ends on a melancholic note of loss and mourning – of the impossibility of a recovery of intimacy – instead of the successful attainment of global selfhood.


As a cultural text of the contemporary globalised moment with its emphasis on embodied subjectivity, Guo’s Dictionary complicates the glib idea of English as a global language and lingua franca, a (technical) language of opportunity desirable for the access it provides to markets, social networks and power, as well as the ease of communication it enables. Thinking of English in this manner assumes an easy slipping between identities and bodies consonant with a neoliberal understanding of selfhood that emphasises empowerment and individual choice or the view of individuals, as Rosalind Gill has described it, ‘as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating.’ Yet the novel qualifies any sense of a progressive, rational self-formation by stressing emotion, affect, and the ineffable. It also repeatedly insists that questions about communication and the possibilities of shared understanding and intimacy remain fundamental in a globalised world. In grappling with the problems posed by the materiality of the body for the global subject, Guo’s novel reminds us of the intractability of the body as well as its openness to linguistic meaning and inscription. In this way too, it challenges current discourses of globalisation to include an emotional and embodied vocabulary about absence, isolation, withdrawal and loss of intimacy, terms which at the very least, should compete with the more conventional concerns about connection, exchange, and circulation that have become natural in thinking about the global world.

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American Self-Fashioning in Helen Foster Snow’s *My China Years*

Constance J. Post

*M My China Years* chronicles the remarkable exploits of Helen Foster Snow during one of the most tumultuous decades in modern Chinese history. When Snow arrived in Shanghai in August 1931, domestic revolutionary war continued to be waged between the Nationalists (Guomindang) and the Communists (Gongchandang) and within a month the ‘Mukden Incident’ sparked the beginning of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.¹ By the time Snow returned to the United States in 1940, the Anti-Japanese War brought Communist and Nationalists forces together again as a ‘United Front.’ The union, however, did not last because of renewed fighting between the Communists and the Nationalists from 1945 to 1949, a period widely referred to as the Chinese Civil War.² Although Snow was not present at the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, she participated in major events leading up to it, interviewed top Communist leaders at Yan’an after the Long March, and led the Gung Ho effort to establish industrial cooperatives in China.

Out of the four extraordinary months she spent in Yan’an in 1937 with Mao Zedong, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai came her first book, *Inside Red China*, which was published under the name, Helen Foster Snow, as was her last, *My China Years*. For other books she used the pseudonym, Nym Wales. Snow’s many books and numerous articles as well as *Democracy*, the magazine she co-founded with Edgar Snow and Ida Pruitt, demonstrate that she contributed to New China chiefly by writing about it while she was in China and long after she left. Gathering material on one occasion involved a daring escape from Xi’an in order to reach the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party in Yan’an. Most of the time, however, the oral histories collected by Snow required no derring-do, and she produced a manuscript in fairly short order – usually in a matter of months and rarely more than a couple of years. Over half a century, however, elapsed between her arrival in Shanghai from the United States in 1931 that she describes at the start of her memoir and its eventual publication as *My China Years* in 1984. In the memoir Snow also writes about the American journalist Edgar Snow whom she married in Tokyo on Christmas Day in 1932. The marriage ended in divorce in 1949, the year of the founding of the PRC.

The long passage of time between the events in the memoir and the publication of *My China Years* may account for the disjuncture Snow creates between herself as she was then (1931-1940) and the self she is now, a gap in time that suggests the two selves separated by more than half a century are firmly fixed. A second gap, that of distance, separates Snow’s experience as a resident of Shanghai and Peking during these years from her recollection of them that she recalls as a long-time resident of Madison, CT where she completed her

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² ‘Yan’an’ is spelled ‘Yenan’ in the Wade-Giles system that Helen Foster Snow chiefly uses in her memoir. In this essay Chinese names and places appear in Pinyin with the following exceptions: (1) ‘Peking,’ for ‘Beijing’; (2) the spelling of the names of Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China, and Chiang Kai-Shek, head of the Nationalist Government in China from 1928 to 1949; and (3) names and places as they appear in direct quotations from Snow’s text.


memoir in the 1980s. Although return visits to China in 1972-73 and 1978 may have sharpened her awareness of the gaps in time and space between then and now in her life, Snow acknowledges that the death of Edgar Snow in 1972 prompted her to take another look at the manuscript of the memoir that she had begun years before (327). The process of writing the memoir over a period of many years therefore problematises her use of ‘I’ in My China Years, making it difficult to identify whether the ‘I’ occurs in a portion of the manuscript written in China that she left untouched, a part written after she left China in 1940 but before 1972 when she decided to work on the manuscript again; sections that underwent substantial revision between 1972 and 1984, or new material for the memoir that she wrote during that fourteen-year period. The finished manuscript of My China Years nevertheless reveals a consistently bifurcated ‘I’ between the girl Snow depicts herself as in the 1930s and the woman reflecting on that experience decades later.

Snow’s memoir offers a distinctive example of American self-fashioning in which the author casts her years spent in China within an interpretive framework distinctively rooted in the literature and culture of the United States. As Stephen Greenblatt reminds us in Renaissance Self-Fashioning, the development of selves capable of being fashioned can be attributed to the rise of an autonomous self in the early modern period, a self that is always dialectical and usually rendered in language. To engage in the act of self-fashioning, moreover, requires an Other, ‘something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile.’ For Snow, the Other can be aspects of Chinese culture that she found to be strange in comparison with her own or elements in her own that she now found to be alien. Often, though, she struggles with a Puritan element in the Chinese Revolution that she recognises as an integral part of her own upbringing and her understanding of capitalism. As a result, the self that Snow constructs in My China Years situates her memoir within the mainstream of American autobiography, a performative act of American self-fashioning accomplished with verve but also with nuance.

In the epilogue of My China Years, Snow states that ‘Like the old Chinese, I worship my ancestors, wear baggy pants, and drink tea.’ She prefaces the statement with the declaration of her support ‘for the Human Achievement, for space exploration, invention, and originality’ and other matters, not the least of which is the affirmation of her belief that conditions in the United States make it possible for an individual to achieve the highest development. She concludes with the following.

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I love tiger cats, my little 1752 house, Robert Redford, Bruce Jenner, my old IBM typewriter, the Encyclopedia Britannica, British movies on public television, fluffy blouses, the nuclear family, the English language as it used to be, trains, the Parthenon, American history (up to 1960), pizza, Coca-Cola, tuna fish sandwiches on rye, Westminster Cathedral, Delphi ... and Pao-an.  

The sharply contrasting elements of these sentences constitute a dominant modernist note that Helen Snow strikes in the book, combining, as she does in this passage, the high and low, the sublime and the ridiculous, the broad generalisation and the concrete particular. Reminiscent of the disjunctures in the modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot, the pairings also evoke an earlier American, Walt Whitman, whose Song of Myself contains numerous catalogues of the disparate strands in the American experience to which the poet bears witness in his vision.  

The content of Snow’s pairings evokes yet earlier Americans. Central to Snow’s long lists is the admission that she worships her ancestors, in particular the Puritans, whose influence on My China Years owes as much to the decades she spent researching her seventeenth-century forbears after she returned from China in 1940 as it does to an intellectual understanding of the Puritan movement that she gained while she was there. Perhaps the greatest tribute paid by Snow to her Puritan ancestors on both sides of the Atlantic is their influence on the way she fashions an American self, a debt that becomes increasingly apparent throughout her memoir. Absent from the pages of My China Years, however, is an acknowledgement of her roots in the Church of Latter-Day Saints and the compelling interest in family history fostered by the Mormons, an interest she shared as her numerous research notes and unpublished volumes of genealogical studies attest. In one of these, ‘The Christopher Foster Family History, 1603-1953,’ she establishes her Puritan ancestry by tracing her father’s family first to Massachusetts and later to Southampton, Long Island where Christopher Foster died in 1687.  

5 Helen Foster Snow, My China Years: A Memoir (New York: William Morrow, 1984) 330. Subsequent references to the text will be placed within parentheses in the essay. Pao-an refers to the area that includes Yenan where Helen Snow interviewed Mao Zedong and other leaders in 1936. Snow revisited the site in 1978.  
7 In Helen Foster Snow: An American Woman in Revolutionary China (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006), Kelly Ann Long notes that Helen’s mother Hannah was active in the Church of Latter-Day Saints but that her father, John Foster, was not (21).  
8 Snow’s extensive research notes and unpublished manuscripts about early American history, Puritan history on both sides of the Atlantic, and her Puritan ancestors constitute a small portion of the vast archive of her work at the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. For ‘The Root and the Branch,’ a 600-page manuscript in the collection, Snow prepared a detailed study about the seventeenth-century English leader Oliver Cromwell and the New Model Army which he led during the 1642-1651 English Civil War.  
9 According to Snow, who completed the Foster Family History in 1953, Christopher Foster (1603-1687) arrived in 1635 aboard the ‘Abigail,’ on which Hugh Peter (or Peters) also sailed. Peter, who helped to organize the church in which Foster served as a member, later returned to England to become chaplain to Oliver Cromwell’s New Model Army and other Puritan military forces. Meanwhile Foster, after two years in Boston, moved to Lynn, Massachusetts and in 1645 sold his home there to settle on Long Island, first in Hempstead and finally in Southampton where he died in 1687 (‘The Christopher Foster Family History, 1603-1953,’ 1). Snow’s Puritan ancestry thus can be traced back to the Great Migration of 1630-1635, a period that saw a tremendous influx of immigrants to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It should be noted that another source mentioned by Snow dates the arrival of Christopher Foster before the settlement of Naoukeag [Salem] in 1628, which would link Snow’s Puritan ancestry to the Plymouth Colony. Snow notes that according to the Foster Genealogy by F.  

In *My China Years* the influence of the Puritans on Snow’s American self-fashioning reflects the secularisation of the Puritan experience delineated by Max Weber in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and R.H. Tawney in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. The historical process whereby Puritanism became secularised did not come to Snow’s attention, however, until she studied Tawney’s book on capitalism as well as his *Land and Labor in China* under the instruction of Harry Price at Yenching University (now Peking University) where she enrolled in several courses in 1934-35. Often paired with Max Weber’s 1904 study, Tawney’s 1926 book concentrates on the link between English Puritans and the rise of capitalism, whereas Weber examines the link between Continental Pietists as well as English Puritans with capitalism. Although Snow’s memoir claims that ‘strict puritanism accounted for the success of the Soong sisters and was the foundation stone of American civilization,’ Weber’s ‘foundation stone’ of capitalism by way of a secularised Puritan is Benjamin Franklin whom Snow mentions early in her memoir. Franklin was 65 and a celebrity on two continents by the time he began his memoirs in 1771 whereas Snow was 77 and had been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize when *My China Years* appeared in print in 1984.

Like Benjamin Franklin whose *Memoirs* were published in 1815, Snow continues the Puritan tradition of self-fashioning, albeit in secularised form, in ways that have come to define American life-writing: first, her belief in the power of an individual exemplary life, including her confidence in the capacity of individuals for extraordinary achievement; second, her conviction that action is an option, affirming the ability of human beings to exercise free will despite the struggle that may accompany it; third, her firm embrace of optimism; and fourth, her way of representing failure and success. These characteristics intersect at many points with the view of the self as a morality play and the self as a person in control of her or his own fate delineated by Diane Bjorklund in *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography*. According to Bjorklund, the idea of an evolving self in the nineteenth-century America rivaled the view of the self as a morality play that was rooted in Puritanism. In *Natural Supernaturalism* Meyer Abrams attributes this change to the English Romantic writers who radically transformed the pattern of Christian conversion whereby the individual no longer stands in need of a redeemer outside the self but instead

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C. Pierce, Christopher Foster and John Foster were part of a company led by Roger Conant, who sought to establish a settlement at Cape Ann (54).

10 P. 135. Harry Price received his M.A. from Yale University in 1932 and began teaching at Yenching University the same year. He became the Executive Director of the Committee for Non-Participation in Japanese Aggression in 1937 while Helen Snow was still in China. He assumed the position of Deputy Director of the United Nations as Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in 1944.

11 P. 61. Ailing married H. H. Kung, a wealthy industrialist who later became Hong Kong’s finance minister; Chingling married Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese Republic; and Meiling married Sun’s successor, Chiang Kai-shek. Had the sisters been educated in Germany or France, Snow insists that their training would not have been strictly Puritan. The three sisters attended Wesleyan College in Macon, GA.

12 The complete text of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* did not appear in print until 1818. Started in 1771, Franklin returned in 1784 and again in 1788 and 1789 to the writing of his memoirs, the title he originally gave to his reminiscences.


becomes the agent of redeeming the self. 15 Failure or success rests exclusively on the individual, something which Snow alternately accepts and rejects in her memoir. *My China Years* also exhibits characteristics of the uncertain self and the self as beleaguered, two additional ways of viewing the self in Bjorklund’s schema that I shall explore as further evidence of the secularisation of the Puritan self.

The first defining characteristics of American autobiography, the belief in the power of an individual exemplary life, appears in the earliest American Puritan spiritual autobiographies of the seventeenth century as well as secularised variants starting in the eighteenth that uphold the value of a good example as an inspiration for others. 16 Embracing this aim, Helen Foster Snow asserts at the beginning of *My China Years* that ‘This is a parable of one small individual, on the edge of nowhere yet reaching out to steal the Promethean fire that lights the future’ (68). Snow’s choice of a parable to represent her life invokes the teachings of Jesus whose use of this literary genre established it as a vehicle to disclose a spiritual truth to the discerning ear but conceal it from others. 17 Among the things that Snow conceals for the most part in her memoir is her Mormon background, in an effort perhaps to strip away any features that might undercut her effort to seem typical. By offering up her life as a parable, Snow hopes it may reveal to others that they too may accomplish great things, finding in her example a route to success that may be difficult but within their reach.

In the Yan’an section of *My China Years*, Snow declares that her book *Inside Red China* made her life accessible to others who literally wanted to follow in her footsteps in reaching the revolutionary stronghold established after the Long March. ‘All over China,’ she writes, ‘young students read the translation and set out for the city, feeling confident that if an American girl could make her way there, so could they’ (232). Here the literal contrasts with the mythological by way of Snow’s identification with Prometheus, the hero who defies the gods and steals the sacred fire for humankind. Describing her life as a Promethean parable is one of many ways that Snow conjoins seemingly disparate strands, classical and Christian, for which the end result is a modern parable in which Snow boldly acts in defiance of the gods. She does so, however, not just to benefit others but also as an act of empowering herself by stealing the sacred fire.

