RELOCATIONS
READING CULTURE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Edited by Imraan Coovadia, Cóilín Parsons and Alexandra Dodd

Relocations: Reading Culture in South Africa

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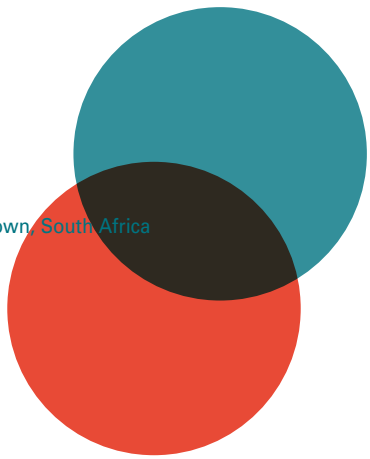

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GORDON INSTITUTE
GIPCA
FOR PERFORMING
AND CREATIVE ARTS

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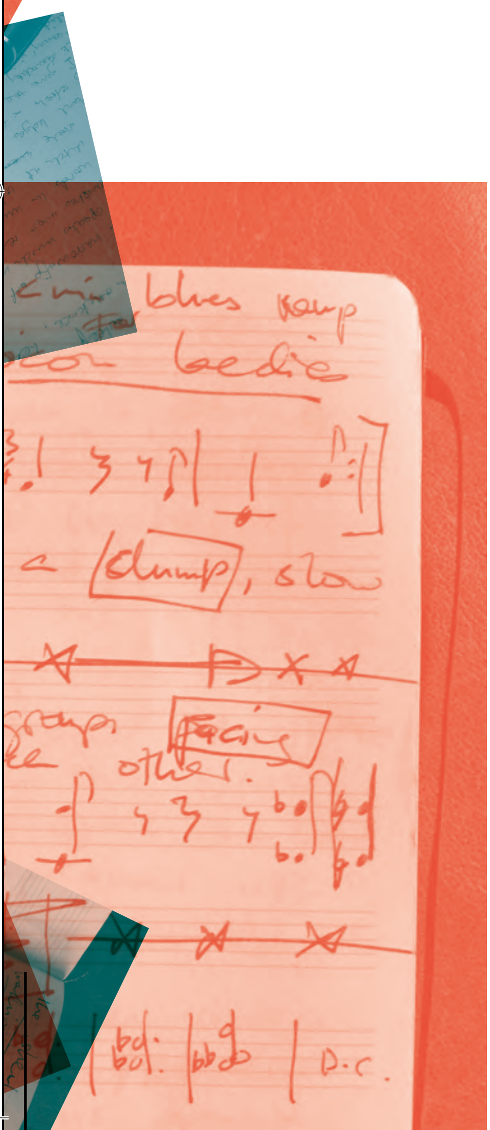

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INTRODUCTION: REFLECTIONS FROM THE CRACKED LOOKINGGLASS

Imraan Coovadia, Cóilín Parsons
and Alexandra Dodd

In August 2009, beginning with a lecture on Cervantes by André Brink, we started an experiment in public culture at the University of Cape Town, in the form of a public lecture series. Sometimes as often as every week, or once a fortnight, the Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts (GIPCA) would organise a talk by the most interesting person we could find in the country on the most fascinating text or question at work in his or her own life. The best enactments of this promise blended the microscopic details of the page or the portrait with the macroscopic conditions of society and culture. Jonathan Shapiro, better known as the cartoonist Zapiro – who regularly provokes the president of the country and prodded him into a lawsuit against a cartoon – disassembled the pages of Art Spiegelman's Holocaust comic book, *Maus,* into its separate panels. Mark Solms, a neuropsychologist who runs a wine farm in the spirit of social reconciliation, talked about scientific understandings of what the mind is. Members of the Handspring Puppet Company, now world-famous on account of its award-winning stage production *War Horse*, brought in a puppet who explained that critics and audiences never responded to, or never seemed to register, the infinite details of technical puppetry that preoccupied the puppeteers, but responded only to the stories told by the puppets.

EACH ESSAY CHERISHES THE SINGLE MOST BASIC UNIT OF STUDY IN THE HUMANITIES – CLOSE READING

The name of the lecture series – Great Texts/Big Questions – was itself a compromise between two different generations of Humanities academics: those who put an emphasis on texts and those who put their faith in questions. In 2009, as today, public space in South Africa was dominated by political debate of uncertain quality and no evident traction. Stepping out of that circularity, the Great Texts sessions, at their best, were unique events at which individual speakers looked back at their own careers and identified questions and texts that had been of great significance to them. The lectures were sited in a space that was consciously academic and not. Distinct from the more rarefied altitude of UCT's Upper Campus on the slopes of Table Mountain, Hiddingh Hall, a capacious Edwardian meeting-room on the university's town campus at the foot of Table Mountain, became the place where stories at once personal and historical could be told. In 2009, South Africa was entering a condition of scepticism, and at the same time, increasing vitality, as the hegemony of the African National Congress disintegrated following the failures in public health of the Mbeki regime, and as the ethical and strategic emptiness of the Zuma administration, which had so brusquely swept aside its predecessor, became clear. The Great Texts/Big Questions engagements with the controversies of this time are memorable, from Justice Albie Sachs's implicit rebuke of Zapiro, when he suggested that artists learn to restrain their satirical representations of black men and women in the light of the country's history, to the university's cancellation and subsequent restaging of a debate on the wisdom of a cultural boycott of Israel.

