November 2017
Volume 10, no. 1

Complete articles

Peer-reviewed Articles

Mary Besemerės Evoking a Displaced Homeland: the ‘Poetic Memoir’ of Andrzej Chciuk

Anna Guttman Home, Factory, World: Domestic and Global Fictions in the work of Lavanya Sankaran

Bhawana Jain Intersecting Memory and Witnessing Violence in Anita Desai’s The Zigzag Way

Medea Muskhelishvili Pataphysical Discourse and Georgian Reflections in Comparative Analysis of Georgian and French Avant-Garde

Michael Potts Dumping Grounds: Donald Trump, Edward Abbey and the Immigrant as Pollution

Fredrik Tydal Of Surface and Depth: Agnes Smedley’s Sketches of Chinese Everyday Life

Rouhollah Zarei The Beloved in Nader Naderpour’s Poetry

Review Essays


Launch Speech

Melinda Graefe Speech delivered at launch of Faithfully I Wait: Poems on Rain, Thunder and Lightning at Jhargram and Beyond by Jaydeep Sarangi, Flinders University, 20 October 2017.
Evoking a Displaced Homeland: the ‘Poetic Memoir’ of Andrzej Chciuk

Mary Besemeres

Abstract

This article looks at some poems by Polish Australian writer Andrzej Chciuk (1920-1978). Chciuk migrated to Australia from France in 1951, having escaped Nazi-occupied Poland as a twenty-year-old in 1940. In Australia he worked as a schoolteacher in Melbourne while continuing to write poetry and fiction in Polish. His work was published in prestigious Polish emigré outlets like the Paris-based journal Kultura and in Australia with sponsorship from the Polish migrant community; to date no English translations of it have appeared. My article focuses on a sequence of poems in his 1961 Pamiętnik poetycki (Poetic Memoir) called ‘Tamta Ziemia’ (That Other Land), about the cities and towns of Chciuk’s childhood: Lwów, Borysław and his hometown of Drohobycz. When the author was growing up these towns were in eastern Poland; by the time of his writing, in the 1950s, however, they had become part of Soviet Ukraine, and were thus doubly removed from his life in Australia. He wrote as a displaced person whose childhood home had itself been displaced. Hence the powerful note of longing that pervades his ‘poetic memoir’. Through a reading of some passages in my English translation, I hope to convey something of Chciuk’s lively poetic voice, and to show that he deserves admission to discussions of twentieth-century transnational Australian literature.

* * * * *

Translingual writers from Ha Jin to Jhumpa Lahiri are increasingly at the forefront of contemporary literature in English, but writers in Anglophone countries working in languages other than English have tended to remain obscure, as Sonia Mycak1 and Michael Jacklin2 have shown in the Australian context. A case in point is the Polish Australian author Andrzej Chciuk (pronounced ‘H-chook’) (1920-1978), whose work in Polish produced in Australia reflects the post-World War II global migration of languages and literatures. Chciuk’s writings are essentially unknown in Australian literary studies, and occupy a marginal place in Polish literary history.3 His best known text, the prose memoir Atlantyda (Atlantis), published in London in

3 Chciuk has a Wikipedia page in Polish, but his writings are not, to the best of my knowledge, studied at schools or universities in Poland. Online, I have found references only to a 1999 paper on Chciuk by Andrzej Baglajewski of Marie Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS), Lublin, and a 2005 conference paper presented at UMCS by Halina Szelwach, a student at Drohobycz Ivan Franko State Pedagogical University, Ukraine.
1969 by the Polish émigré press, appeared in Poland for the first time in 2002 – 24 years after his death. I encountered his work through research on Polish-language texts for the ‘Australian Multicultural Writers’ subset of the AustLit database, which documents Australian literature written in languages other than English. If not for the 2002 Polish reissue of Atlantyda, the 1999 biography in Polish by Australian scholar Bogumiła Żongołłowicz, Ukrainian translations of Chciuk’s memoirs (2011) and his recent inclusion in AustLit, Chciuk might be forgotten today. Given the verve of his writing and the originality of his perspective, this near-erasure is worth redressing.

Andrzej Chciuk was born into a Polish middle-class family of rural working-class origin in 1920 in Drohobycz, a town near the city of Lwów in what was then eastern Poland and is now western Ukraine: a complex, contested, and, for centuries, multi-ethnic terrain. Ruled in mediaeval times by Kievan Rus’ princes, the Halych region was conquered by the Polish kingdom in the mid-fourteenth century. Annexed from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the Austrian Empire in 1772, until 1918 the region – now known as ‘Galicia’, a Latinised form of ‘Halych’ - was the largest province in the Habsburg empire. A ‘multicultured land’ as a recent history calls it, Galicia was a major centre of European Jewish life, the birthplace of Hasidic Judaism, the childhood home of philosopher Martin Buber, among others. Uilleam Blacker’s recent review of an English translation of Polish Jewish writer Józef Wittlin’s memoir Mój Lwów (My Lvov) suggests the rich character of pre-war Lwów’s cultural life, as elegized by Wittlin. The provincial capital, ‘Lwów’ to Poles and ‘Lviv’ (Львів) to Ukrainians, was ‘Lemberg’ in both Yiddish and the empire’s official German. With the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s collapse at the end of World War I, the former Galicia was fought over by Polish and Ukrainian armies, declared Ukrainian territory in 1919 and wrested back by Polish forces in 1920, the year of Chciuk’s birth. It was part of the Second Polish Republic until the Nazi-Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939; in 1944 it was annexed by the Soviet Union and became part of Soviet Ukraine. It remains a key region of post-1991 independent Ukraine, with Lviv (Львів) a major cultural and political centre.

Chciuk escaped Soviet-occupied eastern Poland as a twenty-year-old Polish partisan in 1940. He fled through Hungary to France, where he joined the French Resistance and was briefly imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1942. He studied French literature at Toulouse and settled in Paris after the war, studying journalism and working for the local Polish émigré press including the socialist paper Robotnik polski (The Polish Worker). In 1951, Chciuk migrated to Australia with his first wife Barbara Kulwieć and their two young children Jacques and Anne. He supported himself with various work including as a self-styled French chef at schools in country Victoria and later as a schoolteacher in Melbourne while continuing to write in Polish and co-founding

---

4 See http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/5960600

and performing with Polish Australian theatre group, ‘Kabaret Wesoła [Merry] Kookaburra’. His fiction was published in leading Polish émigré outlets, the London journal Wiadomości (News) and the Paris-based Kultura (Culture); his Pamiętnik poetycki (Poetic Memoir) appeared in Australia with the financial support of local Poles. To date, no English translations of his work have appeared. Natalka Rymska’s Ukrainian translations of Atlantyda and its sequel Ziemia księżykowa (Lunar Land) were published in Ukraine in 2011.

Chciuk’s Pamiętnik poetycki, the focus of this article, was published in Melbourne in 1961. The title means ‘Poetic Memoir’ or ‘Memoir in Verse’, and it was the only collection of poems published by Chciuk in his lifetime. It includes a long opening sequence written in the late 1950s, ‘Tamta ziemia’ (That Other Land), as well as earlier poems dating back to his years in France during and after World War II and his first years in Australia. Through a reading of passages from the ‘Tamta ziemia’ sequence, quoted in Polish and followed by my English translations, I hope to convey something of Chciuk’s distinctive poetic voice, and to show that he deserves to be included in discussions of twentieth-century Australian transnational literature.

Chciuk’s roguish pose in this photo at 19 anticipates the irreverence of much of his writing. Photo reprinted from Bogumila Zongołłowicz, Andrzej Chciuk, pisarz z antypodów.

---

8 See Bogumila Zongołłowicz, Andrzej Chciuk, pisarz z antypodów (Andrzej Chciuk, Antipodean Writer) (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999), 77.
9 See Rymska’s profile and details of her 2012 public lecture in Lviv on Chciuk and other ‘Galician’ writers: http://www.lvivcenter.org/en/publichistory/educational-projects/?newsid=856
The sequence ‘Tamta ziemia’ recalls the towns of Chciuk’s childhood, including Lwów, Borysław and his hometown of Drohobycz. When Chciuk was growing up these towns were located in eastern Poland; by the time of his writing, they had become part of Soviet Ukraine, and were thus doubly removed from his life in Australia. Thousands of Poles from eastern Poland were forcibly resettled in western Poland (in the so-called ‘recovered territories’ taken from Germany) after eastern Poland’s wartime Soviet annexation. Poles like Chciuk who had been members of the Polish resistance during the war ran the risk of arrest if they attempted to return to Soviet-controlled Communist Poland, let alone formerly Polish, now Soviet territories. This was the fate of one of his brothers, Tadeusz, who in 1945 returned to Drohobycz to marry, and was imprisoned by the Soviet authorities.\(^{10}\) At the time that Chciuk wrote his Pamiętnik, then, post-war Poland and Drohobycz (now Drohobych \[Дрогобич\]) and Lwów (now Lviv \[Львiв\]) in Soviet Ukraine would have seemed permanently out of reach. Hence the powerful note of longing that pervades the memoir.

In a poem about the writing of ‘Tamta ziemia’ titled ‘O własnym poemacie’ (About My Poem Cycle), Chciuk declares his debt to the poet Julian Tuwim, whom he calls ‘the Master’ (‘Mistrz’). Tuwim (1894-1953), a Polish Jewish writer widely regarded as one of the most significant poets of the inter-war years, popularised the use of spoken language in Polish poetry; one of his best-known poems ends: ‘Całujcie mnie wszyscy w dupę’ (You can all kiss my arse). Drawing on the Polish Jewish cabaret tradition of szmonces or satirical songs in Yiddish, Tuwim’s poems alternately celebrate and mock modern urban life in Poland.\(^{11}\) Chciuk’s poems similarly blend the lyrical and the colloquial, using a mix of idiomatic contemporary Polish and older poetic language. They contain snatches of dialogue and phrases in balak, the Polish dialect

\(^{10}\) See Żongołłowicz, 58.
spoken in Lwów, where Chciuk was a law student when war broke out in 1939. The poems brim with nostalgia, but are also sharply satirical, often at the poet’s own expense. Chciuk mocks his persistent longing for a lost past, while eloquently expressing that longing. In a poem called ‘Traktat o tęsknocie’ (Treatise on Longing) he writes of how Polish immigrants return obsessively in mind to the places they grew up in, no matter how parochial:

[…] w Rzymie kogoś wciąż zachwyca
Młodość spędza w … Medenicach
(a o nich nawet poniektóry
nie wie gdzie szukać takiej dziury).
Innemu – znam go – ciągle w głowie
jak to tam było w Zdolbnowie
i wciąż w sydnejskim złocie plaży
tylko Zdolbnów mu się marzy …

In my English translation (which lacks the rhymes of the original), these lines read:

[…] in Rome someone is still dazzled
by a youth spent in … Medenice\(^\text{12}\)
(a place most wouldn’t have a clue
where to look for, it’s such a hole).
And another one I know
Keeps thinking back to Zdolbnów
and in the gold of Sydney’s beaches
Zdolbnów is all he can dream of …

‘Zdolbnów’ is a place name that in Polish sounds comically humble, a kind of ‘Woop-Woop’. Yet, according to the ‘treatise’, it is places like Zdolbnów that have bewitched immigrants like Chciuk, holding them in thrall even in the face of the ostensibly superior beauty of Australian beaches.

‘O lwowskim bałaku’ (Of Lwów’s Bałak), the opening poem of the ‘Tamta ziemia’ cycle, is an energetic ode to the city’s bałak dialect. It opens with an exclamation, partly in bałak:

‘Lwowski bałak! Śliszna mowo!/Z polskich akcentów najpiękniejszy!’ (Lwów’s bałak! Lovely speech! / Of Polish accents the most beautiful!). It then launches into an exuberant stream of bałak phrases, beginning: ‘Słuchać batiara – taż to koncert!’ (Hearing a batiar – woł a concert!). A ‘batiar’ – derived from the Hungarian ‘betyar’, or bandit\(^\text{13}\) – was a member of Lwów’s pre-war ‘knajpa’ or tavern culture; somewhere between ‘a punter’ and ‘a low-life’, perhaps, but a term used with affection (see Wittlin; Szolginia). The lines are presented as a batiar’s speech, overheard and eagerly recorded by the poet. The batiar scolds himself for getting into trouble:

‘Ta pocoś zalazł tu, batiaru,
/tutaj na Gródku insza chewra / jo, stąd gelajzig masz trzy żebra…”’ This translates, approximately, as: ‘Why d’you crawl in here, batiar, / it’s a different

\(^{12}\) ‘Medenice’ is pronounced in Polish something like ‘Meh-deh-nitseh’.

\(^{13}\) Lwów/Lemberg was the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s province of Galicia (see Bialasiewicz), hence the presence of Hungarian loanwords in bałak.
crowd here at Gródek, / you’ll leave with three ribs.’ Chciuk abruptly breaks off this riff with a wry aside in his own voice, a mix of standard Polish and *bałak*:

Listę tu przerwę. Każdy wyraz
trzeba ubrać w odsyłacze,
opisać źródło, wytłumaczyć
c o wszystko to po polsku znaczy,
a to przerasta moje siły
i erudycję. Boże mity,
bałakać wpirw, ja szkut, po lwosku
z samej istoty spraw i rzeczy
si w domu przeciż nauczyłem,
dopiero w szkole zaś po polsku
i frajer byłbym temu przeczyć!

I translate this as follows:

I’ll stop the list here. Each phrase
would have to be dressed in footnotes,
be given a source, a translation
into Polish, and that’s beyond
my powers of erudition. Dear God,
I first learnt to ‘bałak’ in Lvovian
as a toddler, at home,
truth be told,
it wasn’t till school that I learnt Polish,
And I’d be a fool to deny it!

The verb ‘bałakać’ used by Chciuk here is a Polish rendering of the Ukrainian ‘balakaty’ [балакати] (to talk), just as ‘bałak’ is a Polishing of the Ukrainian ‘balak’ [балак] (a talk), which shows the indebtedness of this Polish dialect to Ukrainian.

One way to translate the *bałak* words in this passage would be via English slang, for example using ‘sucker’ for the word ‘frajer’: ‘I’d be a sucker to deny it’. But Chciuk’s language is particularly difficult to translate because it blends dialect with standard Polish in a way that sounds entirely natural in Polish, where in English, to have ‘sucker’ follow closely on a word like ‘erudition’ would be jarring. American poet Robert Bly has noted how ‘high’ and ‘low’ registers combine more readily in modern German than in English, and Polish resembles German in this respect. A fluent mixing of registers also seems to be symptomatic of the context in which *bałak* was spoken, by working-class men, university students and intellectuals who drank at the same taverns in 1930s Lwów. It was effectively a kind of male drinking lingo, to which the poem pays loving tribute.

---

15 see Wittlin, Szolginia.
Chciuk goes on to evoke the atmosphere of inter-war Lwów through the speech of some older Poles who still identified emotionally as citizens of the Habsburg empire, although by 1920 Lwów was part of newly independent Poland: ‘co dzień si gorsze świństwu zdarza, / Nie tak to było za cysarza!’ (‘there’s some new swindle ev’ry day, / Weren’t like this under the emp’ror!’). Hearing the Austrian anthem performed during an opera the men stand to attention, tears dripping onto their coats, to the amusement of watching youths. The passage relates equally to the boys laughing (Chciuk might have been one) and to the old men being laughed at, conveying an ironic nostalgia for an earlier generation’s own nostalgia. Given the strength of nationalist sentiment among the twentieth century Polish diaspora (see, for example, Matthew Frye Jacobson) this genial portrayal of Austrophile Lvovians is strikingly countercultural. Chciuk celebrates balak’s multilingual heritage, naming Ukrainian, Yiddish, Russian, German, Tatar, Turkish and Hungarian as influences. The poem ends with the forlorn conclusion, in balak: ‘O, lwoski śliszny nasz balaku, / ty już wymirasz, niboraku!’ (Oh, lovely Lwów balak of ours, / You’re dying out, you’re a goner!’). As Chciuk would have had no need to remind Polish readers, balak was dying out because its city Lwów had changed hands, becoming part of the Soviet Union, and most of its speakers had been displaced elsewhere – like Chciuk himself.

I look now at another poem from the ‘Tamta ziemia’ sequence, ‘O moim kochanym i śmiesznym Drohobyczu’ (Of my beloved and absurd Drohobycz), which is equally nostalgic but ultimately darker in tone. A number of poems in the Pamiętnik lament the war-time destruction of Jewish life. This poem, which begins with an affectionate portrait of pre-war Drohobycz as a blend of picturesque old architecture, mud, oil from the local refinery and provincial boredom, moves on to recall Jewish and Ukrainian figures from Chciuk’s childhood who perished during the Nazi and Soviet occupations. These characters appear as ghosts who populate the imagined post-war Drohobycz of Chciuk’s mind.

The brilliant Polish Jewish writer and artist Bruno Schulz, author of Sklepy cynamonowe (The Cinnamon Shops) (1934), was Chciuk’s art teacher at King Jagiello Public Secondary School in Drohobycz. He appears to have been a significant figure for Chciuk; according to Żongołowicz, Chciuk drafted a book-length memoir of him which he considered publishing until the appearance of Jerzy Ficowski’s biography Regiony wielkiej herezji (Regions of the Great Heresy) in 1967 made the project seem redundant. Schulz appears in other poems in the Pamiętnik, including ‘Poemat o Brunonie Schulzu’ (Elegy for Bruno Schulz), which represents his uneasy relationship to Drohobycz petit-bourgeois Polish society as a loner, an experimental writer, and a Jew, and records his murder by a Gestapo officer in 1942. He is also the subject of an evocative essay in the prose memoir Atlantisa (Atlantis) (1969), where Chciuk recalls his eccentric and compelling manner in the classroom. In the poem ‘O moim kochanym i śmiesznym Drohobyczu’ Schulz appears at the head of a crowd of phantoms ‘wandering the streets where they were made to die’, with his ‘Nerwowa twarz. I smutny uśmiech’ (Nervous face. And sad smile). The shot that killed him then rings out, followed by the ‘rechot tłuszczy’, the mob’s croaking laughter.

The lines that follow evoke the destruction of Jewish districts of Drohobycz:

Na Małym Rynku i na Łanie
zagasyła światła wszystkich bóżnic
— u Pomeranza gdzieś nad ranem 
już nie pożywią się podróżni.

Już nikt dorożką Zuckerberga 
z głównego tu nie zjedzie dworca 
dyrektor Blatt, profesor Sternbach 
nie przejdą się wśród tłumów ‘corsa’.

In my English, this reads:

In the Small Market and Łan districts
lights have gone out in all the synagogues
— travellers arriving at first light
Won’t get a meal at Pomeranz’s.

No one will get in from the station
on Zuckerberg’s droshky,
Director Blatt, Professor Sternbach
won’t stroll down the crowded ‘corso’ again.

The subtitle of Eva Hoffman’s book Shtetl, a searching history of Jewish life in Poland from the thirteenth century to World War II, provides an apt comment on these lines’ depiction of normal life erased: ‘The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World’ (my italics). Chciuk’s main image is likewise that of light extinguished: ‘zagasły światła wszystkich bóżnic’ (lights have gone out in all the synagogues).

Another ghost of pre-war Drohobycz is the poet’s Ukrainian school friend, ‘Józek Łobodycz’:

And my schoolmate, a Ukrainian,
Józek Łobodycz, who loved poems; a Trotskyist. ‘Run, or they’ll get you’, he advised me. They got him first.

Because heretics of the new faith
Are, for them, worse than heathens.
In an NKVD cell he died 
after a final interrogation.

Mary Besemeres. ‘Evoking a Displaced Homeland: The ‘Poetic Memoir’ of Andrzej Chciuk. 
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017. 
Having warned Chciuk to leave Drohobycz when war broke out, Józek Łobodycz was himself arrested and killed by Soviet police as a Trotskyist, a ‘heretic’ in the poem’s mordant term. Next appears Józek’s brother, Sławek, with whom Chciuk shared a school bench and played football after school. The poem recalls Sławek’s passion for Ukrainian theatre, describing how he was so overcome after seeing a performance of a play by the Ukrainian playwright Tobilewicz (Тобилевич) that he couldn’t bring himself to leave the theatre, staying on long after everyone else had left and earning the ire of the building’s janitor.

In lines that movingly distill his feelings for the Łobodycz brothers and his and their shared birthplace, Chciuk writes:

Ta sama ziemia nas zrodziła 
mnie, oraz Sławka Łobodycza 
jednako jedna, swoja, miła, 
jednego w świecie Drohobycka.

On kochał ją po ukraińsku 
a ja po polsku ją kochałem

In English, this reads:

The same earth bore us 
me, and Sławek Łobodycz 
equally singular, our own, dear, 
the only Drohobycz in the world.

He loved it in Ukrainian 
while I loved it in Polish

The poem then relates how Sławek favoured the idea of a ‘Federation’ which would allow Poles and Ukrainians to resolve their conflict over territory, imagining it as a ‘marriage of convenience’, in which ‘love – who knows? might follow’. The memory of Sławek passionately advocating this notion is ‘bitter’ (‘gorzko’) because he was killed in the war soon afterwards. Sławek’s utopian vision has been forfeited, along with inter-war Drohobycz as Chciuk knew it. Their friendship is presented as emblematic of the poet’s memory of his displaced homeland.

Like other poems in the ‘Tamta ziemia’ sequence, this one reflects on how 1920s and 30s Drohobycz was a place where people of Jewish, Polish and Ukrainian descent coexisted, and how this multi-ethnic society with all its tensions and interconnections was destroyed by the Nazi and Soviet occupations. Chciuk’s nostalgic vision of the Lwów region represents the viewpoint of someone writing un-self-consciously from within what had been the politically dominant ethnic group, rather than someone who had experienced bigotry or discrimination as one of an oppressed minority. Polish Jewish writer Henryk Grynberg’s title story in his powerful collection Drohobycz, Drohobycz, which draws on conversations with a Holocaust survivor, presents a much bleaker picture of widespread Polish anti-Semitism in 1930s Drohobycz.16

16 Chciuk appears (briefly) in an unfavourable light in Grynberg’s story ‘Drohobycz, Drohobycz’, based on conversations with Holocaust survivor Leopold Lustig, where he is recalled as a high-school student who sold...
Ukrainians in eastern Poland were victims of a number of repressive government policies during the 1930s. While local anti-Semitism is acknowledged – and mocked – in Chciuk’s poem on Bruno Schulz, and the history of Polish-Ukrainian conflict is alluded to in his ‘Drohobycz’ poem, Chciuk’s *Pamiętnik poetycki* does not fully confront either of these traumatic histories. It does, however, represent the region (‘that other land’) as Jewish and Ukrainian no less than Polish, in a way that is distinctive for post-war Polish diasporic writing.

In its tribute to poet Julian Tuwim, the *Pamiętnik* draws on an acknowledged Polish Jewish satirical tradition, and in its use of *balak* it draws specifically on Lwów urban humour, as epitomised by the inter-war comedy duo ‘Szczepecio’ (Kazimierz Wajda) and ‘Tońcio’ (Polish Jew Henryk Vogelfänger) who used *balak* in their hugely popular radio broadcasts. In his book *Bloodlands* (2010), a deeply nuanced account of the fates of Jews, Belarusians, Poles, Ukrainians, Baltic peoples and Russians under Hitler and Stalin, US historian Timothy Snyder highlights the complexity of national and ethnic identity in this part of Europe between the world wars. Chciuk’s poems capture something of this complexity, in a language that remains vivid. And in this they resonate with the work of other transnational Australian writers, which reflects the fraught diversity of what, from a mainstream Australian perspective, might appear to be internally unified migrant cultures.

I turn now to a poem about the city of Borysław, which typifies Chciuk’s mix of sardonic humour and open nostalgia for the places he grew up in: ‘Pieśń o Borysławiu i o borysławskich łebakach’ (Song of Borysław and Borysław’s Łebaki). ‘Łebak’ is a *balak* word, not included in any of the online dictionaries I consulted. The clearest image of a ‘lebak’ I found online shows a man with two buckets and what looked to me like a handle-less mop (left). This image suggested that *łebaki* were street cleaners. A closer reading of the poem and further research revealed that they were in fact villagers who skimmed crude oil from oil wells, using buckets and severed horse-tails. Oil was discovered in Borysław in 1853, when the town was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and it became a centre of the empire’s oil industry. According to historian Alison Fleig Frank the ‘lebachy’ (another form of the plural *łebaki*) were newspapers containing anti-Semitic propaganda. Given his early left-leaning political views and lifelong friendships with Polish Jews including Marian Hemar, Barbara Schenkel and Gwidon Borucki it seems unlikely that Chciuk ever shared the outlook of these papers, though he might have sold them as a teenager. As Eva Hoffman writes in *Shtetl*, in Poland after 1935 ‘the ideology of chauvinist nationalism moved closer to the center of political and social life’ (194) and anti-Semitism pervaded mainstream media, particularly Catholic outlets.

18 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weso%C5%82a_Lwowska_Fala
19 A 1922 postcard in a ‘Views of Borysław’ series https://polona.pl/item/581391/0/
destitute locals who were often Jewish. In Chciuk’s poem, the łebaki visit the oil wells at night with their buckets and stolen horse-tails and dip these into the wells, squeeze the oil from the horse-tails into their buckets, then sell it on in nearby villages. A scene towards the end of the poem depicts their aggressively cocky demeanour around the guards at the oil wells, who keep well clear of them, mindful that guards have sometimes been drowned in the wells:

Przeto gdy w nocy stróż posłyszy
wśród szybów kroki wie: łebaki!
Więc zachowuje się najciszej
jak byś Borysław posiał makiem

(And he keeps ve-e-e-ry quiet –
you could hear a pin drop in Borysław)

Literally, ‘jak byś Borysław posiał makiem’ means ‘as if you’d sown Borysław with poppyseed’ – a Polish idiom close enough in meaning to the English ‘you could hear a pin drop’, but one which suggests a softer, hush-like silence and hence a more ironic contrast with the loud footsteps, and with the guards’ intended role as police.

The poem ends with an image of the wiry łebaki with their buckets full, swaggering off into a misty, crumbling distance which only exists in Chciuk’s fading memory, and pouring their ill-gotten oil right into his heart. ‘Pieśń o Borysławiu i o borysławskich łebakach’ (Song of Borysław and Borysław’s Łebaki) portrays the łebaki romantically if humorously as wild outlaws, but also includes images of their destitution, the shacks they live in and their emaciated figures lined up for unemployment benefits by day, contrasting them with Borysław oil tycoons who make millions ‘dla sportu’ (for sport).


The poem cycle ‘Tamta ziemia’ conveys love for a particular region and for complex local subcultures rather than for a whole country – less nationalism than love of place, including

industrial landscapes. In this it is arguably unusual for post-war Polish diasporic poetry, which more often imagines Poland as a whole, in a patriotic, nostalgic vein, like Jan Lechoń’s poetry, or via scathing satire, as in Kazimierz Wierzyński’s *Czarny polonez* (Black Polonaise), or by evoking metropolitan Polish culture as embodied by the capital, Warsaw, as in Julian Tuwim’s *Kwiaty polskie* (Polish flowers):

> A polski bez jak pachniał w maju
> W Alejach i w Ogrodzie Saskim,
> W koszach na rogu i w tramwaju,
> Gdy z Bielan wracał lud warszawski!’

(How fragrant Polish lilac was in May
In the Avenues and the Saxon Garden
In buckets on street corners and inside trams
When Warsaw’s crowds rode home from Bielany Forest).

Nobel-prize-winning poet Czesław Miłosz in his poems celebrates the beauty of the Lithuanian countryside of his childhood, as did the nineteenth-century ballads of the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz – but for both Mickiewicz and Miłosz, as for most Poles before World War II, Lithuania was strongly identified with Poland as a nation. In Chciuk’s *Pamiętnik*, it is the towns of pre-war eastern Poland – primarily Lwów, his hometown of Drohobycz, and Borysław – which are the focus, rather than Poland viewed as a nation.

The closest the *Pamiętnik* comes to referring to ‘Poland’ in a wider geographical sense is in the poem ‘O własnym poemacie’ (About My Poem Cycle), where Chciuk ironically contrasts his frenzied longing for Drohobycz with his wife’s yearning for the elegant baroque palaces of her home city Warsaw, the ‘Belvedere’ and ‘Łazienki’:

> zrozumiesz jak to zapach nafty
> potrafił mi się przyśnić nocą
> aż byłem potem nieprzytomny
> ze szczęścia mego i mej męki
> (Tak jak gdy Tobie z Twoich wspomnień
> śnił się Belweder i Łazienki). 

In my English, this passage reads:

> you’ll understand how the smell of oil
> returned in my dreams
> until I was faint
> with joy and anguish
> (Just as it was for you when
> you dreamt of the Belvedere and Łazienki).

---

21 see Norman Davies, xvii

Chciuk’s second wife Jadwiga Wanda Ernst died after an operation in March 1960.22 The *Pamiętnik* is dedicated to her memory, and here Chciuk evokes her fond tolerance for his attachment to a ‘provincial’ Poland she had never encountered. The poem recalls his hope when he began writing the ‘Tamta ziemia’ cycle that it would acquaint her with this ‘lost Poland’, and imagines her reading it even now, with the same understanding she showed when she was alive. A scene earlier in the poem which seems to encapsulate this understanding has his wife returning home from work, seeing Chciuk at the typewriter and commenting mockingly, ‘wieszcz znówu pisze’ (the bard’s at work again), then relenting and putting on some Chopin records which she knew helped him to write.

**Conclusion**

From his own writings and from Żongołowicz’s biography it seems clear that Chciuk himself viewed his work as part of a post-war Polish literature in exile, rather than as contributing to Australian literature. Most of what he wrote appeared in London- and Paris-based émigré outlets like *Wiadomości* and *Kultura*; only his *Pamiętnik* was published as a volume in Australia (by migrant printers Polpress) with the help of donations from Polish readers in Sydney and Melbourne. In including records for his work, however, the AustLit database is effectively reclaiming him as an author of Australian literary texts. On the back cover of the 2002 Polish reissue of Chciuk’s memoir *Atlantyda* (1969), the publishers point out that although Chciuk was widely read among Polish immigrants in Australia, the US and Britain, he was ‘entirely unknown in the People’s Republic of Poland’. As the work of an emigrant who failed to return to post-war Communist Poland, his writings would have been barred from circulation there.

Perhaps the best way of thinking about their cultural location, a concept that the larger AustLit ‘Multicultural Writers’ project helps bring into focus, is as occupying a particular kind of transnational/translingual limbo characteristic of writings in minority languages produced by contemporary diasporas. According to a contributor to a Polish online reading forum ‘Dziś wieczorem czytam’ (Tonight I am reading), Chciuk’s poem ‘O lwowskim balaku’ appears in Krzysztof Masłoń’s 2014 anthology *Puklerz Mohorta. Lektury kresowe* (Mohort’s Buckler: Kresy Readings).23 The contributor, alias ‘Rudbekia’, quotes the lines about the *batiair* which I discussed above, commenting that she was ‘charmed’ by the *balak* phrases and that ‘it doesn’t matter that I barely understand half of it’, it’s the work of a writer ‘as interesting’ as he is ‘forgotten’ (my translation). Chciuk’s biography by Bogumiła Żongołowicz (1999), the Polish 2002 reissue of *Atlantyda*, the 2011 Ukrainian translations of Chciuk’s memoirs, his presence in the AustLit database and inclusion in a 2014 Polish anthology and finally this online reader’s discussion of ‘O lwowskim balaku’ in 2015 all suggest that the transnational limbo Chciuk’s work occupies may yet be evolving in a productive direction – a place of possible future readers, here and elsewhere.