Snow eschews a Puritan self in other ways as well. Instead of a typical example of a sinner turned saint, Snow fashions herself in the pages of *My China Years* as an example of a typical American. When Paul Houston, senior U.S. consul in Shanghai, told her shortly after her arrival in 1931 that ‘There is nothing you can’t do,’ she replied, ‘I’m a typical American, only more so,’ adding, ‘Why not do the impossible?’ Houston responded that ‘typical Americans never came to China,’ noting that what ails most writing about China is that ‘We 14 In *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), Meyer Abrams traces the way Romantic writers ‘recast, into terms appropriate to the historical and intellectual circumstances of their own age, the Christian pattern of the fall, the redemption, and the emergence of a new earth which will constitute a restored paradise’ (29).


only get the peculiar ones – or they wouldn’t have come here in the first place.'\textsuperscript{18} Snow, who credits Houston as the first person she knew with direct knowledge about the Communists, confidently asserts that ‘Only Americans could have done the things any of us did,’ referring to her husband Edgar Snow and herself among U.S. writers publishing articles and books about China at the time (66). In depicting herself as a typical American, however, Snow placed great stress on youth.

To the philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, she says, she ‘became a kind of guinea pig, to try out his complicated philosophy on a youthful, Protestant-secular type of mind. In China Teilhard de Chardin worked as a paleontologist at the Peking Man excavation site in Zhangjiakou at the same time that he continued to develop his abstruse philosophical ideas about the evolving of the universe towards an ever higher consciousness, an attempt to reconcile science and religion that occupied his scholarly research for many years.’\textsuperscript{19} Snow felt especially drawn to the Jesuit philosopher’s emphasis on the power of an individual ‘to develop by use of the mind, by ‘thinking energy,’ into God, and thereby order the universe,’ especially his assertion that ‘becoming God was the nature of man, his special phenomenon, a part of the natural Darwinian evolution’ (102). The idea reinforced Snow’s belief in the importance of gradual development and the ability of an individual to bring that change about by relying on the self instead of a God outside the self, a major shift that Snow reflects in her memoir as a thoroughly secularised Puritan. Snow, who views the achievements of Teilhard de Chardin in science and philosophy as part of the contributions to Asia made by earlier Jesuits such as Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci, marvels at his apparent willingness to pass over ‘young French or English people’ in order to pass on to herself and her husband Edgar Snow ‘the palladia of French power to Young America in the East, not by wish and will but by premonition’ (103).

Teilhard de Chardin’s observation about Snow closely resembles the observation Mao Zedong made about her. According to Snow, ‘For Mao Tse-tung, I was also Young America in search of the truth – and confronted by the contradictions in China, which he undertook to explain to me.’\textsuperscript{20} Helen Snow had jumped at the chance to gather oral histories from him and other leaders after her husband returned in October 1936 from Yenan where he was the first Western journalist to interview Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Peng Dehuai. Reading Edgar’s stories convinced Helen that she ‘had to make a similar trip at any cost’ (202), a decision prompted in part by her identification of the Communist struggle with that of the soldiers in the Revolutionary War: ‘I was Young America of the 1930s, still fighting the Revolution of

\textsuperscript{18} P. 60. Snow’s regard for herself as a typical American is sometimes gender-inflected, a topic worthy of a separate essay. Comments about the American journalist Agnes Smedley suggest that Snow believed Smedley to be one of the peculiar Americans Houston had in mind. In a later passage Snow states that ‘The women of Yenan approved of my modesty and shyness in public.’ Snow mentions additional views of hers that met with the approval of Zhu De’s wife Kang Keching and the other women at Yenan. In fact, says Snow, the only women who ‘dared to disagree with them, especially over the issue of free love versus marriage’ were Ding Ling and Agnes Smedley, ‘and they were ostracised. The women simply did not understand Miss Smedley at all’ (278-79).

\textsuperscript{19} Teilhard de Chardin worked out his views about evolution from 1938-1940 long before they saw the light of print in French as \textit{Le Phénomène Humain} in 1955; an English translation was published as \textit{The Phenomenon of Man} in 1959.

\textsuperscript{20} P. 106. According to Helen Snow, ‘Of all the people I have known, two turned out to be the most important. Both have been virtually deified. The first, Mao Zedong, she says, ‘became the embodiment of Asia in revolution’; the second, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, ‘became the spirit of European civilization.’ Although Helen Snow viewed them as opposites, she believed it was possible to resolve the contradictions in their philosophies.
1776’ (94). Of herself and David Yui, an activist in the student movement, Helen Snow remarks that the two of them ‘seemed to represent Chinese-American youth of the 1930s, leagued together by history’ (210).

Youth serves as the common denominator in the reflections about Snow by de Chardin, Mao Zedong, and Snow herself, a feature she links with an openness to radical change not only on an individual level but also on a national level. As a self-acknowledged representative of American youth, Snow identified with the youth of China in the December 9, 1935 Student Movement as well as other Chinese youth whom she considered the necessary key ‘to build a whole new world’ (68). Snow recognised, however, that the world the Chinese Revolution built posed a uniquely difficult situation never encountered by the United States, which fought three separate wars ‘to establish the American experiment and its principles – the Puritan civil war between Englishmen in the seventeenth century which destroyed feudalism, the Revolution of 1776, and the Civil War of the 1860s’ (147). In contrast, says Snow, ‘China had to fight all three wars at the same time,’ an extraordinary challenge that also required its engagement in a fourth: the war against modern imperialism.

The conviction that action is a viable option is a second characteristic of American life-writing that surfaces in Snow’s memoir. The confidence that the exercise of free will may require intense struggle becomes evident in Snow’s admission that the desire to develop her abilities fully came with a high price tag. Looking back at herself as a young girl in My China Years, she notes that ‘This girl gave up material things and never counted the cost’ (34). This consisted chiefly of putting a stop to buying clothes for herself so that she could afford to buy them for Edgar, whom she considered to be sartorially challenged. Pointing out that she did not buy much of anything for herself from 1932 to 1939, Snow acknowledges that the four evening gowns she brought with her from the U.S. made the purchase of a new gown unnecessary (74, 86). (Some of the four gowns may have been in the wardrobe trunk she brought on her honeymoon, a case of not packing lightly that elicited scorn from her husband.)

Moreover, instead of buying new clothes she sometimes wore new clothes on loan from Helen Burton, owner of The Camel’s Bell, who arranged for Snow to wear cloaks and fancy ball gowns from her shop to attend cultural events in Peking as a way of drumming up business whenever tourist groups were in town. Snow’s sense of deprivation during these years was also mitigated by gifts from Edgar that included an expensive leopard coat that cost $200, close to half the sum of $500 that she claims a Westerner could live on quite comfortably for two years in China (76).

In My China Years Snow questions whether giving up material things has been worth it: ‘What did the girl get in exchange? In 1931 I intended maximum development of the individual in all ways, but I was torn away from my goals by the typhoons of history. Or was I?’

Giving up material things in order to develop her full potential did not work for her either, says Snow, who finds that goal impossible to achieve because of forces over which she had no control. Concluding that in her case that ‘the individual was sacrificed for the common good,’ Snow understood that China’s insistence on the need to serve the people represented a higher priority than her embrace of a secularised Puritanism that valorised individual growth. To Snow, seventeenth-century Puritan history provided numerous parallels for China’s revolution, including Cromwell’s New Model Army that emerged.

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21 Helen Snow reports that her wardrobe trunk caused Edgar Snow to exclaim on their honeymoon as they neared Borneo, ‘You may think yourself a born explorer … but you are no traveler’ (76).
22 P. 34. Snow’s question raises anew the issue of the autobiographical ‘I’ as a single self a multiplicity of selves. My China Years suggests that her response to this question varied throughout the course of her life.

victorious in England’s Civil War because of its willingness to sacrifice all for what it conceived to be the common good.

Elements in the Red Army at Yan’an that Snow identifies with Puritanism cover a broad range from cosmetics to confessions. Wearing make-up invited the suspicion that you were politically unreliable, according to Snow; hence the unspoken edict against it. Although Snow admits she was willing to go without make-up, she drew the line at lipstick.23 She also reports that male and female Communists alike wore baggy pants, a mark of the working class, and adopted the same hair style. Little differentiated women from men at the Red Army camp except for the slightly longer length of their haircuts. Of far greater consequence at Yan’an were romantic relationships. Such entanglements, observes Snow, ‘have to be avoided in this Puritan, Spartan army, which sacrificed everything for the Revolution’ (275). Snow willingly conceded, however, the usefulness of extending many of the prohibitions beyond Yan’an as a means of winning over the people. Strict morality included an insistence on telling the truth, another example cited by Snow as evidence of the Communists adopting the Puritan ethic (217).

‘Confession,’ which Snow highlights by placing it in quotation marks, played a central role in Chinese Communism that she admits she found repugnant. A reference to the Marxist-Leninist practice of criticism and self-criticism developed further by Mao, ‘confession’ required individuals to criticise their own conduct and that of others. In this matter Snow, who disliked the practice because she considered it an invasion of privacy, aligned herself more closely with her Puritan forebears who promoted self-examination as a spiritual discipline but did not require that it be conducted in public. Snow seems keenly aware of the value of group ‘confession’ in China as a means of reinforcing the Puritan ethic of telling the truth both within the army and in the villages where the army sought to enlist the support of the people. These examples explain, at least in part, Snow’s conclusion that ‘The chief Communist characteristic was puritanism in all ways, and this is still true of the New China’ (275).

The Puritanism Snow found in Chinese Communism at every turn bears a much greater resemblance to the communitarian values of seventeenth-century Puritanism than it does to the secularised Puritanism she found congenial because of the importance it places on the individual. As a result, Snow’s willingness to question whether ‘the typhoons of history’ had thwarted the achievement of her personal goals reveals a deep ambivalence about Puritanism. On the one hand, she finds that the fervour of Cromwell’s New Model Army also animates the Chinese Communist Army; both depended for success on the collective sacrifice of its supporters. To some degree, the fervour had her in its grip as well. Noting that Christians of all affiliations in China refused to take part in the revolution, Snow faulted Christianity for its failure to be the ‘revolutionary and progressive religion’ she believed it to be. That said, Snow declares that she did not ‘wish to be a Christian martyr or any other kind,’ even though she was firmly convinced ‘Someone had to act’ (143,146). The decision therefore to assume an active role in the December 9 Student Movement is something Snow claims she did not seek but had been thrust upon her.

In daring to act, however, Snow believed she was doing it at great personal cost that diminished the concept of herself that she had been working hard to create:

23 Right before Snow met Mao Zedong and Zhu De in Yenan, she vacillated between applying more lipstick or removing it; unsure about what to do, she decided against both (265). Elsewhere in her memoir Snow views lipstick as an example of transgressive adaptability: wearing enough of it to satisfy herself but not enough to attract the notice of others (275).
History was squeezing out of me, like wine from new grapes, the surplus I had by nature and development. This wine was being handed out to the Chinese to intoxicate them with will and determination to act. I was still developing intellectually, but history was channeling my studies into narrow paths, contrary to my whole nature. I, who set out to be the Renaissance woman, was being cut down to size as a worker in the vineyard – a researcher on the nature of revolution in China. (146)

As exhilarating as it was to participate in the movement, Snow soon discovered that putting together pamphlets and news releases at a moment’s notice for the students required that she set aside larger writing projects to which she wanted to devote her attention. The needs of others, including leaders of the student movement, made claims upon her time that left little to spare for anything else, let alone the broad array of pursuits that would qualify her as a Renaissance woman of the twentieth century. The dilemma, she believes, is borne especially by women who jettison their plans in order to accommodate the needs of others. Snow’s assessment, however, obscures her evident desire to be many things at the same time – not just an activist and not just a writer – that made a singular achievement elusive. For this Snow believed she paid a high price, first, by failing to achieve immortality by writing ‘the one classic book’; and, second, by allowing her individuality, what she called her sense of ‘self-preservation,’ to be destroyed. Acting individually and collectively continued to be a problem, for Snow, who was drawn to both in China. Before she left the country in 1940, she faced a similar dilemma when she tried to balance her active collaboration with others to promote industrial cooperatives through Gung Ho with the solitude necessary to do her writing.

A third characteristic of American life-writing evident in Helen Foster Snow’s My China Years is her deep-seated optimism. The American writer Lewis Gannett told Snow at a dinner party that ‘there must be something about China to produce Pollyannas such as herself, who ‘seem to think it’s still the best of all possible worlds.’ In her response to Gannett, Snow ignored the allusion to Candide to concentrate on the reference to Pollyanna, the title character in Eleanor H. Porter’s immensely popular 1913 novel: ‘It wasn’t China,’ says Snow, who insisted, ‘I had taken the Pollyanna-ism to China in 1931. It was in my marrow bones. But after the China experience, you never forgot that things could be a lot worse’ (101). In China her optimism was fueled in part by the warm reception citizens from the United States were given at the time. ‘It was great to be an American in Asia in those days,’ marvels Snow. ‘The waves parted before us as before Moses at the Red Sea – especially a red sea. We were welcome everywhere. An American was likely to be looked upon as the next best thing to Roosevelt himself’ (194). Reading the story of Moses and the Red Sea typologically situates Snow within a tradition rooted in Puritan ways of expressing the self, although the figural meaning of Moses is all but lost in the pleasure Snow takes in the pun. The appeal of Americans to the Chinese she traced to the American persona, ‘one great monument to the human endeavor’ by way of the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

For Snow, the source of the enduring appeal of America for China for was the Revolutionary War of 1776. Five years after the young woman of 23 organised the Fourth of July celebration at the American Consulate in Shanghai in 1932, she found herself...
interviewing Mao Zedong, at her specific request, on 4 July 1937 in Yan’an.24 Japan attacked China on 7 July so Mao assigned Wu Liangping and Lo Fu to complete the interview he started with her (269). The interviews she conducted in Yan’an with Mao and others after the Long March deepened her conviction that the Communists would succeed. Her optimism about China, however, extended well beyond its military achievements. Its achievements in art, for example, put the United States to shame, according to Snow, who believed China had done more in the thirty years since the revolution in 1949 than the United States had managed to do in its first 150 years. Snow also praises the connection forged between art and work in China. ‘Marxism glorified labor,’ she writes, ‘not only because it was productive but also because it was beautiful esthetically,’ yet another parallel Snow identifies between Chinese Communism and seventeenth-century Puritanism (118).