But in many ways the scope of agreement between the speakers was startling, across audiences that ranged from almost entirely black to entirely white, whether listening to matters of forced removals and return, or to discussions of classic texts. Inequality and a shared sense of urgency around the seeming lack of a way to remedy it were debated, as were the ways in which an artwork is constructed. Problems of black and white, South and North, rich and poor were explored, as were irony and nuance, tact and manner, the delight we take in art and ideas, and the pain and correction that certain works of art, such as Nabokov's *Lolita*, insist on administering to us. These talks were not altogether different from those that might have been taken up in a university in the United States or Europe, but they were conducted in a context in which the practice of the Humanities is even more marginal and tenuous than ever, and even more necessary at a time of an absence of restraint in business and politics.

In this book, we have gathered together a coherent selection of edited contributions to the lecture series that address a more focused concern. The title, *Relocations*, captures the single most important feature that these contributions have in common. In ways that will be clarified in the course of this introduction and in the essays themselves, each one resituates, rewrites and rethinks. They also all offer compelling readings of cultural monuments – textual and visual, old and new – which have continued and sometimes surprising relevance in contemporary South Africa. This relocation and repurposing means that each essay yields a double meaning, as does the subtitle of the book. While all of the contributors read culture in South Africa in the broadest sense of the word, a core selection deals in very particular ways with the culture of reading. From Isabel Hofmeyr's discussion of reading and printing practices at the turn of the last century to Hedley Twidle's account of teaching E M Forster to young South Africans, and from André Brink's acknowledgement of his annual pilgrimage to the pages of *Don Quixote* to John Higgins's admission of his youthful transgression of the laws of library lending, the essays cover a wide range of reading practices in South Africa. Zackie Achmat's immersion in Marx's work and Sandra Young's deep reading in the history of *Hamlet* criticism; Rajend Mesthrie's homage to Noam Chomsky and Imraan Coovadia's admiration of Nabokov; Duncan Brown's profound understanding of the literature of place and Nicholas Mirzoeff's intricate account of the contexts of W E B du Bois's work – these and all the other essays point to a varied and vibrant reading culture in South Africa that crosses geographical and generic boundaries in an attempt to make meaning of the world we live in.

This is not an exhaustive reading list, and it leans more towards the international than the local, suggesting a reading culture that recognises in practical ways the imbrication of South African literature, culture and politics in a globalised world. What links all of these essays, and underpins the book as a whole, is that these readers read not to be distracted, but to be engaged. Each essay, whether it deals specifically with literature and reading or not, cherishes the single most basic unit of study in the Humanities – close reading – as a tool for wider cultural analysis that offers forms of critique and resistance to the almost numbing dominance of neoliberal economics and politics in South Africa today. This collection showcases and validates the alternative routes to knowledge and heterodox idealism that the best of Humanities scholarship today offers. In the face of rapidly disappearing resistance

to the primacy of the market, and the dizzying pace of money-making in the metropolises of the Global South, the Humanities insist on reasoning and deliberateness as ethical responses. Reading culture – the act of taking time to appreciate, critique and think about cultural production (this is an active form of reading) – is an essential part of a mature and fully functioning democracy, and it is our aim to highlight where it already exists as a daily practice, and to share the results of that practice with a wider audience.

In constellating the texts and questions chosen here, the book seeks to bring together academic and public voices that are readable. Offering insight and reflection by leading scholars, artists and writers, the essays here are committed to promoting richness and variety in the public domain. The orientation of specialist knowledge to a general reading public reflects the new emphasis on Public Humanities today in universities worldwide.[1] In laying claim to a wide audience, we might appear to be turning our back on the academic origin of the lecture series and the book, but we do not see the general and academic reading publics as in any way antithetical. As John Higgins shows in this volume, a popular film can provide the premise for the most nuanced and careful readings of a poem. South Africa has a vibrant tradition of inviting public engagement with the Humanities. Institutes such as WISER (the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research) at the University of the Witwatersrand, the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape, and HUMA (the Institute for Humanities in Africa) at the University of Cape Town link research in the Humanities to current social and political questions. In this way, the South African academy has been a leader in building bridges between universities and civil and political society, bridges that are only now being built in European and American universities, where the Humanities disciplines in particular have stood aloof from the world around them.[2]