---

22 See Żongołowicz, 105-107.
Mary Besemeres is an Honorary Lecturer in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at the Australian National University. She is the author of Translating One’s Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography (2002), and co-editor with Anna Wierzbicka of Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures (2007). She was founding co-editor of the Routledge journal Life Writing.

Works Cited


Home, Factory, World:  
Domestic and Global Fictions in the work of Lavanya Sankaran

Anna Guttman

Abstract

Lavanya Sankaran’s *The Hope Factory* (2013) weaves together two narratives. One is the story of a Bangalore factory owner struggling to enter the world of transnational capitalism. The second is the story of the everyday struggles of one of his household’s servants, a struggling single mother. On the surface, such a division tacitly reinforces the gendered language of globalisation theory, in which markets are ‘penetrated’ and ‘dominated.’ I argue, however, that the use of domestic fiction – generically associated with women characters and readers – to explore globalisation, necessarily challenges more conventional, masculinist approaches. As J.K. Gibson-Graham point out, much globalisation discourse fails to take into account the reality that there is no tidy division between life and work, nor between economic and affective relationships. Yet as Sankaran’s fiction illustrates, experiences and perceptions of globalisation impact the most intimate moments of our lives, and intimate decisions, such as whom to marry, ripple out into the world. I contend that domestic fiction such as Sankaran’s therefore challenges ideas of world literature by insisting on gendered intimacy and specificity, but also risks becoming global literature, with ‘a problem-based monocultural aesthetic agenda that elicits transnational engagement.’

* * * * *

Lavanya Sankaran’s two works of fiction, *The Red Carpet* (2005) and *The Hope Factory* (2013) occupy a contradictory place in contemporary transnational literature. *The Red Carpet*, a collection of short stories, was showered with international praise upon its publication. It received glowing reviews in publications ranging from *India Today* to *The Washington Post*, booksellers’ endorsements from retail giants Borders and Barnes & Noble, and was selected as a Best of First Fiction by *Poets & Writers* magazine. The international reach of Sankaran’s debut was underscored by translations into French, German and Italian. She had already established her voice by publishing short stories in *The Atlantic* and *The Wall Street Journal*. With popular, commercial, and critical acclaim alike, Sankaran seemed set on a path to transnational acclaim. Both her own life – one of moving between the United States and India, while working in international finance – and her cosmopolitan characters, seemed well attuned to our twenty-first century sensibilities.

Sankaran followed up her debut with a novel, *The Hope Factory*, which is also set in contemporary Bangalore. In it, members of all classes struggle to succeed in the wake of

---


globalization’s attendant economic and cultural changes. At the same time, Sankaran wrote a number of journalistic pieces for Vogue, The New York Times and The Guardian (UK). The Hope Factory weaves together two narratives. One is the story of a Bangalore factory owner, Anand, struggling to enter into the world of transnational capitalism. The second is the story of the everyday struggles of one of his household’s servants, Kamala, a lower class single mother. Thematically, then, the book fits well within the concerns of contemporary transnational and postcolonial literature. Yet, I argue, the structure and genre of the novel have posed unexpected problems for critics that may have contributed to Sankaran’s critical neglect, despite her promising beginning.

The structure of The Hope Factory is actually tripartite. There are chapters told from Kamala’s perspective, as she works, but also cooks, gossips, and worries about her son. There are chapters narrated from Anand’s perspective which centre on the factory and his attempts to secure export opportunities with a Japanese automaker. Thirdly, there are chapters set in Anand’s home, that focus on his relationship with his wife and children. While Anand links the home and the factory, other characters in each of these settings remain ignorant of these others, though their fates are arguably intertwined. Spatially, those chapters which depict Anand’s home from his perspective, bring together the story of the factory – and with it, the story of global capitalism – with that of Kamala. The space of Anand’s family is, of course, Kamala’s workplace, and therefore not experienced exclusively as a private space. From the outset, therefore, this novel rejects the Indian nationalist division of the spheres so famously delineated by Partha Chatterjee, in which

the world of social institutions and practices [was split] into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the ‘outside’, of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology […]. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an ‘inner’ domain bearing the ‘essential’ marks of cultural identity.\(^2\)

As I will explain further below, both the home and the factory are equally places of economy and spirituality. I argue that in Sankaran’s work, the boundary between the home and the world – as understood and shaped by discourses and experiences of globalisation – is ever more porous and even, at times, subject to erasure. I explore this politics and poetics of space in greater detail below.

While such boundary crossing has long been of interest to postcolonial studies, reception of The Hope Factory has been decidedly mixed. Writing in The Guardian, Jessica Holland claims that this novel places us ‘almost in Dickens territory.’\(^3\) Meenakshi Venkat agrees in her review in the New York Journal of Books, claiming that there is nothing new or exciting here and that the novel ‘takes few risks.’\(^4\) Their comments are echoed broadly – the book is enjoyable, the writing is competent, but it fails to push formal, aesthetic or political boundaries. Even more positive reviews, such as the one from Kirkus, praise it as ‘a vivid exposé of modern India’s

---

\(^2\) Partha Chatterjee, Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories, 6.


---
growing pains. It is thus understood as an accessible, realist text, best read by non-Indian audiences for a fortuitous combination of pleasure and information retrieval. Such readings may explain why the book has received no critical attention to date. The book nevertheless seems to have done well with audiences, featured as a top pick by Amazon, on the website SheKnows, and in Marie Claire magazine, among others.

Arguably, the novel has sold well and captured the imagination of popular and commercial audiences precisely because of those features – its mastery of, but lack of innovation in genre, for instance, and its familiar deployment of realist narrative – that some critics have found so disappointing. But the novel’s accessibility may be problematic only if we demand that novels fit tidily into pre-established conceptions of national literature, whose study tends to focus on identifying what seems inherently English or American [for instance] in the literatures’ and, therefore by extension, into world literature. Instead, I argue that Sankaran, who writes for publications in India, the United States, and Italy, among others, should be understood as the author of literature that ‘unfold[s] in a complex system of transnational economic and cultural exchanges’ that is characteristic of the globalisation of English literature.

Anand’s house itself may be the most apt metaphor for The Hope Factory. Located firmly in Bangalore’s specific urban landscape, the house is public and even delocalised in several other ways. For Anand, its physical capaciousness denies it the intimacy that would make it a true home. Aesthetically, it draws on a vaguely western ‘modernist aesthetic’ that seems simultaneously culturally neutral – there is nothing especially Indian about it – and distinctly international. It is as much a staging ground for elaborate and politicised meetings and entertainments as it is a private space. Such events leave Anand wishing ‘to go home’ in the midst of ‘the despair of knowing he was home’ (180). The house, as much as the novel, is of the world – easily understood and entered by culturally diverse readers, but perhaps wholly satisfying to none. The house is not a neutral background but is, like all spaces, ‘living, dynamic, affective and rich in symbolism’. But here, the carefully muted quality of its life is a symbol unto itself.

This is not to say that this is a book wholly lacking in specificity or intimacy. Globalisation clearly touches, but does not utterly define, Anand – whose life takes him from an austere Brahmin existence in Mysore, to an out-of-caste marriage and a career in industry in cosmopolitan Bangalore. Rather, the local and the transnational are intimately linked, with the factory itself figured as a kind of domestic space, where the diversity of employees mirrors Anand’s household (71). We are continuously reminded of the particularities of his journey. Indeed, Anand is shaped not just by the realities of global capital, but by its fantasies. In the novel’s first scene, he daydreams about having an attractive female secretary with a European name – instead of the highly competent, and Indian, Mr Kamath. Indeed, the novel generates humour from such discrepancies. Kamala, too, is touched by globalisation. From her years as a

---

7 Jay 34.
8 Lavanya Sankaran, The Hope Factory 24. Further references will be included in the text as page numbers.
9 Angus Cameron and Ronen Palan, The Imagined Economies of Globalization 60.
day labourer on Bangalore’s construction sites, to her (successful) quest to enrol her son in an English-language school, her desires, and her reality, are shaped by globalisation. She admires those from the slum who have succeeding in leaving both it – and poverty – behind, and invests much energy into imagining how she and her son, Narayan, might do the same via education and entry into a profession. Her dreams are the easily comprehensible ambitions of a mother for her son. Narayan, on the other hand, sees things differently, and knows that the construction sites of Dubai are a more likely, but no less globalised, destination (133).

A question which drives the plot in the novel is whether Anand will succeed in expanding his factory. This expansion is figured in decidedly globalised and colonial terms, with Anand and his co-workers compared to ‘early American pioneers pressing into the hostile western regions of their country’ (12). Here, the ‘Indians’ of the American West become both the inhabitants of South Asia who baulk at the new world order, and paradoxically, the foreign others whom Cauvery Auto, Anand’s company, attempts to woo. In order to succeed, Anand must overcome a number of obstacles: obtaining a loan from the bank, negotiating a dubious land purchase, out-maneuvering corrupt politicians and impressing the plant’s transnational clients with Indian capability and potential. Even this global endeavour therefore has national – and therefore homely – undertones, carrying with it a sense of manifest destiny, despite the novel’s less than rosy depiction of India’s business climate.

While Anand clearly stands to benefit from a successful business deal, Kamala loses her home, and therefore the ability to share a domestic life with her son, Narayan, by the end of the novel. Despite her strong individualism, we get less of a sense of her own personal and cultural journey than Anand’s. Kamala’s dream is to see her son well-educated, fluent in English, and settled into a middle-class profession. But it is clear from the outset that neither she nor Narayan have any real sense of how that outcome may be achieved; the obstacles are not only considerable and systemic, they are not fully known. When she seeks advice from a successful local man on securing Narayan’s success, he assures her that she needs ‘luck. And God’s blessings’ (132). Kamala repeatedly vacillates between rational and supernatural explanations for her fate and that of her neighbours (95). Furthermore, Kamala seems deeply entrenched in India’s traditional class hierarchy, and is treated with a lack of respect by her employer, Vidya, that she naturalises to a point of invisibility (65). While political activism offers to Anand and others avenues for addressing problems such as corruption, Kamala’s position seems to preclude, at least in the novel, participation in any kind of collective action.

On the surface, such a division tacitly reinforces the gendered language of globalisation theory, in which markets are ‘penetrated’ and ‘dominated’. The notion that subaltern women are quintessential victims of globalisation, capable of only being the beneficiaries of ameliorative efforts after the fact has become something of a truism of the field. I argue, however, that the use of domestic fiction – generically associated with women characters and readers – to explore globalisation, necessarily challenges more conventional, masculinist approaches. As J.K. Gibson-Graham point out, much globalisation discourse fails to take into

---

10 J.K. Gibson-Graham, The End of Capitalism (As we knew it) 121.

account the reality that there is no tidy division between life and work, nor between economic and affective relationships. On the one hand, Anand’s decision to fund Narayan’s education, even after Kamala has been fired by Vidya, Anand’s wife, encourages the reader to view him as a benevolent employer and blunts any potential critique of the status of domestic workers in India. On the other, this is one of many instances where affect – Anand sees in Narayan something of himself – and economics intersect in complex ways.

Representing subaltern subjects such as Kamala presents a perpetual problem in English-language Indian fiction. Most such fiction is written by members of the globalised Indian elite, and Lavanya Sankaran is no exception. The domestic sphere is very much part of the ambit of this elite, but this may only heighten the danger of speaking for, and erasing subaltern voices within it. The Hope Factory struggles perceptibly with this. The novel depicts interactions between the servants and the family they serve as clipped and infrequent. Kamala’s illiteracy reinforces her subaltern status, as does the fact that she cannot even imagine the inside of a bank (121), and regards computers with a mixture of fascination and fear (245). In this, she is juxtaposed even with the other servants, who have had some formal education. Furthermore, the novel struggles to convincingly represent her cultural milieu. The village haunts Kamala’s past, but appears largely anachronistic in her present. Indeed, with Kamala’s brother and sister-in-law providing conflicting accounts of their lives, the reader is encouraged to think of rural India as a confused, and confusing, place. We are not invited to understand Kamala’s journey in the same cultural and political terms as Anand’s.

Part of the tension in the novel arises from the fact that the bank loan which Anand needs for the factory’s expansion can only be secured by offering his family home, and his parents’ apartment, as surety (102). If his business machinations fail, he, like Kamala, will be homeless. Anand’s family does not know of the risk he has taken. Indeed, even the more elite characters experience a tension between their homely and global selves. Consider Kavika, a childhood friend of Anand’s wife, who has recently returned to India after a stint at the United Nations. She has the most physical mobility of any character and, as a single mother of a biracial daughter, has in some ways strayed farthest from Indian conventions. But she nevertheless cherishes Brahmin traditions despite her ‘current international sophistication’ (166). Indeed, though Anand wishes ‘he could be at ease with foreigners’ (46) like Kavika, the two bond over their shared nostalgia for traditional Brahmanism. This commitment to Brahmanism, we are told, is not to be confused with ‘antediluvian notions on caste, worship, and vegetarianism’ (46) held by Anand’s more old-fashioned business partner. Anand is arguably attracted to Kavika precisely because she is more cosmopolitan than either himself or his wife Vidya. And cosmopolitanism done ‘right’ here connotes competence negotiating the wider world, coupled with a healthy – but carefully delimited – attachment to one’s own origins.

In other words, to paraphrase Roland Robertson, the condition of life – and of world literature – is that there is difference everywhere. We therefore expect, and even institutionalise it. World literature provides the common framework to incorporate it and understand it. It is the literature

---


of and for the cosmopolitan. ‘Cosmopolitan’, however, is a vexed term in _The Hope Factory_. When it comes from Anand’s traditional father, it is a derogatory term, that suggests an unseemly abandonment of dharma and identity (230). This use of the word has its own, very European, history, at which the novel only hints. For Anand’s father, for instance, to be a cosmopolitan is to have one’s loyalty to the nation called into question; it also means to be an other and a capitalist. Indeed, he refers ruefully to ‘the Gujarati, the Marwad and the Jew ... who ... rule the financial world’ (288). Even Anand does not entirely disagree with this rather stereotyped assessment, though he fumes silently during his father’s disparaging discourse on manufacturing and global capitalism. Certainly, he is depicted as being less casteist and classist than other characters, and this forms a part of his cosmopolitanism. Yet the bar where he takes his first step towards setting up the crucial land deal, ‘a cocktail of races ... percolated and distilled ... by the virulent forces of international mercantilism’ (75) is not a space where he feels entirely comfortable. While Anand makes the business connection he seeks, he also is forced into unwished for political, personal, and economic transactions along the way.

This tension is also evident in Lavanya Sankaran’s earlier the short story collection _The Red Carpet_. In ‘Bombay This,’ Bombay represents not cosmopolitanism, as it famously does for Salman Rushdie, but parochialism. Ashwini, recently arrived in Bangalore irritates her listeners with her talk of ‘Bombay this and Bombay that’ without realising, according to the narrator, that many in her new circle ‘had lived in other parts of the country and indeed the world’. Ramu, the narrator, contemplates Ashwini as a wife, initially rejecting her for being too shallow, and too westernised – though he himself has lived abroad – but changes his mind after learning that she has donated a kidney to a family member.

While for Ramu’s mother, organ donation has left Ashwini physically scarred and therefore unsuitable as a bride, Ramu feels just the opposite. This is significant, as it challenges the usual trope whereby the ‘native’ and ‘overseas’ Indian is embodied. As Robbie Goh explains, in a discussion of another Bangalore novel, Aravind Adiga’s _The White Tiger_: 

Marked bodies – masculine, obdurate, grounded, and earthly – thus become the symbolic domain of older and resistant forms of production ... it is the Overseas Indian – suave, knowledgeable, with a seemingly unflappable self-assurance, but also a disconnect with his or her own body, and the body of the nation – who is figured as the invasive outsider.

In ‘Bombay This,’ the marked body is now female, but is now associated with the nation – and with ‘a seemingly unflappable self-assurance.’ But this is not a nation associated with ‘older and resistant forms,’ but one that has been thoroughly globalised. Instead, the overseas Indian is also associated with his bodily urges and functions, as Ramu, who has spent many years in the United States, is acutely aware of his libido and the movement of his muscles as he exercises. In _The Hope Factory_, if there is, indeed, any marked body, it is Kamala’s, whose lifetime of labour has left her ‘sinewed’ (191) – but she is always decorously covered and, indeed, physically

---

13 Lavanya Sankaran, _The Red Carpet_: Bangalore Stories 1.
14 Robbie B.H. Goh, ‘The Overseas Indian and the political economy of the body in Aravind Adiga’s _The White Tiger_ and Amitav Ghosh’s _The Hungry_’, 344.
unremarkable. Bodily exposure is the prerogative of the upper classes in both texts, whose wealth guarantees respectability, regardless of attire.

Indeed, visibility and invisibility are recurring themes in these texts. In Lavanya Sankaran’s ‘Closed Curtains’ the new Bangalore, ‘richly symbolizing the successful integration of India into a globalizing world economy’ is defined both by its architectural newness – the erection of high-rises and the construction of ever larger bungalows – but also by new points of view, as epitomised by the main character’s previously panoptic position at his home’s window. The narrator is an older man, Mr D’Costa, and has witnessed the transformation of Bangalore from quiet provincial city to international business hub. He spends his days gazing at the new construction and new inhabitants of the neighbourhood, who fascinate him with their seeming ability to be both Indian and foreign at the same time. His voyeuristic intrusion into the lives of his neighbours is mirrored by his wife’s retreat into the world of television, particularly cartoons, which she watches almost constantly. Therefore, the symbolic geography of Bangalore is no longer defined by the division between the home and the world, so characteristic of earlier nationalist versions of the nation. Instead, the poor and rich, the foreign and the Indian born continuously observe each other, at home, at work and at play.

In The Hope Factory, it is worth noting that even within Anand’s household, multiple forms of the global and local compete in the same physical space. The competing perspectives are not merely the binary opposition of above and below, though that certainly exists. Harry Chinappa, Anand’s father-in-law, is an ever-present reminder of the older forms of worlding that were a product of the colonial endeavour. His name alone is a reminder of his Anglicisation, as is his policing of other characters’ English pronunciation. Harry is associated with his old money of indeterminate origin. He once managed a coffee plantation (albeit unsuccessfully), which seems a rather stereotypically colonial enterprise, but also one which points to the connection between colonialism and current international trade. Harry is now trying to operate in the vague field of ‘property development’ and wishes to get involved in building shopping malls (110). Anand, on the other hand, via his auto factory, points to a kind of transnationalism born of Fordism – or, in this case ‘the famous Toyota Production system’ (325). The land broker who ultimately secures for Anand the plot he needs to expand his factory is only one generation from the peasantry himself, and helps uneasily as the land is transformed from a home, a place that nurtures body and soul, into a commodity in a capitalist system. Anand comes to realise he needs all of these individuals – with their diverse perspectives and skills – if his business is to succeed.

Indeed, the domestic tension of Anand’s household is inexorably linked to the competing models of identity of each spouse. Willing to do business in a globalised world and to learn what he can from those of other backgrounds, Anand nevertheless maintains a certain nostalgia for his past and feels grounded in his Indian identity. Vidya, whose convent-school education and less stereotypically Indian accent was part of her exotic appeal for the younger Anand, regularly experiments with novel identities via her personal appearance and recreational activities. For Anand, these performances produce a ‘horrifying, inadequate facsimile’ (164) that serves to further throw into relief the appeal of the authentically cosmopolitan Kavika.

I contend that domestic fiction such as Sankaran’s therefore challenges ideas of world literature by insisting on gendered intimacy and specificity, but also risks the thematic flattening that Emily Apter ascribes to global literature, which ‘signifies not so much the conglomeration of world cultures arrayed side by side in their difference, but rather a problem-based monocultural aesthetic agenda that elicits transnational engagement.’

In other words, the framework for global literature invites not so much an appreciation for cultural difference or aesthetic incommensurability, but for the investigation of a theme – the impact of globalisation – across geographical and cultural space for purposes of comparison. Such a project implicitly necessitates the production and selection of readily substitutable examples. Though, on the surface, global literature might claim to move away from world literature, with its traditional celebration of great (and therefore universal) books, it simply exchanges a common, if ineffable quality – greatness – for a common, and equally ill-defined problem – globalisation.

It is easy to see how Apter’s description above might apply to The Hope Factory. Aesthetically, Sankaran’s fiction fits tidily into the Western tradition of realist domestic fiction, despite is globalised plot. It has garnered considerable praise for its representation of Bangalore, a city just emerging onto the literary landscape both within India and internationally. As Anna Tsing points out, however, ‘there can be no territorial distinctions between the “global” transcending of place and the “local” making of places’. Nor can the emergence of Bangalore as a local place in the international literary landscape be divorced from Bangalore’s importance to cultural and economic projects of globalisation, both in India’s liberalisation program, and as a node in the global marketplace for business process outsourcing.

Indeed, for Bangalore and other cities cultural and capitalist forms of globalisation are explicitly linked. Bangalore held its first literary festival in December 2012. With sessions on queer literature, poetry, and memoir (among other things) and a school outreach program, the festival revealed a literary Bangalore poised to change its place in the world, and Indian, literary scene. An even more ambitious festival was held in September 2013. Such festivals cast the city as both a major urban cultural centre for Indians – whose migrations within India are arguably just as, if not more, significant, than migrations to metropolitan centres elsewhere – and as a location vying for recognition on a global cultural stage. Sarah Brouillette’s *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014) argues that, at least since the 1990s, literature and other arts have had a powerful influence over economic policy makers, as is evidenced by diverse Western governments seeking to monetise the arts through official designations for cities such as ‘City of Culture’ (UK), ‘Capital of Culture’ (US), and ‘Cultural Capitals’ (Canada). The interplay between culture and capital in the nomenclature is no coincidence; cities themselves comprise ‘complex networks of capital and culture’.

Sankaran’s fiction is uncomfortably aware, however, of the dangers of transnational aesthetics, which are both textualised and mocked in The Hope Factory. In search of a real estate

---

16 Apter 99.
broker to aid in his factory’s expansion, Anand meets an associate at the ‘Latest Latest Bar … located in the ELIPT Mall’ which the locals agree, mocking its official name is ‘Extremely Luxurious but in Poor taste.’ In this mall,

shiny escalators swooped upward in a space seemingly imported from shrieking Dubai; an amazement of gilt and a fresco-covered ceiling in a mock-up of the Sistine Chapel … the Creator’s hand holding out … Santa Claus-like … the urgent promise of … handbags, perfume bottles, designer labeled shopping bags. (72)

This aesthetic nightmare, born of capitalist globalisation, responds explicitly both to criticisms of globalised cosmopolitanism as essentially consumerist, and to fears of the postcolonial exotic, by having Anand not only articulate his discomfort, but avoiding this space for the remainder of the novel. (Subsequent meetings with the land broker occur in the factory, in his car, and in an open field, among other locations.) In contrast, Anand connects the manufacture of auto parts to the ancient craft of stone temple construction, for which he has an aesthetic, if not religious, affinity (326).

Both texts arguably fall short of answering Arundhati’s Roy call to use a place-based perspective to challenge the teleology of globalisation. Yet Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) and its reception also participates in a complex process of play related to the emerging global marketplace and the very conditions of academic literary criticism. I contend that Sankaran’s work is similarly ambivalent and complex. Even as he expressly links certain forms of Indian aesthetic with the products of transnational capitalism, Anand, in *The Hope Factory*, engages in an interior monologue that argues for the Indianisation of English that would be at home in any text on postcolonial theory (15). Similarly, *The Red Carpet* is populated with characters who are ‘paradigmatic of the era of globalization’ and who overtly reflect on the ‘social theories they preach in the universities’. Sankaran’s fiction is therefore ‘problem-based’ in a highly self-conscious fashion.

Even at a plot level, however, *The Hope Factory* does not truly invite us to consider alternatives to globalisation, or provide much scope for dissent, but merely to ask what ameliorative steps might be taken to ease the suffering of individuals like Kamala and her son. To the extent that the narrative of *The Hope Factory* posits an answer, it is greater incorporation of Kamala into the space of the transnational. Such a trajectory is already in evidence in her move from village to city. Kamala bears witness to a transforming urban landscape, in which farmers are becoming businessmen, and corner shops are replaced with internet cafés, doctors’ offices, and English schools (257). She herself has a mobile phone, which she uses to call her sister-in-law in the village, and such technological innovations are positioned as unproblematic.

The relative absence of strategies of resistance in Sankaran’s work, and the relative failure of what resistance is depicted in the face of the pressures of globalisation, may also have contributed to its neglect by postcolonial critics and theorists. If, as Simon Gikandi, argues, *The

---

20 Elleke Boehmer, ‘East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy’, 64-5.
21 Myambo 160-1.
Satanic Verses is the quintessential text of literary globalisation (and therefore posited as a site for scholarly analysis and intervention) then, it follows, that the global text is idealised as stylistically complex, aesthetically dense, thematically subversive and relatively inaccessible. Certainly Sankaran’s work is very different from Salman Rushdie’s. But, Gikandi cautions, we should attend to texts that ‘cannot be read as stories of hybridity, diaspora, or métissage, they demand a rethinking of the tropes that have dominated the discourse of postcolonial theory in relation to both global culture and nationalism’. After all, it is premature to imagine that the national has been relegated to minimal importance within the transnational, and dangerous to discount the global longings of non-Western subjects, which may not fit tidily into contemporary theory.

The conclusion of The Hope Factory brings it firmly back to the domestic sphere, with a pooja performed to give thanks for the factory’s success. Anand is attempting to repair his strained relationship with his wife Vidya; his success in global business provides the foundation for reconciliation at home. As Geetha Ganapathy-Doré points out, in Sankaran’s work the ‘co-existence of…the traditional world and the newly minted and moneyed one’ is ‘not too hostile’. This accommodation between these putatively separate worlds seems to leave both the nation and the project of transnational globalisation securely intact, a paradox that may appear readily recognisable and comprehensible to readers.

The final pooja in The Hope Factory provides a fitting response to the book’s epigraph, ‘an ancient line for modern times … may all prosper.’ Both the opening and the closing of the novel therefore produce an intermingling of Hindu piety with global capitalism, the public and the private, the home and the world. But the Pooja produces a homely space from which Kamala and her son are now both literally and figuratively excluded. Kamala has lost her house, and there is little hope for the recuperation of her domestic life. Both Anand and Kamala are described as blessed (366, 371), but whereas for Anand, that blessing is expanding prosperity and influence, for Kamala, it takes the form of a dutiful, English-speaking son who she now only rarely sees. Globalisation offers Kamala and her son their only hope for the future, and it is a rather thin one.

Anna Guttman is a full professor and chair of the department of English at Lakehead University, in Thunder Bay, Canada, where she teaches postcolonial literature. She is the author of Writing Indians and Jews (2013), funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and The Nation of India in Contemporary Indian Literature (2007). She is also co-editor of The Global Literary Field (2007), and publishes in areas including Indian Jewish Fiction, queer desire, globalisation, and Indian cosmopolitanism.

Works Cited


Intersecting Memory and Witnessing Violence in
Anita Desai’s The Zigzag Way

Bhawana Jain

Abstract

This essay engages with the juxtaposition of two disparate violent past events: the Holocaust, and the Mexican Revolution, which led to the forced displacement of the diasporic characters in Anita Desai’s novel The Zigzag Way. It explores various ways in which the violent past resurfaces in the present and enables different migrant characters of the novel to bear witness to it by using tropes such as ruin, dreams and spectres. The essay also demonstrates subtle and complex intersections among different memory theories to articulate victimisation and enforced silence of the displaced and traumatized characters. It also investigates the role of fiction in depicting the ‘unspeakable’ horrors of the tumultuous past and the novel’s readers as well as the characters’ implication in it as secondary witnesses.

* * * * *

Hannah Arendt’s assertion in On Violence that the twentieth century was ‘a century of wars and revolutions, hence a century of violence which is currently believed to be their common denominator,’¹ seems relevant when one counts those innumerable people who were displaced and murdered as a consequence of the Shoah and other violent events across the globe. The memories of these events continue to haunt displaced people as living spectres from the past. This essay explores various ways in which the violent past reappears in the present leading to a sense of loss, trauma and dislocation of the diasporic characters in Anita Desai’s novel The Zigzag Way (2004). It also posits that the novel captures memory’s (dis)location outside the human body and in the landscape, and the potential narration and the failure to narrate the memory by analysing tropes of ruin, dreams and ghosts, and hybrid narrative techniques. The essay demonstrates that different strands in memory studies intersect in the novel to trace vastly disparate experiences of trauma across racial, cultural and temporal divides (Huichol Indians, the Cornish miners, dissenting Nazis). Pierre Nora’s ‘lieux de mémoire’ (which are ‘At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are lieux – places, sites, causes


Bhawana Jain. ‘Intersecting Memory and Witnessing Violence in Anita Desai’s The Zigzag Way.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.
in three senses – material, symbolic and functional\textsuperscript{2}) link memory to a fixed and a specific local space and culture. Michael Rothberg asserts that this concept is limiting and has a ‘site-specific’ perspective which leads to polarisation of history and memory and so as an alternative, he proposes a new concept of ‘knots of memory’, which suggests that the ‘acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level).\textsuperscript{3} This concept which supports the idea of memory’s rhizomatic connections across boundaries and cultures is ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing,’\textsuperscript{4} in an increasingly globalised, networked, and mediated world. The essay advocates the advantages of studying \textit{The Zigzag Way} in light of these two complementary theoretical approaches. Besides, Derrida asserts that the traumatic memory might haunt the subject in the form of what he calls a living ‘spectre’. This ghost of memory keeps returning uninvited to traumatise the subject and to shape his or her personal and collective memory. In this novel, the lives of three principal migrant characters, Eric, Betty and Dona Vera, are structured by the intersections of the above-mentioned concepts.

Witnessing constitutes an integral part of memory studies because, with the passage of time when the bearer of primary memory is dead or lost, the memory gets recognition through ‘secondary witnessing.’ Dominick LaCapra defines the secondary witness\textsuperscript{5} as an analyst, an observer or a historian who critically works on primary memory. Unlike primary witness, this witness has not directly seen or has not been ‘there’ but is still being shaped by the original event through the vicarious experience of it. Hence, both primary and secondary witnessing are important in the context of memory studies. While primary memory is created through direct and unmediated witnessing of the original event, as in the case of Betty, Eric and reader of the novel function as secondary witnesses when they listen to the traumatic story of the ‘spectre’. In a different way, Dona Vera also becomes a secondary witness by witnessing ‘lieux de mémoire’ which eventually connects with her past through ‘knots of memory’.