In comparing China with the United States throughout My China Years, Snow establishes many similarities between the revolution in China and what she calls the American experiment. Although the United States has not managed to produce many deities, says Snow, ‘we have produced millions of individuals working hard for the highest standard of living ever known, and developing at the same time a high ‘spiritual’ worth in the sense of maximum generosity, kindness, friendliness, good humor, and true democratic instincts for judging by merit’ (147). Snow’s observation about the United States gathers a number of ideas together, including the belief that an individual can simultaneously attain both a high standard of living and high ‘spiritual’ worth. On a personal level, however, the ideal remained out of reach for Helen Snow, given the straitened circumstances in which she found herself in the years following her divorce in 1949 up until her death in 1997. Although she lacks Ralph Waldo Emerson’s scepticism that the twin aims can be combined, she nevertheless shared his conviction that we are the creators of our worlds and therefore should build our own.25 The genius of America, argues Snow, is that the country has produced millions who have developed themselves on their spiritually by looking within. On this score and many others, Snow apparently took the advice she gave to Dr Frene: ‘You should read Emerson, instead of Kant and Freud’ (61).

How very Emersonian too is the special delight Helen takes in finding herself identified as the teacher and the older, superbly educated man the pupil. That delight, read large, can also be understood as Helen’s fervent desire that a young country like America, through her as a Young American, might be an example to China’s much older civilisation even though she recognises the impossibility of importing the American individualism that she sees as the defining characteristic of American culture. Snow asserts that she ‘would not give up the real American people for all the Parthenons, all the Beethoven symphonies, all the English literature, all the French cuisine, all the Taj Mahals, and all the Russian and Chinese revolutions, all combined’ (146). My China Years attests that Snow’s experiences sharpened her understanding of the similarities and the differences between Chinese culture and American culture, including the shock of recognition about the ways in which the Chinese Communist Revolution resembled aspects of the Puritan origins of the United States, origins that shaped her ancestors on both sides of the Atlantic. Although Snow could not

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24 P. 268. The deliberate choice to interview Mao on Independence Day for the United States, recalls a similar choice by Henry David Thoreau in Walden (New York: Penguin, 1986), who claims that his decision to take up residence at Walden Pond on Independence Day, July 4, 1945 was quite by accident (128). Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, a nineteenth-century American writer whom Snow read extensively, were close friends.


imagine how American individualism could become a part of China, she remained optimistic about the enduring appeal of the United States and about China capacity for change.

The representation of failure and success in My China Years is a fourth feature of American life-writing that demonstrates a secularised Puritan influence. Throughout the memoir, Helen registers some of her failures and successes and does so in a manner similar to Franklin. Unlike their Puritan forbears, who referred to their mistakes as sins, Franklin employs a term from his trade as a printer for his ‘errata’ while Snow calls hers ‘stupid things.’ Two of them she considered especially stupid: the first, her mistake in failing to understand Chinese hiring practices; the second, her mistake in letting other things put her writing on the back burner. Snow, who accepted blame for the first of these mistakes, explains that it happened when she attempted to circumvent the Chinese guarantor system by arranging to have one of two rickshaw men in her employ serve as a houseboy. The mistake deeply offended the cook, who refused to allow Snow to bypass the Chinese custom of only hiring those who come recommended by someone in the same occupation. Her second mistake was to let everything else she needed to do take priority over her writing, something Snow says she could have learned from Ed who never allowed that to happen. ‘All my best creative energy, my morning energy, went into do-gooding for others,’ she laments.

Snow’s depiction of success is much more complicated. In traditional spiritual autobiography, giving all the glory to God obviates the need to boast about one’s achievements. Those who write secularised narratives do not feel obligated to account for their achievements in that manner even if they offer a perfunctory acknowledgement of outside help, as Benjamin Franklin does in expressing gratitude for the favor of Almighty Goodness in his life. Nevertheless, even in his secularised account, there was a strong inhibition against boasting about his accomplishments, considerable though they were. An easy way for him to solve the problem was to include letters of lavish praise from others. In Franklin’s narrative, these were supplied by two of his friends, Benjamin Vaughan and James Abel. Further precedent for the practice can be found in the autobiographies of Booker T. Washington and Jane Addams. Washington, the African American founder of Tuskegee Institute, not only included many letters from distinguished Americans in Up from Slavery, but also the complete text of his most famous speech, a review of it in the newspaper, and other articles about him as well. Addams, founder of a settlement house in Chicago, inserted numerous statistics reports gathered from sociological investigations and even the complete text of one of her lectures in Twenty Years at Hull House. These autobiographers as well as Snow were unlikely to express the matter as candidly as the American humorist

26 For this blunder, Snow refers to herself as ‘Donna Quixote’ in the chapter that recounts the episode about the Chinese guarantor system (107).
27 P. 125. Snow’s use of the idiom ‘do-gooding’ is a variant of the phrase ‘doing good’ in which the object ‘work’ has been omitted. For the origin of this idiomatic phrase, see Acts 10:38 in which Jesus is described as someone ‘who went about doing good’ (KJV).
29 Booker T. Washington includes a variety of testimonials in Up from Slavery in Three Negro Classics ed. John Hope Franklin (1901; New York: Avon Books, 1965); among them are letters from President Grover Cleveland (151) and D. C. Gilman, President of Johns Hopkins University (154) and a newspaper account of Washington’s Atlanta Exposition Address by James Creelman (157-59).
30 Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House, with Autobiographical Notes (1910; New York: Penguin, 1981), includes the text of ‘The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,’ a lecture she gave at the Ethical Culture Society in 1892.

Mark Twain, who likened his memoir to a mirror: ‘I am looking at myself in it all the time. Incidentally,’ he added, ‘I notice the people that pass along at my back ... and whenever they say or do anything that can help advertise me and flatter me and raise me in my own estimation, I set these things down in my autobiography.’

Helen Foster Snow follows that tradition in *My China Years* by letting others toot her horn instead of doing it herself. When Dr Victor Frene is amazed at her brilliance, she reports that he ‘was so astonished he actually kowtowed three times, head to floor. “You are the teacher. I am the humble pupil,”’ he said (61). Her poem on Peking, according to Helen, was considered proof of her literary genius by her husband Edgar Snow (153). Helen also quotes sources such as Dr Hu Shih (137) and the Japanese press (172) identifying her as the person behind the student movement. The most outstanding example in *My China Years* of how Snow uses the remarks of others to praise her achievements is a passage from the forward Edgar Snow wrote for her book, *China Builds for Democracy* (first Hong Kong edition, 1940). In it he remarks that ‘It was she who first interested Rewi Alley in the possibilities of industrial cooperatives,’ noting that without ‘the soundness of her original concept, and the genius of her faith and enthusiasm, the movement might never have come into being at all.’ Edgar Snow also credits her creative thinking in in getting the movement started and in inspiring others ‘by the example of her own tireless and unselfish labor and devotion’ (307).

Occasionally Snow dispenses with this convention altogether by boasting about her own accomplishments, although she somewhat undercuts them. Of the two nominations she received for the Nobel Peace Prize, she explains that both were ‘not for any particular achievement, but for the potential that my ideas and world view hold for peace and progress in the world’ (329). In another instance she informs the reader that Ed found himself a big celebrity in Hollywood and enjoyed it immensely whereas ‘I was the Number 2 celebrity, to my surprise’ (325). Occupying the second spot was not without its own reward for Helen, who notes that J.A. Piver wanted to take her photograph and display it because of her resemblance to the movie star Joan Bennett. (The photograph is one of many reproduced in *My China Years*). Helen also reports that the blue gown she had on the day she was taken off the train from Xi’an and returned to that city is now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York along with the sandals she wore in Yan’an (291). Snow, moreover, claims bragging rights for her 1939 book *Inside Red China*, noting that it ‘was the first on Yan’an and for many years the only one’ about the place *after* it was captured by the Communists’ (104; emphasis mine). Adding the latter qualification, enabled Helen to rule out Edgar Snow’s immensely popular 1937 *Red Star over China* about his visit to Yan’an and the surrounding region before it became a Communist stronghold.

In assessing Helen Foster Snow’s construction of an American self in *My China Years*, the importance of Yan’an cannot be overestimated. Not only does it occupy a special place in Snow’s memoir as a pivotal moment in her development as a journalist, it also functions as a synecdoche for her representation of the years of revolutionary change that she witnessed in China from 1931 to 1940. Yan’an became a Rorschach inkblot test for her impressions about China and about herself that she examined and re-examined through the prism of traditional Puritanism and its secularised variant for most of her life. Snow, who

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31 *Mark Twain’s Autobiography*, with an Introduction by Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924) 2: 312. Twain sets his autobiography apart from every other – with the possible exception of Cellini’s – by noting that unlike ‘the conventional biography of all the ages,’ his does not present ‘an open window’ (311).
relished her role in providing an insider’s view of China’s leaders while the revolution was in its infancy, viewed her participation in it and that of other Westerners as ‘the great adventure of our generation’ (182). Snow’s use of Puritanism to bridge the cultural divide between China and the United States as she recounts the adventure in her memoir provides insight into her views of the American character in the 1930s; it also raises the question of her degree of self-awareness in advancing an imperialist agenda by superimposing a Western intellectual framework on Chinese revolutionary experience. Whether she was oblivious to this or not, Snow’s experiences at Yan’an had the added advantage of bringing into sharp relief another divide: the need to find a middle way between the ‘tough, hard, aggressive’ Westerners such as Agnes Smedley and the Chinese among whom she did not feel that she belonged. Unsure of where she did belong, Snow affirms that ‘There was a special place for me, right on the cusp of change, between two worlds, between two eras, between the old and the new’ (269).

Snow sought to answer that question in My China Years by fashioning an American self that negotiates an old Puritanism with the new by way of a triangulation with China. The mix is a pioneering memoir by Helen Foster Snow that charts new territory, not entirely unlike her ancestors who made the voyage from England to Massachusetts before pressing onward to Utah.

Allen Ginsberg arrived at the docks of Bombay in February 1962 with one dollar in his pocket, enough for a taxi ride to American Express where he hoped to find royalties waiting for him, excited finally to be in ‘the promised land’ that he had dreamt of while in Israel four months earlier. This ‘Premonition Dream’ becomes the first entry in the Indian Journals, introduced by Ginsberg on the back cover as ‘self keeping record of self’s consciousness, the old yoga of Poesy’; a stylised embodiment of one country’s spiritual longing for and obsession with another, or certainly of the lure between cultures. It was Ginsberg’s first visit to India. He was nearly 37 years of age and, having always wanted to live to be 74, saw himself at the meridian of his life (26). A few days later, in his morphine-induced state, he was ‘more sure of its mortalism ... all I’ve seen is my life go by, swift as a mosquito with climatic buzzings of aestheticism & self-congratulatory Rhapsody & morphia inactions & musings furthermore’ (9). Much hinged on this journey through India, the spiritual and poetic regeneration that was vital for a poet-priest.

In many ways, the journey started in the summer of 1948 when Ginsberg was living in Harlem. Masturbating, reading a Blake poem, climaxing, then hearing the poem in the voice of Blake, Ginsberg looked out of his window at an ancient sky, at the moment that he had been born for, at an exquisite moment of initiation, when existence itself was God. He had never stopped looking for an explanation since, even when the visions were followed by a stay at a psychiatric institute, the constant travels, the writing of Howl, the notoriety and literary recognition, the death of his mother, and this constant worry of reaching the end before the ultimate realisation: ‘14 years later I’m still being murdered by “God”. Om Mane Padme’ (26). India was another key to fit into that lock, to see if it opened any answers to him.

Ginsberg was accompanied by his companion Peter Orlovsky and soon joined by poets Gary Snyder and Joanna Kyger. They all kept journals during this period. Ginsberg’s Indian Journals, Snyder’s Passage through India and Kyger’s Strange Big Moon are radically different from each other, pushing the boundaries of the genre of travel writing. The poets visited as many places as they could, consulting guidebooks, visiting Hindu and Buddhist holy men and religious groups, staying in inexpensive rest houses and retreats set aside for pilgrims. The moving was fairly relentless, and would be grueling even for natives who didn’t have to deal with the cultural and physical adjustment that the trip demanded from the Americans. They were the ubiquitous homo viator, a fascinating combination of pilgrim and tourist, described by Swatos and Tomasi as ‘a figure who features in all cultures and civilizations … constantly on a journey in search of what was the supernatural in the past.’

1 The city was renamed Mumbai in 1996.
3 In his 1957 poem ‘Death to Van Gogh’s Ear’, Ginsberg wrote, ‘Poet is Priest / Money has reckoned the soul of America.’
4 ‘ancient sky’, ‘initiation’, ‘existence was God’ were phrases that Ginsberg used to describe the experience during his interview with Thomas Clark for The Paris Review (25-8).


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and is now the cultural-exotic, but also the sacred. For Ginsberg, Orlovsky, Synder and Kyger, the quest was infused with spiritual and intellectual curiosity, an assertion of individuality that involved questioning social identity, where ‘there is no contradiction between piety and relaxation.’ And it was significant that this intensely personal investigation into individualism was taking place within the framework of India’s diverse religious culture.

The present essay’s exploration of India in Beat imagination is based on this projection of the country as a spiritual quest as well a tourist destination, triggering a new era in the dynamics between the two nations, an inquiry propelled by the Beat poets that was different from previous encounters (with American missionaries, philosophers, writers and politicians) as well as a continuum, of interest not only for the richness of thought and aesthetics produced, but for its transformation into ‘the passion of the 1960s counterculture for Indian clothes and music and pop versions of Indian religion.’

India also became the testing ground for many of the core beliefs espoused by the Beats: spiritual experimentation, creativity on the wings of intoxication, celebrating sexuality, and living among the marginalised and the socially disenfranchised. Ginsberg explains,

the Beat Generation and the spiritual liberation movement were just sort of riding on the great biological wave of change in human society and awareness, as the population expanded and the globe grew electric.

There are three interwoven motifs that can be drawn from Indian Journals in understanding Ginsberg’s persona as a participant in this social movement in the United States and as a spiritual tourist in India: encounter with these ancient religions in their milieu of origin, experience of sex as religion, and religious experiences through drugs. Tangential to these are the obsession with mortality and the identification with those that regular tourists kept a distance from: the squalid, the impoverished, the deformed. Here, in distinction with earlier Western project of ‘saving’ India from its squalor through the ‘miracle’ of development and science, Ginsberg attempts to pay more attention to Indian poverty without simply condemning it. The profound, ambivalent experience of this squalor is examined at length in Ginsberg’s diary jottings and gives this journey of the poets its mythic overtones.