The essays in this book inhabit the two worlds of civil society and the academy not as opposites, but rather as constituent parts. Rajend Mesthrie's elegant and clarifying discussion of Noam Chomsky's complicated linguistic theories is a perfect example of this bridging of worlds, as is Duncan Brown's translation of complex theories of place and space into a story about trout fishing. Some of the essays retain the marks of their original lives as lectures, speaking directly to the audience and reader, while others have taken on afterlives in academic books and journals, and bear the signs of having entered that world. What all the contributors offer are unique and compelling insights into global debates from the standpoint of their location at the Cape, even when they found themselves only in transit in South Africa, invited guests at the South African cultural and academic feast. The fractured design of the book captures something of the dissonance and debate set in motion by the texts. It was our desire that the book should have a provisional, journal-like feel about it, offering readers a visually tangible sense of what Ivan Vladislavic has called 'The Exploded View'.

The book intervenes in an ongoing academic debate about the value and meaning of a great text, or a classic. Some three decades ago, J M Coetzee, in what we might call a classic lecture, asked the question 'What is a classic?'. Coetzee's choice of Bach – a monument of European culture – as an example of a classic may, he writes, have been determined by a sense of intrinsic value in his music, or by a conviction that choosing Bach over something more recent, more vernacular, was a form of escape, an attempt to find 'a way out of a so-

cial and historical dead end'.[3] The classic is defined as a valuable object, either for its own sake or as a site of retreat from the encroaching world. But, in a signature Coetzee move, he makes it impossible for us to choose between these two poles, for both options are equally plausible – it may have intrinsic value, but it may also be valued for its capacity to allow an escape. The classic is a fluid, slippery thing, but even in Coetzee's masterful hand it seems brittle compared to the supple objects of analysis and celebration by the authors here, who have chosen their ideas and texts for neither of Coetzee's reasons. They have chosen them because they could mobilise them in new forms and patterns, and because these texts and ideas animate and motivate their thinking. In Peter McDonald's surprising essay on Xu Bing (a plea for the value of untranslatability and misunderstanding), we see texts and ideas as having enduring meaning that is marked more by their arresting nature and their interruptive possibilities than their place in a literary, cultural or historical canon. Muyanga and Kentridge create their own images in their work and essays, moulding a new generation of great texts that not only challenge the present, but will demand to be re-seen and re-heard for many years to come. All the contributors to this book view the Great Text and the Big Question as processes – as ideas in the making – rather than fixed events. Zachie Achmat's essay dissects a correspondence of a kind between Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx, the most successful revolutionaries of a 19th-century West which, in its inequalities and uncertainties, seems not so very far away in today's world. As we read about Marx's role in the formulation of Lincoln's emerging abolitionism, the nature of that signal moment in US history leans slightly leftward, exposing a new genealogy of freedom. The discussion between Henrietta Rose-Innes, Rustum Kozain and Gabeba Baderoon about the capacity of a page to generate its own meanings challenges us to think about the process of reading, breaking the text down into its accidental parts, and asking us to reimagine the reading process. Their conversation struck us as an excellent example of how the lecture series created new kinds of engagement between the public, artists and writers and literary texts. We hope that the transcribed lectures can be as useful and inspiring to readers as the spoken talks were to us in the audience. Even such seemingly static and canonical texts as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Cervantes' *Don Quijote* or Blake's 'Never seek to tell thy love' become in Sandra Young's, André Brink's and John Higgins's essays sites of transit and movement, as we are encouraged to think about them historically and personally. We may never again encounter them as for the first time, Young writes, but we always encounter them anew. Once the text or idea is decoupled from a precious sense of its enduring and unchanging importance it becomes a site for contestation, negotiation, play and pleasure – a usable object that is more provocatively read as a process rather than as a finished product.

While these essays traffic in classics, they mostly avoid 'classical' literature and ideas, focusing largely (though not exclusively) on a more contemporary canon. But the productive and destructive conversations between the classics of European literature and the postcolonial world echo here.[4] For example, Sandra Young's essay emerges from a long and ongoing conversation on the place of Shakespeare in the postcolonial canon that celebrates and questions the complex relationship between Great Texts and their afterlives.[5] Hedley Twidle's reading of *A Passage to India* is equally in dialogue with (though not indebted to)

colonial discourse theory and postcolonial readings of British literature about India. What all these readings have in common is that they emerge from a place where the terms 'colonial' and 'imperial' can have none of the sense of innocence that might be attached to them in a Euro-American world, where they are thought to define a past epoch now thoroughly superseded by neoliberal post-politics. Similarly, the very idea of a canon of literary works and cultural ideas cannot be as innocently construed in the Global South as in the North. For Ankhi Mukherjee, 'the Eurocentric canon, routinely associated with imperial hierarchies, is usually perceived and presented as an edifying, if reformatory, force and almost always as an exclusionist corpus'. The very idea of a classic, Mukherjee argues, often seems to exclude any notion of growth and change. In this reading, the classic's normative function is to define and delimit, not to invite and suggest. But Mukherjee proposes an alternative reading of the idea of the canon, as 'a site of historical emergence through which contemporary English and Anglophone literature and literary criticism can fruitfully rethink their cultural identity and politics'.[6] In this alternative conception, the traditional idea of the classic as the base on which a culture has been built needs to be fundamentally rethought. Mukherjee's classic becomes not a static monument to universal values, but a site for active and ongoing renegotiation. These essays all take for granted that the classic – the Great Text and the Big Question – is one of the most fruitful grounds for reinvention.