Helen Tiffin says ‘postcolonial writers recast history as a “redefinable” present rather than an irrevocably interpreted past.’\textsuperscript{6} \textit{The Zigzag Way} recasts the untold history with the purpose of finding its relevance for the present, to register it and to subvert the hegemony of the official testimony. In the novel, forgotten or lost narratives from the margins are retrieved and are given voice through the fictional depiction of personal or family history of the main characters.

Moreover, the novel has a fragmented structure. It is divided into four parts, titled: ‘Eric arrives’; ‘Vera stays’; ‘Betty Departs’ and ‘La Noche de Los Muertos’. The first part describes Eric’s travel to Mexico and his ‘private quest’ to trace his family’s history to a Mexican town where Cornish miners toiled to the death a century ago. The second section concentrates on an Austrian dancer, Dona Vera, who comes to Mexico during the Second World War by marrying into a Mexican mining family, and who subsequently reinvents herself as an expert on the Huichol Indians. The narrative shifts back to the past in the third section through frame narrative to describe Betty’s diasporic life in Mexico as a wife of a Cornish miner during the year 1910. The final section traces the cross-cultural histories of mining and the Shoah in a zigzag fashion and links them to the present. Hence, the novel *The Zigzag Way* explores European and Mexican traumatic history to study its effect on migration, dislocation and settlement. Therefore, an interrelationship between memory, migration and history is reinforced through the structure of the novel. Moreover, the timeline of *The Zigzag Way* stretches over a century, including the Mexican Revolution in 1910s and the Shoah in the 1930s.

For David Lodge, a polyphonic novel is a ‘novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice.’ The polyphonic fiction allows the characters to have the freedom to incorporate different ideologies and styles which are not subordinated to the authorial voice. Similarly, in this novel, the polyphonic intertwined voices not only create narrative tension that dispel the hegemony of a single voice, but also claim validity for the ‘other’ voices or the narrative perspective of foreign characters such as Betty and Dona Vera. Besides, the novel has a non-linear structure as it proceeds backwards in time, to narrate Dona Vera’s escape from Nazi Austria and to Eric’s grandmother Betty’s diasporic life during the Mexican revolution. The implicit reference to the Shoah in Dona Vera’s dubious background is intertwined with the explicit mining history in Mexico: the novel’s title alludes to the history of indigenous people who ascended from the mining pits in a zigzag fashion.

The focus of this essay is also on how re-visiting the past enables bearing witness to trauma for different migrant characters as well as the readers of the novel. The first part of the paper explores Eric’s journey to Sierra Madre and how the trope of ruin establishes the relationship between ‘lieux de mémoire’ and Eric’s secondary witnessing. The next part engages with the possibility of narrating trauma through the trope of dreams and how the concept of ‘knots of memory’ explores the complexities of Dona Vera’s exile. The final section of the essay analyses how memory manifests as a living and speaking Betty’s ghost to implicate Eric as well as the novel’s reader in her story as a secondary witness.

---

7 Anita Desai, *The Zigzag Way* (Vintage: London, 2005) 55. Further references to this novel will be included as page numbers in parentheses in the text.
Ruin and Secondary Witnessing

The juxtaposition of the colonial enterprise of mining in Mexico and the Shoah in this fiction provides insight into how Anita Desai depicts the gaps or voids left around these important events (lack of articulation, knowledge and direct experience) and how her fiction attempts to fill them. It is impossible to access the past completely, and therefore the author attempts to explore it through an affective semiotics of the gaze on the ruin where the past events have unfolded.

The protagonist Eric is temporally and spatially removed from the Mexican Revolution led by revolutionary Pancho Villa (1910-1920) that resulted in the dislocation death and trauma of his grandparents. He has no direct memories to connect him to this past event and yet he tries to access this part of his family past by returning to the ‘lieux de mémoire’, the lost fabled ‘ghost town’ (84) in Sierra Madre, where his diasporic grandparents lived a century ago as Cornish miners. Here, Eric indulges in a kind of archival practice by retracing these tunnels of the past by descending a dark stairwell ‘as if it were a mine that no light pierced and where no air circulated’ (ZW 68) so as to enter the unknown past.

The night of Los Muertos in The Zigzag Way, when the living remember their deceased loved ones, becomes a setting to depict the fantastic. In this space, Eric discovers complex layers of historical and present times, criss-crossed with different stories of diasporans and travellers. The seemingly normal and ordinary landscape of this ancient city seems to undercut any specific reference to what might have happened there in the past. Yet the presence of the ruin suggests that the space is mutable and it can also become the holder of the past in the present as ‘lieux de mémoire’. The third-person omniscient narrator and linear descriptive narration in this section assert that the past exists everywhere in Sierra Madre: ‘The past was alive here – crepuscular and underground, but also palpable’ (112). The reference here is to the hidden past that is ‘underground’ and ‘crepuscular.’ Eric’s tries to enter into this intangible graveyard of Mexican history full of gloomy secrets. The ruined mines and the deserted ‘houses of adobe and tile that were clearly abandoned and in ruins, doors hanging from their hinges, barred windows opening on to scenes ...’ (160-1) seem to be weighed down by the burden of the particular moment of the unbearable past when silver mines were deserted due to violence and bloodshed during the revolution. Although this decaying ruin is under constant assault by the atrocity of time, nevertheless it reconfigures into a ‘mixed, hybrid, mutant’ place bound ‘intimately with life and death ... the collective and the individual.’9 This site of memory, ‘block[s] the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial,’10 forging a narrative of agency that didn’t exist previously at the time of the original event. In the wake of the totalitarian regime, the memory of the violent past of those who were

---

10 Nora 19.
silenced and marginalised within history and social memory becomes dislocated into this remnant.

James Young states that the sites of memory do not remember by themselves – they require the active agency of individuals in the production of memory.\textsuperscript{11} Eric’s reflexive gaze at this evocative site establishes an intimate connection between the past and the present, individual experience and the place and the act of violence. As Eric moves through the ruin, this unknown and mysterious place changes into the possible site of transmission of the individual diasporic story of the forced dislocation of his grandparents. In a strange way, this viewer becomes a ‘secondary witness’ who was not present during the original event of the Mexican Revolution and so has little information about it, but becomes important for being an after-witness through subsequent viewing. According to Michal Rothberg, ‘Such agency entails recognizing and revealing the production of memory as an ongoing process involving inscription and reinscription, coding and recoding.’\textsuperscript{12} It is through Eric’s act of reflexive gazing at his family’s past that he participates in the re-inscription of memory, loss and absence on this place. Eric’s psychological and sensory engagement with this site leads to his embodied cognition and the continuity of the past in the present. This physical site of memory, hence, enables the encounter between the present and the past, the self and the other, personal experience and unknown space to render possible Eric’s secondary witnessing.

Many other vivid descriptions of ‘lieux de mémoire’ are also incorporated in the novel to convey a looming sense of traumatic history. Critic Maya Jaggi suggests how Desai’s landscapes in this novel are impregnated with complex layers of history:

Desai’s acute sense of history infuses sensuous landscapes, from a Maine coast redolent of diesel oil, brine and seaweed, to the ‘stained and peeling stucco’ of wartime Vienna. In a Mexico built on genocidal attrition, cacti emerge from the volcanic rubble ‘like stakes rising from secret graves’, and cobbles are the ‘shape and size of human skulls’.\textsuperscript{13} The above lines suggest that the characters might be ephemeral but the ‘stained’ landscapes from across Europe and Mexico were able to preserve the traumatic memory. In a way, the death might annihilate the character’s embodied sense of pain and loss, but his memory gets dislocated outside in the landscape. As a result, an interrelationship between memory and place is established.

**Dreams and Traumatic memory**

Linking memory with trauma, Geoffrey Hartman states:

\textsuperscript{12} Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 8.
The knowledge of trauma is composed of two contradictory elements. One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced … The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche.14

Trauma involves disjunction, a sense of belatedness, and a compulsive return of the memories of the original event, thus fostering Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma as ‘the confrontation with an event that, in its un-expectedness or horror,’ and that the event ‘continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time.’15 Such a conception of trauma as a lingering presence of the horrendous memory exposes the living to the sudden violent intrusion by something unexpected. The novel also explores the complexity of trauma whilst unfolding Dona Vera’s story.

Dona Vera is a mysterious character, a ‘coiled serpent’ (46) who ‘had evidently sloughed off the past and emerged like some sly and secretive snake in its new skin, to continue on her way’ (96). The use of alliteration ‘serpent,’ ‘slough,’ ‘sly,’ ‘secretive’ and the simile drawn between snake and Dona Vera creates suspense around her identity and past. Just as the snake sheds its skin to allow for further growth and to remove parasites, so does Dona Vera want to get rid of her past that is hampering her growth. The narrative shifts back and forth between using a sad, strange, dreadful, pessimistic tone and a somewhat happier and hopeful one as Vera’s desire to leave her past behind ignites even more. Here, the reader needs to generate their own interpretative trajectories through imposed gaps around Dona Vera’s past and her vague links to the Nazis. As the story unfolds, the reader uses the hints in the novel to piece together that she came to Mexico from Austria to escape Nazi politics that threatened to engulf her (58) during the early 1930s. The sense of her suffering and guilt due to her dubious European past augmented by her ‘aloofness and solitude’ (62) in her diasporic present, manifests itself in the narrative of belatedness through repetitive nightmares:

If she would not get into the cage, they would enclose her within stone walls instead, because the truth was this was no magical mountaintop refuge: she had tricked herself into it and was a prisoner here, there was no escape. She was being slowly suffocated to death - screaming, struggling, and suffocating. Her hands tore at the stones, and she panted – let me breathe, let me breathe, let me breathe – while heaving for breath. (71-2)

The surreal image of being entombed and the Nazi military overtones in this passage symbolise the brutal murders in the gas chambers. The alliterated lexemes ‘suffocating,’ ‘screaming,’ ‘struggling,’ ‘tearing the stones’ symbolise the suffering and trauma that Dona Vera has escaped physically, but by which she is now entrapped psychologically. Here, Dona Vera’s trauma stifles her possible ‘false victim’ status. Besides, the maddening atmosphere of the nightmare depicts her inner turmoil and her inability to provide a rounded account of her trauma even after

---

decades have elapsed. The trope of nightmare is repository of violence, and it animates the horrendous past with an affective power that echoes the imaginative reconstruction of victims’ perspectives in the gas chambers in Holocaust narratives such as The Hell of Treblinka and Schindler’s Ark. The latter imaginatively reconstructs the inner turmoil of those in the gas chamber, and fictionalises the character’s final experience of choking through the use of realist narrative techniques. Similarly, The Zigzag Way employs the image of the ‘gas chamber’ which is synecdoche of the Shoah to illustrate the emotions of a choking victim rather than the final shock. However, both The Hell of Treblinka and Schindler’s Ark set a moral and ethical limit to depict it in that they never move beyond what can be described by a survivor or a primary witness’s testimony. While they epitomise the shocking and violent nature of the Shoah by employing realism, Desai uses surrealistic imagery - which is dense, dramatic, elliptic and absurd – to convey the extraordinary setting of the gas chamber, the tension before the shock and the powerful affects that are brought into play to convey the tragic intensity of emotional upheaval of an assumed victim. This conforms to what Jean François Lyotard contends about Walter Benjamin’s books One Way Street and Berlin Childhood around 1900: that these do not ‘describe’ traumatic events but describe ‘what is uncappturable about them.’ Similarly, the novel The Zigzag Way does not actually ‘describe’ the Holocaust; rather it attempts to capture the unspeakable trauma of Dona Vera owing to her guilt and empathy.

Dona Vera’s life goes on in the shadowy realm disfigured by the past as she is exposed to the menace of the horrendous past. As a coping mechanism, Dona Vera painstakingly tries to suppress the echoes from the past. In a monologue, she says: ‘You are not to follow, hear? Go back! Now! At once!’ (81). The past, here, is personified, exposing her fears as she desires to ‘crush’ the ‘tracks’ leading to it (80). She insists on forgetting and hiding rather than finding ways for her past to ‘fuse with the present’ (64). Her invisible private self counteracts her public position as a representative voice of the Huichol Indians – a position she actively connives in, that is borderline fraudulent, and that aligns with her lifelong pretence about her Austrian past as much more socially respectable and politically neutral. Through the depiction of this contrariness or zigzagging in her personality, the novel also rehearses the problematic postcolonial issue of authenticity in a post-factual world where subjective, expressive narration of identity is often given far more credence and positive valuation.

Much debate in memory studies has engaged with the problematisation of the ethical representation of a multiplicity of traumatic subjectivities arising from the juxtaposition of the Holocaust with other holocausts because of the incomparability and the uniqueness of the former. Instead of setting up such a debate, this essay focuses on the motif of silence, darkness and echoes to portray both the Shoah and the Mexican revolution. The novel also depicts how in

both events, totalitarian regimes were responsible for death and destruction. Both also resulted in
the forced dislocation of the people across the globe.

While trying to trace the past of mineros in the Mexican ruins, Dona Vera experiences a
similar darkness as she has experienced in her nightmares about the Holocaust:

She felt certain their echoes must still resound ... Perhaps even the hoofs of Zapata’s
horses, carrying the message of the Revolution: ‘Tierra y Libertad!’ Taking a few steps
into that darkness, she was brought to a standstill by the total absence of light ... it could
only grow darker, blacker, more totally. Still, she stood waiting to see if something would
materialize ... ‘Tierra y Libertad!’ she said to herself and then, realizing there was no one
to hear, shouted out, ‘Tierra y Libertad!’ (59)

The chaotic echoes and total darkness symbolize the traumatic past and its persistent presence.
The turbulent history of the abandoned silver ore mines resurges magnified due to the total
absence of light. The echoes of revolution bring back the atrocities committed by the colonial
miners and re-ignite Dona Vera’s suppressed memories of the Nazism. Dona Vera’s final
declaration ‘Tierra y Libertad!’ following the incident signify not only her implication as a
secondary witness in the trauma inflicted on the inhabitants by the colonial miners and their
descendants, but also her conscious desire for liberation from the oppressive past and her
rebellion against the hegemonic forces be it the Nazis or the colonial miners. Her encounter with
this ‘other’ Mexican experience opens up the ‘Third Space,’ which according to Homi Bhabha
is an in-between or interstitial space of movement, negotiation and appropriation that also has the
possibility of mixing.\(^18\) This ‘third space,’ which eventually traces the lines across the two
disparate histories, paves way for Dona Vera’s ‘knots of multidirectional memory.’ In spite of
being a dissenting Nazi, she had been forced to bear the brunt of the past and her gaze as an
outsider on the Mexican genocide, projecting a similar story of loss, injustice and suffering,
provides her with a new possibility for creating a bridge between disparate historical
experiences.\(^19\)

While the traumatic past of Dona Vera is illustrated through surrealist images or the trope of
dreams, the motif of silence and disruptive narration, Desai aims not just to fill the gap left by
the unarticulated Mexican past but also to create a new presence. To fill this void, Desai renders
visible that part of the dreadful past which has not been acknowledged up till now, and which the
trauma has never allowed to be evident. To do so, she uses the trope of the ghost. According to
Derrida, the ghost is the one who ‘is not only the carnal apparition of the spirit, its phenomenal
body, its fallen and guilty body, it is also the impatient and nostalgic waiting for a redemption.’\(^20\)

The presence of the ghost in the present opens up a discursive space in which the memories of
the deceased are transmitted over several generations through ‘secondary witnessing’ as we will

\(^{18}\) Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 296.
\(^{19}\) Michael Rothberg, ‘Multidirectional memory’, *Témoigner: Entre histoire et mémoire*, 176.
see later. In *The Zigzag Way*, the figure of Betty’s ghost indulges in the defiant act of reproducing and remembering her lost story. The fictional act of seeing directly from victim’s eyes and her purposeful act of direct witnessing serve the purpose of recounting the past when the ghost of Betty unlocks the hidden traumatic precepts of Eric’s family.

History is juxtaposed with the personal memory which exists only in the form of Betty’s ghost, or, in the words of Derrida, as the absent presence of the ghost which is explained as follows:

The specter appears to present itself during a visitation. One represents it to oneself, but it is not present, itself, in flesh and blood. This non-presence of the specter demands that one take its times and its history into consideration, the singularity of its temporality or of its historicity.21

Betty’s ghost is a dispossessed and dislocated character whose voice has been erased and forgotten due to death and violence. However, it seeks to redeem the dead from enforced anonymity by making itself heard through her romantic and fascinating personal story. Her storytelling depicts alternative, fragmented and partial traces of the deadly conflict in Mexico. Her ghostly apparition hence becomes an agency of transmission of her traumatic ordeal when any other means of public or private testimonies are unavailable. Through Betty’s storytelling process of association, substitution and incorporation, the voids in Eric’s knowledge are partially filled. The presence of Betty’s ghost also highlights the blurring of boundaries between the past and the present, presence and absence, fantasy and reality.

**Ghosts, trauma and the reader’s implication**

The third section of the novel ‘Betty Departs’ is in flashback and revolves around the menacing repercussions of the Mexican war on the once living migrant alien Betty. Because of the inherent difficulty in expressing trauma completely by the victim herself, her story is narrated alternately by third-person omniscient and first-person narrator, adeptly depicting the effects of trauma on Betty and to give a coherent rendition of the nightmarish events during the Mexican revolution. The author adds intensity to these violent acts by first creating a utopian and romantic image of Mexico and by eventually deconstructing it. When Betty first arrives in Mexico, she is enchanted by its beautiful landscapes: ‘Travelling … Betty was made breathless by the vast space and by the snow-toped volcanoes’ (117). The omniscient narrator lingers over and dramatises the vision of this beautiful ‘scene’ to elaborate on Betty’s happiness as an immigrant in the New World. In an ironic twist, the Mexican landscape soon becomes corrupted with hunger for power. As the revolution led by Zapata and Pancho Villa makes painful inroads into social life: ‘Then the mineros began to disappear from their mine, without a word’ (135), and the home – the place that normally should provide security and shelter – paradoxically is also affected by the

21 Derrida 157.
violence outside. The threat of outside violence penetrates and shadows the private and intimate space of home to blur boundaries between private and public, interior and exterior. Betty becomes a hidden primary victim of and witness to the acts of violence as she is exposed to their complexity: ‘like a new rift, open and raw, that had been suddenly revealed.’ (138) The simile used here suggests how the intensely strange and frightening landscape is exposed to Betty ‘like a new rift, open,’ as a scene of awe and bewilderment. Desai interweaves closeness and distance through shifting narrative styles to vividly describe the atmosphere during the revolution: ‘Then there was a night … echoed with a sudden volley of shots, shocking and splintering … At dawn the news came that the rebels, the insurgents, had looted the warehouse, emptied the vaults’ (136). The use of alliteration – ‘shots, shocking and splintering’ – evokes the impending scene of violence, destruction and dread in which Betty becomes trapped. The shift to fast-paced narrative realism, using short sentences and foregrounding active verbs, demonstrates the radical transformation of once a beautiful landscape into a cursed place, with flares lighting in the night and the corpses lying everywhere. It eventually disfigures her diasporic home into an uninhabitable space as Betty becomes a passive witness to the surging violent spectacle from the silent corners of her home. Her death while escaping this violence becomes symbolic for all the victims of the Mexican Revolution who are left unheard and forgotten.

Derrida argues that the possibility for a just future lies in one’s ability to remember the victims of injustice – to conjure the dead and listen to what they have to say rather than to forget them. According to him, the living have a responsibility to attend to those who are ‘no longer’ living or those who were denied awareness in the past. Similarly, both Eric and the novel’s reader become implicated in Betty’s trauma. For every testimony, there has to be a listener: as Laub and Felman say, ‘testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude.’

The reader enables Betty’s narrative to become testimonial. Thus, the testimonial act is witnessed by the ‘other’ who then participates in the testimony and also ‘comes to partially experience trauma in himself’. Therefore Betty’s testimony, possible because of the reader, serves the function of ‘reconstructing a history and essentially re-externalizing the event’ and filling a ‘gaping, vertiginous black hole’ in the reader. The testimonial process, hence, renders visible the trauma of the victim—Betty. Desai’s writing suggests what Russian Formalist Valentin Voloshinov says: ‘Any utterance, no matter how weight and complete in and itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication. But that continuous verbal communication is, in turn, itself only a moment in the continuous, all-inclusive, generative

---

22 Derrida xix.
26 Fresco cited in Laub and Felman, *Testimony*, 64.

---

process of a given social collective.’

Therefore, Betty’s utterance entails acts of seeing and viewing by the novel’s reader. With the presence of the potential and implied audience, Betty’s utterance, even if partially and not in its totality, now participates in reinstating those events in the present that were earlier compromised due to Eric’s fragmented and disruptive memories. Moreover, the dialogical narrative between Eric and Betty in the penultimate scene imposes an attentive proximity between the two and also makes Eric a secondary witness to Betty’s trauma in the novel.

The open-ended climax of the novel when the ghost of Betty suddenly disappears at the dawn after briefly interacting with Eric is described as follows:

There was only the melancholy tinkling of bells and a movement of the speckled stones that proved to be young goats who had come to graze ... The light grew brighter, the sun appeared and everyone went streaming back to where they had come from. (179)

The lexeme ‘only’ suggests the melancholy tinkling of bells is caused by the goats and not by memories of the past. The ambivalent concluding line ‘Everyone went streaming back’ denotes that daily life continues as normal and that Eric’s journey is left unfinished. The novel doesn’t end in the end but loops, recoils and retrenches in the past to be hesitatingly prospective.

Suhasini Vincent asserts that this change in the end is marked by the shift in narrative technique from the fantastic to the realistic by evoking Eric’s sustained hesitation in the climax. She says:

Even though the fictional space abounds with traces of magical realism, I would also like to highlight the fact that certain characteristics in the novel definitely do not fall in the category of the magical realist mode as it abounds in fantastic elements ... a vast difference exists between the brief hesitations experienced when reading a work of magical realism, and reading a work of fantastic literature, when sustained hesitation occurs.

This sustained hesitation, a characteristic of the fantastic, also affects the dynamic relation between Eric, the ghost and its story by preserving the difference and the distance between the secondary witness and the original trauma. The partial effect of ghostly presence and the logical advancement of the storyline signify that Eric doesn’t fully internalise the dangerous past. It just stops short of complete contact. It also suggests geographical and temporal distance between the past events of traumatic repercussion and the present.

One can say that the novel successfully juxtaposes vastly disparate experiences of traumatic pasts across racial, cultural and temporal divides by employing a syncretic approach of memory studies. This fiction *The Zigzag Way* portrays an unspeakable as well as indescribable traumatic past as a ‘lieux de mémoire’ and as the living ghost that affects the present of the characters in the novel and fashions their personal and collective memory. The act of writing becomes a site of bearing witness to trauma where the reader gains importance as a secondary witness in the process of restitution of forgotten and marginalized stories which have been lost through violence and atrocity, as well as the distances of space and time.

**Bhawana Jain** has completed her PhD in English Literature from Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis. Her research focuses on migration and trauma literature. She has a particular interest in issues pertaining to diaspora, memory studies and cross-cultural encounters. Her articles have been published in several books and Journals. She has previously taught at the University of Delhi. She is currently working at Université Paris-1, Panthéon-Sorbonne.

**Works Cited**


Bhawana Jain. ‘Intersecting Memory and Witnessing Violence in Anita Desai’s *The Zigzag Way.*’


Pataphysical Discourse and Georgian Reflections in Comparative Analysis of Georgian and French Avant-Garde

Medea Muskhelishvili

Abstract

This paper studies Alfred Jarry’s Pataphysics and searches for Pataphysical reflections in Georgian modernist literature, including works by Georgian modernist writers Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (1893-1975) and Demna Shengelaia (1896-1980), and contemporary Georgian writer Tamaz Chiladze (born 1931), in a comparative analysis of the Georgian and French avant-garde movements. The former was ‘born’ in an isolated environment, in a country with a rich cultural background and literary tradition, first under the rule of Russian Tsarism (1801-1918) and then under the oppression of the Soviet Union (1921-1989). The Georgian avant-garde was never totally European but Asian too, and came to a ‘bloody’, tragic end as a victim of the Soviet totalitarian regime, whereas the French avant-garde was rather free, bold, limitless, and uncontrolled. Examining these two absolutely different avant-gardes and studying Pataphysical themes and reflections in Georgian literature in hindsight will provide a valuable picture of the movement and the period itself.

Introduction

Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), French symbolist writer and precursor of the Theatre of the Absurd of France, author of a scandalous play, Ubu Roi, invented Pataphysics during the period of French avant-garde (La belle époque) to mock at metaphysics and traditional sciences (as in Pataphysics ‘each experimental case is a unique phenomenon following its own unique Laws’), stating that if there is Metaphysics, there must be Pataphysics too – the realm beyond metaphysics. Alfred Jarry finally formed the theory of Pataphysics in his neo-scientific novel Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician (released posthumously in 1922), in which Jarry discusses the principles and themes of Pataphysics and gives the reader a comprehensive definition:

Pataphysics is superimposed on metaphysics and extends it as far beyond as the latter extends beyond physics […] Pataphysics will examine laws governing exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one […] Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineament.2

1 French La 'Pataphysique – pseudo-science and philosophy. Etymological spelling, Greek: τὰ ἄτι τάμεταφυσικά – ‘that which is above metaphysics’.

Pataphysics was born during the French avant-garde, accompanying an Anarchist movement like an explosion, when artists started realising that saloon gatherings were not sufficient anymore and they were in desperate need of something more – a bigger arena to have a wider audience and to make louder, bolder, even outrageous performances: ‘They developed a systematic technique of scandal in order to keep their ideas before the public.’

As for Georgian modernist writers, after three years of independence (1918-1921) they had to create their literary works during the Soviet Union regime, during which Georgian modernism and avant-garde struggled hard to survive but, unfortunately, could not and turned out to be very short-lived. According to the Georgian contemporary scholar Bela Tsifuria the formation and development of Georgian avant-garde took place through two directions: multicultural avant-garde (as being one of the centres of South-Eastern Europe, Caucasian and Russian avant-garde, 1918-1921) and Georgian avant-garde (1910-1920). It finally ceased to exist in the 1930s when the Soviet regime officially declared modernism to be a kind of formalism, as a part of bourgeois culture. As for avant-garde with its conceptual radicalism and anti-Soviet discourse, it was forcibly moved to a marginal position and, finally, after 1930s it was totally destroyed and replaced by socialistic realism. However, Georgian authors were able to write several works with avant-garde elements, in which we can identify Pataphysical themes and reflections (hallucination, ‘pataphysical defamiliarisation’, dream, the ‘death’ of God, anomaly, Clinamen, parallel times). As for Georgian avant-garde, it has not until now been uncovered and profoundly studied even by Georgian scholars as throughout the whole twentieth century during the Soviet Union Regime, after Georgia was forcibly made a Soviet country and a peripheral zone of the Soviet Union, it became the part of the forbidden memory, forgotten history.

**Historical-Chronological Survey of Georgian Modernism/avant-garde**

The beginning of the twentieth century is the time when ‘The monster [Tsarism], which was considered to be undefeated, fell down with just a single flick’.4 As a result, Georgian literary life and process became lively and more profound, and new directions started emerging. Poets of different generations and beliefs peacefully co-existed and co-worked.

In 1915 Akaki Tsereteli and Vazha-Pshavela, two great Georgian realist writers, passed away. Georgian symbolist poet Galaktion Tabidze wrote, ‘the great époque has ended’.5 The writers of a new generation had to take up a new responsibility as the society expected something innovative from them. So, the scenario completely changes: first of all, it is important to admit that, generally, modernism or avant-gardism is associated with mainly symbolism in Georgia. In other words, the Georgian symbolist school is the representative of the methodological novelties and the groupings of the 1920s, the name of which is Tsisferkantselebi (‘The Bluehorner’). The name of this group meant to connect Europe and Asia: the word ‘blue’ stood for the tradition of the European romanticism and ‘horns’ for the Georgian tradition.

After the declaration of the independence of Georgia on 26 May 1918, Tbilisi became a cultural centre. Russian writers and artists escaping from the Red Russian Revolution began to arrive in Georgia. The literary elite of Kutaisi moved to Tbilisi too. So, Tbilisi became ‘the city

---

of poets’. According to Bela Tsipuria’s research, one of the tasks that Tsisferkantselebi set themselves was the positioning of Georgia as a cultural centre of modernism and refusing to accept that Georgia was on the periphery in relation with the Russian imperial centre. Moreover, the leader of the group even stated in the first manifesto that ‘After Georgia Paris is the most sacred country.’ After 1918 the futurists escaping from the Russian Bolshevik Revolution started migrating to Georgia: Aleqsei Kruchnick, Ygor Terentiev, the brothers Ilia and Kiril Zdanevich, Vasil Kamenski and others. They would organise artistic and literary evenings in Tiflis cafes and cabarets. All these processes were taking place in a small country that always had to defend itself and fight for its independence, national identity and state system.

However, in 1921 the ‘monster’, whose defeat Georgia celebrated at the beginning of the twentieth century, came back, but this time as a Soviet Union. The totalitarian regime reached its climax in 1930s and started destroying Georgian Modernism: many artists were either arrested, exiled or shot. In 1931 Tsisferkantselebi declared self-liquidation. This act is finally followed by the ‘bloody end’ executed by the Soviet Union ideology and regime: on 22 July 1937 the leader of Tsisferkantselebi commits suicide directly in the so-called Palace of Writers, just after the meeting. In 1937 many other Georgian writers and artists were either shot or exiled forever.

As for the representative of the other literary direction of that period in Georgia, it was the group of futurists with an initiative of fighting against traditions and calling for novelties on behalf of avant-garde, which finally formed its ‘ideology’ with a manifesto Georgia-Phoenix published on 6-7 May 1922. They declared futuristic aesthetics as the only modern art, stating ‘We reject everything that is behind us and from now on Georgia starts from us’. In 1924-1928 Georgian futurists published three journals: H2SO4 (1924, one issue), Literatura da Skhva (Literature and Other, 1925, one issue), Memartskheneoba (Leftism 1927-28, two issues), and one newspaper Drouli (Timely, 1925-26, three issues). It is worth mentioning that the manifestoes of symbolism and of futurism were printed in the French journal entitled Phigaro on 18 September, 1886 (Jean Moreas) and on February 20, 1909 (Philipo Tomazo Marineti). As for H2SO4, it was not just the name of the journal but also the name of the group uniting the principles of Dadaism, Constructivism and Futurism, which insisted on being the only art of socialistic revolution. Georgian futurists, members of H2SO4 were Simon Chiqovani, Beno Gordezian, Irakli Gamrekeli, Pavlo Nozadzeetc.

What was Georgian futurism (H2SO4) and symbolism (Tsisferi Kantsebi) like in sum? Georgian modernism, or avant-garde, was born in the closed surroundings, which later became the victim of the totalitarian regime of the Soviet ideology. Irma Ratiani notes that we should probably take modernist writing as the model of anti-Soviet discourse with its diverse forms and tributaries, for it was high modernism characterized by a striving for representational freedom, the artistic tendencies of quest for truth and establishment of individuality that constituted the main threat to Soviet demagogues. 8

Both symbolism (which is associated with modernism in Georgia) and avant-gardism started rather late in Georgia for a number of reasons. When symbolists started their grouping in

---


7Manifesto. 1922. (My translation).