‘Keeping a journal,’ as Kyger puts it, ‘gives history back to you.’ If we are to agree with her and with James L. Farrell that ‘one of the most important developments of the American 1960s was the understanding that the personal is political,’ we can read the Indian Journals as not only symptomatic and heraldic of that understanding of Beat poetry as personalistic, but also as performative, an exhibition in itself. In doing so, one is only too

6 Swatos and Tomasi 19.


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aware that Ginsberg’s exoticisation and stereotyping of the ‘Orient’, postulating it as a conduit for the realisation of his genius, lends itself to criticism of extending the ‘Orientalism’ projects of European colonisers. A key ambition of the present essay is to find an alternative to the extremely restrictive notion of ‘orientalism’, or indeed ‘appropriation’. How can one prove that any writing by any western writer on India, of any historical period, is not orientalist or appropriative? Ginsberg, a gay Jewish male, is hardly a representative of Empire in the way a philologist-bureaucrat in nineteenth-century colonial India might have been. Indeed, Ginsberg’s writings constantly point to the effort of learning from Indian experiences, even while being critical of them when required. I wish to read this text in a more hospitable and open-ended manner. As with most performative texts, the nuances are far more layered, and it is the intention of this essay to take an alternate approach to the postcolonial critique in order to place these ideas in the context of Ginsberg’s poetics and Beat culture. It also seeks to redress the underplaying or overlooking of the Indian Journals in Ginsberg’s oeuvre and to the spiritual saga of the Beat writers.

Indian Journals is a hypnotic work that unites premeditation, a location-specific spontaneity, and a post-deliberative quality. That it seems to encompass all these divergent motifs without the seams showing, even in re-readings, is a testament to its uniqueness. Although Ginsberg claims on the back cover of the book that it was ‘not originated for public eye’, it is clear that the decision to give it a certain form for public consumption was made with an eye on posterity and awareness of the importance of such a work in representing a unique moment in the shared cultural experiences of the United States of America and India.

India Imagined and Experienced
Beginning with the confusion over the identification of ‘Indians’ by Columbus, India, distant and alluring, has always had a place in the American imagination. Whether among early Christian missionaries, the intense poetry of Walt Whitman (especially in ‘Passage to India’), the gentle exploration of the metaphysical by the transcendentalists, or the modernist innovations of T.S. Eliot that invoked the East (most eminently in ‘The Wasteland’), the fascination decidedly intensified after the Second World War when the United States found itself as a leading defender of the Western ideals of democracy and India gained independence from the British. Americans looked towards India for the same reason that they had valued and ‘needed’ Europe – tradition; only there was the added incentive of the thrill of exploring something unfamiliar, an ancient civilisation that was perceived to be grounded in spirituality and the Atman (soul) in contrast to the American ideals of individuality and capitalism.

Many American philosophers and writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century made the journey to India, either physically like Mark Twain, or intellectually like Emerson, Whitman and George Santayana, or both in person and in writing as did Aldous Huxley.11 India had something that their American realities did not encompass, ‘something they needed in order to achieve personal fulfillment’.12 The resurgence of capitalism in America following the Second World War with its ‘all-consuming work ethic, sexual

11 Although Huxley was British, he spent much of his life in the US and had a large influence on American counterculture.
12 Rotter 36.

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repression, cultural xenophobia, militaristic patriotism, and suburban materialism brought the accompanying realisation of spiritual bankruptcy. A growing interest in alternative states of consciousness became one way to subvert the increasing materialism underpinning the national creed. Huxley was one of the enthusiastic advocates of induced states of intoxication for mystical experiences. India was perceived as offering easy access to drugs and alcohol, as well as spiritual rediscovery and rejuvenation for those who had given up all worldly possessions, much of which was manifested in the anti-establishment emergence of the Beat philosophy.

Allen Ginsberg explained the concept of Beat, even while resisting the term as a box that tries to include all which is outside the box, calling it ‘a common insight – as well as the correlative of opening up of an awareness or consciousness’ and claiming this common insight to be ‘spiritual liberation.’ This stance would offer wide-ranging implications to the counterculture movement, India becoming a potential source of creative and spiritual inspiration. Stephen Prothero argues that since Beats were spiritual protesters as well as literary innovators, they ought to be viewed as at least minor characters in the drama of American religion. In many ways, the literary and religious experimentations were seen as complementary to each other.

This journey to India, the birthplace of the Buddha, was primarily the idea of Gary Snyder who had been living in Japan and studying Buddhism. He and his wife Joanne Kyger stayed in India between early January and late April 1962; four intense months of travel through the length of the country, from Madurai in the South to Dharamshala in the North, from Calcutta in the East to Jaipur in the West, with a dozen places of tourist interest thrown in between. Ginsberg and Orlovsky joined the couple a month into their travels but stayed on in India for over a year till May 1963.

For those travelling on the American dollar, India was a relatively inexpensive destination and the visitors try to make the most of it. ‘I am everywhere / there is to see as a tourist,’ writes Ginsberg in the Indian Journals (24). It is undeniable that there is often a blindness to the privileges of a strong dollar, and an American passport. Nevertheless, the engagement with the sensorium of India enlarges, and makes visible, the ambiguities of the term ‘tourism’. The supposedly timeless rhetoric of ‘poets on a pilgrimage’ is in truth full of attention to the historical significance of young American poets in a Cold War era, and is fully aware of what this trip would contribute to a newly emerging American counter-cultural sensibility.

Joanna Kyger, whose first book of poems was not yet published, was attempting ‘to investigate the stuff of writing,’ but she was ‘Gary’s wife’ for the journey, and her artistic self can be found crouching resentfully in the pages of her journal, which she dismisses as ‘not very revealing as to the actual experiences of a journey.’ Her entries, because of their preoccupations with laundry and logistics, are bursting with pent-up creative energies; her observations sharp, candid and unapologetic. In a 1998 interview, Kyger talks about the journal as her ‘particular refuge’ while among these poets who shared ‘a very strong male

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14 Dalgard and Lauridsen 24.
16 Kyger xi.

bonding’ and never asked her if she would like to read her poems with them. Snyder’s journal, *Passage through India*, put together from letters that he wrote to his sister Thea Snyder Lowry, is a more clinical and controlled version, very distinct from Ginsberg. Nevertheless, there is a heightened awareness of being in the land that incubated their spiritual and aesthetic outlook. Compared to Kyger and Snyder’s published journals of this journey, Ginsberg’s *Indian Journals* captures the immediacy and dynamism of this encounter in a much more visceral manner. It is a variegated and highly dramatic account of his deeply personal and intimate exploration of India; a pulsating tapestry of dreams, sex, drugs, poetry, sketches, memories, photographs, encounters, sights and obsessions.

**Playing with the Gods**

Ginsberg’s trip to India was preceded and succeeded by estrangements with Peter Orlovsky. Naturally, a sense of loss and an anxiety for new beginnings follow Ginsberg in India. The man who pretended he knew all felt as if he had suddenly run out of every pretension, ‘down in possessions to Peter & a knapsack’ (102). And it slipped out, innocently; the overarching need and drive that is stamped across the *Indian Journals* – he had wanted to be a saint, but instead had become shameful and boring (11). During the sea journey to India, Ginsberg had armed himself with an impressive array of reading, mostly on spiritual texts about Hinduism and about Indian civilisation and history, but it did not seem to have prepared him for the embodied experience of shrines, rituals, idols, festivals and holy men. This is an important aspect to keep in mind as one reads *Indian Journals*, particularly since the line between adulation and profanity is a disconcertingly thin one for Ginsberg. He indulges in a constant jesting of the anthropomorphism, ‘fat knees of elephant boy – baby – stone baby Ganesha – Wouldn’t you think you’d seen the verse of your hatchet this axerday – Miss Gannippatti, Parvati’s his mother’ (103); often crude blasphemy that seeks to scandalise, ‘Fuck all Hindu Goddesses / Because they are all prostitutes / I like to Fuck / All Hindu Goddesses / are Prostitutes’ (80); or just random silliness peppered over philosophical concerns, ‘I worship Dumbo, the Porpoise’ (100). On the face of it, Ginsberg is being outright disrespectful and offensive. However, as one looks closer, there emerges the possibility that Ginsberg has astutely, probably intuitively, perceived the dualistic approach to the religion, cleverly subverting the concrete face of Hinduism – a veritable melee of gods and goddesses worshipped either in idol form or symbolically, having idiosyncratic personalities and family lives similar to mortals, and hence relatively easy to comprehend – so as to create a shortcut to the more abstract realm of pure metaphysics and high theological debates. And if it is insulting or flippant in the process, it does not matter to Ginsberg; rather, it only adds to his delight in the word-spirit experiment.

Besides, Ginsberg’s reaction to institutionalised Hinduism is no different from the rejection of religious institutions that the Beats practiced in their own country. This search for the wild ascetics was like the ‘beats’ flight from the churches and synagogues of the suburbs to city streets inhabited by whores and junkies, hobos and jazzmen. 20

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17 *San Francisco Beat. Talking with the Poets* edited by David Meltzer (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001) 127.
19 Farrell writes about Snyder’s notion of the Beats as ‘striving for contemplation, morality and wisdom, corresponding roughly to the Buddhist dyana, sila and prajn’ (68).
20 Prothero 209.

individualism demanded the finding of some logic in how the self was connected to the life force around it and adapting it to the calling of one’s spirit, the universal and the particular coming together in a single orb of illumination. Nearly everything the Beat writers had done in the aggrandisement of their art, especially Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg, involved glorifying spontaneity, of taking every act to the limit of social mores and then to push it towards histrionics; to critique the absurdity of conservative America and to ‘sacralize the secular, turning everyday existence into a drama of ultimate consequences.’ Kyger describes a soul connection with India as soon as she arrives, though it dissipates upon sustained interaction with the country, ‘I feel constantly to be on the brink – not of understanding – a much bigger feeling ... the religiousness of India seems to bring it out more.’ Religiosity here is not something that needs to be ferreted out; it is an overwhelming and transgressive force that demands accommodating. For Ginsberg, this kind of excess was precisely what he sought and with his typical irreverence he intensifies it further.

It is obvious that Ginsberg took delight in the variety and novelty of the many Gods in the Hindu pantheon, infinitely more engrossing for him than the Judeo-Christian tradition. One sees these unsettling comparisons between Hindu Gods and Western aesthetics in the journal, for instance when Ginsberg wonders how da Vinci could beat an elephant on a mouse (65). Characteristically, he swings between extremes in his fascination. Sometimes the Hindu Gods are inspiring figures offering bold alternatives to the destructive materiality of the West – ‘Vishnu’s Chakra or Discus – E = Mc²’ (21) – and at other times they represent ‘a huge cartoon religion with Disney Gods’ (64). The more gods available for the play of words and thoughts, the more texture it offered his writing, and inevitably more quandaries too. Barely ten pages into the journal, he starts to wonder if a guiding force is needed and soon becomes relentless in his hunt for a spiritual teacher among the holy men and women in India, someone to guide him through the metaphysical maze.

**In Search of a Guru**

Ginsberg has the same question for all the religious practitioners he meets: could they help him find a Guru who would show him the path to enlightenment, preferably through love and drugs? He is invariably drawn to the ash-covered and matted-haired Shaivaite sadhus with their scant clothing and their love of marijuana. He is able to empathise with their distancing themselves with mainstream society, and their abandon to prayer and intoxication, but for an intellectual creature like himself, the pure sensory experience is limiting and their larger philosophy of life slips through his grasp. Nonetheless, their impact on him is considerable. Among the images that Ginsberg chooses to include in his *Indian Journals* are those of Shambu Bharti Baba who poses with his trident in three snapshots placed in close succession, the Baba going from a towel wrapped around his waist, to a loin cloth, and then completely bare. The cover of the first edition of *Indian Journals* is of the same Baba in the nude. The depiction of the various stages of undressing clearly capture more than Ginsberg’s artistic tastes or the Baba’s renunciation. Ginsberg is, and yet is not, a participant in his heart’s deepest longings to be the other man. This is the paradox of how touristic discourse works ‘to

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22 Kyger 157.
23 A reference to the elephant-headed god Ganesh who is often depicted seated on a mouse.

promote difference while simultaneously erasing it.\textsuperscript{24} Inevitably, there is the ‘gaze’, the encounter with that which is not the self, and for a spiritual tourist the experience becomes more remote even as the physical distances shrink.

Despite Ginsberg’s frantic efforts to find a way around it, there is a fundamental problem between the workings of Hinduism and the brand of enlightenment that he is in search of. Kyger shrewdly diagnoses this in her journals: ‘His big hangup is that he wants quick enlightenment, he won’t sit or train for it, maybe the way Howl brought him quick fame.’\textsuperscript{25} Ginsberg refers to this constant tension between artistic temperament and spiritual temperance in the koan of a man dangling from a tree with only silence to save his life: ‘The Zen man hanging by his teeth with no other answer’ (51). If the man were to answer the question, he would fall and lose his life, but if he were to remain silent then he is evading the question. Ginsberg cannot help letting go of the figurative branch in his mouth when the Americans get an audience with the Dalai Lama. Having wondered if Buddhism had better solutions for him than Hinduism, Ginsberg grabs an opportunity to ask the Dalai Lama himself. While Snyder and Kyger have questions about meditation and faith, Ginsberg is more interested in knowing about how drug states correspond to the experiences of meditation. Ginsberg saw the asceticism of ancient Hindu and Buddhist mystics as ‘needlessly painful’ when a similar alteration in body chemistry, for transcending the physical form in the spiritual quest for oneness with the divine, could be achieved through drugs.\textsuperscript{26} Ginsberg writes at length about the ‘inside-outside’ visualisation that drugs create (52), the phantasmagoria that a potent mix of drugs and spiritualism inordinately whips up. He compares the hallucinations caused by LSD to the Viswaroopa Darshana in the Bhagvad Gita where Lord Krishna reveals himself and the entirety of creation to be the same in a dazzling cosmic vision (28). However, the Dalai Lama in turn has a question for Ginsberg, one that Ginsberg frames within the dedication to Indian Journals – ‘If you take LSD can you see what’s in that Briefcase?’ (4). The poet-pilgrim had to acknowledge that drugs could only take him so far as the edges of any briefcase, its contents yielding only to a different kind of seeker.