Many of the essays in this book seek to read great events 'inside out', to borrow a phrase from Michael Chapman, whose book *Africa Inside Out* gathers together disparate voices to provide a fractured and fracturing, yet deeply human, look at Africa.[7] The standpoint that allows the writers or artists or critics to view their topic from the inside out is one of the key premises of this book; they are reading not just Africa, but the world, and often the colonial and neo-colonial world powers. To put it in the language of postcolonial studies, this book could be read as a case of the empire writing back.[8] Because so many of the essays collected here address monuments of European culture, paying homage and yet doing so from a position of difference and questioning, they might be accused of a 'sly civility', to poach a term from Homi Bhabha – a form of mimicry, but with the force of unalterable difference that comes from the authors' location at the Cape.[9] While these two guiding concepts in the field of postcolonial studies might help us to construe the premises of thinking about the world from South Africa, the field of postcolonial studies, often accused of being based on simple binaries (North/South, centre/periphery) and their unbinding, has changed significantly as we have come to recognise the more entangled ways in which empires and their colonies, colonised people and colonisers, oppressors and oppressed, ruling class and ruled class interacted during the colonial era and continue to interact today.

Recent work in postcolonial studies has had a more nuanced approach, perhaps best characterised by the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose book *Provincializing Europe* (2000) offered compelling case studies in how we might rethink the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment in tandem with colonial history. He writes that 'European thought … is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and historical in India.'[10] That European thought might be indispensible to the colonies is a basic premise of colonialism and an idea that

rightly became a target of postcolonial intellectuals and regimes. At the same time, Chakrabarty writes here of the valuable European legacy of ideas of democratic citizenship, which for all its faults cannot be dismissed as not belonging in the colonies. Chakrabarty's insights recognise the value of the patrimony of some great texts and big questions, and authorise sceptical, radical and alternative voices to interrogate, pay homage to, and provincialise (by pointing to their parochialism rather than their universalism) the accepted classics of Euro-American literature and thought. South Africa exemplifies the complex interaction of European ideas and African realities, as its political and cultural life during and since apartheid has been marked by 'complicities' and 'entanglement'.[11] The neat binaries of an earlier postcolonialism cannot hold.

Achille Mbembe, one of the most original and thoughtful scholars of contemporary African politics and culture, writes that 'the postcolony' is 'characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation'. For Mbembe, this improvisation is marked by 'a tendency to excess and lack of proportion', but it is also a driver of renewal, creation and excitement.[12] On what does the postcolony improvise? On the ruins and monuments of the vanquished colonist. The postcolony is characterised by a refiguring of the archive, the documents of a colonising power.[13] We can find this sense of post- and anticolonial culture creatively repurposing the monuments of the colonising power wherever colonialism took hold (and it took hold almost everywhere). In one of the undisputed classics of the 20th century, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (first published in serial form as the struggle for Irish independence began to take hold, and shot through with many and repeated references to South Africa and the South African War), one of the two principal characters, Stephen Dedalus, identifies 'the cracked lookingglass of a servant' as 'a symbol of Irish art'. He speaks 'with bitterness', describing what he thinks to be a fatal flaw in the art-making capacity of the colony, which always produces a warped image of the colonist's art.[14] But while Stephen may see this as a falling off from an ideal of artistic production, Joyce does not. Indeed, what makes *Ulysses* such an enduring text is precisely its ability to view modernity as reflected in the cracked lookingglass. The view from Ireland, a 'semicolonial' place in the words of Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes, is one that offers a unique insight into the world.[15] Dublin, and by extension all other sites of empire that look askance at the putative centres of power and culture, offers a privileged vantage point from which to create new and disruptive readings of the world.

THIS BOOK SEEKS TO UNDO THE EASY PASSAGES OF POWER AND INFLUENCE IMPLIED BY THESE FRAMES OF REFERENCE

While we might borrow from the language of colonialism and postcolonialism by force of South Africa's colonial past, this book seeks also to undo the easy passages of power and influence implied by these frames of reference. Despite the fact that the contributors discuss texts from around the world, and hail from the Global South as well as the Global

North, their thoughts and theorisations form one strand of what Jean and John Comaroff call 'theory from the south'.[16] This might be a counterintuitive claim, as so many of the objects of study here are not from the Global South; however, the theorisation of these objects is located in and emerges from a particular place and moment in the history of the world. As such they represent an intervention into ongoing conversations in the world that are enhanced by the view that reflects from the cracked lookingglass.