Georgia, the period of symbolism was already passed in Europe and Russia. However, they were pioneers in Georgia trying to destroy conventions and establish novelties in poetry. Therefore, they are associated with avant-gardism in Georgia. What is more, the Georgian avant-garde was neither political as was the case with the European avant-garde, nor did it ever try to change the values of society. Besides this, the Tiflis avant-garde upheld the idea of the European and Asian unity. One more thing that makes the Georgian avant-garde different from the European is that for the European the present is the result of the past and beginning of the future, which is a determiner. As for Georgian avant-garde, it considers reality more as space than time and ‘it still perceives time epically.’ Indeed, as Luigi Magarotto, an Italian Kartvelologian and the researcher of Georgian avant-garde asserted, ‘In no other countries did a tradition and history have as strong influence as they did in Georgia. The attempts of Georgian modernists were somehow even the continuation of the tradition.’ In conclusion, it could be seen that although they were late to form futurism, manifestoes and scandals compared with Europe, Georgian avant-garde and modernist writers, in general, could still find in the background of the world avant-garde experience an original and unique path:

It is obvious that Georgian literary modernism is a unique phenomenon in European literature and it does not represent an imitative appendage to European modernism or a peripheral sphere. On the contrary, Georgian modernism creates a totally imitative invariant of European modernism. It does broaden and extend European modernism.11

Parisian avant-garde and La Belle Époque

The scenario of the avant-garde in Paris is totally different. The French call this period la belle époque, ‘the good old days’ – 30 years of peace and quiet, prosperity and internal contradiction. This period was described by Roger Shattuck as the ‘Banquet Years,’ a real carnival, which lasted 1885–1914 in Paris. Paris represented the cultural capital of the world that time. The lifestyle of the high-class bourgeois society was associated with hypocrisy, false values, recklessness and immorality, which was soon followed by avant-garde turning all the values upside-down. Prior to this, a ‘wake-up funeral’ took place in Paris, partly bringing about the revolution in arts and literature: in May 1885, Victor Hugo died. It could be said that the avant-garde started in Paris when France was freed from a man as well as a literary movement and was able to start a totally new époque.

Indeed, Paris became an artistic hub of the world in the first half of the twentieth century. The years which were going to be followed by the First World War were characterised by great experimentation and a variety of artistic movements, including Fauvism, Cubism and Orphism. For artists, musicians and writers from all over the world the city was like a magnet attracting them to a place that was synonymous with personal and artistic freedom – especially during the

---

12Roger Shattuck refers to La Belle Époque as ‘Banquet Years’. He also describes the death of Victor Hugo in The Banquet Years, revised edition (Toronto: Random House, 1968).
rise of totalitarian governments in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Among all the ‘layers’ that made up the city, the most popular and demanding was still the salon, where the aristocracy developed the conversation of what were considered as ‘great minds’. But soon the great performers started moving from salon to the café. So, the century changed slowly but firmly. Artists discovered that their path was hardly being followed with a great enthusiasm. They constituted what we call the avant-garde, a ‘tradition of heterodoxy and opposition which defied civilized values in the name of individual consciousness.”^13 They started and followed systematic scandals so as to keep their ideas before the public. The Lapin Agile, the Montmartre cabaret that succeeded the Chat Noir around the turn of the century, would host many celebrations. Indeed, it was carnival time in Paris.

A number of personalities, impresarios and patrons were prominent in the Parisian avant-garde. Apollinaire, a keen advocate of l’esprit nouveau, was a leading art critic, who wrote enthusiastically about Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Simultanism. His collection of poems, Calligrammes (1918), is a demonstration of an early avant-garde through complex ideograms and spatial arrangements of words and letters on a page. In Paris, everything is happening at the same time: Picasso and Braque bring cubism and Éric Satie resumes composing. After fifteen years of reticence, Paul Valéry starts writing poetry whereas André Gide accomplishes his novel of l’acte gratuity, Les caves du Vatican. Last but not least, Alfred Jarry ridicules the whole French Bourgeoisie creating the monstrous personage of Ubu and at the same time invents Pataphysics, philosophy and pseudo-science to mock at metaphysics and traditional sciences.

These were the early demonstrations, manifestations of the French avant-garde during which it served as a true community:

To a greater extent than at any time since the Renaissance, painters, writers, and musicians lived and worked together and tried their hands at each other’s arts in an atmosphere of perpetual collaboration […] the avant-garde first formed in France as there was an artistic tradition of defiance, and it has lasted longer there because the country as a whole has only reluctantly taken to heart the lessons of its own most venturesome talents.\(^14\)

So, what were the two very different avant-gardes like in sum? The Georgian avant-garde started in the isolated environment and was associated with symbolism. Later it was continued with futurism; it was non-political, represented only culture and was never totally European but Asian too. The Georgian avant-garde co-existed with foreign avant-gardists staying in Tiflis. Besides this, it could not totally lose touch with the traditions and the past. Finally, Georgian avant-garde ceased with a ‘bloody’, tragic end as it became a victim of the Soviet totalitarian regime. It lasted for about 20 years. We have an absolutely different scenario in French avant-garde: it started in Bourgeois environment and came with Anarchism. Unlike Georgian avant-garde, French one was free, bold and limitless and was never associated with symbolism. What is more, it tried hard to change social values and sometimes even lost touch with human values, something that never took place in Georgian avant-garde. Finally, the avant-garde was first formed in France and lasted longer there than in other country.

\(^{13}\) Shattuck, 24
\(^{14}\) Shattuck, 42

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017. 
Who is Alfred Jarry and what is ‘Pataphysical Discourse’?

As one of the main goals of this paper is to study and demonstrate at what extent avant-garde can develop, what kind of manifestations it can have when it is free like wind and is able to blow in any directions at any speed and in any manner, we refer to Pataphysics not just as a science and philosophy but also as the best embodiment of a free, limitless avant-garde – Pataphysics is a manifestation what levels avant-garde can reach in a free environment. As for Georgian avant-garde, it is a good example how avant-garde can be destroyed and distorted during any totalitarian regime; how severely it is degraded and tormented because of being controlled, censored, and locked in a vacuum by the system.

Alfred Jarry was not just a writer. He was a playwright and director of his own life as well: his whole life was like a play of a tragicomic genre. Not only did he write the play Ubu Roi but he also created a new personage, a new human exposing rather than hiding all his internal faults and monstrosity – the era of hypocrisy, mannerism and courtesy is over, and it is time to unmask, let all guises go away and show what we really are deep down. And Jarry lived like Ubu, the most grotesque personage of that time in Paris, talked like him and walked like him to ridicule more the bourgeois society and the naturalism of the theatre of Paris as well as the values of the humanity in general. Ubu was not just a fictional character protesting against Parisian bourgeoisie and the values of Naturalism in the French theatre of that time. Ubu was a ‘real’ character embodied by Jarry, who was the beginning of a new philosophy and (anti-) science in Paris, and whose path was continued by Dr Faustroll, another character by Jarry. The paradox is that Jarry’s personages were ‘real’, and Jarry himself turned into a scandalous fictional character walking in the Parisian streets, visiting cabarets on Montmartre, shocking the French society with his sarcasm, mockery and gaining more enemies than friends. Jarry lived like a Pataphysical personage – living his life at full extent and staging his early death at the age of 34. No, Jarry did not commit suicide. And yet, his life-style, his philosophy and the way he perceived the world, events, things and people, caused his early death. Before his death, Alfred Jarry invented a new ‘science’, Pataphysics, the science of imaginary solutions. Roger Shattuck, an American scholar studying the French avant-garde, expressed the essence of Pataphysics more simply: ‘Pataphysics, then, is an inner attitude, a discipline, a science, and an art, which allows each person to live his life as an exception, providing no law but his own.’

Finally, we have reached our destination – ‘pataphysical discourse’. In the paper I define ‘Pataphysical Discourse’ as Pataphysical themes, symbols and literary devices, and the language itself used by Jarry in his works, which were reflected in the works of the Georgian authors even though they were not aware of Pataphysics. However, since modernism and avant-gardism were so developed in Georgia, the country was ready to receive Pataphysics at the level of cultural intuition and reflection. I discovered the following themes that form Pataphysical discourse in several Georgian literary works of that period: hallucination, dream, parallel times, decomposition of the plot, anomaly, Clinamen, ‘Pataphysical defamiliarisation’ and the ‘death’ of God. Georgian writers and artists were not familiar with Pataphysics that time: they had no knowledge of Alfred Jarry and his philosophy, and even if they did, it would have been unfavourable and even hazardous for them under the Bolshevik totalitarian regime. It is quite remarkable that when these writers came up with something new that they did so in the same manner and within a few decades of each other, in different countries, cultures and

15 Shattuck, 28.
environments, absolutely independently from one another, just because they were in need of better self-expression, innovations, or some circumstances push them to do something to take them beyond their world. Georgian writers managed to leave the boundaries of physics and metaphysics in search of something more: more freedom and liberation, destruction of conventions, of ‘normality’, existing values; contradicting and protesting against reality. Or maybe a totalitarian regime is the best incentive for writers to come up with something like Pataphysics as a form of protest:

“The primary feature of totalitarianism as enforced rule is creation of ideological dictatorship, forming of clichés and their implementation. This obviously restricts considerably the frame of literary freedom.”

‘Pataphysical Defamiliarisation’ - Pataphysical Anomaly and Clinamen

According to the Russian Formalists,

the aim of art is to give the sensation of things as they are perceived rather than as they are known or recognised. The technique of art is the device of ‘defamiliarisation’ of things and the device of laboured forms, which increases the difficulty and the length of perception as perceptive process in art is autotelic and must be prolonged […] to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase difficulty and the length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.

So, the role of art is to make things seem unfamiliar and not automatic and make us see them as though we saw them for the first time. This is absolutely pataphysical, as in Pataphysics there are no repetitions, all things and occasions are unique following their own unique rules. Jarry defamiliarises things, events, personages at the extent that it is almost impossible to identify them conventionally. Moreover, the process of perception takes place at different stages and for the reader it is too hard and complicated to do it at one try. As pataphysician Ruy Launoir noted, ‘the pataphysician proposes to decorate with new solutions our representations of the poverty-stricken, linear, “world”.

It can be considered that it is Pataphysical anomaly and clinamen that best demonstrates Pataphysical defamiliarisation. Anomaly, which primitively can be defined as something that does not fit, is probably the most common theme of Pataphysics. It is noteworthy to mention that Pataphysical anomaly is always internal, following its own contradictory logic and rules. In the Pataphysical realm, in theory, it should be absolutely unnecessary and impossible to have any anomalies as in Pataphysics there are no repetitions but everything is equally exceptional and unique. Therefore, ‘Pataphysical anomaly exists within the rules that it contradicts’. Surprisingly, Pataphysical anomaly, which might be considered as the central Pataphysical energy, is as absurd as the thing it contradicts and always ready to destroy the surroundings (clichés, rules, laws, established opinions, common sense, values). Alfred Jarry’s most grotesque
personage Ubu is a perfect embodiment of Pataphysical anomaly – his reign was monstrous but, in fact, he could not change the world as his reign was a like a momentary eruption after which everything returned to its primary place as if there was no chaos and anarchy in the country at all. So, in Pataphysics the anomalos is more a surprise, often grotesque, realised through defamiliarisation, which, in reality, causes laughter and amusement rather than tragedy. Cristian Bök goes even further in his attempt to connect Formalism with Pataphysics while discussing the ignored, unused possibilities of the language in narration and emphasising ‘the novelty of anomaly’, and proposes the following:

Formalism almost verges upon the ‘pataphysical insofar as its scientific evaluation of poetry privileges the novelty of anomaly – the surprising noises in the alienation effect of ostranenie. Like Futurism, such Formalism tries to use the language of scientific methodology in order to examine the neglected machinery of language itself, not the word as sign, but the word as such (slovokaktakavoe). Such a machine embodies a ‘pataphysical retroversion that does not simply use its devices to convey a narrative meaning, but uses such meaning as an excuse to deploy innovative devices.²⁰

Pataphysical novels are ‘Pataphysical defamiliarisation’ of the world – objects, people, events – as we know it. Jarry often applies this technique, mostly in his descriptive language, and presents things not just differently but in an anomalous manner – rather strangely: one could never ever imagine to see this way in the world we live in. Very often Jarry’s defamiliarisation is of a paranormal character: he totally distorted people, things, events; made them come out of their niche and presented them in a totally unusual, anomalistic manner. Therefore, Clinamen by Lucretius, unpredictable swerve of atoms (the name he gave to this phenomenon to defend Epicurus’ atomistic doctrine) is the concept that is central to Pataphysics as it is about exception, anomaly, deviation. In one of the chapters of Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician, Jarry mentions Clinamen as ‘the unforeseen beast Clinamen ejaculated on to the walls of its universe’, which is followed by the description of the Pataphysically defamiliarised world: ‘What a beautiful sunset! Or rather it is the moon, like a porthole in a hogshead of wine greater than a ship, or like the oily stopper of an Italian flask’, or ‘The river has a fat, soft face for the smack of oars, a neck with many wrinkles, a blue skin with green downy hair’, or ‘God forbids Adam and Eve to touch the tree of good and evil. The angel Lucifer runs away’.²¹

Indeed, very often his method of defamiliarisation is either grotesque or funny, or even both at the same time. The personage of Pere Ubu would serve as the best example in this case as he is both ruthless and amusing at the same time, bringing about lots of laughter in the play.

As for the reflections of ‘pataphysical defamiliarisation’ in Georgian fiction of that period, the best example of this is the novel titled Sanavardo,²² which was written in the modernist period by Demna Shengelaia. His manner of describing things are rather strange and paradoxical, sometimes even funny. It is noteworthy that Demna Shengelaia wrote and published Sanavardo in 1924 when the development of Georgian fiction was beset by problems including the tense

---


²²Sanavardo is the name of the village in the east of Georgia.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017. 
political environment – the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union. So the novel was like the first flow unleashed to form a new type of Georgian novel, a modernist novel. Apart from its outstanding form, contents, poetics and language, the author invented a literary device that had been totally unknown before and created a modernist experimental novel – the problem of time and space is surmounted, which is often achieved through defamiliarisation: while creating artistic images in the structure of the novel, the writer uses absolutely strange and unexpected descriptive techniques for the construction of the fiction, which leads the reader to the illusionary, imaginary world of the ordinary things and occasions, presented in unordinary and sometimes abnormal way. Here are several examples:

There in the darkness the night rolled down the ground like a puppy, barking and howling;  
The sun is shining brightly directly on the moor and the blown up poison is flapping on the surface of the ground like sweetness;  
The night overgrown with moss was already rotten and moon was like a swollen stomach of a person diseased with leprosy;  
The moon dreeded like a ripe cucumber;  
The mosquitoes are fluttering on the rays of the moon;  
The fever was pouring down on the ground like a yellow mucus;  
The moors have evaporated and are blowing off steam in the white-hot air;  
And the night went away whereas the morning is still so far away.23

The novel is full of such defamiliarised descriptions of the nature, of the environment. The writer goes too close to the objects and uncovers all the hidden details. That’s why very often the realistic perspective is distorted and the reader starts believing that the night can roll down and bark, the moor can evaporate, the moon has not got beam but rays and there is no morning coming after the night has gone... Through this device – making unfamiliar what is familiar – the author manages to create an illusion of free associations. There is an absolutely old new world in front of us – this is a pataphysical world, the one that is and starts after metaphysics.

Hallucination, Dream

As I have said, Georgian avant-gardism was forcibly stopped in 1930s due to the Soviet Union repressions and pressure. A very talented generation was liquified. Of course, it was an artificial cessation of something very natural and this phenomenon (avant-garde) could not ultimately have been ‘ceased’ – it would have burst out again sooner or later, because avant-gardism was not a movement, class, or genre but it was a way of life that is always present. In 1950ssome young Georgian writers manage again to create literary works with the elements of avant-garde. In the stories by Tamaz Chiladze, we were able to discover Pataphysical reflections such as dream/hallucination and parallel times leading to one of the central themes of Pataphysics called antinomy, or the plus-minus theory, which proves the simultaneous existence of the opposites. In Jarry everything is upside down: values are devalued as ‘incongruity of life

must be understood as a source not of disgust but of joy. The intelligence can feed on triviality and by persistence create sublime’.  

So, Jarry started with absurdity and ended up in hallucination, violated consciousness. Using this literary device is not a novelty in our time as the first German romantics discovered another realm of dreams, which was resumed by Gerard de Nerval and Rimbaud. Their experience of dreams played a big role for Jarry and other avant-garde writers of The Banquet Years, who polished this technique and lead it towards hallucination. And Jarry’s life itself was like a dream, or more a nightmare, which is not frightening but absurdist, outrageous but funny. In his early poetry Jarry applies traditional images of night and darkness to create dream surroundings. In the novel entitled The Days and Nights (Les Jours et Les Nuits) the author even goes further and depicts the possibility of the existence of a ‘true hallucination’, the continuous waking dream in which night cannot be distinguished from day and vice versa. Applying dream techniques in the arts meant an effort to overcome unrestricted intimations of time and space, as I have said.

The Crane by Tamaz Chiladze (1964) is one of the outstanding stories in this sense: the character reaches such a state through dreaming or hallucination that it is hard both for him and for the reader to tell which is a dream (that is very hallucinatory on its side) and which is reality, or if a dream is really a dream or a reality and vice versa. The story starts with the scene of a husband and a wife: the man, Ucha, is in his bed and the wife is sitting on the bed looking through the window, describing to the man the sky full of cranes. The crane is the central motif in the story. The man likes the atmosphere a lot: he feels tired and drowsy and the voice of the woman pleases him as it calms him down like sleep does as ‘this voice [...] was like a dream that one can hear rather than see.’ The author mentions the word ‘dream’ several times in the story. As for Tsira, the woman character, she is absolutely ostracised from reality, from the present time. Her husband helps her connect with the reality. Tsira only recognises the future: she actually does live in ‘tomorrow’. When the man first saw her, she was walking in the bazaar wearing a white dress and sandals in the rain and smiling, taking no notice of the colourful fabrics on the stalls, nor ripe water-melons and trumpeters playing a melody. She was walking smiling and could neither see nor hear anything around her. Throughout the whole story the husband helps his wife, he even forces her not to lose touch with the present and past. In his hallucinatory dreams Ucha tries hard to remind her that they are a couple:

You must have become my wife. Don’t you remember? We loved each other!
(The woman is laughing)
I have known you for a long time.
(The woman is laughing)
How could you forget everything.
Hush! Stop talking! – responded the woman.
We could have been happy!
Hush! Hush! - repeated the woman.

Finally, he forces her to wear the dress she wore at their wedding day, which the woman cannot remember, or does not want to remember, as she asks the man, ‘What? Which dress?’ Then she exclaims his name several times ‘Ucha! Ucha!’, protesting against his request, protesting at

24 Shattuck, 34.
26 Chiladze, 77. My translation.
being connected with the past as she has no sense of time – her husband serves as her sense of past time as well as her memory, which she neglects and avoids. Indeed, the wife is devoid of memory but only waits for something to happen in the future. Thus in the text we encounter parallel times – past, present and future – occurring simultaneously. As for the husband, he lives in two times, present and past at the same time, due to the memories, which are rather hallucinatory; sometimes it is quite hard to tell whether the man remembers something that really happened to him in the past or whether this is just a mirage; imagination occurring in the present time. So in the text there are certainly pataphysical reflections of plus and minus theory presented in terms of times. The factor of the memory makes this process even more intense as the man’s memories are mostly hallucinatory.

There is a very similar scenario in *Days and Nights* by Alfred Jarry. Sengle, the main character, in love with the Memory of Self, is in need of a living, visible friend, since he has no recollection of his Self, being totally devoid of memory:

Sengle was discovering the true metaphysical cause of the happiness of loving […] the enjoyment of anachronism and communing of his own past […] It is admirable to live two different moments of time simultaneously; this is all that is required to live out authentically one moment of eternity, or rather, all eternity, since it has no moments […] The present, possessing its past in the heart of another, at the same time lives out its Self and its Self plus something. If a moment of the past or a moment of the present existed separately at one point in time, it would not perceive this Plus something which is quite simply the Act of Perception. This is love of oneself and one’s own past perceived in the eye of another.27

Alfred Jarry masterfully used the literary device of hallucination or dream in the novel through the alternations of chapters set during daytimes that are described as though they are happening at night, and vice versa, until that alternation itself breaks down: finally all the borders between the day and the night, the present and the past, reality and hallucination are eliminated and the oppositions reach a climax in the chapter entitled ‘Pataphysics’, in which Jarry mentions Leibniz and referred to ‘Leibniz’s definition, that perception is a hallucination which is true’,28 which he inverted – ‘hallucination is a perception which is false’ and formed a final definition of the hallucination: ‘And he [Sengal] believed […] there are only hallucinations, or perceptions, and that there are neither nights nor days […] and that life is continuous.’29 *Days and Nights* can be considered as one of the last literary creations still applying the language of Symbolism as well as modern literary devices such as recollection, dream, hallucination. Allastair Brotchie argues that ‘Joyce was certainly familiar with Jarry’s work, and the Surrealists’ debt to him is immense and acknowledged.’30

27 Jarry, Collected Works, 14.
28 It might seem that Jarry misattributed Taine’s formulation of the concept of hallucination, ‘external perception is a true hallucination’, to Leibniz. However, Leibniz had already said this more than a century before Taine, but the latter expressed it in a more direct and simple manner, as Jarry tried to emphasise (Taine’s *De l’intelligence*, Book 1, Part 2, Ch. 1).
29 Jarry, Collected Works 75.
30 Jarry, Collected Works 20.

Ecstatic Hallucination

In the short story *Bells in the Gale* by Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (1924) the author applies the literary device of hallucination to make the character leave the boundaries of a reality which is very harsh for him, to liberate himself from all the chains that connect him with limited human abilities and to make his dream come true, feel happy and be devoid of any restrictions. In the story the cross has been removed from St Zaqaria Church, the priest has stopped his services, shaved his beard and opened a tavern. Only Sexton Oqropir still remembers God and he feels desperate due to the situation in the village: people have forgotten God, nobody goes to church anymore, a play titled ‘Arsena the Gunman’ is being staged in church in place of a sermon, and people are living in subservience to the satanic époque. Sexton Oqropir’s is to said to be ‘a boring and nightmarish dream. The dream that a person will not even remember after waking up: how was it? Why was it?’

Reading this passage, one can feel a little confused about the reality and the dream: the writer does not say that his life was like a nightmare but that his life was a nightmare, was a boring dream, it is hard to determine what is real and what is a dream, or they are the same or one unity. So, Oqropir’s life is a dream and dream is his life, which is so monotonous that he does not remember much, nor does he regret or feel happy about anything much – he has been ringing the church bells for 25 years. On Easter Eve Sexton Oqropiris invited to the cabaret to drink wine. After drinking nine glasses of wine he falls into a hallucinatory realm. For the first time after so many years he starts feeling a little joy deep down. It is pouring down outside, the wind is blowing very strongly and clouds are on fire. He starts running in the dark through the village towards the church, feeling unusually full of joy, and finally climbing the steps to the bell tower he starts ringing first the small bells and then the bigger ones. And soon he reaches the climax of hallucination and enters an ecstasy: the bells starts singing together with drunken angels and a bright milky path opens between the bell-ringer and the sky. Oqropir feels extremely happy and the unleashed bells start blowing with laughter towards the skies, singing loudly. An innocent moon is laughing on the draw-sheets of the white clouds like a baby Jesus in the cattle-shed of the shepherds. The clouds of ships with the sails of scarlet blood are blowing towards the moon and Jesus is hanging upside-down on the mast of the clouds like a wrecker pirate. Finally, the gale gets so strong that it destroys the bell-tower. Oqropir is dashed to the ground and dies in an ecstasy. And suddenly the author arises an existential question: ‘All his life Oqropir had thought about what life was like. Is not it a short fairy-tale?’ Then the author himself refers to ‘ecstasy’ in the story – ‘I want to sing for the ones killed in the ecstasy.’

So, this is one of the first texts in Georgian modernist literature in which the author uses the literary device of hallucination to help a depressed character escape the frames of reality and limited possibilities, to uncover hidden abilities inside him, use his imagination, feel free and happy, make his dream come true and, finally, die in this condition.

The Concept of the ‘Death’ of God in Comparative Analysis

The attitude towards the concept of ‘death’ of God in Georgian and French avant-garde literature is absolutely different: since God has ‘died’ the human has become supreme, the only divinity. So, the God has been removed from the literature and the human has taken His place. French personages do not suffer from the ‘death of God’ but try in a humorous way to become divine

32 Gamsakhurdia, 20.

themselves, to unleash, uncover all their abilities, conscious and unconscious, to become almighty. In *La Dragonne* Jarry states bluntly: ‘We have covered a few years in our evolution since the guinea pig … God is dead.’ In the texts of Jarry the reader comes across many manifestations of this tendency: in the play entitled *The Caesar Anti-Christ* the Almighty God leaves a hair in the brothel and panics when the hair starts making a noise that might reveal the fact that God has visited the brothel. He feels totally desperate and miserable and starts complaining: ‘Up until now, I believed myself to be the All-Powerful; but no; now I am forced to hang my head in shame and admit I am a miserable wretch!’ Moreover, one of the Jarry’s characters says ‘I am God’, and another, Pere Ubu, a very grotesque and ruthless anti-hero, is referred to as ‘the Reverend Father Ubu, of the Society of Jesus’. All these cases are rather comical and hilarious. However, interestingly, the absence, the death of God is tragic in Georgian texts: its emphasised that people should believe in something, otherwise, they cannot exist; God protected a man from evil and now, without God, people are desperate and helpless. In most texts of this period Georgian authors try to show that the souls of non-believers are always occupied by Satan. In the story titled *The Photographer* by Konstantine Gamsakhurdia the main character, a photographer refuses to take a photo of the city as there is no God there – ‘The Godless city is not worth being taken a photo of’ says the black bird to the photographer and he breaks his camera immediately. Such attitude towards God is quite common in Georgian works of that period.

Why were Georgian writers (and readers accordingly) not able to put up with the ‘death’ of God, or treat this idea humorously (as French writers did)? The answer to this question has deeper roots than might be apparent: historically, Georgia was a country and state built on three major elements, ‘Language, Motherland, Faith’, which helped the country to survive the attacks of its enemies throughout centuries. It seems that the factor of religion or God could not be ignored during the modernist period but became even stronger in order to survive when the Bolshevik regime was established in Georgia. Sadly, the independence of Georgia lasted for just three years (1918-1921). Another factor is that religion, fear and love of God had always been deeply rooted consciously and unconsciously among Georgians religion has always played an indispensable role for them through a history of being attacked and conquered by Muslim enemies. Presumably, Georgian writers could not dare, or just were not willing, to mock at God or abuse Him even during the period of modernism and the avant-garde, but preferred to demonstrate how tragic, hopeless and vulnerable the country and people are without God. What is more, the leading Georgian modernist writers used to travel to Germany at that time; some of them were educated there. It seems that German literature and writers (Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann) had some influence on them in terms of the idea of ‘death of God’, for whom the absence of god is not amusing or beneficial at all but the beginning of degradation of a person, of morality and of human values.

---

33Quoted in Shattuck 40.
34 Hugiil, Pataphysics 227.
35 Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, ფოტოგრაფი (The Photographer) (Tbilisi: Palitra L, 2012 [1924]) 76.
36 Ilia Chavchavadze, prominent Georgian writer and public figure of the nineteenth century postulated the central ideology of the Georgian nationality this way. ივერია, ღონისძიებები, როგორც ქართული ხელოვანობა [Osmalo’s Georgia]. Newspaper ‘Iveria’, #9, 1877, Tbilisi.
Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that in particular environments writers might come up with something totally new, outstanding, and sometimes scandalous and develop it as a ‘science’ and philosophy and even give it a name such as ‘Pataphysics’. Others might feel a strong urge for novelties to destroy barriers in art and literature, protesting against an unfavourable political and social environment, and, therefore, might start developing a novel literary device without giving it a name or even realising how far they have gone – unknowingly some modernist Georgian writers got into the pataphysical realm without even knowing it. The goal is achieved in both scenarios: Jarry was very lucky that he was born in la belle époque, because the French avant-garde was so reckless, free and limitless and allowed him to leave behind every form, every norm, every value firmly existing throughout the centuries. He totally destroyed and distorted definitions, views and clichés, and he did it very noisily, shouting loudly, behaving boldly without caring much about the outcomes, society, friends, without even fearing death. As for Georgian authors, they did all of these things rather quietly, tragically, heavily, and painfully for many reasons, objective and subjective. That is why a pataphysical discourse developed in Georgia as reflections, though not conspicuously or to its full extent. And yet, it did develop because ‘La Pataphysique est la science...’

Medea Muskhelishvili is a PhD student of Humanities, majoring in Comparative Literature at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. She is a translator/editor and researcher at Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature. Major research interests include literary theory, general and comparative literary studies in a broad cultural context; Theory and practice of translation; Georgian literary translations. Among her most recent publications are: ‘From ‘The Banquet Years’ to Pataphysics – Alfred Jarry’s Pseudo-Science’, ‘Pataphysical Discourse and Georgian Reflections’, ‘Comparative-Typological Analysis of the Anti-Heroes of the plays Kvarkvare Tutaberi by Polikarpe Kakabadze and Ubu Roi by Alfred Jarry’, ‘“Ali and Nino” by Kurban Said in Terms of Imagology’.

### Medea Muskhelishvili

37 Alfred Jarry finished his neo-scientific novel *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysician* ['Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician'] with the sentence ‘La Pataphysique est la science...’
References


Dumping Grounds: Donald Trump, Edward Abbey and the Immigrant as Pollution

Michael Potts

Announcing his bid for the US presidency, Donald Trump caused outrage by claiming that undocumented migration from Mexico to the US showed that America had ‘become a dumping ground for everyone else’s problems’. Trump began his typically bombastic speech by declaring that the Mexican government was ‘sending people that have lots of problems ... they’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.’ However, Trump’s framing of undocumented migrants turning America in a ‘dumping ground’, whilst shocking, can be clearly situated within a persistent strain of rhetoric in mainstream American culture and media that uses imagery of pollution and toxic waste to depict Mexican immigration. In this essay, I want to show how such rhetoric and imagery survives in popular American culture and literature as part of a sublimated discourse that adopts and adapts the terminology, imagery and conventions of genres such as travel or nature writing in order to convey a message which implicitly frames the immigrant (and particularly the Hispanic immigrant into America) as a form of pollution. As a case study of this process, I will analyse some previously under-researched articles by American nature and travel writer, Edward Abbey.