Ginsberg then is soon wondering if he can do this spiritual journey by a different sadhana (a disciplined practice towards self realisation), a concept that has been around in Indian aesthetics for a long time, where art (poetry) is the deliberate discipline for the true seeker. This poses different challenges for him: ‘And Poetry as Sadhana – But to have faith in Who? And love who? & weep for who but all of us Whos alive’ (184). Working on his notes for a lecture to give at a Marxist Literary Conference, Ginsberg spells out the ‘jump of perception’ that he is wanting from his poetry ‘breaking syntactical order / punctuation order / logical orders / old narrative order / meaning order’ (93). Just as his poetry is breaking with discipline, Ginsberg wants his spiritualism to break with discipline, however both tapasya (austerity) and sadhana are antithetical to the kind of rejection of ‘form’ that he is enthusiastic about. This is where India / Hinduism / Buddhism turn out to be tougher than his idealisation of them.

A trip to Brindavan, where Lord Krishna is said to have spent his childhood, and following an encounter with a Hindu holy woman, Ginsberg feels that he needs to stop

\textsuperscript{25} Kyger 191.
looking for a living human Guru or a God to worship; rather, the love they inspired had to be the leading light. Sitting on the banks of Ganges, smoking in the company of a sadhu and watching a funeral pyre, he thinks, ‘Man has no right to be’ (102). With that bleakness emerges a realisation that he is in the middle of an important life-experience, one that his literary gurus – e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman and W.C. Williams - did not have access to and his thoughts travel to them: ‘to Cummings, Why? – to literature, with a capital Me. Pound. They never did see India – glad I got here I thought by road.’ (102). The time spent moving across India becomes a teaching, the deepest self acting as a guru, the journey cleansing the spirit as much as the arrival at the holy shrine.

Thoughts of artistic immortality for Ginsberg are closely shadowed by thoughts of the corporal self, the mortality of the flesh. If one dominant image were to be picked out of the Indian Journals, it would have to be the slow graphic disintegration of a human body in a blazing pyre. Death is a towering Ginsberg obsession during his time in India; almost nothing comes close enough, not even his lover who is a constant presence in the book. Early in the text, during the first few encounters with burning bodies, there are indications that Ginsberg is trying to exorcise himself of his terror of both life and death, ‘the echo of being afraid to be born, to leave Naomi’s womb ... Is the same as being afraid to leave the womb of life & go forth into the State of Death’ (29). As if having resolved to face his demons, he spends long hours at the cremation grounds, sometimes alone, sometimes stoned, sometimes among the company of Bengali poets or sadhus, but his eyes rarely moving away from the burning body.

Every detail is captured, how the human fat drips, the brain exposed and charring, how they become ‘meat-dolls’ (61), the eyes ‘popped & white’ (67), the process of cremation demystifying death; often the actions of the ‘pole men’ or the Chandaals are described, again a community of people shunned by most; that their job is just a job, completely matter-of-fact, seems to appeal to him. For Hindus, death is transformation, the body dies but the spirit is reborn over and over again; infinite cyclic patterns that have always been of interest to the Beats. ‘I want the joy of Maya, not only the Dukkha,’ Ginsberg announces (85); not just the suffering but the illusory nature of all emotions, in fact the great illusion itself.

Kyger’s also mentions a visit to the cremation grounds. ‘Shopping and sightseeing all day. The burning ghats.’ The sights of cremation becoming a part of the tourist experience, as perhaps it is for most Westerners coming to India. Kyger’s words highlight what Ginsberg on the other hand is trying in his journal-writing – pushing the boundaries of his tourist persona, throwing himself into the most alien and morbid and then staying immersed in it till he can glean some form of personal truth. Admittedly, this is still behaving like a tourist, but the raw honesty of his selfishness is an artistic move in itself, a brilliant evocation of transnationalism. The political boundaries that define the United States and India and the vast physical distances that separate them are rendered extraneous to the connection that one human life makes with another, through the common experiences of joy, sorrow, growth and death.

Andrew J. Rotter writes, ‘Americans and Indians were incomplete others, or even selves seen in a distorting mirror ... not static over time.’ Probably the biggest achievement of Ginsberg as the homo viator is that he is able to look beyond the dichotomy of the new and ancient cultures, of East and West, finding ways to make them blend into one, the dualism of

27 Kyger 173.
28 Rotter xxiv.
logic and emotions turning into a seamless flow: ‘Reliance on spontaneous writing to capture the whole mind of the Poet – not just what he thinks he should think with his front brain’ (93). In the poem ‘Durga-Kali-Modern Weapons in her Hands’, Ginsberg takes mythological and religious symbols from one world, transposing it on the ‘reality’ of the other, a strange stock-taking of the culture that he has come from, that he is denouncing, and in doing so, turning redundant, almost surreal in a dark brooding way. Hence, Shiva’s trident becomes a Jet, Yama’s Iron Rod is a concentration camp, Indra’s thunderbolt a bomb (21). And suddenly, the distortion in the mirror becomes a desirable dramatic device. The commentary is travelling both ways, into both cultures, and ‘Kali as Statue of Liberty / starts moving with ten arms / reading counterclockwise’ (22). Literature for the Beats, for Ginsberg in particular, was certainly an ‘organized experiment in consciousness’ (93) and in the Indian Journals the experiment is being extended into the body and life of the poet in an explicit manner, offering itself for scrutiny and study in new exciting ways. Their understanding of spirituality as the ‘sacralization of everyday life and the sacramentalization of human relationships’ is almost the sub-text of everything that Ginsberg writes when he is in India.

To Shock is to Awaken
‘But how ever recreate India?’ Ginsberg asks (193). Almost impossible, it would seem. A repetitive and almost psychedelic pattern can be traced in the Indian Journals, a movement between lucidity and intoxication, between realisation and confusion, between renunciation and indulgence, certainly not a linear shift between binaries, rather a circular movement where it becomes impossible to locate beginnings and ends, where there is only perpetuation and all states of being and becoming are part of the same sphere of existence. It is not always easy to say where the prose ends and the poetry begins in the text; words tumble with sensations, the language an exaggerated enactment and at times desperately over-performed too. ‘Monotone years waiting for thee Traveller / faster than light or Sex abstraction ... I am a lost soul, a poor lost soul’ (173). At first encounter, many of the entries read like the antics of an adolescent trying to garner attention – swearing outrageously, over-indulging, throwing tantrums, swinging from self-adulation to self-pity to self-destruction, trying constantly to shock. Who was he trying to shock, the Indians who would dismiss his eccentricity as a white man’s self-indulgence or Americans who had already accepted him as one of the ‘bad boys’ of Beat? To shock either or both was only too easy for a talent like Ginsberg. After all, being a liminal figure was a matter of pride and effortlessly claimed in Beat philosophy. It seemed more likely that he was desperately trying to shock himself, upping the stakes each time he could not. In a country where propriety is highly valued, he seems to feel a greater pressure to strain and push against imagined and real cultural boundaries, but even more against his own creative faculties, his sanity and his self-identity. In fact, Indian Journals does not reveal much about the India of the sixties that Ginsberg saw, but ‘reveals more about the priorities of his own culture.’ It is a confessional that is both individual and collective at the same time.

29 Prothero 214.
30 John Lardas points out to how the Beats employed a ‘liminal strategy’ in their lives and literature, which as a process of deep play was one of delineation, of probing the boundaries of human behavior and the sharp edges of social facts (29).
31 Stephens 59.

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Why does Ginsberg want to tell all? Biographer Bill Morgan points out that Ginsberg had developed a method of writing of prose snippets for the purpose of converting those fragments into poems; and perhaps the journal was at times a means to an end, but it also offers to readers motivations and confessions that suggest a work of art being consciously constructed. The confessional approach to poetry that Ginsberg had found with *Howl* created new dynamics between the sensual and the spiritual and ‘was a way to realign the self with the cosmos through the drama of introversion.’ *Indian Journals* could in fact be read entirely as a confessional prose-poem-travelogue. The sustained and heightened self-consciousness makes it irresistible, the kind of voyeuristic gratification that audiences derive from reality shows on television where participants spill out their deepest secrets.

Many of his journal entries contain graphic details of Ginsberg’s sexual acts with Orlovsky; and repeated elaboration of his belief that sex and eroticism are also acts of self-realisation. There is inspiration to be found in the religion he is exploring. The phallic shape has been worshipped for ages in many Hindu temples as the Shiva lingam. ‘Lingams worshipped here,’ Ginsberg notes and draws a penis alongside (100). The erotic is at easy access and even though it remains heavily symbolic, it becomes a powerful source for inspiration for the poet.

Yet, at the same time, there is an instinctive rebellion and aversion to what Ginsberg knows he ‘ought to’ enjoy as a tourist in India. The visit to the Taj Mahal, the ultimate tourist destination in India, is probably an exception. Otherwise, the *Indian Journals* is oblivious to the profusion of colour, cultural variety and natural beauty of India. It spills over with description of burning bodies, disease, decay, decadence – all magnified and adulated. In repulsion Ginsberg finds attraction, and in attraction he finds himself. The motif of finding himself is similarly closely sutured to the motif of losing himself, either in drugs or sex or the intensity of life on Indian streets. Open any page of the *Indian Journals* and neither day nor place is important, only that self-repulsion and self-attraction constantly playing itself out on the very edge of consciousness. We learn so little about the itinerary and logistics of events and places around the travelers in those 16 months, but we do learn of the shifts within Ginsberg and it is riveting in the pitch and scale of the drama, as ‘epic’ and climactic as he believes himself to deserve. He is the chosen one, born for the spotlight, and India providing the slightly shaky but grand enough stage.

Even when he pities himself, there are pleasures,

‘Nobody loves me, I’m old / ugly Allen Now like I dreamed I always / was when I was tender boy with hide-outs / rubbing my flesh tube down in my legs’ (175).

Snyder, who was the catalyst to the India trip, gets cursory mentions in the *Indian Journals* and Kyger is almost not there. Orlovsky comes and goes in the narrative in waves of desire and lust. There is Ginsberg and only Ginsberg in this India. But even this Ginsberg is not entirely real, at times an entirely fictitious persona. Lardas writes, ‘as the Beats imagined America, they could not help but imagine themselves.’ The self / poet that Ginsberg imagines and projects is deliberately mystified as was his larger public image. Hailed by the counterculture

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33 Lardas 153.

34 He connects this imagining to a claim by Ginsberg that the early Beat agenda was focused on the transmission of cultural values from the individual to the rest of the society (136).
movement as ‘America’s greatest Hindu guru,’ some of what Ginsberg propounded, like *mantras* (chants), yoga practices, *mudras* (hand gestures) became part of the culture and eventually very soon led to what Julie Stephens calls a ‘consumption’ of India through ‘diverse commodities, rituals, language and ideas.’ This became apparent as the sixties progressed and the ‘hippie trail’ brought the American counterculture to India in human waves.

Gary Snyder takes care to clarify that he and his fellow travellers in India, including Ginsberg, were ‘in advance of the counterculture invasion (which came more from Europe than the U.S) and weren’t burdened with too many visionary expectations’ but also agrees that the Beat Generation transformed into the hippie-generation. The Hare Krishna movement that began in New York in 1966 reinforced India as both pilgrimage and holy destination. Since the separation between mainstream America and the counterculture was highly permeable, what fired the imagination of a small albeit experimental section of society soon gathered credence in the national consciousness. In fact, Dale Riepe argues that India has had more influence on American philosophic thought than any other non-Western culture. This was certainly true for the war-weary American youth of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. As forerunners to the counterculture and as pilgrims who had actually been to India, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder were invited to the first ‘Be-In’ in San Francisco in 1967, a gathering meant to ‘show that hippies and radicals were one.’ Here they performed the Hindu rite of *pradikshina* (circumambulation usually done around the sanctum sanctorum in temples) of a polo field and the whole event was accorded the status of a pilgrimage gathering. Through such enactments, the individual quest and experientiality of the (Beat) poet was consciously shared and turned into a communal space, and probably explains the transformation of the *Indian Journals* from an intimate travel diary to an unapologetic book addressed to the public. For Ginsberg, *Indian Journals* became an exceptional polyphonic literary terrain to showcase and engage with multiple cultures, a bridge for alternate spiritual explorations. This was the beginning of the process whereby India established itself as an integral, and continually self-reinventing, part of the American post-war imagination. The poet, through India, had found a way to be a priest.

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37 Snyder ix.

38 Dalgard and Lauridsen 68.


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‘How Shall I be Saved?’ The Salvation of Mrs Curren in Coetzee’s Age of Iron.
William M. Purcell

In announcing the selection of J. M. Coetzee as the Nobel Prize laureate in literature for 2003, the Swedish Academy wrote that Coetzee’s works follow a recurring pattern: an investigation into the ‘the downward spiraling journeys he considers necessary for the salvation of his characters.’ Though salvation is a strong motif in Coetzee’s novels, explicit connection with Christian salvation is avoided in virtually all of his novels, except for one, Age of Iron. Oddly, however, Age of Iron has been viewed from just about every lens but the Christian one. Susan VanZanten Gallagher and others have correctly noted that Mrs Curren, the novel’s central protagonist, serves as a human allegory for the plight of South Africa. VanZanten Gallagher’s analysis notes references to Virgil and ‘the unborn dead,’ Charon, Dante’s boatman at the river Styx, Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, and Tolstoy’s ‘What Men Live By.’ In a later work she includes Age of Iron in the category of South African confessional literature, but provides no analysis and discussion of how the work fits in the genre. Derek Attridge writes that the role of the ‘other’ in Coetzee’s work, particularly Age of Iron, is key to understanding the author’s writing. For Attridge the conjoined interaction of self and the ‘other’ lead to a recognition of perspective. Although he acknowledges that recognition of the ‘other’ in religious work is transcendent, Attridge does not seem to appreciate fully the role of Christian scripture in Age of Iron. Gilbert Yeoh focuses his attention on ‘love,’ with emphasis on such distinctions as ‘agape’ and ‘caritas’ to explore ironies. Acknowledging the Christian apparatus, however, Yeoh connects Mrs Curren’s ordeal to I Corinthians and ignores obvious allusions to the broader Biblical context. Yeoh appropriates the language of Christianity, but is not attentive to what I regard as the predominant Christian imagery contained in the novel.

There is no doubt that Age of Iron is an allegory for the social and political struggles of South Africa as it emerged from apartheid. The thesis of this paper is that Age of Iron should also be read as an account of Christian salvation in which a lost soul, Mrs Curren, is saved by learning to love the unloved and unlovable. The narrative of Mrs Curren’s salvation is crafted via references to a variety of Christian scriptures including John, Luke, Matthew, Mark, Hebrews, Corinthians, James, and Amos, as well as the Dies irae, a portion of the Requiem Mass.