But perhaps what links all these ideas and texts more than anything else is that they are, to borrow a term from Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr's recent edited collection on imperial book history, 'charismatic': they 'outlive their historical moment, making history and underwriting historical change beyond, perhaps, what their author ever intended or imagined possible'.[17] They do not simply survive in their original form, but they live on, disrupting and reauthorising life long after the death of their historical moment. To summon a ripe phrase from *Hamlet* (and one that has lived on in so many fruitful ways), they are 'out of joint' with their time and their place. And because they are out of joint and yet still relevant, we continue to read them and make meaning from, through, with and against them. Whereas for Karl Marx 'the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living',[18] and for Stephen Dedalus history is a 'nightmare' from which he is trying to escape,[19] for the contributors to this book it represents a starting point for new and vibrant readings of the world around us.

These are the intellectual and political anchors of our project – the motivations for its establishment and continued existence. But they don't solely define the essays, which live outside the strictures of the academic debate. The cracked lookingglass throws back many and contradictory reflections, kaleidoscopic in their beautiful multiplicity, and we hope that this book will do the same. The contributors read both with and against the grain, but they all think and read from a questioning stance, which yields surprising results not just within each essay, but in the conversations between them. Take, for example, Zackie Achmat's insistence on the suppressed revolutionary power of Lincoln's almost accidental support for abolition, and how it can and should allow us to wrest readings of Marx away from the poisonous legacy of Stalin and Mao, who have overshadowed other lineages of the revolutionary present. Nicholas Mirzoeff's essay on W E B du Bois's analysis of the post-Civil War period gives us a sense of just what that potentially utopian moment looked like, when slavery was abolished and all things seemed possible. Read together, and in conjunction with Isabel Hofmeyr's analysis of a different, utopian, revolutionary movement, these arguments offer unique insights and productive collisions. The emancipation of slaves in Civil War America takes its place, in this encounter, among a series of liberation movements from the mid-19th century to the present, and from South Carolina to Durban and Delhi.

This, finally, is what we hope this book will be for you, our readers: a place of serendipitous encounters that offer fresh questions and banish easy answers. While the Great Texts/Big Questions project began as a lecture series, our aim in editing this book was to offer a material object to you, one that can be read and reread, read in spurts, annotated, stored and passed from reader to reader. As literary scholars, we are not immune to the fetishisation of the book as object, and hope that you will see in this a collectable item with endur-

ing material and intellectual qualities, but we also invite you to treat it with irreverence – to subject it and its contents to the type of generous questioning that all our contributors model. We encourage you to provincialise the book – to see how it can generate new meanings in your hands. While many of these lectures are available online, which will offer you a taste of the moment of their conception and delivery in Hiddingh Hall,[20] we were determined to collect them in a book because it gave the authors an opportunity to reflect on and re-engage with their ideas, sometimes years after having given the lectures. These essays are the result of a slowed down, more meditative process of thinking, and we hope that they will help you to enjoy the same pace of reading and thinking. It is impossible to annotate a lecture and make it yours, but we offer up this book as a page on which to write your own active engagements with these ideas.

ENDNOTES

1 | For examples of the new Public Humanities in the United States, where the term has most currency, see programmes at Brown University, the University of Washington, the University of Wisconsin-Madison and elsewhere, where the humanities programmes consciously speak to the wider public rather than simply an academic audience.

2 | John Higgins, *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013) lays out some of the controversies and questions that meant that political freedom was more closely tied to academic freedom in South Africa than perhaps anywhere else.

3 | JM Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays* (London: Penguin, 2001), 18.

4 | Lorna Hardwicke and Carol Gillespie (eds), *Classics in Postcolonial Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) offers a comprehensive set of case studies and critical essays on the reception and re-use of the classics in postcolonies.

5 | For reflections on the South African contexts and implications of this debate, see, for example, David Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Natasha Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare and Post-colonial Culture* (Lampeter, UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005); Chris Thurman (ed), *South African Essays on 'Universal' Shakespeare* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014).

6 | Ankhi Mukherjee, *What Is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 4.

7 | Michael Chapman, *Africa Inside Out* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012).

8 | Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

9 | Homi Bhabha, 'Sly Civility', in *The Location of Culture*, ed Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1994), 93–101.

10 | Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

11 | Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009).

12 | Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 102.

13 | On postcolonial refigurations of the archive, see Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris and Graeme Reid, 'Introduction', in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed Carolyn Hamilton and others (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 7–18.

14 | James Joyce, *Ulysses,* ed Walter Gabler (New York: Random House, 1986), Chapter 1, lines 145–146.

15 | Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (eds), *Semicolonial Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

16 | Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

17 | Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Introduction', in *Ten Books that Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons*, eds Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 8.

18 | Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', accessed 15 November 2014, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm.

19 | Joyce, *Ulysses*, Chapter 2, line 376.