Abbey (1927-1989) was a prolific novelist and essayist, whose articles appeared in a wide range of periodicals. Perhaps best known for his classic 1975 novel of eco-sabotage, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Abbey was a larger-than-life figure who railed against both multinational companies despoiling the wilderness and what he saw as an intrusive and often venal government. In recent years there has been a marked resurgence of interest in Abbey and his writing, as indicated by books such as Sean Prentiss’s *Finding Abbey: The Search for Edward Abbey and his Hidden Desert Grave* (2015), David Gessner’s *All the Wild That Remains: Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner and the American West* (2015) and a number of articles in outlets such as *Salon, Earth Island Journal, Orion Magazine* and *Counterpunch*. Indeed, it is safe to say that interest in Abbey’s legacy as a writer has never been higher.

This resurgence of interest in Abbey has posed the problem of how to defuse and de-toxify his well-known outbursts on immigrants and people of colour. Typically, this has been achieved by referring his reactionary outbursts to his love for the environment, a manoeuvre which involves some frankly unedifying ideological contortions in arguing that, firstly, Abbey’s xenophobia was an anomaly which did not affect his writing as a whole, and that, secondly and consequently, we should effectively overlook his xenophobia and celebrate his importance as an environmental icon for the progressive movement in America. For instance, Louis Proyect, writing in the alternative left newsletter *Counterpunch* (2015) takes on the task of trying to reconcile Abbey’s more problematic positions with a ‘Marxist vision of progress’. Typically, he...

---


cites Abbey’s infamous 1988 essay, ‘Immigration and Liberal Taboos’ which is, he admits, ‘deplorable’ with its heavily racialised and derogatory depiction of Mexican immigrants as prolifically fertile invaders who secure their claim to America by giving birth there. Astonishingly, though, Proyect seeks to apologise for such demonisation and excuse it by downplaying its importance in comparison with Abbey’s status in the environmental movement, saying that, ‘I would not hold this [i.e. his blatant racism and xenophobia] against Abbey. History will judge him as a prophet of life in balance with nature and not as an anti-immigrant zealot’ (2015).² That someone who prides himself on being progressive feels able to wave away such appalling bigotry as merely a ‘foible’ (Proyect’s term) by making vague references to Abbey’s being ‘in balance with nature’ shows how effectively nature and travel writing can sometimes function as sublimated discourses that convey anti-immigrant rhetoric within a putatively acceptable discourse.

The argument of all such apologetics, though, is fatally flawed in its core assumption that Abbey’s nature and travel writing can be separated from his xenophobia and racism. Indeed, these articles powerfully reinforced a xenophobic and racist image of the immigrant as pollution by employing long-established quasi-biological and quasi-ecological metaphors of purity and pollution in order to map cultural and ethnic prejudices on to an idealised landscape. Such discourse, I will argue, was disturbingly effective because, by projecting cultural ideals onto a romanticised landscape, it worked to turn a political and legal issue into an existential threat that brooks no compromise. In other words, it ‘totalised’ the immigration issue. By framing the immigrant as a form of pollution, an invasive species that posed a threat to a putatively ‘pure’ American landscape, Abbey’s articles preserved and transmitted the oldest and crudest images of the immigrant as a quasi-biological threat to the environment and the nation.

In ‘Contaminated Communities: The Metaphor of “Immigrant as Pollutant” in Media Representations of Immigration’ (2008), J. David Cisneros surveys the literature on representations of immigrants in America and notes that the adoption of quasi-ecological and biological metaphors is a commonplace discourse in media depictions of the subject. Citing earlier studies on the rhetoric surrounding California’s Proposition 187 that sought to limit undocumented immigrants’ access to benefits, Cisneros comments on the rhetoric of pollution and infection that structured discussion of immigrants in terms of ‘clusters’ and ‘contamination’:

The ‘civic’ rhetoric emanating from government and mainstream media sources reinforced dominant assumptions about the danger of ‘illegal’ immigration by focusing on nativist, racist, and xenophobic justifications for immigration restriction. The discourse of the Proposition 187 campaign accomplished this characterization through metaphors of ‘pollution,’ ‘infection,’ and ‘infestation.’ These clusters created images of biological invasion or contamination that structured discourse about immigration and fuelled the Proposition 187 movement.³

He also cites the work of Dorothy Nelkin and Mark Michaels which ‘identified in the public discourse about immigration a pervasive use of biological and eugenics metaphors that were used to portray immigrants as dangers to the ‘purity’ of American society and culture’ (572). Cisneros himself compares images of immigrants and immigration with media coverage of the toxic waste disaster at Love Canal. He notes that the visual framing of this type of threat of contamination through toxic waste seeping into water sources or through images of heaps of damaged toxic waste drums was echoed in a striking manner by ‘representations of immigrants on major cable news networks like Fox News and CNN [that] often portrayed undocumented immigrants through similar visual techniques, creating an impression that immigrants were collecting like piles of potentially dangerous waste or were approaching the viewer as mobile pollutants’ (579). The de-individualisation and dehumanisation of undocumented immigrants either by framing them as ‘clusters’ of ‘biological invasion or contamination’ or by framing them as ‘piles of potentially dangerous waste’ stoked atavistic fears of an amorphous foreign mass infiltrating and threatening the health of the native population.

Such discourse employs a technique of adopting quasi-biological or ecological metaphors in order to frame the discussion over immigration in terms of native versus non-native in such a way as to imply that the non-native poses an existential threat not only to the security but the culture, health and environment of the country. Leo Ralph Chavez has remarked on the way Mexican immigrants are framed as a biological threat because they are seen as ‘out of place’ and therefore effectively ‘pollution, threatening the purity of those in place – that is [of those] in their “proper” category’. In addition, the adoption of quasi-ecological rhetoric in discussing immigration enables a duality of discourse; the author can write about immigration using quasi-ecological or environmental discourse, but conversely can also write about environmental issues in a way that reinforces nativist assumptions and ideals. Jonah H. Peretti has shown that the framing of debates about which species are native and which are not, and are therefore considered invasive or toxic, reinforces the problematic assumption that nature is properly both static and pure and that anything not native is a form of pollution which should be removed. Ecology and landscape can therefore become metaphors which advance a nativist agenda by using a putatively environmental discourse of purity and pollution as a vehicle to reinforce anti-immigrant themes of native versus foreign, of that which belongs and is in harmony, and that which does not belong and therefore poses a supposed threat.

This conflation of pollution in an ecological sense with the far more established sense of pollution as the ‘Other’, the foreign and therefore out-of-place, is exemplified in Abbey’s article first published in 1984 under the title ‘The Rio Grande: All Vigor Spent’ in a National Geographic collection entitled Great Rivers of the World, and republished in 1988 under the title ‘Round River Rendezvous: The Rio Grande’ in the collection, One Life at a Time, Please. Superficially, the essay is an account of a visit to the polluted waters of the mouth of the Rio

---

Grande on the Mexican-American border near Brownsville, Texas, and is interspersed with reminiscences of a recent hiking trip to the source of the Rio Grande high in the Rocky Mountains, Colorado.

But whilst Abbey’s decision to write about the Rio Grande might be seen as entirely circumstantial, the selection should not be passed over too quickly, as at that time the river was the site of numerous American media reports on what was seen to be an ever-rising number of undocumented immigrants crossing the Rio Grande into America, often referred to by the derogatory slur of ‘wetbacks’. *US News and World Report* issue of 7 March 1983 led with ‘Invasion from Mexico: It Just Keeps Growing’ with the cover showing a Mexican woman being carried across the Rio Grande on a man’s shoulders. *Newsweek*’ s 25 June 1984 issue led with ‘Closing the Door? The Angry Debate about Immigration: Crossing the Rio Grande’ and similarly showed a Mexican woman being carried across water by a man.6

Alongside and reinforcing such hyperbolic stories depicting an invasion across the Rio Grande was a growing concern about the perceived disparity between declining fertility rates for white Americans and increasing Hispanic fertility, supplemented by immigration. Indeed, so prominent was the attention given to the issue that the 1980s were dubbed the ‘Decade of the Hispanic’ and mainstream media predicted European Americans could be a minority population in America as soon as the twenty-first century.7 Such reporting was tellingly often accompanied by imagery of pollution, justified by Malthusian theories of population growth as a driver of both pollution and environmental degradation.8 A particularly lurid cover of *Time* magazine for 6 August 1984, for instance, had the headline ‘Mexico City: The Population Curse’ and depicted a tightly packed crowd of Mexican people in the foreground.9 In the background, smokestacks belch out pollution that colours the entire cover a sooty golden brown, unsubtly suggesting a link between Mexicans’ ethnicity and pollution. The article is explicit in linking Mexican population growth with pollution, citing the number of tons of garbage produced every day in Mexico City alongside statistics on the number of children born.

Abbey at this time was particularly exercised by the issue of immigration and the threat, as he saw it, that this posed to the health, environment and culture of America. Echoing popular tropes of Mexican immigration as pollution, Abbey warned that allowing continued Latino immigration


8 Named after the eighteenth-century English cleric and scholar, Thomas Malthus, Malthusianism is the theory that because population can increase exponentially, but increases in food production only arithmetically, population growth will outstrip the food available to sustain it, leading to catastrophe if not forestalled. It has something of a chequered history, because whilst overpopulation is a real and pressing concern, it has frequently been used to justify colonialism, oppression and racism (Allan Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*).


would simply lead to America becoming another Mexico, overpopulated and polluted. In 1983 he wrote to the editors of the *Arizona Daily Star* that,

Since the editors of the *Daily Star* are so devoted to promoting mass immigration from Mexico, it seems to me you might well change the name of your paper to the *Daily Estrellita*. Better yet, set up your editorial offices in South Nogales, where you can enjoy today the poverty, misery, squalor and gross injustice which will be the fate of America tomorrow, if we allow the Latino invasion of our country to continue.\(^{10}\)

In another letter of that year to the *Arizona Republic* newspaper, Abbey apologised for having referred to Mexican towns as ‘garbage dumps’ but defended his anti-immigrant stance and warned that population growth in Southwest towns such as Tucson and Phoenix meant that they too were in danger of becoming dumping grounds.\(^{11}\) His polemic ‘Immigration and Liberal Taboos’ was also written in 1983 and subsequently sent to, and rejected by, the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Mother Jones*, *Harper’s*, *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek* and *Playboy*.\(^{12}\) 1984 saw Abbey writing to notoriously outspoken Democrat Richard Lamn, Governor of Colorado, urging him to ‘stick your neck out even further’ by raising ‘such issues as mass immigration from Latin America and differential birth rates in the USA’.\(^{13}\)

Abbey’s decision to write about the Rio Grande, then, a river that was also an international border and the centre of much media attention, must be considered in a variety of contexts, from chronological to career, from geographical to cultural and sociological. River mouths are always liminal areas, between estuarine wetland and littoral ecosystem. But the mouth of the Rio Grande is also a liminal area politically, legally and geographically, marking the border between America and Mexico, rich nation and developing nation. In such a location and at such a time, seemingly neutral topics such as nature, ecology and pollution become freighted with significance.

Standing at the mouth of the Rio Grande Abbey opens by asking ‘why not begin at the end?’ and wastes no time in signalling his theme of pollution and mixing:

[I] watch the Rio Grande merge its thick, sluggish, algae-green water with the bright blue of the Gulf of Mexico ... one of the great American rivers finally completes its journey to the sea ... the water seems not to move at all ... diverted, processed, recycled, all vigor spent.\(^{14}\)

\(^{10}\) Edward Abbey, *Postcards from Ed* edited by David Petersen (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2006) 151.

\(^{11}\) Abbey, *Postcards* 133


\(^{13}\) Edward Abbey, *Postcards from Ed* edited by David Petersen (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2006) 153. Like Abbey, Lamn was much admired for his stance on environmental issues but castigated for his views on immigration. He was a ceaseless writer and published numerous works linking immigration with population growth, cultural fragmentation and environmental degradation. See, for example, his *Immigration Time Bomb: The Fragmenting of America* (1985).


In this disrupted and degraded ecosystem, the nitrogen run-off from industrial farms upstream together with the sewage effluent and other pollutants provide a rich source of food for organisms that can thrive on such detritus, an alternative food chain that upsets and eventually displaces the normal food chain of a healthy ecosystem. Thus, Abbey notes that ‘the river is not as dead as it looks’ observing the presence of fishermen and their families, crowded around the river mouth (149). ‘Why are the fishermen clustered here at the mouth of the river?’ Abbey asks rhetorically: ‘because the effluents from upstream, the sewage and fertilizers and garbage from towns and farms, attract the hierarchies of small organisms, including shrimp, that attract in turn the large game fish that attract human predators’ (151).

Abbey’s mention of the fishermen appears to be in the context of the problems of pollution, their presence serving as an indication of an ecosystem which is thriving not because the river is healthy but because it is polluted. However, Abbey immediately adds another observation which overlays the ecological and environmental insights with a further layer of identification and meaning: ‘All but myself appear to be Mexicans, or Mexican-Americans. Here on the international boundary, in this neutral zone, one’s actual citizenship makes little difference’, Abbey remarks, before pointedly adding that ‘the uniformed police of the U.S. border patrol are nowhere in sight’ (150).

With this observation Abbey blurs the distinction between political and ecological. By remarking on the nationality of the fishermen and questioning their right to be there, he reframes his observations from a purely ecological analysis of the damage done to the river by industrial pollution to a quasi-socio-political critique that revisits the older definition of pollution as that which is foreign and out of place. The visual metaphors and tropes noted by Cisneros and others are present: the fishermen and their families are presented in the mass and discussed in quasi-biological language. They are ‘human predators’ that have ‘clustered’ around the polluted mouth to feed. Furthermore, by situating them within the food chain of a degraded ecosystem Abbey frames their presence within the context of population dynamics, the study of how a species’ population is affected by the over or under supply of food. This removes the element of rational human volition in explaining the presence of the Latino fishermen and their families and reframes it in crudely reductive biological and ecological terms.

A series of identifications is therefore set up which marks out not just the political or legal differences between the Latinos as supposed immigrants and Abbey as a white male American citizen, but also a putative set of qualitative differences which rely on invoking nativist ideals linking purity with homogeneity, and pollution with heterogeneity. The immigrant is depicted as being baser in their motivations and desires, and is discussed in quasi-biological or ecological language, obviating the recognition of each of them as a rational individual agent reacting to historical, cultural and personal circumstances. By contrast, the white American citizen is individualised and his motivations described in terms of aspirations and ideals instead of wants and desires. This contrast is not explicit or categorical but implicit, relying on a cumulative series of identifications, on differing contextualisations of immigrant and native, and on the specific use of language and metaphor to depict and describe immigrant or native.

Abbey achieves this differentiation in ‘Round River Rendezvous’ by switching between narrating his visit to the polluted estuary of the Rio Grande at sea level (identified as a site of Latino immigration) and reminiscing about a recent hiking trip with his wife to the origins of the river high in the San Juan mountains of Colorado. Immediately following his encounter with the Latino fishermen Abbey, for example, Abbey thinks back to a recent hiking expedition to ‘find the origins of the Rio Grande, the source, *La Source*’. The mundane terminology of ecology is obviously not sufficient here for Abbey, as it was in describing the ‘neutral zone’ of the Mexican border. Indeed, it is perfectly clear that he sees his expedition to the source as an ascent to a literally and metaphorically higher place invested with meaning and significance. He elevates the expedition to a semi-mythological quest for purity in which ‘I envisioned a mythological maiden in a flowing, diaphanous gown, pouring crystal clear Rocky Mountain spring-water from a jug on her shoulder. What we really found was something much finer’ (152). Abbey’s florid prose here is telling: as Catrin Gersdorf has pointed out, Abbey typically figures the America landscape as an ‘Anglo-Saxon male space’ of struggle and hardship, the battle for survival. But here he figures the landscape in a distinctly feminine way, with the ‘mythological maiden’ both virgin and mother, highly unusual for him. The source is thus identified as a site of proper fertility, that is to say, of fertility that is pure and in balance with nature.

This contrast between the undesirable heterogeneity of the border zone of the river’s end and the idealised and romanticised homogeneity of the source is subsequently revisited with even starker contrast, confirming and reinforcing the distinction. In the border town of Brownsville, Texas, Abbey describes the scene inside a shop selling used clothes:

A dozen weary little Mexican women, all pregnant, sit among mountains of old clothing, each woman patiently sorting through these trash piles in search of children’s garments ... The air in the place is stifling, swarming with flies, and dense with the unmistakable, unforgettable smell of poverty. The manager of this pen, a swarthy, greasy-haired, crossbred, snake-eyed *bandito*, the only male in view, waits in the corner for the women to finish their sorting and hand over their faded paper pesos. Hordes of children play outside on the slime and broken glass of the street. (152-3)

Once again, the visual description here fulfils the nativist anti-immigrant tropes of the ‘immigrant’ as pollutant, invader and infestation. Just as the Latino fishermen were portrayed as part of a degraded, polluted ecosystem, so the Mexican women are depicted clustering around the cast-offs of consumer society, sifting through the ‘trash piles’ of children’s clothes. Once again, the underlying fear is of uncontrollable fertility, attracted by, and burgeoning on, the waste and effluent of consumer society. The pervasive use of biological metaphors to describe

---

15 *La Source* may refer to a number of different paintings by various artists, but which all share the same theme of a young, white woman pouring water from a jug (in some variations she is bathing under a waterfall). The painting symbolises the union of fertility and purity in balance with nature.

immigrants, noted by Nelkin and Michaels (1998),¹⁷ and the tendency for this to slip into coded eugenic language is evident in Abbey’s increasingly unpleasant description of the shop as a ‘pen’ of pregnant Mexican women watched over by the ‘swarthy, greasy-haired, crossbred, snake-eyed bandito’.

Abbey makes the used clothes shop a Dantesque scene and a clear warning to his American readers of what lies in store ‘if we allow the Latino invasion of our country to continue’.¹⁸ The trope of the immigrant as a biological threat because they are non-native and therefore ‘out of place’ (to use Chavez’s phrase) is palpable in his depiction: this is not nature’s fertility but a grotesque and swollen parody of it.

To accentuate this difference between natural fertility and uncontrolled invasion and multiplication Abbey again returns to the beginnings of the river, to the mythologised and romanticised purity of the source:

Watching this intolerable, unacceptable scene, which nevertheless we tolerate and accept, I think again of Stony Pass in the San Juans, the clear, cold mountain air, the peaks covered with fresh snow, and the bright virgin waters of the Rio Grande trickling from their multitude of secret beginnings under the rocks and the tundra and the alpine flowers. The elk were on the move, through the pines and aspen; in the evenings we’d hear the bull elk bugle forth his challenge to the world. That is another world, a sort of paradise compared to this, a world that these women and most of their children will never see. (153)

By invoking the image of the patriarch elk ‘bugling forth his challenge to the world’ Abbey emphasises the difference between native fertility, supposedly in harmony with the environment, and the putatively unnatural, prolific fertility of the biological invader. The ‘crossbred’ Mexican shopkeeper with his ‘pen’ of pregnant women and the native bull elk calling for females and warding off intruders imply a qualitative difference between that which is ‘out of place’ and that which is in its ‘proper’ category.

Abbey’s use of the native elk here in a romanticised setting draws on long-established tropes that spring from the early confluence of conservationism and eugenics. As Allen E. Garland has noted, the elk was a frequent symbol in early conservationist literature that symbolised the nobility of pristine nature and undiluted bloodlines and was one of the common metaphors comparing conservation of the human germ plasm with the nobility of nature in its pristine form [and] a typological mode of thinking that saw species in nature and human groups in society as represented by essentialist or uniform types (the largest elk or the pure Nordic) as some sort of abstract entity, viewed as existing romanticized past that is being eroded away by the modern world.¹⁹

¹⁸ Abbey, Postcards 132.
Inhabiting mountainous areas and the high ranges, the elk symbolised the putatively ‘higher’ animal, hardy and noble, perfectly ‘in balance with nature’ (to make ironic use here of Proyect’s description of Abbey). In this romanticised re-imagination of nature and ecology, Abbey’s elk signifies the figuratively ‘higher’ creature, removed from but still threatened by the unnatural and prolific. The call to protect the environment in pristine form thereby becomes covalent with an unstated but implicit call to preserve and strengthen racial and ethnic boundaries.

Hence, in his reference to the used clothes shop as a ‘pen’ and the depiction of the Mexican women as passive breeders, Abbey distinguishes the women by figuring them as cattle, an allusion that signifies particular distaste for Abbey, who loathed cattle, blaming them for destroying native vegetation and polluting water sources. In an earlier travel article (‘On the River Again’) Abbey recorded travelling down the Rio Grande where the country is denuded of native wildlife and instead

overrun with half-starved Mexican cattle. They infest the thickets on both shores of the river and graze, browse and trample the desert for miles into Big Bend National Park.

Eating up our heritage . . . the Mexican cattle, like the Mexican people, suffer from lack of the same thing: a good five-centevo contraceptive.20

Here the distinction between Mexican cattle and Mexican people is all but erased. Both are treated as problematic populations in need of penning and controlling. Abbey and his boating companions even half-jestingly discuss lethal ecological measures for preventing these ‘illegal cows’ from crossing the border (‘plant the river with alligators, crocodiles, piranhas and hammerhead sharks’) but he concludes in another telling phrase that ‘we all well know that nothing will be done’.21 The fiction that he is engaging in ecological critique here is openly mocked by Abbey himself. The unpleasant fact of the matter is that the immigrant, the ‘illegal cow’ of the essay, has been reduced to a biological threat, an ecological menace ‘eating up our heritage’.

In analysing Abbey’s depictions of immigrants, it is crucial to recognise that whilst Abbey may have been xenophobic, it is Malthusianism that provided a spurious link to ecology, allowing him to pursue an anti-immigrant agenda in articles that were supposedly writing about the environment and travel. Nowhere is this made more distastefully explicit than in his article ‘Sierra Madre’ (1979), in which Abbey records his visit to the Sierra Madre mountains in Mexico. Ostensibly, the subject of the article is hiking in the Sierra Madre, but Abbey spends most of the article titillating and terrifying his reader with descriptions of the waste, pollution, degradation and of course population of Mexico. Flying over Chihuahua in a small privately-chartered plane, Abbey gives a God’s-eye description of the scene below. The air, the reader is told, is ‘full of windblown dust and smoke from forest fires’, the cattle ‘dying by the thousands from thirst and starvation’.22 Landing, Abbey describes with regret the effect of development on

---

22 Edward Abbey, ‘Sierra Madre’ [1979], Abbey’s Road (New York: Plume, 1991) 81.
the local wildlife and the local Tarahumara people, and always with an eye for the squalor and
the sheer number of people everywhere.

Towards the end of the article Abbey makes the point, the real point which all of his previous
description has been building towards: uncontrolled population growth is driving environmental
degradation and the subsequent ecological collapse is causing and will continue to cause a
relentless, nightmarish attack on American borders by half-starved Mexican cattle and people:
the two seem to be largely interchangable for Abbey. Citing the type of statistic beloved by
Malthusians (the increase expressed as multiplication and percentage, the reference to seemingly
objective and undeniable science – ‘demographers tell us’), Abbey reminds the reader that
Mexico is a ‘nation of babies, kids and horny adolescents. Youthful vigor!’ and so unlikely to
see a slowing in the rate of increase for some time.23 Abbey rejects the suggestion that what is
needed in Mexico is more investment and further development. Adopting the typically
Malthusian argument that industrialisation without population control will always be ineffective
and counterproductive, Abbey asks rhetorically, ‘dare one mention – would it be impolite and
impolitic? – the name of the real and true spectre haunting this glamourous land, a dilemma that
no amount of turismo and industrialismo is going to solve? May one?’. Answering his own
question, he ventriloquises the imagined Mexican reply:

No. One may not. We are guests here, and the reply, if one were reckless enough to
provoke it, can easily be anticipated: No, gringo, mind your own focking beezy-neezy and
geev me peso or I cut your focking gringo throat.

There is another India aborning on our southern borders: Juarez, Nogales, Tijuania ... will
be the cactus Calcuttas of the year 1999. No wonder a million desperate wetbacks, a
million hungry aliens attempt each year to infiltrate our southern defense lines. Living
bodies hang on the coils of concertina wire, hands clutching at the barbs.24

The reference to India points unequivocally to the source of this terrified and terrifying image of
zombie-like hordes blindly impaling themselves on coils of barbed wire. It is the Malthusianism
of Paul Ehrlich, William Vogt, Garret Hardin and others who warned of a population explosion
in non-white, non-western nations. With their scientific credentials (Vogt and Hardin were
zoologists, Ehrlich is a biologist) and use of authoritative-sounding statistics showing the
implacability of population growth and the certainty of disaster, they transfixed the public’s
attention and galvanised a movement to address the seeming threat of uncontrolled population
growth in developing nations.

Yet, whilst such figures undoubtedly provided the immediate impetus behind the near-panic
with which Abbey and others perceived Mexico and Mexican immigration, Abbey’s
identification of the immigrant with toxic waste and his dehumanising analogy of them with
‘half-starved cattle’ in need of contraceptives has much older roots in American culture. Mathew

23 It is worth noting the use of ‘vigor’ here, given Abbey’s later use of it as the original title for his National
Geographic article, ‘Rio Grande: All Vigor Spent’. The term had been popular in America since President Kennedy
had used it as a way to emphasise his comparative youthfulness compared to rivals.

24 Abbey, ‘Sierra Madre 96. Emphasis in original.
Connelly records the animus against Chinese immigrant labour in nineteenth-century America leading one scholar to claim in *The North American Review* that ‘constant over-population’ had adapted the Chinese to ‘live in swarms’ and live, half-starved, off the most unpalatable of food sources, driving ‘the vulture from his prey, or devour[ing] the unclean bird itself’.

Through such imagery, the immigrant (mostly the non-white immigrant) was dehumanised and identified as out-of-place: as pollution, in other words. With their backgrounds in biology and ecology, later Malthusians such as Vogt, Hardin and Ehrlich, whatever their intentions, tended to reinforce the already established link between immigrants and pollution, as a population that had overexploited and devastated its own lands and was now seeking sustenance in the ‘New World’ of America. Thus, when Abbey describes in his article ‘Big Bend’, ‘rack-ribbed, hungry, Mexican Scrub cattle ... waiting their chance to sneak across the river into the far better forage on the US side of the border’ and warns his readers that ‘having denuded their own range, they now lust after ours’ he is not only drawing on a long-established theme of overpopulation and invasion, but also on more recent ecological tropes of population dynamics and carrying capacity.

Clearly, then, the contention of Abbey’s apologists that his nature and travel writing can be separated from his xenophobia and racism is untenable. They embody and convey in sublimated form his own prejudices and preconceptions projected on to a landscape that is heavily idealised and politicised. For Abbey, the immigrant posed a ‘total’ threat to American democracy that necessitated the employment of all means of persuasion to fight back against what he saw as the pollution and dilution of white America. As he put it in ‘A Writer’s Credo’, the writer had a duty to tell unpopular and unpalatable ‘truths’ even if doing so meant breaching taboos on what was considered acceptable discourse:

> Consider the interesting question of immigration, race and culture: if we who still form the majority in America really care to preserve our democratic traditions, derived in the most part from our European heritage and ancestry, then we must be willing to reevaluate the possible effect of differential breeding rates and mass immigration from Latin American, African and Asiatic countries upon those traditions.

Democracy and the American way of life, Abbey believed, relied on a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon population and was threatened by what he clearly saw as ‘lesser’ peoples migrating to America who did not share this ‘European heritage and ancestry’. His loathing of the Mexican immigrant in the mass, as in the fishermen at the polluted river mouth or the pregnant Mexican women in the used clothes store, is the horror of the privileged white American confronted with squalor and poverty and viewing it as a monstrosity that results not from inequality and exploitation but from the reckless reproduction of a class or people that have

---

obviously outgrown their own territory and now seek new sustenance. Abbey’s description of Mexican towns as ‘garbage dumps’ and his warning that American towns risked being turned into garbage dumps as well if Mexican immigration was allowed to continue epitomises this perception of the immigrant as ‘pollution, threatening the purity of those in place – that is [of those] in their “proper” category’. When Abbey addresses the issue of immigration directly, it is clear that his animus is culturally and ethnically based. Malthusianism, though, provides the ideological basis for his animus in his nature and travel writing, where this cultural and ethnic prejudice is translated into metaphors where the balance of an overtly romanticised ‘pure’ nature is threatened by the influx of a biological ‘other’ which is not native and which therefore poses an existential threat.

Trump’s complaint, then, that the US has become a ‘dumping ground’ for Mexico’s ‘criminals’ and ‘rapists’ must be seen, therefore, not as an anomaly but as the continuation of a long-standing fear of the immigrant as pollution, threatening the purity of a romanticised America. It could be argued that the anomaly in Trump’s case is not the substance of what he said but his refusal to encode it (or perhaps his inability). Joan C. Williams (2016), writing in the Harvard Business Review, analyses Trump’s willingness to transgress accepted norms in the bluntest (and crassest) way as part of his appeal with white, working-class voters who might not share his xenophobia, but applaud his ability to infuriate the polite, professional ‘elites’ and (as they see it) their double-talking and double-standards, claiming to represent their best interests, but instead primarily concerned with engineering an election-winning coalition of voters. Indeed, it is noticeable that, as observed by Williams, as class has declined as a way of analysing and discussing demographics and politics in America, so ethnicity, gender and other markers of identity have increased. As Thomas B. Edsall observed in 2011, ‘preparations by Democratic operatives for the 2012 election make it clear for the first time that the party will explicitly abandon the white working class’ in favour of trying to build a coalition of affluent voters and ethnic minorities. In other words, economic and class issues were to be sidelined and cultural-identity issues foregrounded.

Whilst this might seem to be unproblematic in and of itself, such a move away from class-based politics potentially opens the door for populism and nativism of the kind that we have increasingly witnessed in politics in America (and indeed elsewhere). Discussions about immigration and border control can become ‘totalised’ as rational and nuanced discussion is ever more freighted and constrained, and becomes increasingly sublimated. In such a climate, the quasi-biological metaphors and tropes about immigrants that have been largely latent in society, but still circulating in seemingly respectable publications and discourses, can become resurgent. Trump’s invocation of the threat of the almost-congenitally criminal Mexican pouring across the border has valence because, as I have argued in this essay, it draws on long-established themes that survive in sublimated form outside of overt xenophobic discourse. Trying to ‘shut down’ (as the popular expression has it) such bigoted discourse is not only difficult, but, given a particular

---

28 Chavez, 42
set of economic and political circumstances, can easily backfire, as the Presidential election of 2016 has shown.

The necessity, then, is to recognise that reshaping the discourse requires a readiness to do the harder work of identifying and confronting the sublimated forms of racism and xenophobia that circulate in seemingly acceptable discourse. This can be deeply uncomfortable. If we recognise and condemn the racism and xenophobia that underpins much of Abbey’s writing, does that mean that we thereby undermine all of his writing on behalf of the environment? Can we value the beauty of Abbey’s depictions of nature and wildlife, and yet criticise and confront the racism of the writer? Calling out the overt xenophobia of Trump and others like him is easy, and requires no such distinctions be made: he is a perfect target for ire. Calling out subtle but powerful xenophobic or racist tropes in nature or travel writing can seem almost disingenuous: should we really be tackling such coded discourses when there is blatant racism to confront? Yet, as I have argued here, it is precisely in this apparently acceptable discourse that seemingly outdated and discredited tropes of the immigrant or the ‘other’ survive.