Attridge has written that Coetzee’s characters often use religious expression as a means to describe certain aspects of society: ‘although they apparently have no orthodox religious beliefs, they cannot talk about the lives they lead without such language.’ Indeed, Age of Iron is wholly dependent upon such language. This is no accident. As VanZanten Gallagher writes ‘For many years, South Africa had the strongest civil religion of any

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5 Attridge 180.

twenty-first century nation,’ as the ruling National Party defined the nation as a ‘Christian country.’ Moreover, Lyn S. Graybill has written that ‘South Africa is a country that is “Christian” in a sense that would be unrecognizable to Americans. Theological discourse on political matters is taken seriously.’ She continues, noting that ‘Biblical language’ ‘resonates’ throughout South African thought as it was used both by the ruling National Party to justify its apartheid policies and by resistance leaders as a critique of those policies.\(^7\) Coetzee, as he tells us in Boyhood, attended Catholic school and was deeply attracted to Catholicism at one point in his youth.\(^8\) Mrs Curren, the fictional character, as a University Classics Professor, would have a decent grounding in Catholicism/Christianity and its doctrine of salvation. Additionally, a Christian view of salvation is cogently articulated by Blanche, a Roman Catholic Nun in Coetzee’s 2003 novel, Elizabeth Costello.\(^9\)

Christian salvation involves the transformation of a person’s soul. As Paul S. Fiddes writes, the transformation ‘does not just involve the individual, but always places the person in relationship.’\(^10\) The person moves from one status to another. Salvation is reached through atonement, ‘the restoring of relationships between human beings and God, who are estranged from each other.’\(^11\) Those relationships are restored through a ‘personal relationship in which those who have broken them are actively involved’ (178). A second stage in salvation is sanctification. According to Wilhelm Niesel, Roman Catholic theology sees sanctification as beginning with God’s grace, but also requiring that the person’s ‘will is active in the reception of grace, by ... free will and cooperation.’\(^12\) Progress toward sanctification requires ‘the meritorious character of the works’ done by the sanctified person through hope, love, and faith.\(^13\) Though the Reformed tradition maintains that Sanctification is only bestowed by God, the resulting salvation still involves the transformation of the person.\(^14\)

Age of Iron takes the form of an extended letter, written by Mrs Curren, a retired South African Classics professor, to her adult daughter, who now lives in the United States. The novel is set in South Africa from 1986 to 1989, a period during which Mrs Curren is dying of cancer. Concurrent with her terminal diagnosis, a homeless man, Vercueil, takes up residence in Mrs Curren’s home. During the 3 year period, Mrs Curren develops a relationship with Vercueil and eventually relies on him to post the letter to her daughter. Mrs Curren also becomes more involved with her domestic servant, Florence, and her family, when Florence’s son Bekhi and his friend, John, are savagely beaten by police. As Mrs Curren becomes intimately involved with a homeless man and black South Africans, one sees, as many commentators have noted, a human allegory of South Africa as a country. The allegory, moreover, follows quite familiar Christian forms.

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\(^6\) VanZanten Gallagher 38.


\(^11\) Fides 178.


\(^13\) Niesel 63.

\(^14\) Niesel 62
Age of Iron is divided into four chapters that each detail successive stages in Mrs Curren’s salvation. The narrative opens with Mrs Curren’s first encounter with Vercueil. She has just received her terminal diagnosis and returns home to encounter a man, whom we learn later is named Vercueil, sprawled out in a cardboard box at the end of her alley: ‘Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette’s, his jaw agape. An unsavory smell about him: urine, sweet wine, moldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean.’ Mrs Curren asks Vercueil to leave her property. As Mrs Curren recalls the situation she ponders its significance: ‘Two things, then, in the space of an hour: the news, long dreaded, and this reconnaissance, this other annunciation’ (15) As Yeoh has written, the use of ‘agape’ invites the connection to the Greek term ‘agape,’ Christian love. Even more relevant to a Christian reading are the descriptions of smell and clothing which resonate with Jesus’ encounter with Lazarus in John 11: 28-44. In that passage, Mary and Martha, firm believers, take Jesus to the bedside of their brother, Lazarus. Lazarus is described as having an ‘odor, for he has been dead four days.’ Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and in so doing becomes an enemy of the Pharisees. In consorting with the unclean Vercueil and later with Florence and her family, Mrs Curren violates a variety of mores expected of a woman of her race, class, and station. Jesus repeatedly violated the Jewish cleanliness laws in touching lepers (Mark 1: 40-42), a bleeding woman (Mark 5: 24-34) and other outcasts. Jesus, of course, was well known as a prophet when he performed these acts. Mrs Curren is a broken woman, estranged from family and country and now facing a terminal illness.

The reference to the encounter with Vercueil as an annunciation, of course, invites comparison to the ‘The Annunciation’ in the Christian Scriptures, the Angel Gabriel’s appearance before Mary and his forecasting of the birth of Jesus and his eventual legacy (Luke 1: 26-37). Just as the Christian annunciation foreshadowed a transformation so too does the annunciation of Mrs Curren.

In spite of Mrs Curren’s initial resistance, Vercueil returns and Mrs Curren allows him to stay, first in her carport and eventually in the house. She offers him food and money in exchange for chores that he does not really do. She writes: ‘All in all, more trouble than he is worth. But I did not choose him. He chose me. Or perhaps he chose the one house without a dog’ (18). One is reminded here of Jesus’ remarks to his disciples in John 15: 16: ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.’ Again, Mrs Curren’s ultimate harbouring of Vercueil and her various remarks connecting him with angels resonates with the passage in Hebrews where Paul cautions that one should show hospitality to strangers ‘for some have entertained angels unaware’ (13.2; also James 2.2-7).

Mrs Curren’s relationship with Vercueil is uncomfortable from the beginning. She is disturbed by his ‘strange green eyes,’ ‘animal eyes,’ and his smell’ (6). She smells his presence in her room at night. She likens him more to an insect ‘emerging from behind the baseboards’ than to an angel (13-14). Nonetheless, the relationship between the two deepens. As she understands Vercueil more her attitude toward him begins to shift. The smell, she learns, comes from his feet: ‘He needs new shoes. He needs a bath. He needs a bath every day; he needs clean underwear; he needs a bed; he needs a roof over his head, he needs three meals a day, he needs money in the bank. Too much to give: too much for someone who

15 J.M. Coetzee, Age of Iron (New York: Penguin, 1990) 4. Subsequent references to this text will be included in parentheses in the text.
16 Yeoh 130.
Vercueil’s neediness, emphasised with the repetitive use of the word, is reminiscent of the Beatitudes (Mark 5) with its repeated use of ‘blessed.’ The needy people, Jesus tells us, are blessed and ‘they shall inherit the earth.’ The consideration of Vercueil’s neediness moves Mrs Curren to a contemplation of charity and ultimately helps her to deal with her own needs.

Mrs Curren is resistant to providing for Vercueil without work in return. She tells him that ‘we can’t proceed on charity.’ Vercueil asks why. ‘Because you don’t deserve it,’ she responds. Vercueil replies, ‘keeping his smile to himself: Deserve ... Who deserves anything?’ Mrs Curren responds in anger and ‘thrusts’ him her purse (21). Thus, a discussion of charity leads to the contemplation of grace, undeserved and freely given. At one point Vercueil has asked her why she doesn’t convert her house into a boarding house or a soup kitchen. Mrs Curren responds with something of a tirade: ‘Because the spirit of charity has perished in this country. Because those who accept charity despise it, while those who give give with a despairing heart. What is the point of charity when it does not go from the heart? What do you think charity is? Soup? Money? Charity: from the Latin word for heart.’ She then notes to herself that her etymology is false. Caritas, charity, comes from care. Vercueil, she feels is ‘beyond caring and beyond care’ (22). Subsequently, however, she discovers that there is greater depth to Vercueil.

Mrs Curren is a lover of music. She plays classical pieces on her piano and notices that Vercueil is listening. At one point she plays the Goldberg Variations on her phonograph and notices Vercueil, squatting in the alley, smoking, and listening. She looks at him and muses: ‘At this moment, I thought, I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love’ (30). The thought repulses her, but she considers it nonetheless. She has connected with Vercueil on visceral, transcendent, and aesthetic levels.

Chapter One closes with Mrs Curren asking Vercueil to perform a task for her after she has died. She wants Vercueil to post her letter and some other documents to her daughter. Though Vercueil is resistant, he finally agrees and the first chapter ends. Mrs Curren’s terminal diagnosis puts her in the frame of mind to contemplate something of a spiritual calling. The arrival of Vercueil sends her thoughts to biblical teaching she has known since childhood. Vercueil, in her mind, could be an angel. The fact that her angel is far from perfect moves her to contemplate the nature of charity and its basis, the love of another person. Vercueil’s agreement to post Mrs Curren’s letter puts him in the role of dual messenger: Mrs Curren perceives that he may be a messenger from God; she, in turn, sends him to deliver a message of her own. The message, as becomes evident in the pages that follow, is the story of her soul’s salvation.

The next chapter opens with the return of Florence, Mrs Curren’s black domestic, and her children, Bekhi, a 15 year old boy, and two young daughters, Hope and Beauty. Bekhi is later visited by a friend, John. Both boys are infused with the revolutionary militancy of the generation that would soon topple the apartheid regime. The boys taunt Vercueil and provoke an altercation with him. Mrs Curren breaks up the fight and tells the boys they must leave Vercueil alone, that he lives there. Florence gets involved in the discussion: ‘He lives here,’ she says, ‘but he is rubbish. He is good for nothing.’ Mrs Curren corrects Florence, saying ‘There are no rubbish people. We are all people together. ... He is my messenger’ (30). Mrs Curren’s reference to a messenger certainly refers to his role in conveying the message she is writing for her daughter, but it also alludes to her thought that Vercueil is a messenger for her and the vehicle for her salvation.

Mrs Curren has a subsequent discussion with Florence about what is going on in the

townships. Florence states that the oppression of the whites has made her people cruel. Florence is proud of the children: ‘These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them.’ Mrs Curren reflects on the comment:

Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. The Age of Iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? A Spartan matron, iron-hearted, bearing warrior sons for the nation. ‘We are proud of them.’ We. Come home either with your shield or on your shield. (50)

Mrs Curren has come to question her training as a classicist and her role in perpetuating a regime that created that Age of Iron. John and Bekhi are children of iron. Curren’s classicism represents the influence of humanism and the limitations that the humanist outlook has had on her own time. Their militant behaviour contrasts sharply with the names of Bekhi’s two younger sisters, Hope and Beauty. They represent the South Africa that is yet to come.

Eventually, John stays at Mrs Curren’s home, along with Bekhi. A policeman comes to Mrs Curren’s door, asking for the boys. Mrs Curren speaks to Florence, telling her she does not want trouble. Florence responds that it is safer there than in the township, Guguletu. When the rainy season arrives Mrs Curren invites Vercueil inside the house. Vercueil brings a drunken street woman into the house and Mrs Curren, jealous and angry, banishes the woman. Shortly thereafter a police van intentionally hits Behki and John, while they are riding a bicycle. Mrs Curren runs into the street screaming desperately for an ambulance. John is badly wounded in the incident. His forehead is cut open, leaving flesh ‘hanging in a loose flap’ and blood flowing onto his face. Mrs Curren pinches the skin tightly, trying to staunch the flow of blood. She is drawn by the sight of the ‘precious’ blood. ‘Blood,’ she muses in a theological train of thought, ‘is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together: lent not given; held in common, in trust, to be preserved: seeming to live in us, but only seeming, for in truth we live in it’ (62-4). She also notes the absence of bleeding in her own post-menopausal body. John is taken to a hospital. Mrs Curren and Florence treat Bekhi’s wounds at home. When Bekhi holds up his bleeding palms Mrs Curren wonders if the wounds are ‘honorable’ ‘wounds of war.’ Curren’s thoughts on blood utilise Christian imagery. Blood is communal. Blood is ‘sacred’ and ‘abominated.’ Mrs Curren is washed in the blood of John and Bekhi, sacrificial lambs necessary to the conversion of both Mrs Curren and the white South Africa she represents. Coetzee and Mrs Curren characterise the event in the language of salvation.

Mrs Curren leaves with Vercueil to search the hospitals of the area for John. Part of her awakening is the realisation that there are separate hospitals for Blacks and Whites. While waiting in the car with Vercueil, she muses that she is becoming used to Vercueil’s smell: ‘Is this how I feel toward South Africa: not loving it but habituated to its bad smell’ (70). Vercueil grumpily asks her what she needs him for. She responds, again emphasising her lack of choice in the relationship, ‘it is hard to be alone all the time. That’s all. I didn’t choose you, but you are the one who is here, and that will have to do. You arrived. It’s like having a child. You can’t choose the child. It just arrives’ (71). They continue the discussion with

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18Curren’s classicism represents the influence of humanism and the limitations the humanist outlook has had on her own time. This is a theme Coetzee places in much sharper focus in Elizabeth Costello when Elizabeth debates the merits of humanism with her sister, Blanche, a Roman Catholic nun. Elizabeth smugly takes her humanist position back to the Greeks. Blanche responds the Greek ideal with withering scorn.

“‘How Shall I be Saved?’ The Salvation of Mrs Curren in Coetzee’s Age of Iron,’ William M. Purcell. Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
comments about Mrs Curren’s daughter. Her daughter, she says, will not come home to South Africa. She is ‘like iron’, she says. Vercueil responds: ‘You are like iron too’ (75). She tells him that something inside her broke when he made the comment. What was breaking was her iron resolve, her unwitting complicity in the dysfunction of her country and her life. Vercueil remarks that Curren’s daughter is in exile. She responds: ‘No, she is not an exile. I am the exile’ (76). Mrs Curren’s acknowledgment of her exile status prepares her for a shocking entry into Guguletu township, a foreign country in her own land. Her sins have been washed away by the blood of the lambs, but she has yet to realise fully the extent of her sins. Mrs Curren has explored the consequences of involvement in the lives of others as in Chapter Two. In the next chapter she learns what that involvement demonstrates about what it means to love.