20 | Audio recordings of most of the lectures collected here can be found at http://www.gipca.uct.ac.za/.

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Spanish edition of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* from André Brink's library. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1957, illustrated by Salvador Dalí, bought by Brink in Madrid in 1964. PHOTO: Karina Brink

This essay, 'The marvels of the ingenious knight Don Quijote de la Mancha', focuses on one book only, but it is important to bear in mind that, in countless ways, this book comprises all the books written in the West since the Renaissance. It has occurred to me that, if I were so intrepid as to choose a text by Shakespeare as a starting point, the equivalent of *Don Quijote* in English drama would probably be all of Shakespeare's plays, not just one of them – this should give you an idea of the enormous scope and complexity of what has been called, many times, the first modern novel. In its pages almost everything that has happened in the genre since its modern beginnings is already present, at least in embryonic form.

In the first chapter of the book not much is specifically divulged about the hero, Don Quijote of La Mancha, and we are soon informed that this is not even his real name but the name he has adopted as a *nom de plume* for his exploits, for the three main journeys that he undertakes in the course of this massive book. Published first in 1605, with a second part added in 1615, after an interval during which somebody else, called Avellaneda, continued on his own steam, on his own volition, writing another *Don Quijote*. That was partly why Cervantes was inspired in 1615 to make sure he himself published a sequel. He knew that those second chances, in those times when something like copyright did not exist yet, were hard to come by. He would do better to get in there himself before too many others forestalled him.

This gentleman, the Knight of the Sad Countenance, as he is known, realises that, if he wants to be a knight-errant, which is the one *idée fixe* that determines his whole life, he first needs a horse, and then a lady to whom he can dedicate his exploits. But he'll need, above all, a cause. For most of his life his brain has been softened to the point of falling out of his skull by reading and re-reading the chivalric romances of Spain and those of other countries that haven't been translated yet, especially the exploits of the great hero, Amadis of Gaul. Don Quijote has a whole room stacked with books, which in those days was not such a common practice, all about knight-errantry.

Knights-errant always had something to dedicate their lives to – and that, in a way, is the great enterprise pursued through the rest of this book. This means that Don Quijote's first task, easy enough in itself, it would seem, would be to equip himself as an *hidalgo*, as a knight-errant. He knows that he has an old, moth-eaten set of clothes in his cupboard. He even has part of the armour of a knight. The first problem, however, is that when he tries to put the helmet on his head, he realises that it is only partly preserved – only the top. That does not present much of a problem at a certain stage, once he finds a barber's basin that he can imagine – and now proudly claims – to be the helmet of a famous wizard, Mambrino. A niggling worry is that there is no visor, so he has to set about devising a visor for himself. This he does by fashioning one from a piece of cardboard. It takes him three weeks to do that, a really impressive achievement. But then, unfortunately, he realises that, in order to make sure it can function as a proper helmet, it will have to be tested, which he promptly does. And, of course, with the first stroke of his sword he cuts it in half. Then, very patiently, he sits down and starts fashioning another visor for this helmet, which takes him another three weeks, and then at last he is ready. This time he decides *not* to test it, and he simply leaves his sword in his scabbard, because he *believes* that from now on this helmet will do the trick. This is a decisive moment in that first movement of the story. It is

the moment when he leaves the world of the real and the everyday behind him, and moves into the realm of the imagination. He believes this helmet will do whatever it is supposed to do. And, of course, many things happen as a result of that. But the key to the scene is the moving from one order of experience into a different one altogether. That is why most people, over so many years, have regarded it as a novel primarily about the dichotomy between the real and the imaginary. There are many reasons one can find for proving that *Don Quijote* is exactly that. But that is clearly only the beginning.

Famously, very early on in his first trip, he comes across a row of windmills. Believing them to be giants, he attacks the windmills and, of course, comes off rather the worse for wear. Soon afterwards, he sees a flock of sheep driven on by a number of shepherds, believes them to be the whole Saracen army, charges at them, and once again comes out second best. And so it goes on: he believes that he sees and encounters certain things, and every time they turn out to be not what he thought they were, but something completely different.

For much of the first of his journeys, he finds himself in a very lowly inn, which is in fact a brothel. There he addresses the ladies of the establishment very courteously because he takes them all for princesses, worthy of the greatest respect. Inevitably, as a consequence of this, a whole variety of – for the reader – predictable events ensue. This goes on for practically the whole of the first book.

Then everything changes very dramatically. In the second book, almost all the main events are clustered around a visit to the castle of a duke. And this duke knows about Don Quijote, as most of the characters in the second book already know about his exploits in the first book, because by then (1615), when the second novel appears, everybody has already read about the knight and his squire. And that causes many of the problems. Most of the readers see him as a character from a book, from a story, from an invention, and therefore they love taking the mickey out of him. And every time he obliges, but gradually one discovers that, in fact, he seems to know rather more than the people he encounters assume. As a result, he constantly sets out to turn the tables on his hosts. The more outrageous the traps that are set for him, the more logical, the more wisely he actually reacts to them by exposing the bystanders as fools, the way everyone in the first book tries to turn him into the butt of their jokes, and the fool of their stories. It gradually becomes infinitely more complicated than a simple matter of imagination and reality. That is where so much of the magic of the story comes from. Very soon there are no longer straight and stark divisions between what we normally call real and what belongs to the realm of fantasy.