Whilst is tempting, and even reassuring in a sense, to assign such backward views to a largely illiterate section of the public and thereby effectively write them off, the uncomfortable truth is that such bigoted language relies on a far wider and putatively acceptable discourse to retain its power to scare and motivate people. Contra the pleas of Proyect and other apologists, the urgency of environment crisis is not, and cannot be allowed to serve as, a justification for allowing racist tropes of the ‘other’ to be propagated.

Michael Potts is a researcher interested in the intersection of ecology, culture and literature. His previous work has been published in Australian Literary Studies and in Violence Against Black Bodies: An Intersectional Analysis of How Black Lives Continue to Matter, published by Routledge. He has also published on other subjects from the influence of Oswald Spengler in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings to the representation of homosexuality in Michel Houellebecq’s Atomised.
**Works Cited**


---.


Of Surface and Depth: Agnes Smedley’s Sketches of Chinese Everyday Life

Fredrik Tydal

Abstract

This article focuses on American author Agnes Smedley’s creative non-fiction writings on China, seeking to recover her as an important transnational figure in light of an uneven reputation. For while Smedley is known and read in China, she is virtually forgotten in the United States. To reassert her relevance, and to balance her reputation, I employ the 1933 work Chinese Destinies as a case study to discuss Smedley’s interest in everyday life as a site of socio-political analysis, a mode of inquiry that anticipates later methodologies in the social sciences.

I begin by establishing how Chinese Destinies maintains a surprising focus on everyday life, despite the wartime setting. Emphasising her background as a novelist, I then explore how Smedley is able to thematise everyday life in two different ways: first as a site of trauma, and then as a space of resistance. In this way, I argue, her work has historiographic implications, and I go on to situate her engagement with everyday life within a broader debate about historical agency and causality. As part of my conclusion, I speculate as to why Smedley’s creative brand of literary non-fiction is not as recognised as similar work by her contemporaries.

* * * * *

In the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery outside of Beijing, the ashes of American writer Agnes Smedley lie buried under a tombstone that describes her as ‘a friend of the Chinese people.’ Among the American writers who covered China in the interwar period (Pearl Buck, Edgar Snow, Anna Louise Strong), Smedley occupies the curious role of being almost forgotten in the United States, while at the same time being taught and studied in China. The discrepancy is not only striking, but also ironic: the cross-cultural currents which so fundamentally characterised Smedley’s work have, in her posthumous reception, come to largely flow in only one direction.¹

This article seeks to redress some of the imbalance in Smedley’s reputation by focusing on what her American perspective allowed her to see in revolutionary China, while also positing her as an overlooked pioneer in literary non-fiction. Concentrating on her ostensibly minor 1933 work Chinese Destinies: Sketches of Present-Day China, I want to argue that Smedley’s originality as a writer derives from her critical engagement with the surface familiarities of

¹ For an account of the disparity in Smedley’s reputation between the United States and China, see Florence Howe’s afterword to the anthology Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution, ed. Jan and Steve MacKinnon (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1976) 167-69. In recent decades, two English-language biographies and a critical reappraisal of Daughter of Earth have helped to raised Smedley’s profile in the United States; however, none of the five books on China published in her lifetime are currently in print in English. In China, on the other hand, Smedley’s friendship with General Zhu De has been turned into a major motion picture (1986’s Zhu De and Smedley), her likeness has appeared on a postage stamp (repr. in Price 422), and most recently, a bust of the author was unveiled at the Lu Xun Museum in Beijing (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-12/04/content_11651587.htm).

everyday life. For despite the epic associations given by its title, the individual pieces of *Chinese Destinies* are often anchored in an ordinary or even mundane situation, such as a restaurant visit or a walk in the street. Yet in what seems a conspicuous pattern, these quotidian scenes are often interrupted by a sudden action of significance or a moment of intense meaning. Just as quickly as they appear, however, they recede again – back into the familiar texture of everyday life. Such moments were of course common in modernist literature (Joyce, Woolf, Proust); however, what makes Smedley unique is that, inspired by the literary milieu from which she emerged, she deploys such moments in a real-life context – that is, in her analysis of this crucial period in Chinese history.

Central to my argument, then, is the novelistic quality of Smedley’s writing, even as she operates in the domain of non-fiction, and how this generic ambiguity in turn allows her to defamiliarise everyday life. Closely linked in my analysis, these two aspects of *Chinese Destinies* should be situated both within the author’s body of work and in the broader literary culture of which she was part. First, it is important to note that Smedley began her career as a novelist, publishing the semi-autobiographical *Daughter of Earth* in 1929. Although well-received by critics at the time, Smedley’s striking combination of proletarian themes with modernist introspection never reached a wider audience, nor gained a subsequent place in the canon. Combining race, class, and gender in her cogent analysis of power, Smedley is able to show how the interaction of these factors severely limits if not disables social and political agency in early twentieth-century America. These weighty issues, however, she grapples with not through political theory nor through any violent confrontations; rather, her focus is on how these limiting mechanisms operate at the level of everyday life, and also how they essentially remain the same regardless of context, whether in rural Missouri or in urban New York.

But even though *Daughter of Earth* is definitely an original novel, it did not exist in a vacuum; rather, it still has certain affinities with other works of the period. In fact, earlier in the 1920s, everyday life had already become an important representational terrain for certain writers on the left, as they sought to expose the sordid side of that decade’s economic boom. Here, we may think of John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, which depicts an unforgiving urban landscape through a conspicuous focus on everyday life, or Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, where middle-class conformity, ingrained through everyday practice, negates any departure from the status quo. During the following 1930s, the literary focus on everyday life intensified, as it became an even more pressing site of inquiry for a whole host of socially conscious writers: most notably John Steinbeck and James T. Farrell, but also proletarian writers like Michael Gold and Robert Cantwell. In contrast to the realist novel, where the minutiae of bourgeois life exist to produce what Roland Barthes calls ‘the reality effect,’ everyday life for these Depression-era writers functions as something interesting in and of itself, as a level of social reality where ideology both manifests and consolidates itself. For example, in Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, we are made to understand that everyday life forms something of a closed system for the title character, and that everything of which it is made up – pool-room antics with his friends, conversations at the family dinner table, the consumption of mass culture – leaves little room for critical thinking, and as such forecloses his development of a political consciousness.

The French philosopher and literary critic Henri Lefebvre once commented that American interwar novelists, such as Steinbeck and Dos Passos, had been able to ‘open their eyes to what is nearest to them – everyday life – and to find themes in it which amaze us by their violence and originality.’ Against this background, it is possible to see what Smedley brought with her to

---

China from the contemporary American literary scene. For like her fellow Depression-era writers, she too approaches everyday life as a conceptual category, as a level of social reality often neglected, yet more than worthy of critical attention. Specifically, as I will argue, through using techniques borrowed from the domain of fiction, she is able to thematise everyday life in two different ways: first as a site of trauma, and then as a space of resistance. In doing so, she anticipates post-Foucauldian theories of everyday resistance, of finding gaps and fissures in seemingly closed systems of control. Taken together, then, Smedley is on the one hand before her time, yet on the other hand, she is also profoundly of it, in ways that have yet to be fully appreciated. Ultimately, as I will suggest, we may see Smedley as a kind of modernist-materialist historian, whose findings are drawn from the plain and plebeian of everyday life rather than from the official decrees and documentations of traditional historiography. As a result, she is able to not only give a voice and historical agency to ordinary people, but also to predict with surprising accuracy the developments that lay ahead for China.

Based on her experiences in China between 1929 and 1932, *Chinese Destinies* depicts the chaotic period of the civil war, focusing on the human dimensions of the conflict. While scenes of battle and violence are presented in key parts of the book, they do not take centre stage in the narrative as a whole. Instead, there is an emphasis on ordinary people, places, and situations – only occasionally interrupted by the realities of the war. In terms of structure, the book is made up of 30 chapter-like segments, each of varying length: some merely a few pages, while others run up to 20. It also includes 28 accompanying photographs, which add to the documentary feel of the work and as such help to conceal its novelistic impulses. Indeed, reviews at the time tended to emphasise the book’s elements of reportage without detecting the aestheticised nature of the everyday scenes it depicted. In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, George E. Sokolsky suggested that the book acts as a contrast to ‘the elegiac works of Pearl Buck or Nora Walkn,’ offering as it does ‘pictures of stark, ugly, unrelieved realism,’ and in his review for the *New Masses*, G.F. Willison assured the readers that although Smedley is a novelist, ‘*Chinese Destinies* is no anemic fiction.’ Recent years, however, have seen a growing recognition of the ways in which Smedley uses the tools and techniques of fiction in her reportage work. In her discussion of *Chinese Destinies* and Smedley’s other writings on China, Mari Yoshihara takes note of the intricate use of focalisation in a non-fiction context; these ‘unique narrative strategies,’ she suggests, allows Smedley to remind the reader of ‘[the] mediated, performative nature of the text.’ More recently, Douglas Kerr has described *Chinese Destinies* as ‘a cinematographic montage,’ highlighting the creative nature of the work as well as its stylised quality. For Kerr, however, the combination of fiction and reportage is a problematic one. As he suggests, Smedley tends to invest the lives she depicts ‘with a historical portentousness that makes them exemplary, and even allegorical; the characters start to behave and speak operatically,’ which in turn makes the text cross over into propaganda.

---

4 In a chapter on Smedley in his recent *Transpacific Community* (2016), Richard Jean So suggests that the author’s lack of canonical standing even within the American proletarian tradition is the result of a retrospective inability to fully situate her work in the context of its times. Focusing on Smedley’s prolific use of the telegraph and her involvement in the campaign to free Chinese writer Ding Ling, he argues that ‘[i]t is precisely her commitment to causes and forms of expression that only in retrospect appear foreign to the American Cultural Front that has led to her scholarly exclusion’ (3).

5 George E. Sokolsky, ‘China’s Other Half,’ *Saturday Review of Literature* 4 November (1933) 238.


Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.
motive ... guides the pen,’ he writes, ‘and dehumanizes both the characters and the narrative which speaks for them’ (179). Earlier, historian Kenneth E. Shewmaker had gone even further in his criticism, describing Smedley’s modus operandi as that of a ‘proselytizing novelist,’ whose ‘fictionalized characterizations and extreme bias render Chinese Destinies an ineffectual instrument for relaying either information or propaganda.’

Yet propaganda, it needs to be remembered, did not become a pejorative until after World War II, only then picking up its connotations of artful ruse and manipulation. But Smedley is not trying to fool anyone here: her stance is clear at all times, and there is no doubt that her sympathies lie with the communists. Indeed, Lewis Gannett called the book ‘hot blooded and partisan and honest’ in his review for the New York Herald Tribune, emphasising Smedley’s unapologetic subjectivity and commitment to her own position. While Kerr’s point about the occasionally stilted and theatrical mode of characterisation is well-taken and may illustrate why the work has not aged well, I do take issue with Shewmaker’s claim that the book offers no insight or information. For while her background in fiction may lend an undeniable subjectivity to her work, it also allows her to open up everyday life as a thematic and interrogative space in a manner otherwise reserved for novelists.

From the very first page of Chinese Destinies, it is clear that Smedley is careful to anchor the book in everyday practices. For it is surely not a coincidence that the opening piece begins with the author entering a restaurant, and does so furthermore, by stressing the element of ritual. This is the first line: ‘We entered the old-style Shantung restaurant through the kitchen, as is the custom, because the kitchen is in front so that guests may look at the food being cooked on the earthen stoves. For such is the practise in a land where cooking is an art.’ In other words, there is a sense of Smedley taking us by the hand, enveloping us in the safety and familiarity of customs and manners. Soon, however, through a shift of perspective, we find that the actual focus of the piece is not the author’s culinary experience, but rather what she overhears from a group of peasants at the neighbouring table. At first, the middle-aged family men talk about fairly typical things: disobedient sons and daughters, who do not respect the old ways. Yet as the men continue to have their meal there emerges a fearful undertone to the conversation, and we are made to understand that this is not just a story of generational conflict. One of the men mentions his sons having new ideas, talking about exploitation and landownership, ‘squeeze[ing] the life from the poor,’ as he puts it (7). At this point, another man breaks in to acknowledge what has just been gestured towards, as he mentions the execution in a nearby town of a young man accused of being a communist. After this, the men around the table cautiously exchange a few words about the subject, ‘as if treading on dangerous grounds’ (8). Are these new ideas just youthful idealism, or could there be something to them? The men are unsure. In any case, surely young people should not have to pay so dearly for expressing them? The man who is worried about his sons becomes distraught, as he realises that they may have turned to communism: ‘May the gods protect me – can it be that my sons! ...’ (8, ellipsis in the original). From this point of despair, Smedley abruptly brings us back to the normality of everyday life, by noting that new guests are arriving: ‘From below in the restaurant came the great noise of new dinner guests arriving. The yell of greetings soon drowned the voice of the men’ (8). And so, in a way, the story ends up where it started: in the safety and familiarity of customs, as new patrons arrive

11 Agnes Smedley, Chinese Destinies: Sketches of Present-Day China (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1933) 3. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.
and take part in the dining rituals previously outlined. In other words, the ending suggests a
continuation of the status quo, of things going on as usual despite terror and persecution. In this
sense, there is a disturbing irony at work in this passage, a sense of terrible things lurking under
the surface of normality.

In the third story, ‘Peasants and Lords in China,’ Smedley travels to Wuxi in Jiangsu
province. From her account, Wuxi appears to be a deeply polarised city, reminiscent of both
Benjamin Disraeli’s and Friedrich Engels’s description of Victorian England as two nations –
that of the rich and that of the poor. While travelling into the countryside to see rural conditions,
Smedley and her party draw attention to themselves, and soon, they are invited to the mansion of
the largest landowner in the area, a man named Chu. For fear of disrespecting this local potentate
and so as to be able to continue her reportage, Smedley pragmatically accepts the offer. At the
mansion, the guests are treated to an extravagant dinner, with each one in the party expected to
give a toast as a sign of gratitude. When it comes to Smedley’s turn, however, something strange
happens – a little sign of something being kept just below the polished surface:

As we all stood, our cups of rice wine held before us, there came a shuffling of feet and the
rattling of chains from a corner of the great hall. The surrounding crowd and the dim light
from the candles prevented us from seeing far, and we uneasily resumed our dinner. (30-1)

After the dinner, Smedley asks the landowner’s guards about the sound she had heard. As if it
was nothing out of the ordinary, the guards explain that it was just some peasants being arrested.
At this point, Smedley comes to realise that the mansion has its own prison. As if wanting to
show off their catch, the guards then bring their guest of honour to the cold and dark dungeon
room, where two peasants lie chained hand to foot on a pile of straw. At the sight of this,
Smedley exclaims: ‘And all the time we were feasting!’ (31).

That is, while Smedley and the travelling party have enjoyed the hospitality of the landowner,
these peasants have been shackled and humiliated elsewhere in the house, as part of Chu’s anti-
communist crusade. There is much that could be said about this episode, and how the mansion
might be seen as a microcosm of society as a whole – certainly, there is the element of allegory.
In this sense, the episode thematically evokes W.H. Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, published
later that same decade, which describes how ‘suffering ... takes place / While someone else is
eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.’ Auden’s poem, as we know, was
inspired by Breughel’s The Fall of Icarus, in which ‘everything turns away / Quite leisurely
from the disaster.’ As such, the painting touches on a theme that is both timeless and universal:
the frequent disregard towards others’ suffering. But can Smedley really be faulted for enjoying
her dinner while others lie in chains? Everyday life often blinds us, after all, with its routine and
repetition; as such, its surface familiarity can be deceptive. As Henri Lefebvre once put it: ‘The
everyday is a kind of screen, in both senses of the word. It both shows and hides.’

But how can people be roused from this indifference? How can the veil cast by routine and
repetition be lifted? As Smedley knew from her contemporaries, it had to be done through
aesthetic means. So far, I have focused on content; now, however, it becomes necessary to
consider its intersection with form. For as I have already indicated, the power of Smedley’s
writing in large part derives from her use of novelistic techniques in a non-fiction context.
Consider her exclamation ‘And all the time we were feasting’ – it is a combination of modernist

13 Henri Lefebvre, ‘Towards a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx’s Death,’
Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Chicago: U of Illinois P,
1988) 78.
defamiliarisation and the proletarian call-to-action, designed to cut through the routine of everyday reality. In a well-known turn of phrase, Viktor Shklovsky suggested that art ‘exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.’ What Smedley knew, then, was that it could also make cruelty cruel.

In what is undoubtedly the most formally inventive piece in the book, Smedley uses a montage technique to edit together fragments of urban life in Shanghai. Appropriately titled ‘A Moving Picture of Shanghai’ and reflecting the influence of Chinese modernist Lu Xun, she here gives us 29 snapshots ranging from a handful of lines to a few paragraphs – but none longer than a page. What emerges is a top-to-bottom, gutter-to-gala composite picture, reminiscent of the then-contemporary collective novel: we see rickshaw drivers, government officials, foreign diplomats, and ordinary factory workers. Fragmented as they are, these snapshots all have one thing in common: their ostensible unimportance, as none of the scenes or incidents would ever merit inclusion in a newspaper. They are too ordinary. Yet in bringing them together in this way, something interesting happens, and the relationship between form and theme becomes clearer.

Smedley’s account, it seems, hinges on the idea that that the whole can be assembled from its parts – that snatches of everyday life can shed light on social reality as a whole, on the totality of its relations.

This becomes evident in the final snapshot of the piece, which stands out due to the sudden burst of direct and forceful authorial commentary at the end. In this episode, taking place in the French Concession, a rickshaw driver fails to observe a minor traffic regulation and is as a result severely beaten by a policeman. The incident takes place right out in the open, and so it reinforces the theme of injustice and oppression being perpetrated in the midst of everyday life. Unlike in the previous examples, however, there is a clear and immediate reaction here: a foreign couple observes what happens and tries to intervene. Together, they all walk to the nearest police station, where the foreign couple speaks up in defense of the rickshaw driver. However, it is to no avail, as the French police sergeant tells them they are too soft and sentimental, and that they furthermore should not meddle in domestic affairs. Upon meeting this resistance, the foreign couple relents and then leaves the station.

In a sense, the scene stands out from the other displays of everyday brutality we have seen, in that someone actually reacts. But that reaction does not seem sufficient; rather, it is a little too reminiscent of the surface benevolence of colonialism. This also seems to be Smedley’s point, for as the foreign couple walks away from the station, the woman comments: ‘I want to leave China – I can endure it no more.’ To this, Smedley retorts, inserting herself in the piece: ‘But there is no leaving China for the masses of the oppressed ... The foreigners can run away; or those who do not, remain and join the ranks of those who do the beating ...’ (25). So, we see European imperialism and domestic repression go hand in hand – all contained in that everyday episode, and it is that realisation which also allows us to make the connections between the diverse fragments we have just seen.

As we come to realise the extent of Smedley’s novelistic influences, we also begin to appreciate the structure of the book. For in the middle of the volume, as if marking a turning point, stands ‘The Revolt of the Hunan Miners,’ which continues the theme of repression normalised as routine, but also goes on to suggest that everyday life is the site from which revolutionary change may spring. Here, the conditions are similar to those in ‘Peasants and Lords in China,’ with the mud huts of the mine workers being contrasted against the warm and comfortable houses of the mine owners. A few years earlier, Smedley explains, communist

---

sympathies had taken hold in the mining community, but this had been violently pushed back by
the owners of the mine, and as we step into the story, it is made clear that suspected communists
still face persecution. Despite the harsh conditions and control, however, the miners seem to
have located a space of potential resistance: ‘Down in the tunnels, before the open surface
hearth, over in the electric motor rooms, and around the gambling tables, groups of miners
gathered together, talked in low tones, and then flowed apart again’ (122). During the small
spaces of the day, the miners are able to plan the revolt. Notably, none of these are really
secluded spaces – they are at work and at leisure, never sneaking away to some secret meeting
hall or otherwise. Drawing on simultaneity, another modernist staple, Smedley is then able to
show how the uprising is able to succeed precisely because its planning has been hidden, as it
were, in plain sight.

At night, the miners sound off a signal – inauspicious enough not to disturb the sleep of the
mine owners, but clear enough to mobilise the miners:

The guards did not hear, the police did not hear, the bosses in their comfortable beds did
not hear, the police officers and Kuomintang officials sleeping in the beds of their
concubines did not hear. But every miner in Shuikoushan who was supposed to hear,
heard. (127)

With the flair and gusto perhaps only a novelist can bring, Smedley then describes how all the
miners rise at the exact same time, overpowering all of those lulled by sleep. Here, one
formulation in particular stands out: ‘From all sides came the soft thud of hundreds of feet
running …’ (127). ‘Soft thud’ – the sound of hundreds of people running should not be soft by
any stretch of the imagination. Still, there is something appropriate about it, in the sense that it
conveys how that movement has been built up in a clandestine manner, as it has been woven into
everyday life, and so takes the mine owners by surprise.

Here, a reversal is enacted: from everyday life as a site of trauma to a space of resistance,
anticipating the theories of Michel de Certeau and his subversive practices of everyday life. In
his landmark 1986 work The Practice of Everyday Life, Certeau sought to nuance Foucauldian
determinism, by locating resistance against seemingly monolithic regimes of control in the
‘clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical and, makeshift creativity of groups or
individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline.”’

This counter-activity, which Certeau calls tactics, depends on the amorphous quality of everyday life for its deployment. ‘[A] tactic,’
he writes,

is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus … It must vigilantly
make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the
proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises. It can be where it is least
expected. It is a guileful ruse.

In ‘The Revolt of the Hunan Miners,’ the everyday is a space of resistance, of revolutionary
potential – it has a certain formlessness which makes it dynamic. Like in Certeau’s thinking, it is
a social space that cannot be fully policed by the dominant order, and so proves essential for the
emergence of the uprising. The encounter with China, then, allows Smedley to move beyond the
alienation of everyday life so often found in the novels of her American contemporaries, to
instead locate forms of agency and resistance where it may be least expected: in the humdrum of
daily routine.

16 de Certeau 37.
In uncovering the kernel of revolutionary potential within the deep structures of everyday life, Smedley’s work also amounts to a form of historiography. For even though her role is ostensibly that of a contemporary chronicler, her work and method nonetheless have implications for the discipline of history.\footnote{In his chapter on Smedley in Dialogics of the Oppressed (1993), Peter Hitchcock is interested in how she ‘negotiates the fraught relationship of the individual to historical change,’ as part of his larger Bakhtinian exegesis of the author’s political commitment (129). Yet it is clear that Hitchcock’s main concern is not that of historiographic practice. ‘How does one represent the vertiginous confrontation in the narrative of history?’ he asks at one point, after quoting Smedley’s meditations on being caught up in the midst of historical change – only to then note that the answer to the question lies beyond the compass of his study (158-9).}

In 1878, Friedrich Engels wrote: ‘The idea that political acts, grand performances of state, are decisive in history is as old as written history itself,’ a conception that he suggests has left us with little recorded knowledge about that ‘which has taken place quietly, in the background, behind these noisy scenes on the stage.’\footnote{Friedrich Engels. ‘Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science,’ Collected Works by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Vol 25 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987) 147.} What Engels describes here is something that has interested thinkers across the political spectrum, for even someone as diametrically opposed as Karl Popper could later make a similar point. In his The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945), Popper laments what we talk about when we talk about history, arguing that what is generally known as history – what is taught in schools and treated in books under that name – is actually only one specific form of history, namely that of political power. Open any book purporting to chronicle the history of the world, he argues, and what invariably unfolds across those pages is a story of political dominance told through a succession of empires and superpowers, from the Egyptians and Babylonians to the present day. Somehow, at the expense of other histories, the history of political power has become synonymous with history itself. The gravest consequence of this semantic confounding, Popper argues, is that the most important of histories has remained underwritten: the concrete history of mankind, as he terms it. ‘The life of the forgotten, of the unknown individual man; his sorrows and his joys, his suffering and death, this is the real content of human experience down the ages,’ he argues. ‘But such a history does not and cannot exist; and all the history which exists, our history of the Great and the Powerful, is at best a shallow comedy ...\footnote{Karl Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies (London: Routledge, 2002) 476-7.} This history, however, does exist for Smedley, and it is the one she records in Chinese Destinies. In doing so, she anticipates later developments in historiography, which would all in different ways answer to Popper’s appeal: E.P. Thompson’s ‘history from below,’ Howard Zinn’s ‘people’s history,’ and perhaps most significantly, Fernand Braudel’s three-part Civilization and Capitalism, which sought to ‘introduc[e] everyday life ... into the domain of history.’\footnote{Fernand Braudel, The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible (London: Collins, 1981) 29.} Nevertheless, despite her predominant focus on everyday life, Smedley still manages to include the ‘Great and the Powerful’ of traditional historiography in her account – albeit in an indirect way. As I have already noted, in situating the revolt of the Hunan miners as the first sign of a turning point in the narrative structure of Chinese Destinies, Smedley anticipates the historical development that would follow. Yet ‘The Revolt of the Hunan Miners’ is prescient in more ways than one, for not only is Hunan the home province of Mao Zedong, but the future chairman was also inextricable from the larger revolutionary activity in the area, as he had led the so-called Autumn Harvest Uprising elsewhere in the province only a few months earlier.

Still, there is more: for in the last major piece of the book, ‘The Fall of Shangpo,’ Mao actually makes a short appearance, in what is likely his earliest portrayal by a Western writer or
Towards the end of this story, dealing with the siege of Shangpo in Jiangxi province, Smedley listens to Mao as he delivers a brief speech following the communist victory, advocating leniency towards the defeated. Naturally, had this account been published 20 years later, it would have come across as generic agitprop. After 400 pages of terror, persecution, and all manner of hardship, Mao appears as the saviour at the end; the narrative logic is predictable, as if borrowed from the most formulaic of proletarian novels. Yet here, in 1929, Mao was only one of many in the Communist Party leadership, and even at the time of Smedley’s publishing the account in 1933, the Long March was still a year into the future. In addition, Mao’s position at the time of the story was not only modest; it was also precarious, as the result of tensions with party leader Li Lisan. Indeed, although she herself is sympathetic to him, Smedley observes a less than positive response to Mao from the crowd, with some openly challenging his authority: ‘From the audience men angrily accused him of trying to protect the landlords from the peasants,’ she writes, noting his struggle to respond to the criticism (360). Thus, at the time, Mao was only one of several commanders, his standing uncertain, and so it is only in retrospect that his brief appearance becomes of interest. For any reader after 1949, the appearance of Mao is any number of things: conspicuous, jarring, even uncanny. It is the striking and revelatory detail observed in a photograph only decades afterwards.

The effect of Mao’s appearance on the contemporary reader, I would suggest, is a little like that which the sight of Napoleon famously had on Hegel. In an example often used to explain the German philosopher’s view of history, Hegel in a letter describes observing Napoleon on horseback in the aftermath of the battle of Jena in 1807. As he writes: ‘I saw the Emperor – this world-soul – riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it.’ Without drawing any other parallels between the two historical figures, it could be said that Hegel and Smedley both observe Napoleon and Mao in the wake of decisive victory and on the cusp of making further history. Yet in the case of Hegel, he could of course appreciate the importance of the moment, given that Napoleon was the most powerful leader in Europe at the time. Smedley, however, had no apparent way of knowing the eventual ascent of Mao, which would only start in earnest with the Long March in late 1934. So, it is the post-1949 readers – not Smedley – who get to experience something similar to Hegel’s reaction: sensing the movement of history condensed into one person, who would eventually stretch out over China to dominate it. Yet the difference is that in Smedley’s account as a whole, Mao is contextualised as being part of a larger historical process, and not actually driving that process himself, as in the case of Hegel’s view of Napoleon. What Smedley does, then, is to elucidate the foundations of that process in everyday life. By keeping her ears close to the ground and her eyes open for the strange in the familiar, she is able to apprehend the historical forces around her, and with the perspective of time, the foreshadowing glimpse of Mao could be seen as confirming the value and validity of her historiographic method.

Conclusion

How can one disengage literary form from politics? In Chinese Destinies, Smedley arrived at a literary method that allowed her to at once document and diagnose a complex period in Chinese history, in the process predicting the eventual outcome of those tumultuous decades. At the same time, we must acknowledge, it was also the outcome she hoped for. This explains, of course,
why her work was shunned in the United States following the proclamation of the People’s Republic in 1949 and the accompanying debate of ‘who lost China,’ which ruined the reputations of those diplomats and intellectuals who had predicted a communist victory. In the case of Smedley, her predicament was also exacerbated by allegations of espionage for the Soviet Union. Thus, at the time of her death from post-surgery complications in 1950, her legacy was doubly stigmatised, with the result that she fell victim to McCarthyism even in her posthumous life. As biographer Ruth Price reveals, Smedley’s work was ‘burned in a “cleansing campaign”’ directed by the Wisconsin senator himself, initially targeting government libraries abroad. Soon, the campaign widened in scope, and as Price explains, ‘[Smedley’s] books disappeared from libraries,’ and ‘publishers allowed her books to go out of print,’ while at the same time showing no interest in bringing out her posthumous work. A result, her name eventually disappeared from public view, buried under the weight of the Red Scare. Yet what this purge conveniently obscured was the fact that Smedley’s work had only ten years earlier been used as official World War II propaganda in the United States. For in 1943, the Council on Books in Wartime – a governmentally funded organisation – had promoted the author’s then-current Battle Hymn of China as recommended reading on the war, and later that year, the book was turned into a radio program by the same group. Dealing with the Second Sino-Japanese War, the book was no less sympathetic to Chinese communism than Smedley’s other work, yet the alliance between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek combined with the larger threat posed by Japan had now turned her into an officially sanctioned voice. Ten years later, however, it was this very same book – along with Daughter of Earth – that was targeted by Senator McCarthy, demonstrating with great irony what a difference a decade makes.

In conclusion, then, it would seem that the demands of realpolitik have diminished Smedley’s innovations in literary non-fiction. Had her work been considered on formal merits alone, I believe she would have stood comfortably next to other writers mining similar literary territory in the same decade, such as John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, and Erskine Caldwell. But today, when Cold War anxieties have on the one hand passed and we are on the other hand seeing a number of generically ambiguous narratives on the 2008 financial crisis – epitomised by Michael Lewis’s The Big Short – perhaps the time is right for a rediscovery of Smedley’s idiosyncratic yet potent brand of literary non-fiction, along with its validation of everyday life as a site of socio-political and historical inquiry.

Fredrik Tydal is Senior Lecturer in English at the Stockholm School of Economics. He is currently undertaking a research project on the Armed Services Editions, the book series that provided the American military with reading material during World War II. He is also the Vice-President of the John Dos Passos Society.

23 Price 420.
24 Price 420.
25 ‘Books on the War: Recommended List No. 6,’ Series VI. Posters; dates not examined; Council on Books in Wartime Records, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
26 ‘Words at War, Episode 16: Battle Hymn of China,’ NBC 30 September (1943) https://archive.org/details/WordsAtWar_995

Works cited


‘Books on the War: Recommended List No. 6. Series VI. Posters; dates not examined; Council on Books in Wartime Records, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.