The third chapter opens with a phone call to Florence. There is trouble concerning Bekhi and she needs to go to Guguletu. Mrs Curren decides to drive Florence and the children to Guguletu. Going in to Guguletu is like traveling into another world. The rough road is abandoned and their car is engulfed by swirls of mist. They drop the oldest child, Hope, off with a relative and pick up Florence’s brother, Mr Thabane. They drive ‘through a landscape of scorched earth, blackened trees’ (76). They eventually have to stop and go on by foot. The scene is grim: ‘around us was a wilderness of gray sand dune and Port Jackson willow, and a stench of garbage and ash. Shreds of plastic, old iron, glass, animal bones littered both sides of the path’ (93). The houses are shacks, many covered only by plastic. Gunshots can be heard in the distance. Beyond a sand dune people are gathered watching some of the shacks burn. Others struggle to remove possessions from burning structures. A man in a black coat hacks at doors and windows with an axe as his companions douse the dwellings with gasoline. The crowd screams and throws rocks at their attackers. Government troops surround the area, riding in armored cars. Mrs Curren is exhausted and asks to go home. Mr Thabane mocks her: ‘You want to go home,’ he said, ‘but what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?’ (97). Mrs Curren speaks, trying to condemn the situation, but her words are inadequate. A man from the crowd dismisses her words, telling her that she is talking ‘shit’. Mrs Curren agrees, but points out that to describe the scene would ‘require the tongue of a god.’ Again, the man replies ‘shit’ (99). They journey further into the devastation and encounter Florence emerging from a building, her face in tears. Inside the building is a mass of rubble and, against a wall, are five dead bodies, including Bheki. Mrs Curren returns home in outraged disbelief.

Guguletu is Gehenna, Hell, a dumping ground for discarded things and people. Mrs Curren must literally pass through Hell in order to be saved. At home she contemplates the futility of her life. She thinks about her family. She thinks about Hell. She thinks about Judgment day, invoking a line from the Requiem Mass: ‘Dies irae, dies illa when the absent shall be present and the present absent’ (111). Death and her day of judgment are near.

At home, depressed, Mrs Curren contemplates suicide. She and Vercueil drive around town and she talks of driving into the sea and setting herself on fire. Vercueil eggs her on, but for some reason she resists. Vercueil gets a bottle of liquor and they share it. Vercueil urges her to get drunk. She tries to explain her anger and sorrow to Vercueil:

When I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised

up again.’ (125-6)

She rails at Vercueil: ‘You think I am upset but will get over it. ... What I cannot get over any more is that getting over. If I get over it this time I will never have a chance not to get over it. For the sake of my own resurrection I cannot get over it this time’ (126).

At this point Mrs Curren is quite conscious of the fact that the welfare of her soul is dependent upon her relationship with another, particularly Vercueil. In contemplating her situation she invokes the parable of the sower: ‘Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him. I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul’ (130). Her unrequited love with Vercueil is like’ rain falling on barren soil’ (Matthew 13:3-23; Mark 4:2-20; Luke 8:4-15).

The relationship with Vercueil is crucial to the salvation of Mrs Curren’s soul. She sees her fate inextricably connected with Vercueil: ‘I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him’ (131). Again, she has invoked Scripture, Isaiah 42.3, in considering her relationship.

Subsequently, John, Bheki’s friend, who was wounded earlier, comes to her house looking for Bheki. She tells him that Bheki is dead. She feeds the young man, all the while thinking that she despises him, yet knowing that she must love him:

That is my first word, my first confession. I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. ... That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. ... He is part of my salvation. I must love him. (136)

Ultimately, she thinks of the absurdity of her impulses, noting it is ‘Cruciform logic which takes me where I do not want to go!’ (137). Here Mrs Curren explicitly struggles with the Christian connection, aware for the first time, perhaps, of her transformation.

The police come to her house to take John. She tries to order them away. Ultimately, the police force Mrs Curren from her house and she wanders away, wrapped in a quilt, to an overpass, where she lays down to rest. She lies asleep, wetting herself and suffering the attention of homeless scavengers, who pick at her frail body, looking for valuables. She dozes off again and awakes to a familiar odor, Vercueil. He holds her, gives her a drink from his bottle of wine, and listens as she talks: ‘it is a confession I am making here this morning, Mr Vercueil. ... I have been a good person, I freely confess to it. I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough!’ (165). Vercueil responds to this confession and communion with Mrs Curren with a snore. He has fallen asleep. They stay the night together under the overpass. In the morning Mrs Curren and Vercueil return home. The police interrogate her and again she falls asleep.

Mrs Curren has plunged further into the world as she comes face to face with the conditions in the township. In the aftermath, considering suicide, she hits rock bottom as she finds herself asleep, under a highway bridge, soaked in her own urine. She is now equal to Vercueil, no better, no worse. She is nearly prepared for death.

In the final section Mrs Curren wakes from a confusing dream about the afterlife, Aphrodite, and Florence, her servant. She discusses the dream with Vercueil, trying to talk out its significance. She tells Vercueil that there is more that she needs to know. ‘I want to see you,’ she tells Vercueil, ‘as you really are’ (179). Vercueil responds that he is merely a man who came with no invitation. Vercueil denies choosing her, stating that he merely came
to the house that did not have a dog. Mrs Curren is in pain and has bought more pain pills from the pharmacy. Vercueil offers to kill her and puts his hands to her throat. She refuses, but invites Vercueil into her bed, where she sleeps fitfully along with the man and his dog. After a while, Vercueil tells her about his life. She tells him about her life, her career as a teacher of classics.

Time progresses toward the old woman’s death and Vercueil helps her as her needs increase. She writes of her relationship with Vercueil:

I have fallen and he has caught me. It is not he who fell under my care when he arrived, I now understand, not I who fell under his: we fell under each other, and have tumbled and risen since then in the flights and swoops of that mutual election. ...

He does not know how to love. ... He does not know how to love as a boy does not know how to love. ... Does not know what he has to do.

The nearer the end comes, the more faithful he is. Yet still I have to guide his hand. (196)

The book closes with a mysterious scene in which Mrs Curren wakes to see Vercueil standing at the balcony, before an open window. She asks at what he is looking and then, knowingly, ‘Is it time?’ Vercueil nods. They climb into the bed together. ‘For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me with a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had’ (198).

Is Vercueil the angel of life or death?

I think he is both. Vercueil has prepared Mrs Curren for her physical death and in so doing facilitated her spiritual rebirth. The fact that Mrs Curren can no longer smell Vercueil indicates that her transformation is complete. The distinctions between Mrs Curren and Vercueil are gone. Mrs Curren, like South Africa, is being transformed from the old into the new. Having loved again, she must die in order to be reborn.

*Age of Iron* is the New Testament of Mrs Curren’s life. Mrs Curren’s conversion narrative, written in the first person, takes her from a cursory and dismissive recognition of another to a familiar and trusting one. Over the course of her three year journey she becomes increasingly aware of the world around her. As her connections to that world deepen she becomes connected with the people who inhabit it. The judgmental and distanced attitude Mrs Curren has toward Vercueil dissipates and she rediscovers what it is like to connect with the soul of another. As she connects with Vercueil, Bekhi, and John she becomes humbled to the point where she can meet death with a certain amount of grace. The entire journey is narrated with frequent references to Christian scripture.

The Christian scriptures represent one of the largest bodies of consolatory and inspirational literature in the Western world. The dominance held by Christianity in South African culture insures that South African Literature is infused with the essence of this literature. Coetzee, himself, was quite aware of the themes of redemption and salvation in western literature. In 1985, five years before the publication of *Age of Iron*, Coetzee traced themes of confession in an article in *Comparative Literature*. In regard to Dostoevsky he wrote: ‘True confession does not come from the sterile monologue of the self, but ... from faith and grace.’

As Mrs Curren, Mr Vercueil, Bekhi, John, and Coetzee himself show, the

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message may sometimes transcend the bounds of the person delivering it. The salvation of Mrs Curren, South Africa, and perhaps Coetzee is a work in progress, literally and allegorically. When asked about grace for Mrs Curren in a 1990 interview with David Attwell, Coetzee responded: ‘As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet.’ Grace and salvation are again raised in Elizabeth Costello via the dialogue of Elizabeth Costello and her sister, Blanche, a Roman Catholic Nun. The humanities, Blanche argues in response to Elizabeth, are not sufficient for the salvation of humanity. Rather, ‘Extra ecclesiam nulla salvatio.’ Later, in the book’s eighth chapter, we find Elizabeth being barred admission through the ‘Gate’ because she has no beliefs on which to stand. And as can be seen in Coetzee’s most recent work, The Childhood of Jesus, Coetzee is still not yet a Christian. He is intrigued by its mystical allusions and allegories, but also by what he has learned in philosophy, and literature. At best, though, he is still troubled about where he stands. His explorations into the human condition, frank and often very personal, nonetheless move his readers to negotiate the world around them. Coetzee is ultimately a contemporary religious philosopher, having moved to a point beyond the Catholic and Reformed Christianity of his South Africa. His works are forming their own testament.

Salvation is at the centre of Age of Iron. For Mrs Curren to be saved she must recognise her sins and connect with the souls of those around her. Her journey through Guguletu makes her painfully aware of her sins, as she acknowledges in her subsequent confession to Vercueil. It is not so important that she be explicitly forgiven by Vercueil, but that she forgive herself. Again, as Coetzee wrote in 1985: ‘The end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself.’ Opposing sides can tell their versions of the ‘truth’ in perpetuity. The difference is made when we move beyond posturing, accept what has happened, and move on. The Age of Iron is an allegory for South Africa, not just in the dysfunction, but in the denouement as well. The Truth and Reconciliation hearings, though years ahead at the time of Age of Iron’s publication, are the logical response to this allegory and a testament to the Christian character of this still troubled nation.

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21 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello 133.
22 Earlier, Elizabeth denies that her advocacy of vegetarianism comes out of a ‘moral conviction.’ Rather, she says, ‘It comes out of a desire to save my soul.’ Adding to this perceived inconsistency she points out that she is wearing leather shoes and is carrying a leather handbag (88-89).
23 Coetzee, Confession 230.

Fragmentary Introspective Observations: Animals, Emotions and Location in John Kinsella’s Poetry.
Review Essay
Tom Bristow


John Kinsella, Jam Tree Gully: Poems (W.W. Norton and Co. 2011)

At present, the version of history we are encouraged to consume is one that suits big corporations and their employees in our state governments. It is a history of conflict and consumption, of production and power that denies us elements of our very nature, as human animals. 

John Burnside

Contemporary criticism regards the term ‘pathetic fallacy’ as one indicating excessive sentiment. In the current geological epoch it is questionable if we can ethically ascribe human qualities to inanimate objects; the attribution is as problematic as ascribing emotional qualities to flora and fauna. Poets have long considered this pejorative inference arising from the act of placing a noun onto an object. As counterpoint, making (poeisis) – conceived ecologically – harnesses the present participle within craftwork, to offer things as yet incomplete and always in relation. Sense and emotion become questions of expression, mood and tone that entail the world that includes the human as one part therein – arising on its own terms. John Kinsella’s cartographic and posthuman turns in these two collections promote awareness of emergent ontologies and the limits to language in attending to a creaturely life that speaks of subject (self) and world (object) as one: to extend the self into the world might suggest both an epistemological flaw and a fallacy of bi-directional harmony.

The dead planet slumbers,
it’s godpaw on its dogear,
stars billowing like clouds. (‘Bedenimed Cloud: An Apostasy?’ 229)

These are the final three lines of the closing poem to ‘Verse from the Nineteenth to Twentieth Century’, one of eight sections to The Jaguar’s Dream, an incredible collection of poems running over 200 pages that offers an extensive range of translations, adaptations, versions (and ‘transversions’) of poems from non-English languages. The topography of Western Australia now dominates Kinsella’s writing and philosophy to the point that location is a complex and nuanced literary critical idea of central importance. However, readers of Kinsella’s anthology of Persian poetry, Six Vowels and Twenty-Three Consonants (2012), Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography (2008), and his ‘Derrida poems’ (Peripheral Light, 2003) will be familiar with the poet’s forays into linguistic cultures.


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beyond the Australasian context as a means to explore the human propensity to alter physical and intellectual landscapes. This collection is the most significant and inclusive transnationalism offered by Kinsella thus far in his ever-expanding oeuvre; it moves from the seventh-century BC Greek poet, Alcman, to the contemporary Chinese-Australian writer, Ouyang Yu, and it moves through Latin, French, German, and Russian on the way.

Alongside a deep consideration of the common plight of drought in the WA wheatbelt region lies a creative engagement with multiple sources of inspiration in *The Jaguar’s Dream*. Layers of multiple localities place fresh light on language understood as ‘a patronymic | splendour in the rasp | of imprint’; and while one might focus on ‘rasp’, imprint is conflated with impact: ‘I tread carefully, not | wishing harm’ (214). This celebration of human technology in the guise of poetry is curiously aligned to an intertextual cultural husbandry that is indicative of human resourcefulness that Kinsella is keen to write out and critique. In these two books, the Romantic problem of the delicate use of language to acknowledge its limitations is turned over to incorporate an ethical ontopoetics like that of the lyricism of Jan Zwicky, Dennis Lee and Don McKay, but is also in ecopoetic dialogue with Jorie Graham, Mary Oliver, Allison Funk and Nancy Holmes. Furthermore, an engagement with Language Poetry is clear once more in Kinsella’s practice, yet this North American analogue portends an acute trans-hemispherical mind that belies the focus on selfhood, region, ecosystem, or particularised angles on flora and fauna. Here selfhood is political consciousness, and thus consciously beyond nature; and by extension, Kinsella’s uniquely elasticised Australis offers an alternative to this new field or sub-genre known as ‘ecopoetics’. Kinsella’s handling of poetics of location, or home, brings to light an anarchical attempt to disown the ego heralded by the lyrical stance. His relinquishing of human centredness is ultimately impossible in human language and in human action, yet the intention and the objective give rise to an earth-centred poetics, which rewrites the human in place. Kinsella appears to negate any holistic apolitical realm by insisting on situated knowledge that positions a posthuman subject at play with non-human animals. This approach is not fashionable; it is critical.