For the past 50 years, I've tried to make a habit of reading *Don Quijote* every summer. The latest reading led me to a number of repetitive reassertions I encountered in studies of Shakespeare about the famous lost plays. The one play, dealing with the history of a man called Cardenio, written pretty late in Shakespeare's life – around the time that he wrote *The Tempest* – became most famous in its absence.[1] Somebody like Derrida would love the idea that the most intriguing play by Shakespeare is not available at all (in spite of recent

Afrikaans edition of Cervantes' *Don Quijote* from André Brink's library. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2010, translated by Brink in 1966. PHOTO: Karina Brink

efforts to retrieve or reconstruct it), and really exists only in terms of its absence. This time I set out to try to discover more about Cervantes' Cardenio, which apparently prompted Shakespeare's play. It turned out to be a story much like many of the great Spaniard's other stories, though very entertaining and very intriguing in its own right. There is this young man, a very scruffy fellow whom Don Quijote encounters in the Sierra Morena, the Black Mountain, which more or less divides the La Mancha region in the middle of Spain from Andalusia in the south. He is intrigued by the presence of this character and wants to know the life history of the young lover. It turns into one of those stories one can imagine Shakespeare would have loved, because there are so many mistaken identities, there is so much masquerading going on, that it would probably have fitted in with the later romances: *A Winter's Tale*, *Pericles* and certainly *The Tempest*. The problem is that Cervantes' Cardenio never comes to finish the telling of his tale to Don Quijote. The young man has warned him, very early on, that nobody is allowed to interrupt: he must be allowed to tell his story, and if anybody interrupts, that will be the end of the story. But Don Quijote cannot abstain from long digressions about knighthood and chivalry. So Cardenio stops talking, goes off into the mountains and disappears. It takes quite a long time before he is found again and is ready to resume his story. But, once again, he does not really finish. It

is one of those stories so often encountered in the chivalric romances of the 16th century and which abound in *Don Quijote* itself – a story quite entertaining in its own right, but with an unfinished quality about it, an *unfinishability*, akin to what Derrida would have called an *iterability*: the story could be continued to be told in innumerable ways, there would be something forever unfinished about it.[2]

It is the unfinished business of *any* and every story that is really demonstrated by this. And this becomes prophetic of Don Quijote's own story, which, yes, ends, and ends as so often these stories do, with the death of the hero, one of the greatest deaths in world literature. It is that wonderful moment after Don Quijote has faced his final challenger. In fact, it is one of his old friends, a so-called Bachelor Sansón Carrasco, known as the Knight of the Full Moon, who challenges him to a duel and engages in a wager: the one who loses must do exactly what the winner demands of him. Don Quijote loses the duel and he is ordered by his opponent to return to his home and never set out on any travels again. For a knight-errant this would obviously be comparable to a death sentence. And so he goes home and dies, because he has nothing more to live for.

The great moment in that final encounter comes when the victor orders Don Quijote to admit that his Lady, the peerless Dulcinea whom he has never seen in the flesh, is in fact a peasant girl from the neighbouring village of Toboso. Don Quijote has heard about her; among other things, that she is the greatest hand at salting pork in the province. She doesn't seem to be a very savoury character by any stretch of the imagination, but we know by now that his imagination is capable of anything, and so she is promptly turned into a lady worthy of being worshipped by a knight. Her real name is reported to be Aldonza Lorenzo, but Don Quijote chooses another name for her, Dulcinea del Toboso. In this manner he turns her into the lady of his dreams. And when towards the end of the book he is required by his conqueror to swear that Dulcinea del Toboso is not the most beautiful woman in the world, he cannot do that. So he says, 'Here I am, at your mercy, kill me. I would rather be killed than tell a lie, and it would be a lie to say that Dulcinea del Toboso is not the most beautiful woman in the world.' He swears that she is real, and incomparable, and this is not dependent on his word alone. Whatever he says, she will remain the most beautiful woman in the world.