‘Words at War, Episode 16: *Battle Hymn of China.*’ NBC 30 September (1943) 
https://archive.org/details/WordsAtWar_995

The Beloved in Nader Naderpour’s Poetry

Rouhollah Zarei
Yasouj University, Iran

Abstract

This paper offers a new picture of a modern Iranian poet and Nobel Prize nominee, Nader Naderpour, in light of his take on the feminine. The paper is an analysis of some less known love poems most of which were expurgated from his collections of poems after the Islamic revolution in 1979 in his home country. In his long and prolific career, he composed many poems celebrating the beloved in various ways. His outlook on the feminine ranged from simple poems detailing erotic and sexual scenes to very romantic and idealistic pictures of ethereal soul-mates. Naderpour’s well-known power of vision, making him a significant modern Persian poet in this regard, enabled him to produce women in many forms, earthly or heavenly, literal or symbolic. Thus, in Naderpour one can find the voice of a typical modern Persian male poet as regards the beloved.

* * * * *

Nader Naderpour (1929-2000), an Iranian poet who spent the last years of his life in the United States and died there, is not well known in the English-speaking world. He is a poet whose sensitivities are unforgettable for many Persian readers. His main concerns in poetry were nature, romance, and passage of time (youth, old age, and death).¹ His poems were written over decades and cover a variety of subjects, so it is hard to pigeonhole him into a single school of poetry.

Classical Persian poetry followed strict rules of prosody and rhyme and the subject matter was more less fixed. But the atmosphere of the change in the subject matter of poetry including new issues of patriotism, freedom, feminism, and proletarian literature had already started with the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911).² After the accession of Reza Shah to power in 1925, a new movement known as the New Poetry, which challenged the established form of poetry, emerged. The leader of the literary movement was Nima Yushij (pen name for Ali Esfandyari, 1895-1960), who manipulated rhythm and rhyme and allowed the length of the line to be determined by the depth of the thought rather than by the established metrical rules. The reign of Reza Shah (1925-1941) which marked the end of the post-Constitutional period helped give rise to a kind of romanticism roughly comparable to the French romanticism. Disillusioned with social movements, poets preferred seclusion and took refuge in nature in that period. When Reza

Shah was deposed in 1941 upon the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, the pressure of the deposed king’s regime on Iranian intellectuals slackened, until the coup against Prime Minister Mosaddegh in 1953. Before the coup, there was a sense of mission and commitment to society among intellectuals and poets but after the coup, they felt insignificant and paralysed. There was a shattering of their dreams so many sought refuge in the world of imagination and seclusion again. The poet in this era was introverted, sullen, defeated, and disdissant.\(^3\) The quarter of a century between the coup and the 1979 revolution brought about certain new changes in Persian poetry including a further development of the romantic and individualistic trend an offshoot of which was erotic poetry.

_Havasnāma_ or erotic poetry is an old but not very popular genre in Persian literature. The post-coup pessimism and sense of failure accounted for its rise. It was an unconscious outlet of dismay and a conscious vent for forgetfulness. The carpe diem philosophy which was the hallmark of Naderpour’s poetry in those days prompted some of his contemporaries to criticise him for his lack of commitment and responsibility.\(^4\)

The New Poetry movement in Iran not only broke away from the established rules but also updated the reservoir of themes by introducing subjects that met the need of modern Iranians. Naderpour very cautiously steered away from the traditional poetry and embraced the changes in form and content. Shams Langroudi (pen name for Javaheri Gilani), a contemporary Iranian poet and author, maintained that ‘Naderpour’\(^\prime\)s moderate and neo-classical poetry attracted most audiences in the 1950s because of the romantic and living images, addressing deep sensibilities and anxieties in modern human beings, and the ease and fluency of language.\(^5\) For this reason, Morteza Kakhi calls Naderpour a colossal secure bridge that helped his contemporary poets pass over from the prevalent old poetry to the New Poetry era.\(^6\) Long before Kakhi, Nouri-alā referred to Naderpour and a few others as the pillars of the bridge connecting the classical to the new poetry.\(^7\)

Naderpour’s evolution as a poet was steady and consistent over decades of literary activity. In 1950s, he was already well-known with the publication of _Chashmhā va dashthā (Eyes and Hands), 1954_, _Dokhtar-e jām (Daughter of the Cup), 1955_, and _She \^r-e angūr (The Grapes Poem), 1958_. Thus when _Sormehy-e khorshīd (The Sun’s Kohl), 1960_ came out, he was already at the pinnacle of fame. In modern Persian poetry, Naderpour is arguably the best in the use of imagery. Pictorial description dominates Naderpour’s thoughts and feelings and his power lies in images that are clear and sharp.

Naderpour’s heavy dependence on the production of images had supporters and detractors. Supporters believe that he rekindled an almost forgotten trend in poetry in modern times. Opponents, however, argue that an image in itself is insufficient and that Naderpour lived in an

---

4 See Forough Farrokhabaz\’s views below.
5 Shams Langroudi (M.T.J. Gilani), _Tārikh-e tablīfic-e she\^r-e no (An Analytical History of Persian Modern Poetry)_ vol. 2 (Tehran: Nashre Markaz, 1991) 57.
7 Esma’\^eal Nouri-alā, _Sovar va asbāb dar she\^r-e emrouze Iran (Imagery and Accessories in Modern Iranian Poetry)_ , 1\(^\text{st}\) Ed. (Tehran, Bamdad Publishers, 1969) 407.

---


---

ARCHIVED AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY: DSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU
ivory tower and forgot other people’s distress. Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), a famous contemporary of Naderpour, criticised him for overemphasis on images and de-emphasis on meaning:

Naderpour’s poems are completely devoid of meaning. He is an expert imagist but what is the use of an image alone? What is he going to express with these images? Nothing. … Only his own pains impress him."8

One factor responsible for the rise of the new poetry in Iran was the direct or indirect influence of European literature. Naderpour admitted that those influences, harmful or useful, were undeniable. The share of French literature was greater than the rest in this respect.9 He mentions that

[A] factor that helped me improve on and modernize my poetry was French, the treasure I inherited from my knowledgeable and cultivated parents. I started to study the French poetry and soon I was familiar with Charles Baudelaire.10

Naderpour maintained that he was a poet of his generation. He did not see language isolated from its content. Therefore, he put forth what he felt in the current language. His language was not too archaic to scare the common reader away nor was it so colloquial to bore the elite. For this reason, he has had readers from among the general reader as well as the elites. ‘Form and content,’ he asserted, ‘are born together like twins.’11

This paper will trace Naderpour’s treatment of the beloved, with a focus on poems that were expurgated from his collected poems after the 1979 revolution in his home country. The female is deemed as powerful and a source of inspiration. At times, she becomes a soul mate, inspiring the speaker with romantic feelings. At other times, she becomes an erotic and sexual partner and on many occasions she is an inseparable part of the outside nature.

The picture which Naderpour draws has roots in the past and present. In the classical Persian literature, women had no grand status. They were either the enchanting beloved or the unfaithful and deceitful woman. Very rarely do they appear as good and pious.12 In lyric poetry, too, the beloved is, as Shafi’ee Kadkani maintains, a divine, inaccessible, cruel and bloodthirsty masochist.13

The female appears in three forms in classical Persian literature. In the first form, which provides a negative picture of women, she is humiliated and belittled as in didactic and religious literature. In such cases, we are dealing with a ‘woman’ rather than a ‘beloved’ since there is a clear-cut borderline between the two in Persian literature. The thirteenth–century Sufi poet,

---

8 Forough Farrokhzad, Harfhā-i ba Forough Farrokhzad (Words with Forough Farrokhzad), ed. Sirous Tahbaz (Tehran: Roshdieh, 1956) 35.
13 Shafi’ee Kadkani 23.
Rumi, for instance, maintains that one should take women as clothes with which a man cleans his dirt, ‘Know that they are like a garment; in them you can cleanse your own impurities and become clean yourself.’\(^\text{14}\) In the same century, Sa’di talks about housewives:

> If thy wife take the road to the bazar, beat her, or sit thyself like a woman in thy house. Let her eyes be blind in the presence of strangers; when she goeth from thy house, let it be to the grave.

> Take a new wife each Spring, O friend, for last year’s almanac serves no purpose.\(^\text{15}\)

This was more or less typical of the age, culture and dominant masculine attitude. Thus, the poet might at times have been voicing dominant negative views about women rather than his own beliefs.\(^\text{16}\)

In the second group, which is indeed a rare case, they are adulated and idealised. To Nizami, a twelfth-century poet, women were not objects of masculine lust but he found in them the potential to run the country, to judge and give counsels. Mahin Banu, an Armenian queen and her niece, Shirin, who becomes the queen after her aunt’s death, are such examples in Khosrow and Shirin. In this specific example, psychological and cultural factors like xenophilia might be involved in the poet’s positive take on the two as they were not Iranians. A prominent Iranian scholar, Zarinkoub, maintains that Shirin is in no way inferior to Khosrow, the Iranian king.\(^\text{17}\)

Being superior for whatever reason, she does not represent an Iranian woman or the attitudes toward her.

The third group includes charming women for whom love poems are composed as in lyrical poetry. There is, of course, a sharp difference between the second and the third attitude towards women as in the third they are merely objects of love or, more properly, of lust and it is their body that matters. However, there is a point where this group and the first meet and that is the picture of the woman or beloved as a temptress who entices men into sin. Reminding the Western reader of Medusa, in classical Persian poetry the long hair of the beloved is sometimes compared to snakes. In Irāqī, a thirteenth-century Persian poet, we read, ‘I hung onto her dishevelled hair/ How fond of me to hold a snake’s tail’\(^\text{18}\) or in another line by him, ‘Tying heart with the hair of any beloved / was leaving heart with a new dragon.’\(^\text{19}\)

The biblical story of Adam and Eve is repeated in the Islamic tradition so it is not surprising that beautiful women should be linked with Satan, snakes, and Paradise. Persian Sufi literature is replete with such images. Gha’ani, a nineteenth-century poet, makes abundant correlations of the tempting tresses of the beloved with snakes and Satan in the Garden of Eden.\(^\text{20}\)

Simin Behbehani, a contemporary female poet, puts it in this way, ‘The apple tree is bowing before the cypress / as if Eve has a

\(^{14}\) Rumi, Discourses of Rumi (Or Fihī ma Fihī), Translated by Arthur J. Arberry, Omphaloskepsis: Ames, Iowa, 2000) 156.


\(^{19}\) Irāqī, Collected Poems, 204 (translation mine).

The beloved in Nader Naderpour’s poetry. Rouhollah Zarei. 
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017. 

present to deceive Adam’ (‘Judas Tree’). Forough Farrokhzad finds man and woman equally responsible for the original sin although she finds it a necessary step for growth and finding truth:

Everyone knows,  
you and I saw the garden  
from that cold crabbed aperture  
and that we plucked the apple  
from that playful, hard-to-reach branch.

Everyone is afraid  
everyone is afraid, but you and I  
dared join with the lamp, the water and the mirror. 

In Naderpour we at times encounter the image of the beloved as a seductress or as he puts it, a ‘sin-thirsty woman.’ On a number of occasions he does employ the image of snakes to refer to women. In ‘Feverish Thirst’, the speaker muses, ‘the serpents of her arms crept on my shoulders,’ and in ‘The Sun’s Blood’ he writes,

Like a drunken serpent  
she was lying in the grass,  
from the cleft of her lids  
sun rays shone on the crystal of the eyes.

All in all, the image is not positive.

In the Persian language, there is a single third person pronoun for both male and female. This has caused ambiguity and has led to age-old questions regarding the gender of the beloved in a given poem. Classical Persian poetry is full of overt or covert cases of homosexuality. In the Sufi spiritual poetry, things get more convoluted when God too as the beloved enters the equation. However, the gender in contemporary poetry is quite known to the audience as she is described in unambiguous terms. In modern times the picture of the beloved has grown more and more vivid as the expression of love has become much more down-to-earth. The beloved moves away from an impersonal and homogenous whole to a clearer personal identity one can find in everyday life.

The change of the picture was partly due to the efforts of female poets. Alamtaj (pen name, Jaleh) Gha’em-maghami (1884-1947) was one the first women to publicly fight for the female cause in the world of literature. The unhappy prearranged marriage at the age of 17 with a man

26 See Shafi’ee Kadkani 62-63.
27 I have excluded female poets of older times like Rabia Balkhi (10th century), Mahsati Ganjavi (12th century) and Jamileh Isfahani (17th century) as we have access not only to poems by modern female poets but to their lives.
whose daughters were older than Jaleh made her look for love in the world of imagination. In her poems she addresses the personal and social sufferings of women and explicitly criticises the patriarchal culture of her times. Many of her poems criticise her forced marriage with a man she never loved: ‘Is it marriage or prostitution? / Is it life or in fact death?’

Parvin E’tesami (1907-1941) is another poet who called for social changes through mild censures. She did not actively participate in the social movements for women’s rights and freedom. She aimed to teach her compatriots humanitarianism, so her poems are basically free from hedonism and topical issues. The woman in her poems, who is usually a mother, is divine, creative, able and knowledgeable, but romantic love is never her concern. In ‘The Woman in Iran’ she offers a model of chastity for women. The real pearls, she maintains, to decorate women are simplicity, chastity and immaculacy:

Chastity is in the eye and the heart
The shabby chador is not the foundation of Islam.

But that was not the approach of the Forough Farrokhzad. She tried to save the beloved and the woman from the male gaze in her poems. Shafi’ee Kadkani argues that in Forough one comes across unprecedented personal experiences. She broke away from the established norms and maintained her own identity. She dared describe the hero sensuously which was atypical for a female poet of her time in Iran:

My beloved
with his shameless bare body
stood upright on his sturdy legs
like death. …
My beloved
is a simple human being
I have hidden
in the bushes of my breasts
like the last sign of an amazing religion
in an ominous wonderland.

Last but not least was Simin Behbehani (1927-2014), twice a Nobel Prize nominee, a prominent poet and activist who addressed the issues not only of women but of men in our times. A poem like ‘A Prostitute’s Carol’ reflects the plight of a certain class of society which very rarely finds its way into a male poet’s mind.

There are rare occasions in Naderpour as in ‘From a Half to the Other’ with its telling title, when the woman is granted such independent identity:

---

29 See Arianpour 540.
31 Shafi’ee Kadkani 23
O grandeur of the Being!
O great joy!
O immortal feminine soul!
In the depth of this dark night,
flow as the river of light! ...
Remain a woman, O essence of femininity!  

However, the beloved in Naderpour appears in different forms. In her crudest form, she is a sex object. There are many such poems, almost all of which were included in his books of poems before the revolution and censored in the versions published after the revolution. The composition of such poems coincides with Naderpour’s youth when sexual, erotic and romantic themes were his main concerns. Many of the poems discussed in this paper are from *The Grapes Poem*. They can be categorized based on the degree as well as the overtness of sexuality.

The beloved in the first category is a mere sexual partner quenching the thirst of the avid speaker. There is little trace of Naderpour’s typical power of depiction and varied imagery in these poems as they are overtly literal. In ‘Feverish Thirst’ the speaker does not bother to cover eroticism in the figurative language he is familiar with. The poem draws on few literary tropes and is mainly a direct narration of corporeal enjoyment. In the poem, ‘Need,’ romantic images are still straightforward and little figurative description of the beloved is given.

Sometimes Naderpour’s descriptive and imaginative power is at the service of sexuality. ‘Relish’ is an example of an erotic poem detailing acts of sex. In ‘Geography’ the city of Tehran is imagined as a prostitute to whom Mount Alborz is making love:

In the sky’s ceramic tallow-burning light, on a colourful bedspread with hundreds of patches, Tehran, the prostitute, lies drunk and naked. She has closed her eyes out of fear the red-skinned sun might sew her at dawn to the bed with his arrow, but she has opened her two fat legs and the Alborz mountain range is screwing her in the dead of the night.

In ‘The Sun’s Blood’ the sky is depicted as a voyeur and the speaker-lover bars the beloved with his shadow from the sky’s amorous glance. In ‘Night Flower’ human and nature together have a significant part in the production of the images of love-making. Sometimes human romance finds a counterpart in nature and gradually the two plots merge in a concerto:

---

37 Naderpour, *Collected Poems* 494. Tehran is situated at the skirt of the mountain range, Alborz, a masculine name in Persian.
The city lay naked in the arms of the cloud,
no star’s toothed eye
watched her through tree branches.
The cloud slipped his aquamarine hand from the minaret top
onto the dome of her breast.

... 
The shower of my feverish kisses
planted fever blisters on her lips like the rain’s kisses,
she was sleeping and I cried all night
like a cloud over the ruins of her body. (From ‘A Cloud over a Ruin,’ 1960)\(^{40}\)

In ‘Impatient’ nature helps prepare the beloved for the lustful lover. In the morning the curves of her body are carved by the sun’s golden axe, at noon beads of sweats drip from her body, and at night she is prepared for the bed.\(^{41}\)

Naderpour shows an incredible power of vision, turning an ordinary thing or image into a beautiful artifact at will. This is a reminder of the seventeenth century English metaphysical poets whose wit and sensibility created romantic images out of unromantic objects such as fleas. Images of lovemaking can come from anywhere. The following epigrammatic poem is a romantic scene whose images are borrowed from bakery:

I knead the warm dough of your limbs.
The breasts: sweet loaves,
one, the moon; the other, the sun.
The hot oven of my bosom opens mouth
O God, how full is my bare tablecloth tonight! (‘Tablecloth,’ 1959)\(^{42}\)

Naderpour’s youth and the post-coup milieu were two main factors which had their inevitable impact on the production of sexual explicitness in poetry, although he is not the first in Persian poetry to write about such subjects.\(^{43}\) However, as the poet grows older and more mature he engages in more figurative approaches to topics with romantic or erotic overtones. In the following short poem, images from nature strongly blend with that of lovemaking. The poem describes a woman in terms of nature but the sex act is now described symbolically. Thus, a gradual shift from the literal to the figurative is perceived in Naderpour:

She belonged to the earth’s naked body:
soft white soil
with two burning hills
embraced by the sun
and two arms of a river
flowing down
to a shameful cleft

\(^{41}\) Naderpour, The Grapes Poem 93-94.
\(^{42}\) Naderpour, The Sun’s Kohl 79.
\(^{43}\) Azraghi (11th century), Suzani Samarghandi (12th century), Ubayd-e Zakani (14th century), and Iraj Mirza (19-20th century) were some famous figures who talked about sexuality in naked terms though for various purposes.

The Beloved in Nader Naderpour’s Poetry. Rouollah Zarei.
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.
at the bottom of which
grew a wet patch of grass
watered by a spring
as red as a smile.

I wept in the evening
of her narrow ravine. (‘Natural Map’ 1975)

The beloved is not always a sex object. Naderpour at times enhances her from terrestrial to
celestial domains. In such cases she is wrapped in spirituality and becomes more and more
ethereal. ‘Sketch’ is particularly important in that there is a dramatic shift from the body to the
soul, from the earth to paradise, from the human to the houri, and from the reality to fantasy. The
speaker used to know the beloved’s body well enough but for the first time he discovers her
heavenly self and wishes her to be his soul-mate.

In ‘Fugitive’ the speaker remembers and wishes for a return of youthful caprices when both
the lover and the beloved were young: ‘though the sun of your eyes got the colour of the autumn,
/ in my eyes you are still the smiling spring.’ Nature provides fine images, however, unlike
‘Sketch’ in which the woman is presented as an angel, she is now a bewitching seducer, an
unavoidable ‘sin-thirsty woman.’

Naderpour is first and foremost a poet of nature. It is not
unusual for the reader to find the
beloved occupying a special place in his portrayal of nature. Different gradations of his take on
the feminine from the most spiritual to the most carnal can be observed here, too. The day is
seen as a woman who emerges from the dawn and on whose long hair the dust of the red dusk
glitters. The sun is described as a woman from whose breast, the milk of light flows into the
copper sky. The beloved is sometimes a bird that has abandoned the speaker who is likened to
a lonely chicken. However, Naderpour’s favourite natural image is that of the tree. The poet is
able to see the tree as he wishes, either spiritual or carnal. The beloved can be a tree giving
virgin birth to a bird in the morning as in the following short poem composed on Christmas Eve:

The spirit of the morning
hangs fruit on the virgin tree;
from its green womb
a bird is born, and flies
toward the red opening
in the sun.

44 Zarei and Sedarat 34-35.
45 Naderpour, The Sun’s Kohl 67–68.
47 See Zarei and Sedarat.
49 ‘A Future in the Past’ (1984), Zarei, 70.
A brother to light,
this happy bird (‘The Holy Spirit,’ December 1969).\textsuperscript{51}

She can be the last leaf on a dead bony tree;\textsuperscript{52} or the tree itself is an erotic object for the sun’s lust:

Dusty Poplars,
without bending,
wash their feet in the brook
and the lecherous Sun, from among branches,
warmly kisses their marble-white legs. (From ‘An Approaching Spring,’ 1964)\textsuperscript{53}

At last, the borderline between the tree and the beloved is blurred and the two become one as the object of the speaker’s romantic love:

Your body’s aroma,
your lovely tall figure,
your warm blood,
your blossoming breasts,
your gracefully long legs,
awaken the spring in me. (‘A Lover Looks at a Tree,’ 1970)\textsuperscript{54}

Some images and concepts produced here are typical of love poetry but some others are unique to Naderpour. The poems selected from Naderpour’s books of poems composed over decades are intended to offer a snapshot of his take on the beloved in his poetry. His depictions do not account for the beloved in her entirety in Persian literature. However, in his massive poetical corpus, Naderpour portrayed a fairly comprehensive picture of the desired and beloved woman under a male gaze. It is true that in him the beloved has no identity to express and she is only there to be loved passively. The period of suppression between the coup and the revolution which brought about dejection among intellectuals was not so bad after all from another perspective. Mohammad Reza Shah’s secular regime did not care about implementing strict moral and religious codes on published material so new branches of literature like erotic poetry had a chance to flourish, while some older branches, like strict moralism in the didactic literature, withered. Good or bad, many were to miss erotic poetry on the formal literary scene in the years after the Islamic revolution.

\textbf{Rouhollah Zarei} is an assistant professor of English at Yasouj University, Iran. He holds a PhD from the University of Essex, UK. Dr. Zarei’s previous publications include \textit{Edgar Allan Poe: An Archetypal Reading} (2013), a translation into Persian of Ramon Llull’s \textit{The Book of the Lover and Beloved} (2014) and \textit{Nature and Nostalgia in the Poetry of Nader Naderpour} (2017) co-authored with Dr. Roger Sedarat.

\textsuperscript{51} Zarei and Sedarat 37.
\textsuperscript{53} Naderpour, \textit{Collected Poems} 444.
\textsuperscript{54} Zarei and Sedarat 33.
Works Cited


Check your metaphors: Review Essay

Paul Sharrad

University of Wollongong


It has been a source of wonder to me how the Netherlands has kept publishing sometimes quite arcane scholarly works when everywhere else has succumbed to market forces and multinational mergers. Despite (science-based) research measurements and other publishers’ reluctance to accept collections of conference papers, Rodopi, for some decades now, has managed to put out edited collections of literary studies grouped under the ‘Commonwealth’ or ‘postcolonial’ label, the best known being the ‘Cross/Cultures’ series. Some of its volumes have been influential in shifting critical focus and introducing new writing to the world.

So it is good to see that, while the inevitable merger and ‘rationalisation’ process has finally hit the Dutch academic publishing scene, the ‘Cross/Cultures’ series continues in new guise. Now under Brill’s management, and in a sharp new paper cover that is print on demand from an e-format, volume 195 selects eighteen papers from the 2011 conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies. Authors are based in France, Germany, Holland, Italy, India, Australia, Britain, the US and South Africa. The places and writers they discuss relate to some of those countries but also to Turkey, Canada, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and New Zealand.

The editors preface their selection with comments on how the humanities operate by borrowing concepts from other disciplines and turning them into metaphors to think by. Walls can protect or imprison; gateways can allow escape or lead to destruction. Like some disciplinary labels, metaphors can spark new ideas or be so malleable that they spread into a swamp of ‘disincarnated rhetorical acrobatics’ (x). Postcolonial readings are presented as ideally ‘performing critical inspection’ of ‘construction sites’ building with metaphors such as walls and gateways (xi). New metaphors might be a means of allowing scholars to keep on doing the same old thing: talking amongst themselves about books most people have not read, and attributing to them an agency for social change that makes analysing them seem important and politically radical.

One of the virtues of work carried out under the ‘Commonwealth Lit’ label is that it has continued to focus on the literary text. Sure, it picks up the jargon of current theory and puts it to sometimes mechanical but usually productive use, and it does talk about social issues and politics, but it stays closer to writers and literature than some other modes of textual scholarship. This creates organisational problems that relate to the conceptual underpinnings of the field: how do you meaningfully hold together a body of writing that is – even and perhaps especially if it is
only in English – a loose and often disjointed assemblage of organs and limbs? Well, you reach for a metaphor: preferably a concrete image that can then be played around with in all kinds of abstract ways – diversity given the appearance of unity: a strength in weakness, weakness in strength. This accords nicely with the project of postcolonial writing and reading: to expose power structures and undermine them; to find the inbuilt gaps and cracks through which things might escape or by which structures might be eroded, demolished. Walls and gateways.

Perhaps the best example of this is Margaret Daymond’s chapter. She looks at letters as letters, providing a careful, clear reading of three. These are from women differently exiled because of South Africa’s apartheid regime, all talking to other women a long way away about home and their feelings. The right amount of background information is provided, and the particular nature of ‘dialogue’ between writer and addressee teased out. The author closes with some modest but suggestive comments on how reading such texts carries challenges consistent with postcolonial theories and can usefully inform how we ethically read other writing in a postcolonial context.

The opposite of this kind of work tries too hard; it either presents worthy ideas in ‘scholar-speak’ so thick the reader feels bombarded with undercooked sticky date pudding, or it parades all the possibly relevant theories of text and culture to the point where they prevent clear thinking about what the texts being discussed do or can do. I agree that postcolonial studies has the potential to turn the neo-imperialism of World Literature as posited by its major proponents into something more radically planetary, but an argument for escaping the walls of Eurocentrism needs to be self-critical about using Goethe and Marx as gateways, and I’m not at all sure that David Damrosch has much in common with Frantz Fanon. Nor will any amount of theory-citing convince me that women disguising themselves as ‘crones’ are escaping or subverting patriarchal discourse: the crone as witchy wise woman is itself a gender stereotype and whatever freedom its marginal social placement confers happens partly because the crone is part of a conventional gender economy; no longer providing sexual or reproductive benefits, she is devalued. Her position certainly escapes some of the pressures on young women but it is also abject rather than revolutionary. Similarly a theoretical framework pointing at liberatory textual moves should not blind a reader to the fact that Divakaruni’s *Mistress of Spices* exploits as much as questions ‘Orientalist’ tropes, both of the ‘mystic East’ and of the spiritual wisdom of Native Americans.

The other trap for the postcolonial scholar is reading from a theorised position of political correctness that results not just in analysing the discursive strengths and limits of a work, but in sounding judgemental that the work is not as thoroughly radical as its reader. Tim Winton, writing about the largely male and almost exclusively white surfing community in Australian country towns, just cannot be deconstructing all gender roles, race relations, and ethnic differences. It is enough in one novel (*Breath*) that he tease out a few complexities in the sport / lifestyle as intuited by some largely inarticulate young people in an otherwise spiritually bankrupt society. It is certainly worth putting that in social context and pointing out an implied conservative attitude to masculinity that favours community service over hedonism. Noting a consistent interest in absent mother-figures is also a productive critical intervention. That’s
enough, perhaps with some brief indication of how or whether Winton’s other work pushes beyond the ‘walls’ of this text.

Most of the above is derived from the final section of the collection, which is perhaps an example of how the conference metaphor gets stretched to accommodate as much as it can. Gender is the wall or gateway here, and the section opens with comparison of Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* and Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*. Europe is the wall and gateway for Africans fleeing violence and poverty, both books showing up the diversity of experience and the realities behind theories and images of migration and ‘the refugee’. Contemporary migration is an echo of the Middle Passage, but with major differences, and the experiences of men and women diverge markedly. Both books break up narrative sequencing to reflect lives in which no continuity can be expected between one day and the next. The chapter concludes that ‘The only glimmer of hope to break through in Phillips’s dark narrative is its potential effect on the reader’ (265), while Unigwe’s oppressed women band together to provide a more positive ending. We might wonder whether that has the reverse effect on the reader of allowing escape from social concern.

The first section relates to the originating conference venue: Istanbul. Atatürk’s modernisation of his nation symbolised in laws against old forms of dress provides a basis for looking at Fanon’s writing on the veil and contemporary oppositions to the various modes of female muslim attire summed up as the ‘burqa’. The essay shows how every attempt to construct a legislative ‘wall’ results in unpredictable ‘gateways’ until specifically targeted discriminations turn into a general suspicion of human identity: ‘the mask is the inescapable condition of identity’ (19) and we all become targets of surveillance.

Comparison of Elif Shafak’s *The Bastard of Istanbul* and the work of Salman Rushdie (particularly *The Satanic Verses*) shows clear similarities between depictions of diasporic experience (doubles, hybridity, the dangerous power of literature, gendering the city as female and its conquest as a masculine takeover) and suggests the viability of using postcolonial theory to read Turkish literature. Rushdie is seen as ultimately pessimistic, while Shafak is more optimistic about Istanbul’s capacity to hold past and present together.

In ‘The Bosphorus Syndrome’ we get a panoramic history of ‘the puzzling interface’ between West and East and Orientalist dualities of ‘millennial splendour and gothic twilight’ (41). European artists, travellers and writers are cited as backing up a ‘sentimentally submissive’ quality in contemporary Turkish authors expressed by Orhan Pamuk as ‘hüzün’: ‘a kind of profound cultural sensitivity verging on schizophrenia and steeped in melancholy meditation’ (46).

For some reason, Amitav Ghosh is the most cited author in this collection, and ‘Geography Fabulous’ takes a late essay by Conrad as a basis for assessing Ghosh’s denial of ‘writing back’ to someone who otherwise seems to have clearly been an influence. The essay argues that Ghosh imbued Conrad’s investing of geography with romance, and attributes his favouring of Melville over Conrad to his being interviewed while living in the US and thinking about the Gulf War and oil in relation to Britain’s earlier exploitation of the opium trade.
‘The concomitant spaces of territory and writing’ begins with Africa-inspired plays performed in Toronto and ranges across Derek Walcott, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Amit Chaudhuri, Europe’s modernists, Synge, Tagore, Beckett and Janet Frame. All this to argue that the English language was widely adopted not so much as a colonial imposition as a ‘gateway’ offering expressive flexibility and a lever for freeing up the rigid literary codes of vernacular writing. (Nirad Chaudhuri argued this years ago for Bengali, and, like this chapter neglected to mention that the hybrid flexibility of English was also posited by imperialists as part of the assimilative ‘genius’ of their rule.)