‘Godpaw’ and ‘dogear’ are intriguing compounds that might indicate an image of a human figure in contemplation, the head propped up by the hand while the mind is transported to thoughts further afield than the quotidian domain of experience; however, the real jewels of poetic sense that *The Jaguar’s Dream* has to offer lie in their ability to harness what can only be called a ‘transcendental-material-animalist-sensory faculty.’ This compound is evident in these three lines and throughout this poem of over 700 lines. Such interfusion of elements and embodied sensibility suggests resistance to a normalised sense of creation as transport, or elevated consciousness as a mode of knowing – and by extension, controlling. Ecopoetics desires emancipation from the artwork and yet, at present, is wracked with a guilt and loneliness born from a disconnection between humans and their environment that is apocalyptically amplified to the scale of subsequent planetary decline through a loss of ecological literacy. Such art invokes an emotive terrain, a period of our history known as the anthropocene. Kinsella’s negotiation of this moral domain as an extension of and causal effect of Enlightenment rationality can be seen within these lines that exemplify his riposte to the crude explorations of cosmologists in ‘Bedenimed Cloud’: ‘Look for their names in constellations | I’ll grow microbes over your fractures’ (228). Like weeds growing over concrete – or as the North American William Carlos Williams has it, saxifrage splitting the stone – this post-rationalist courage is in part a celebration of the lyric and in part a new

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posthuman stance; a stance that is animated by the successful comprehension of exterior or more-than-human worlds operating beyond our categories of knowledge. Moreover, these micro-moments within the poems are indicative of the various standpoints and departures Kinsella takes from the selected ur-texts, which operate to foreground his political intelligence.

‘Not wishing harm’ (214) understands the principle of *ahisma* – an important religious tenet, literally non-violence towards all living things – but it also acknowledges Walter Benjamin’s view on the task of translator, whereby ‘the language of nature is to be compared to a secret password, which passes on each post the next in its own language, contents of the password’. Benjamin is speaking of language as the expression of the aspect of mental life that is communicable. He is drawing from the notion of language as a method of expression, not particularly a lexical field. Kinsella, most acutely in this collection of translations and adaptations, is adroitly sensitive to Benjamin’s sense of respectful translation within the context of contemporary ecopoetics, as he is sensitive to the naming process through which the essence of man’s being arises. This very essence, according to Benjamin, has not remained creative in man; it must be ‘fertilised’ to forward the language of things themselves. Such fertilisation is a spiritual quest, to allow ‘things’ to shine forth on their own, avoiding violent naming if you will, and enabling fresh points of relation to arise without the dominance of human intention or human instrumentalism. The jaguar’s dream that is the subject of the eponymous poem of the collection is symbolic in this very sense. Fertile relations thus understood vis-à-vis instrumentalism and symbolism is significant for ecopoetics and its concern for literature’s view on physical geography.

‘Zoo Ferry’ is one part of a sustained response to book six of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which details the protagonist’s descent into the underworld and his father’s prophetic vision of the destiny of Rome. One may abstract the following from this moment: lineage, inheritance, envisioning futures; and the transformative role of human action. From these abstractions one can consider the material legacies of anthropocentrism rather than the cultural migrations of things from one era to another.

Water
Birds – gulls, terns – would neutralize
The zoo sounds, and the guttural splutter
Of the ferry, shallow-draughted, would

Counterpoint the bird calls. (51)

Lineation is key to Kinsella’s dialogical incape of possibility and potentiality (note the stress on ‘would’ here): ‘water birds’ and ‘counterpoint’ receive significant amplification through the enjambment of the syntactic unit by white space, thus the conspicuous arrangement of things enables the reader to rediscover a sense of separation and classification of the earth’s manifest processes. Simultaneously, lineation here signifies the always already deconstructed binary of *nature* and *culture* – the former is situated within technology’s wake in this poem and many others. However, as in this poem, any crude positivist formulation of causality is undercut by the soundscape in *Jaguar’s Dream* that is often set in the foreground to thicken

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surface appearances and warp linearity. Here, the ‘shrieks and calls of animals’ disconnected from ‘their environments’ (51) pollute the walker’s scene to bring into relief culturally constructed currents or locales – knots in the space-time continuum – that enfold upon one another to indicate a world beyond ‘codes’ and ‘zoos’: a shorthand both for sterile controlled space and false categories of knowledge, incarcerating containers that are witnessed as forces with ‘sun and moon bending’ powers. The ecologically literate reader gains much from this poetic outlook, especially in terms of human sensing, and the forms of distance between human and non-human worlds.

Elsewhere, this rewiring of human sensing to illustrate the possibilities of a subtle proto-ecological consciousness, broadly conceived, is written out as polemic attuned to the power dynamics of ‘this greedy State of Entrepreneurs’ who ‘hack away’ at the earth’s resources in ‘On the Devastating Fallout of The War Against Climate Change Waged by Humans Around the Earth as Witnessed in the Chittering Valley’. Notably, counterpoint in this poem is charged with hope: trees will survive over deep time; trees will re-grow and be re-imagined, ‘they will re-become archetypes’ (74) – a fascinating idea that owes something to geological time and a sense of creation oscillating between elegy and lament, growth and decay. Such tricksy manifestations of cyclical patterns and biological resilience are far from romanticised in this collection. At times this collection betokens a view of spiritual life, of Zoë (not bios, biological life), that is rendered as an oil painting of Henri Rousseau. A thick tapestry of moments of observation in ‘The Jaguar’s Dream’ captures environment – ‘stagnant | humid air’ – and agent – ‘slayer of oxen and horses’ (118) – to move into a human view on animal consciousness represented as a combined mode of intelligence and imagination that can be registered in dreams. This particular combination inflected with post-human emphasis is not easy to locate and yet it is the watermark to this collection.

Form and content are dynamic creators of ultimate sense throughout Kinsella’s interrogation of the capacity of lyric poetry to decentre and resituate the human in space. These collections instantiate what the poet is calling ‘international regionalism’: to open the bond between different geographies and cultures, while respecting the cultural and regional integrity of the participating points, and the fact of the pronominal voice. We are informed that the male gendered jaguar, ‘dreams that in the middle of the green arbours, | With one leap, he sinks his liquid claws | Into the flesh of startled and bellowing bulls’ (118). The slick and expansive stanza of four sense units constructed over 22 lines of generative fluidity match the predator’s imagined stealth. Here, the animal rendered as a symbol of consciousness in flux, is clarified in the final move as something that is not unreflective but is taken from ‘measured | Steps’ sustained in the present participle. As with the impulse to internationalise without obscuring minority literatures, the politics of the representation of animals as ‘others’ in this collection is programmed by a particular empiricism of poetic images that resist the reduction of things to nodes within a network of relations. Readers will find this resistance when they locate agencies of human, animal, landscape and region convincingly left alone to shine forth in their own way. The animal here does not speak for itself; it dreams itself into being.

This part philosophical, part aesthetic project takes on an allegorical hue in the extended metaphor of the ‘beast’ that ‘had no existence’ (192) in Kinsella’s ‘Variation on Rilke’s “Sonnet to Orpheus”’ (2, 4). The unnamed, non-existent force, lacking concrete

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signification, indicates the presence of our failed love and our failed language games; the failure (and concomitant loss) is the problem of Enlightenment dualism, setting things in view but transforming verb to noun, as figured in the making of poiesis degraded to the state of production, reducing life into something ‘made’. In Stephen Cohn’s translation of Rilke, the beast is to be beheld as ‘the animal that never was’; fortified and nourished with the idea that ‘space uncompromised and pure’ enable ‘being’ to be ‘paramount’ (75); Kinsella, too, has the beast ‘poised’ and fed ‘with the possibility of existence’ (192). Both poets are speaking of freedom. Both translators conceive of life not as something that is necessarily an embryonic form of a future state not yet manifest, but that it is in process, within a wider field of becoming – or a world that is creatively fertile to draw from Benjamin’s lexis – and thus not as easily reduced to an isolated object. And thus not easily exploited by instrumentalists. Kinsella, wise to this poetic stance, delineates freedom thus: ‘And in the space, clear and left aside, | it made its presence known, but scarce | needed to’ (192). The stanza break separating the final two lines provides a double economy of limited animal presence and unnecessary obscurity, yet this marginality does not detract from the autonomy afforded by being ‘left aside’: in its own space; forgotten or missed by the human. This space for the other is the result of diluted human techne or skill: anthropogenic agency relinquished for elliptical witness that fails to adumbrate that which is settled (or at home) in the processes (and pure space) of change that our photographic naming cannot fix. It is a position of loss.

Kinsella’s progressive lyrical response to and reworking of Rilke is carried forth into departures from Paul Celan in a series of difficult ‘graphological’ poems at the end of The Jaguar’s Dream. These works appear to be informed by Celan’s unsettling celebrations of and revisions to the syntax and morphology of German language. While the haunting background of labour camps in German occupied Ukraine and Wallachia sustain the dark genius of Celan, Kinsella shifts from the obliteration of familial and geographical points of origin to ‘a grinding out of bread growth’ namely the tensions and incommensurable values that lie resident across cultural growth and basic sustenance. This is an understatement of the conflicts between capitalist, market-oriented ownership of materials, and personal, self-sufficient withdrawals from unified, monochrome, hegemonic forces. One notes that Kinsella’s international regionalism gestures towards political internationalism and environmentalist anarchism.

Jam Tree Gully: Poems is equally daring and trans-nationalist, and deeply indebted to Henry David Thoreau. 20 of 100 poems use Walden; or Life in the Woods for their epigraph; another 20 either take their title from a quotation or paraphrase Thoreau. The collection documents Kinsella’s version of the American poet’s nineteenth-century project in self-reliance, undertaken in a dwelling place outside York, Western Australia, to settle a piece of land and write out a portable sense of place that is attuned to an acute geographic site. As a response to scepticism, husbandry of the WA wheatbelt conflates a literary cartography of location with ecopolitical consciousness. This amalgam transforms the American’s acclimatisation to the shifting seasons, acoustic response to distinct birdcalls, and the cultivation of vegetables; each of these in Kinsella’s version, are pictured as complete and discrete events in themselves. That is to say, they are centres of sensibility, which are alive to psychological processes i.e. the move from impressions to motor fibres that ignite reason and emotion. These specific moments in time are clearly legible as environmentally

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1 Rainer Maria Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus with Letters to a Young Poet trans. Stephen Cohn (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000).

problematised actions lived out by a sensitive subject who labours amidst nature. They offer a critical revision of pastoral as a mode of selective reflection and an idealised reconstruction of a more complex reality.

I have colours and shapes
at angles, blurred,
confrontational; the smell
is of over-ripening grasses
and their drying, and that’s
also the sound. (‘Four Scenes’ 1.5-10).

Here, three sense faculties operate to offer an impressionistic sense of the world that ‘leav[es] out the birds and insects’ and ‘the hint of larger animals’ that are present only through their absence. Thus an ironised version of the world is viewed in terms of a comprehensive analysis of parts and wholes, as indicated both by the season ‘over-ripening’ and the impossibility of epistemological security or human confidence once one is fully convinced of a depleted world as read through a seasonal aperture on an unfixed scene that is almost ‘dying’.

Such complex spatial amalgams that instance degrees of complementarity between human and non-human worlds find their home in the foreground of the collection’s strongest poem, ‘Survey’. This poem reads like a notebook-in-process, the lyric as compressed mp3 recording of poet-in-situ. The tour around the block leads to the knowledge that dead tree limbs cleared by the surveyor will provide an enclave for ground insects and perches for birds. Environmental knowledge of this kind supports a mind that connects both to the geographical specificity of ‘Jam Tree’ and the literary heritage that Kinsella is explicitly invoking.

The water-trough I fill for Kangaroos and other wildlife in this desiccated habitat is almost dry and what moisture remains informs a bloom of algae. (82)

This poem might best exemplify a new nature poem of the anthropocene: the climatic pastoral of the vacant block. Here, the property viewed at the lyric’s primary mode of orientation – the landscape scale of the block seen from a transcendent vantage point – is processed at the level of human action grounded by the act of walking, and yet the lyrical timescape is evident beyond the human experience of its corporeality. Nature comes forth on its own terms via Kinsella’s reading and paraphrasing of William James in this poem.\(^5\) While James sensed that emotion derives from self-observation, Kinsella downplays the human sympathetically excited by sensations; his is an emphasis on sensations and physicality. This is no dualism but a bridge across sensory feelings and intellectual excitement. Emotion is not


a songline that runs through particulars in the world, separated yet related. Lyricism is not devoid of moral feeling. These two ideas seem to be at war in these collections that rely upon the referent as a symbol of contingency and as locus for human (misplaced) care.

In ‘Sacred Kingfisher and Trough Filled with Water Pumped from Deep Underground’ the very same act of husbandry—or somatic effort—replayed with the speaker noting kangaroos and birds coming to the trough, suggests that one consequence of human habits is that we require new vocabularies, otherwise we become accustomed to things too easily. The central theme is the tension between freedom and sustenance, married in bird and man with the action taking place ‘With[in] the record heat’ of the season. Human-centred reckoning in this version of the same problem—that offering sustenance to one life form (or altering the resources within an ecosystem) impacts on all life in the seasonal biome—contrasts with the wisdom of the bird that reads the coffin-like trough as a container for ‘dead water | from deep in the earth’ (90). We note the representation of animal consciousness via the controlling lyrical voice, which counterfactually acts as an antidote to the idea of the block as an isolated sphere of perception. This poem is not the same poem as ‘Survey’.

‘Sacred Kingfisher and Trough Filled with Water Pumped from Deep Underground’ moves outwards from the appeal to introspection towards the given lifeworld. This move reflects back upon the site of both poems: the block thus brought into relief as a microcosm of Kinsella’s expansive point of view, ironically suggests that nervous centres have their own modes of perception.

Thoreau’s ‘Spring’ is used as epigraph for ‘Pressure at the Boundaries (of Jam Tree Gully)’, to foreground a human sense of inheritance of land (rather than history) that extends to ‘plastic emotions’ meeting ‘quasi-scientific’ desires, which are detailed against a backdrop of an orange crowned hill and the overwhelming death of trees: ‘groundwater | vanquished | And surface evaporated’ (143). This use of Thoreau as a platform for Kinsella’s pastoral negativity that plays with depth of field is worth comparison to the American’s chapter, ‘The Ponds’, which anticipates his seasonal ruminations at the close of Walden and its contemplation of the smooth surfaces of the ponds, alive with no disturbances. These material events in the Concord landscape act as metaphor for a relatively cool mind, albeit animated and excited by the apostrophe to spring. This relaxed view on things, an interiority or state of mind, suggests that one way to keep calm in the face of environmental anxiety is to resist the fallacy of cooperation and to embrace the solidity of material events present to consciousness; to engage with illuminative moments whether or not they recognise us or speak directly to us. This acute sensibility to things, objects, and events, at least in its literary form as instanced by Kinsella, invokes human impact while carefully mapping dependencies and relations between things. This reflexivity constitutes a twenty-first century position in nature poetry that is heightened by the posthumanist impulse to provide pluralist accounts of humans, birds, and marsupials, which extend the post-Romantic frame of the lyrical ‘I’ to an international regionalism that quietly betokens a new Whitmanian and Wordsworthian ecologically oriented expansive selfhood.

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