Section Two (‘Under Construction: Nations and Cultures’) begins with ‘Towards an Australian Philosophy’, an attempt to show Murray Bail’s The Pages as reworking the Enlightenment project to establish linearity, realism and rationalism as more worthwhile than postcolonial critiques would suggest. I have to confess that I gave up on The Pages and this reading does not incline me to try again, though it gives close attention to the text and uses Heidegger as support for the narrative’s presentation of philosophy not as a linear progression towards truth, but as ‘a complex fragmented pattern of thoughts’ that can be read in any order and might ‘re-map bonds between Australian space and thought.’ (98).

A livelier chapter considers the idea of nation in relation to Africa and its diaspora. ‘Image-i-nation’ opposes Renan’s concept of cultural and racial unity to a more complex national belonging that may be multilingual, multi-ethnic, poly-religious. It tracks the history of Benin / Dahomey to reject the idea that hybrid constructions of identity did not just begin at the other end of the Middle Passage, but were already under construction in West Africa. Later Black intellectuals tended to romanticise a unified national heritage somewhere in Africa, while all around them the idea of nation was being reinterpreted (Brathwaite’s ‘nation language’ and the redefinition of nation in Brazil into ethnic communities). Transformations within Vodun and debates around the use of colonial language or creoles (with differences between the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean) are considered within an argument for regional creation of entirely new concepts of ‘nation’.

‘Refugees and Three Short Stories from Sri Lanka’ points out the many kinds of dispossession in the history of civil conflict of that island. It notes, too, that no South Asian country has signed refugee conventions so that resettlement devolves to local states and lacks consistency. Neil Fernandopulle’s ‘Dear Vichy’, Jean Arasanayagam’s ‘The Journey’ and S. Panneerselvam’s ‘My Motherland’ show the difficulties of internal and overseas displaced peoples, and unsettled and unsettling exclusions of nationalist politics.

Amitav Ghosh’s The Sea of Poppies is contrasted with Barlen Pyamootoo’s Bénarès, the former a positive view of poor and persecuted Indians anticipating a better future in Mauritius, and the latter, written in Mauritius about some modern-day villagers taking a couple of women from the capital back home, portraying a bleak existentialism: ‘If Ghosh’s protagonists cannot foresee their future, Pyamootoo’s are even less capable of retrieving their past’ (145). Ghosh’s journeys are spatial, whereas Pyamootoo’s characters try to recall things that will give their home significance. The juxtaposition of a local and an internationally famous book is productive
and allows comment on the expectations of postcolonial / global readers. (Pyamootoo’s book suggests further comparison with Subramani’s stories from Fiji.)

‘Postcolonial Literature in the Time of World Literature’ has been mentioned already. Its ‘wide-angle’ discussion narrows briefly around Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration*, Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* and Shrilal Shukla’s *Raag Darbari*.

Section Three looks at borders. ‘Die Mauer is no joke!’ compares depictions of the Berlin Wall by New Zealand writers Cilla McQueen and Kapka Kassabova. McQueen was in Berlin in 1988 to learn German, and published poems as *Berlin Diary* in 1990. A friend of Maori Poet Hone Tuwhare, who had also written about time in Germany, McQueen reads The Wall partly as a metaphor for the bicultural society of her homeland, its solidity containing hints of its immanent collapse. Kassabova migrated to New Zealand from Bulgaria after biculturalism had morphed into something more complex. Her visit to Berlin resulted in *Geography for the Lost* (2007) and *Street Without a Name* (2008), and relates to her memories of the Cold War from the Eastern Bloc perspective in which the Wall was both prison and comfort, its loss an excision of her past. The chapter relies on close reading of poems and some recourse to ideas from urban planning.

South African Ivan Vladislavic writes about walls around property, but (in line with Sarah Nuttall’s discerning a new ‘ethic of hospitality’ in South African writing) he envisages some walls not as exclusionary protectors of isolated privilege, but as creative constructions witnessing to the past and to collective desires. The chapter is structured by Heidegger’s binary *Mitsein* and *Dasein* and includes comparison with some work by Gordimer and comment on supposedly ‘Ndebele’ artwork on Johannesburg walls.

Carol Shields’ novel *Larry’s Party* is read against Northrop Frye’s depiction of Canadian nature as an obstacle occasioning a ‘garrison mentality’. ‘Enclosed: Nature’ riffs on Shields’ central motif of the maze, it being a wall but also a gateway, nature but also culture. With reference to ecocritical ideas, the chapter tracks old texts that read the maze as life’s journey (noting Shield’s penchant for a ‘life writing’ narrative mode), and examines the novel, showing some of Larry’s strengths and limitations as a user of and blurrer of boundaries. Garden writing is also often journal-like and records a journey towards some ideal. Shields can be read against the pioneering ‘garden’ writing of Susannah Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill and the art of Emily Carr, and creativity ultimately comes up against the world beyond language that may express itself through nature. The maze / garden as ‘processed wilderness’ (234) leads to ‘the discovery that human nature is part of the uncontrollable Otherness’ (236), not a separate entity walled off by prairies and mountains.

‘An Ethics of Mourning’ returns us to Amitav Ghosh and *The Shadow Lines*. Noting the protagonist narrator’s quest to remember properly, the chapter argues that ‘the novel maintains a tension between the refusal to forget, on the one hand, and imaginative, fictional productions of loss, on the other’ (241). Objective maps are contrasted to subjective memory in which desire informs ‘truth’ and the narrator clings to the past as present in traumatised melancholy. Photographs serve as ‘a prosthetic mnemonic tool’ reinforcing fixation in selective recall.
Repeated rehearsal of the past by the narrator ends in an act of imagination that ‘functions as a trace’ and ‘a creative product that fills the void of his loss’ (250).

One thing that stands out in this book is the absence of any papers on indigenous writing. Here we can perhaps see the exclusionary nature of the governing metaphors: walls and gateways have little relevance to nomadic cultures, for example, though protest writing about being confined to residential schools and prisons and white homes could have been examined. Possibly such work was seen as well documented already, though Kim Scott’s actual deconstruction of walls in *Benang* seems like a topic too apt to have been neglected.

Postcolonial studies is itself a structure and one which many scholars have declared uncomfortably restricting. As globalisation and cross-disciplinary studies have gained momentum, the old nation-centred, discipline-based work has spread out into micro- and transnational studies and into indigenous, gender, cultural and animal studies, and started to inform work in anthropology, visual arts, archaeology, geography and so on. As the editors of this volume properly signal in their subtitle, the project has always been a process: power shifts ground and form, so speaking truth to it must also change: the postcolonial is a site forever under construction. Claims of its disappearance are either wishful thinking or overly pessimistic, depending on your politics.

---

**Paul Sharrad** is a Senior Fellow in the Faculty of Law Humanities and the Arts at the University of Wollongong. He has taught postcolonial writing there for many years, edited *New Literatures Review*, and published widely, especially on Indian and Pacific literatures. He recently co-edited the final volume of the *Oxford History of the Novel in English*, covering Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Pacific.
Introduction

‘Nzuri Na Mengi’ is the sequel to an essay I wrote in 2007 about the first seven winners of The Caine Prize for African Writing, a prestigious annual award for short fiction.1 Over the ensuing decade, much has happened to Africa, to my own relationship with the continent, and to our planet. As for the Prize, per se, the sequel has been a happy one. The perks of victory continue to include a cash award of 10,000 British pounds (the world’s largest prize for African writing), as well as extensive publicity, which helps recipients garner book contracts and other plums.

The 2007-2017 winners have increasingly strained the elastic criteria for eligibility: ‘someone who was born in Africa, or who is a national of an African country, or whose parents are African, and whose work has reflected that cultural background.’2

What with conferences, residencies, and so forth, even the three Caine Prize winners who currently live in Africa are global citizens. Since several recipients teach literature and writing across the continent and beyond, it is no surprise that they wield the trademark tools of post-modernism: shifting points-of-view, time-frames that slip in and out of focus, multiple registers, and so on. Like the first seven, many of the eleven subsequent stories address issues plucked from the headlines, such as political chicanery, the environmental crisis, and the plight of refugees. Given the condition today of both Africa and the world, it is unsurprising that the stories project a sense of growing urgency. As 2001 winner Helon Habila remarked, contemporary African writing cannot help being political.3

As for my own connection with the continent, in 2010-2011 I sojourned in six countries, interviewing activists for a book about the state of African democracy.4 This project was a way to revisit my Peace Corps days in Nigeria during the 1960s, the first decade of Independence for many sub-Saharan nations. My 2010-2011 experiences also served as a reality check for the essay I had written in 2007, and they continue to inform ‘Nzuri Na Mengi.’

Six of the 2007-2017 Caine-Prize winning stories can be grouped thematically, three each about children at risk, and memory recaptured. The other stories’ themes are wide-ranging: gay love in traditional African society, fundamentalist Christianity in the diaspora, environmental disaster; war and politics; and Sufi-ism and literature in contemporary Sudan. To provide a

---

2 The Caine Prize for African Writing: How to Enter: http://caineprize.com/how-to-enter/
sampling of the stories, *Nzuri Na Mengi* will consider three particularly noteworthy examples. At the end of the essay, readers will find a chronological list of all the stories, with annotations for the eight that have not been discussed. This list includes publication details, with URLs for downloading.

**Children at Risk.**

Zimbabwean author, No Violet Bulawayo’s ‘Hitting Budapest’ asks us to bear witness to the impoverished lives of African children. ‘Hitting Budapest’ evokes a shocking reaction in its readers, which is suitable to its unsettling subject. The story’s complexity begins with its title and the author’s pen name. ‘Hitting’ is a slang word for robbery. In this case, a band of six desperately poor and hungry boys and girls venture beyond the boundaries of their township to systematically plunder the guava trees of mansions in a contiguous neighbourhood. Naming the rich neighbourhood ‘Budapest’ is not a blatant irony, as it would have been to call it, say, ‘Rodeo Drive’ or ‘Biarritz’. This sublety contrasts with the in-your-face irony of calling the children’s home-township ‘Paradise’. The author’s striking pen name, ‘No Violet Bulawayo,’ is also complex. (Her real name is Elizabeth Zandile Tshele.) Zimbabwe’s second city, Bulawayo is a hub of resistance to the geriatric dictator, Robert Mugabe, and ‘Hitting Budapest’ projects an image of its creator as no violet, let alone a shrinking one.5

The story’s two main characters are sharply contrasted. ‘Bastard’ is a brutally practical orphan who enjoys undermining the other children’s dreams. His opposite number, Darling, is a cherished ten-year old and a sensitive, curious, half-educated narrator. Between them, Bastard and Darling encapsulate a central conflict between fantasy and reality. Near the end of ‘Hitting Budapest,’ when Bastard explodes her dream of escaping to join her aunt in the US, Darling’s reaction is fierce: ‘If I had proper strength ... I would slap him, butt him on his big forehead, and then ... slam ... pound ... pin ... jab ... til he begged for his two-cents life’ (15). This violent fantasy presages the oddly joyous brutality of the ending, when the children are about to steal the shoes of the corpse of a light-skinned woman with thin arms who has hanged herself in ‘Heavenway Cemetery’.

First, though, Bastard stones the hanging woman to make sure she is dead. When another child, the hapless Godknows, protests that ‘God will punish you for that’, Bastard’s blunt reply anticipates the final desecration: ‘God does not live here, fool’ (17). That pronouncement may sum up the theology of many Zimbabweans, forced as they are to bear the yoke of dictator Mugabe.

The hanging corpse may seem too important a figure to make her first appearance, as she does, so near the end of the story. She is, however, an echo of an earlier character. During the guava gleaning, through the locked gates of a big house, the children see a ‘tall, thin woman’ with ‘feet peeking underneath her long skirt ... clean and pretty, like a baby’s.’ Munching on a piece of cake, the stranger stares out at them. The cake is unlike anything Darling has ever seen: ‘The top is creamish and looks fluffy ... and there are coin-like things on it ... the color of burn wounds’ (5-6).

This naïve description heralds a conversation marked by mutual, culturally based misunderstandings. Godknows violates a taboo by asking the stranger, an adult, her age. ‘Me? Well, I’m thirty-three, and I’m from London. This is my first time visiting my dad’s country, she says, and twists the chain on her neck. The golden head on the chain is the map of Africa’ (7).

Next, she asks, ‘Do you guys mind if I take your picture? ... We don’t answer because we’re not used to adults asking us anything’ (8). Assuming that silence means consent, she snaps photograph after photograph, until the children abruptly stalk off. Then, instigated by Bastard, they turn back and scream insults at her.

The unknown corpse in the cemetery feels like the ghost of this visitant from ilu oyinbo dara (‘the white man’s beautiful land’). The earlier description lingers, allowing readers to flesh out the suicide’s description. The chain becomes the noose, and the unstated cause of the suicide, the map of Africa – that is, the collective misery of the lives of African children. Just as, having fled the first woman, they turned to shout insults at her, after fleeing the cemetery, they will return to desecrate the corpse.

The other lingering detail is the cake, transformed as the story ends, into the prosaic, but delightful, loaf of bread they plan to buy with money from selling the shoes – bread, a much more accessible dream than, say, escaping to the US: ‘We all turn around and follow Bastard back into the bush, the dizzying smell of Lobels bread all around us now, and then we are rushing, then we are running, then we are running and laughing and laughing and laughing’ (18).

The complex art of ‘Hitting Budapest’ invites us to be complicit in a joyous act of corpse looting. The story creates in its readers a deep uneasiness. Not to be flip, but it puts us in the children’s shoes.

Memory Recaptured.

Okwiri Oduor’s ‘My Father’s Head’ is another sophisticated story. The Kenyan author practises narrative sleights-of-hand to navigate time and space in ways that suit her subject, a young woman’s quest to bring her father back from the dead. Also like ‘Hitting Budapest,’ ‘My Father’s Head’ is anchored in the realities of contemporary Africa – in this case, the Luo district of western Kenya.

Take ‘Simbi’, the narrator-protagonist’s name. Simbi-Nyaima is a crater lake in western Kenya about which there is a legend of a village that the gods sank, in punishment for the denizens’ refusal of hospitality to an old woman. Oduor’s Simbi is a nurturing caretaker at an old people’s home, but she is ambivalent about hosting her own dead father’s ghost.

Simbi’s memories are triggered by the arrival of another ‘father,’ Father Ignatius, the old people’s new chaplain. She is critical of, and unwelcoming toward, this priest, who sermonises his new flock about love, then disappears from the story. Like Simbi, the old people are wary: ‘although [they] gave Father Ignatius an ingratiating smile, what they really wanted to know was what type of place Kitgum was’ (1).

In fact, Kitgum, Father Ignatius’ previous parish, was the site of a notorious massacre in north-central Uganda. The Acholi, the region’s dominant ethnic group, are related to the Luo, and many are refugees from Uganda’s civil wars, which the priest may also be.7

At first, Simbi wonders why she is having so much trouble remembering her father. Luckily, she finds help from a friend, Bwibo, the nurturing cook at the home. (In Swahili, ‘Bwibo’ has associations with harmony and family.) When Simbi, an amateur artist (like the author) tries to draw her father, but cannot remember the shape of his head, Bwibo explains why:

Although everyone has a head behind their face, some show theirs easily; they turn their back on you and their head is all you can see ... good men never show you their heads; they show you their faces. (4)

After Simbi becomes able to recall her father’s violent death (run over by a cane tractor), and after she has talked to an old man at the home about how everyone wants to forget the elderly, Bwibo ‘licked her index finger and held it solemnly in the air. “I swear, Bible red! I can help you and I can help you.”’ She completes the reclamation process through a vivid fantasy of Simbi’s return to her intact childhood home: ‘one day, you will renounce your exile, and you will go back home, and your mother will take out the finest china, and your father will slaughter a sprightly cockerel’ (5).

The process of remembrance reaches fruition with a visit from the father’s ghost. But, even then, Simbi is not sure she wants him to stay. As the story ends, the dignified ghost senses her lingering ambivalence:

My father said to me, ‘I have seen you. You have offered me tea. I will go now.’
I said, ‘Maybe you could stay here for a couple of days, Baba [father].’ (8)

Among the other earthy realities in which ‘My Father’s Head’ is anchored are many descriptions of eating. (No surprise, since the story was first published in a South African anthology of food writing.) ‘Do not buy chapati from Kadima’s kiosk – Kadima’s wife sits on the dough and charms it with her buttocks’ (3). Oduor has mixed her ingredients ingeniously: the Simbi myth, the cook-as-magician, and the idea that one must concoct the precious past like a difficult recipe. As the 2014 Caine Prize spokesperson put it: ‘Okwiri Oduor ... exercises an extraordinary amount of control and yet the story is subtle, tender and moving. It is a story you want to return to the minute you finish it.’8

War and Politics.

Of the first eighteen Caine Prizes, Nigerians have won six, which is unsurprising, given that country’s size, wealth, and status in the world of the arts. Writers such as Chinamanda Achiche and Teju Cole have international reputations, and ‘Nollywood’, still only 15 years old, is the world’s second largest film industry. By the time he won the Prize for ‘Bombay’s Republic,’

---

Rotini Babatunde’s resume included widely published fiction and poetry, plays produced in several countries, and residencies at arts colonies in the US and Italy.

‘Bombay’s Republic’ presents a sweeping panorama of modern African history. Babatunde’s narrative carries its protagonist from an unnamed country in sub-Saharan Africa to what was then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and on to Burma (Myanmar), where he fights on World War Two’s ‘forgotten front’. After the war, Bombay returns home to further exploits. In a post-Prize interview, the author explained his choice of subject: ‘that context of world war two in African history, and the story of the Nigerians who went to the Burmese front, has not been properly explored ... To understand the present we need to explore the past.’ But that explanation does not begin to capture the flavour of ‘Bombay’s Republic’, a grisly, fantasy-laden satire whose targets include propaganda, war, politics, racism, and culture. Babatunde’s garish language suggests that, as he wrote the story, he was sailing along on the heady palm wine of his own words.

Like many other young Africans, prompted by Allied propaganda, Bombay’s motive for enlisting is fear of Nazi atrocities. After he is shipped out and trained, the story settles into a long horrors-of-war narrative, replete with graphic details. For instance, an expedition to rescue Bombay’s commander ends with the discovery of his corpse:

The man was stripped stark naked and tied to a tree ... The spectacle of his entrails spilling out of his evacuated stomach and drooling down to his toes could not have been ghastlier.

(18)

‘Bombay’s Republic’ is also a coming-of-age story. In the course of the war, many of the protagonist’s beliefs are turned topsy-turvy. When a maverick bombardier breaks out of the stockade, Bombay, on guard duty, shoots him dead. But the unthinkable act of killing a white man leads to a big surprise:

The next day, Bombay received a letter from his commanding officer. To Bombay’s shock, it commended Bombay for his quick thinking, which had prevented a bigger carnage from decimating the barracks. (21)

When the war ends, the hero returns home just in time to play a singular role in the struggles for African independence, which were sparked, in part, by the wartime disillusionment of many soldiers like him. At first, though, he is just a village eccentric, who spins tall tales to delight the children. The children’s favourite, about ‘the clan of weeping jinni’ that pursued Bombay through the jungle trying to steal his soul, provokes a different reaction from their elders: ‘some grown-ups made mockery that ... it was not impossible that the veteran, as substitute to his three-medalled soul, had bartered off a slice of his sanity’ (26).

At this point, Bombay re-boards the ship of history. When constables demand that he pay a hut tax on his imperial residence, the former jail, they are showered by streams of invective and urine from the palm-wine addled dictator. As the shrewd District Officer calculates, a non-

---

9 ‘Rotimi Babatunde wins Caine prize for African writing,’ The Guardian, 03 July 2012

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/03/rotimi-babatunde-wins-caine-prize

7

Ron Singer.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.
response is indicated: ‘the native firebrands campaigning for independence could latch on to the
matter as a fulcrum on which to hinge their campaign ... Better let sleeping dogs lie’ (31).

As this shaggy tale nears its end, Bombay’s self-proclaimed republic becomes a fun-house
mirror of actual nightmare African nations. Consider the titles he confers upon himself:

Lord of All Flora and Fauna. Scourge of the British Empire ... Sole Discoverer of the
Grand Unified Theorem ... Chief Commander of the Order of the Sahara Desert and the
Atlantic Ocean. Father of the Internet. (32)

Compare that mouthful with, for example, the self-proclaimed title of Joseph Mobuto, the
megalomaniacal kleptocrat who despoiled Zaire: ‘Mobutu Sese Seko Koko Ngbendu Wa Za
Banga,’ which means, ‘the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible
will to win, will go from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake.’ Selah!

In a further reductio, Bombay battens on the failures and insecurities of the new Africa:

national leaders ... invited him to ... their countries. Bombay called these trips state visits.
He always reminded his hosts that giving your guest something good to take away, if
possible cash, was a venerable African tradition. (32)

And then comes the obligatory, fulsome obituary, of which Bombay is posthumously proud:

Before Hitler’s war spawned possibilities in his universe like body bags on the Burma
front, Colour Sergeant Bombay would not have believed an obituary so affecting could
come from a newspaper based in a country he considered foreign. (33)

The ‘foreign’ country, of course, was his own country of birth!

Conclusion

The dystopian strain that runs through most of these eleven stories stands in a complex relation
to reality. You may have come across a website called ‘Africa is a Country.’ That tendentious
title flies in the face of 2006 Prize-winner Binyavanga Wainaina’s mockery of stereotypes, in
‘How to Write about Africa.’ But, as the world shrinks, the recent Caine Prize stories do seem,
if not global, at least pan-continental. Why, for instance, do so many of them have open endings?
Is it because the future of so much of Africa seems so uncertain? Not to mention the future of
our shared planet, currently reeling from crisis to crisis.

Although urban grit remains a Caine Prize staple, it has become even grittier. Brian
Chikwava’s manically playful ‘Seventh Street Alchemy’ (2004), for instance, has several grim
counterparts among the new stories. Instead of jazz and flea markets, we now read about
environmental disaster and the looting of corpses. My own 2010-2011 visits to more than a
dozen African cities both confirmed the harsh visions of the recent Caine-Prize stories, and
presented a sharp contrast with the vibrant, semi-functioning cities I had enjoyed during the
1960s. One of my favourites, back then, was Lagos, the setting for that ur-urban novel, Cyprian
Ekwensi’s People of the City (1954). During my recent visits, I was pickpocketed in Nairobi,
and menaced by thugs in Soweto (in Johannesburg) and thieves in Accra. I found myself, alas, thanking the gods of birth that I do not live in an African city.

One of the starkest failures of present-day Africa, with its explosive population growth, is the plight of the children. Education was to have been a pillar of the new African societies. But, even in the 1970s and 1980s, a striking image of this broken promise was the crowds of Zairean children lining the village streets in their ragged school uniforms, compelled to cheer the entourage of dictator Mobutu, even as he despoiled their schools.¹¹

Despite the buffeting education has endured over the half-century of African Independence, it remains the hope of the continent’s growing middle-class, and, ultimately, one basis for strengthening democracy. But not many of the poor young people who roil their way through the Caine-Prize stories are on the road from school to success. On the contrary, neither Bastard nor Darling seems to go to school, and Bombay does graduate work in the hard-knocks university of war.

During my African sojourns, I ran into many unmoored African children. In 2011, for example, at an outdoor cafe in Addis Ababa, my friends, visitors from the Ethiopian diaspora, and I were accosted by children steering blind beggars to people with money, thereby doubling the pull on our heartstrings. I also experienced, up close and personal, Africans of all ages who were deeply embittered by the disappointed hopes of Independence. I ran into quite a few Bastards.

On the other hand, it was my pleasure to meet the originals of the warm, clever narrators of ‘Hitting Budapest’ and ‘My Father’s Head.’ Professionally, I interviewed and observed many resilient fighters for democracy, both in and out of government. On a personal level, time after time, I experienced the kindness of strangers. I think, for example, of an elderly guard at the un-air conditioned National Museum in Accra. Seeing that I was nearly overcome by the heat, he silently took my hand and guided me to a gate, which he unlocked, revealing a shaded sculpture garden. ‘You can rest here, my friend,’ he said.

Over time, what I expect to retain from the Caine-Prize stories are bittersweet snapshots, such as a deranged war veteran urinating on a tax collector, a young woman serving tea to her father’s ghost, and joyful children gleaning the shoes of a hanging suicide. Like the fossil, AL288-1, aka Lucy, a replica of which I saw in Ethiopia’s National Museum, Africa remains the mother of these characters – and of us all.

* * * * *

The Caine-Prize Winning Stories, 2007-2017

Monica Arac de Nyeko, ‘Jambula Tree’ (2007), Uganda.

Henrietta Rose-Innes, ‘Poison’ (2008), South Africa.


Olufemi Terry, ‘Stickfighting Days’ (2010), Nigeria.
Adolescent boys who live in a garbage dump spend their days playing the eponymous war game. Originally published in *Chimurenga*, 2009: [https://newint.org/books/2010_terry_stickfighting_days.pdf](https://newint.org/books/2010_terry_stickfighting_days.pdf)


Originally published in *Mirabilia Review*, 2011: [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/565c3d39e4b027c789ba5b70/t/58191e1620099e33f3205f49/1478041113993/Bombay%27s+Republic+%28PDF%29.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/565c3d39e4b027c789ba5b70/t/58191e1620099e33f3205f49/1478041113993/Bombay%27s+Republic+%28PDF%29.pdf)

Tope Folarin, ‘Miracle’ (2013), USA/Nigeria.
A diasporan church in Texas is the setting for a meditation about the deeper meanings of faith. Originally published in *Transition*, 2012 (an excerpt from an autobiographical novel-in-progress, *The Proximity of Distance*): [https://muse.jhu.edu/article/490138/pdf](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/490138/pdf)


Lidudumalingani, ‘Memories We Lost’ (2016), South Africa.
A girl’s efforts to save her schizophrenic sister are set against the backdrop of an isolated village. Originally published in Incredible Journey: Stories That Move You (Burnet Media, South Africa, 2015)
https://static1.squarespace.com/.../Memories+We+Lost_Incredible+Journey_SINGLES.

Translated from the Arabic (by Max Schmookler), and drawing upon Sudanese literature and culture, this rich, magical-realist story describes an encounter between an impoverished writer and a beautiful girl-spirit and her sister. Originally published in The Book of Khartoum – A City in Short Fiction (Comma Press, UK. 2016).
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/.../t/.../The+Story+of+the+Girl.....pdf

---

**Ron Singer**’s writings about Africa have appeared, for instance, in Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Evergreen Review, The Georgia Review, open democracy, Poets & Writers, and The Wall Street Journal. He has published ten books, the four most recent of which are Look to Mountains, Look to Sea (poetry); Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with Pro-Democracy Leaders (non-fiction); Betty & Estelle and A Voice for My Grandmother (memoir); and Geismann in Africa (thriller-travelogue). To find out more, visit www.ronsinger.net.

**Sources**

*Africa Is a Country* http://africasacountry.com/about/

https://www.pw.org/content/everything_follows_interview_helon_habila?article_page=5

The Caine Prize for African Writing: How to Enter: http://caineprize.com/how-to-enter/


‘Okwiri Oduor Wins 2014 Caine Prize for African Writing,’ Guardian Africa Network:

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.

---

‘Rotimi Babatunde Wins Caine Prize for African Writing,’ The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/03/rotimi-babatunde-wins-caine-prize

Singer, Ron. ‘O Ti Lo Wa Ju (You Have Gone Past All): The Caine Prize for African Writing.’ The Georgia Review 61.2 (Summer 2007) 401-421.


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulawayo

(Many other factual details are also taken from Wikipedia entries.)
Jaydeep Sarangi, Faithfully, I Wait: Poems on Rain, Thunder and Lightning at Jhargram and Beyond (Cyberwit, 2017)

Speech delivered at Launch, Flinders University, 20 October 2017

Melinda Graefe

Jaydeep Sarangi is a poet for all seasons, and his poems are the changeable days and nights of the seasonal cycles. His poems, too, are the ever-growing trees, planted in the earthy spaces of Jhargram. Jaydeep invites his reader into the sensuous forest of his community, a forest land where his ‘roots lie’, and his ancestors, ‘the kindly ones’, live.

‘My days are carefree’, writes Jaydeep, ‘Red soil is my first love’. These are the first lines of the volume’s first poem, ‘Love and Longing at Jhargram’ (7). In this volume, poet and land are deeply entwined through forest networks, what he calls his ‘native links’ (7), and the poems that emerge out of the lush landscape of the forest-skirted district town are the products of what might be called his ‘vegetable love’ of language. Jaydeep draws a powerful connection between poet and native land, in variegated metaphors that transform poet into forest tree. There are no pathetic fallacies here. The forest truly speaks its own language of emotion, and the birds are the historians of the place.

Jaydeep’s Jhargram, so richly evoked in its ‘dream-fresh’ (7) and mostly green hues, is where he grows into his own as a poet. ‘My laurels are made of forest leaves’ (7), writes Jaydeep, yet he is quick to note the mutability of his poet-identity, admitting that he is ‘fast losing [his] green leaves’ (8). But the poet has rightly claimed his laurels. The very meaning of what it is to be a poet is close to Jaydeep’s heart, and the poet in this volume lovingly invites us to witness love. Jaydeep concludes: ‘Jhargram – This is where everything ends in love’ (8). We cannot doubt him.

Jaydeep’s poems reveal the cosmic shape of love and loving. In ‘Mango Tree’, love takes the shape of a newly-created luminescent moon:

Under the cool shade of the mango tree, I  
Remember, we made earth’s other moon.  
Between the parallel lives. You taught me alphabets.  
Punctuations. I cooked my poems in your earthen pots.  
Tremors of love and loveliness travelled  
Home and beyond.  
For better, and for worse,  
In sickness and health, bright is the Moon today. (12)

The poems also take on domestic form – the shape of earthen pots, of houses, and of gardens and temples – but they never take on the cosiness of the domestic. In Jaydeep’s poems, people are worldly, they lead parallel lives and travel under alien skies, and as they each pursue their natural course, they are guided home. In ‘For my Ancestors’, Jaydeep reflects on the power of connection to place for the restless wanderer:
Mind is guru, at times, restless pointer
Useless as weapons after the war. I return in the night,
After the rain. Woods are fresh and green. (15)

Well-travelled, but never world-weary, Jaydeep prompts us to see our own journeys in the rhythms of language and love. In the same poem, Jaydeep asks us, ‘How far is that land of love’, that we all search for? We need not look far:

Between the alphabets, between the day and night
Temples and churches, love and more love. (15)

Jaydeep is perhaps strongest when he sees life and love in the very elements of the universe, as in his poem aptly titled ‘Poems’. In this little ode, the poem is a votive candle that lights the dark corners of the mortal self: fire flickers to ember and words burn down into dreams of song:

The candle of poems
burns slowly, very slowly.
I watch them burn in me.
Like a ladder
moving up
between two ultimate pages:
life and death.
My words move.
Dreams are unhappy embers.
Each day is a song, somewhere. (21)

I thoroughly recommend to you Jaydeep Sarangi’s volume of poems, Faithfully, I Wait, for its unique view of the world, of poetry, and of the poet’s imperative to always see in a new light what is vital to us as lovers in a world that we continually and intimately craft for one another.