One is reminded of the fact that it was only a few years after this moment in literary history that Galileo was summoned before the Inquisition and asked to withdraw everything that he'd ever said and written about the Copernican system of the universe. Galileo has to admit that it is not the earth that turns around the sun, but it is the sun that turns around the earth. He says that he will comply. Because he realises that if he does not, the Inquisition will condemn him to the most horrible death imaginable. Being a practical man, this to Galileo is not really worth it. So he says, I abjure, I admit that the earth does not turn around the sun, it is the sun that turns around the earth. And then he is set free, but as he leaves the room, somebody hears him mutter under his breath: '*Eppur si muove* – and still it moves.' It doesn't depend on me. I can say anything that you want me to say, that it

is the sun that turns around the earth, but in reality it is the earth that turns. And that is exactly the same moment of philosophical greatness that Don Quijote obtains at the very end when he decides that because the world no longer depends on his statements about it, the world is as it is. *El mundo es como es*. This is, even today, one of the most authentic concepts in the Spanish approach to the world. To a very large extent, even in modern Spain, it is said that – and here one has to use the old patriarchal term – as the model of man, one can take the two persons on whom everything in *Don Quijote* depends: Don Quijote and his squire, Sancho Panza. One with his head in the clouds, the other with his feet very much on the ground. In this duality you will find what human beings are really, essentially, about. So, in these two, we find an image of humanity. And in a way, the two cannot be conceived of without the presence of Dulcinea. Somewhere in the background, somewhere in between them, somewhere in the heart of *Don Quijote*, somewhere in the heart of Spanishness, somewhere in the heart of humanity, the female element is as indispensable to this notion as the male. And in the male element there are then these two aspects that remain important throughout.

SO DEATH IS NOT THE FINAL POINT BUT THE STARTING POINT. THE IMAGINATION AS SUCH IS NOT THE FINAL POINT BUT THE STARTING POINT

So what Don Quijote desires and ultimately realises, what he has been yearning to find, is a *mental*, a *philosophical* atmosphere. So many possible conclusions for his quest have been advanced over the years. One of the most magnificent is the one used in the most modern, and I think so far the best, English translation of *Don Quijote*, by Edith Grossman, who has also translated most of the modern Spanish authors, like Marquez and Vargas Llosa among others. Her translation of the Cervantes is prefaced by Harold Bloom's wonderful essay in which he says: 'Don Quijote's quest is primarily a quest for justice. It also means a quest against death, because death is the ultimate injustice in the world in which Don Quixote travels.' But, of course, this is itself relativised to a really important extent by what happens at the end of the novel when Don Quijote returns home and voluntarily dies – a way of overcoming death by no longer acknowledging its tyranny, its absolute power over him. So in a way it means that, in the process, death itself is vanquished.

To fully understand this, one should perhaps return to the encounter with Cardenio in Cervantes' story. I do not go into all the laborious details of that interminably long story, but just try to summarise and contextualise: whenever Don Quijote and Sancho Panza encounter somebody at a crossroads or in an inn or wherever, they start telling their stories. On one occasion, again in the Sierra Morena, they encounter a whole gang of 22 slaves on a long chain, on their way to the galleys where they have to live out their punish-

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ment in the service of the King. And all 22 of them start telling their stories to Don Quijote. That is one reason why the book is so long: it becomes a long chain of stories. Cardenio is one of the tales, because what happens to Cardenio is a version of what happens to Don Quijote himself, especially in his imagined relationship with Dulcinea del Toboso. It is also a repetition in a different key, highlighting different nuances of the stories told by all these innumerable other characters in this novel.

The fascinating thing is that, when we meet Cardenio in the book, it is as a fellow traveller in the Sierra Morena. We see him as a character on the same footing as Don Quijote and Sancho Panza. He is as much alive as they are. He is as real (or of course as unreal) as they are. That is why they are interested in his telling of his story; so that they can find out where he comes from, how it has happened that he should find himself in this particular spot, and how the rest of his life may evolve.

The original series of events folds ever more intricately into the life of Don Quijote himself. It starts with the story of what happened when Cardenio fell in love with a particular woman, and then lost her, and afterwards got involved with two sons of a nobleman. The first was not very interested in him, the second employed him, and the nobleman then employed him to woo a certain lady on behalf of the younger of the two sons of this household. The outcome is that the second son actually gets the woman, has his way with her and then loses all interest in her. Afterwards he becomes interested in Cardenio's own mistress and so he moves his affections there. She promptly abandons Cardenio.

The Cardenio we later encounter in the mountains presents the outcome of this story. It is not a matter of meeting the man and then moving into the realm of fantasy and finding out more about him. It is a matter, really, of encountering somebody, and then reliving his life, a fantastic story-life, in order to take us to this particular point of Cardenio's life. At that stage he becomes so much alive that he becomes a worthy companion for Don Quijote, who in his relationship, or imagined relationship, with Dulcinea del Toboso also moves constantly between the dimensions of what we, for the sake of brevity and simplicity, call the dichotomy between the real and the fantastic. So when a character from a story bursts into what we may call a real life on the level of the reality of this novel we can amplify the events, modify them, relativise them. In this process there is a development from story into so-called reality, just as Don Quijote moves from his story, his stories, into the ultimate sense of reality, where death is the final answer to everything.

There is a remedy for everything except death, says Sancho at every other moment. But we discover in the course of the novel that death is the one thing that really finds itself part of the very heart of human experience. It is the starting point of what we think about life, of where we can develop into our lives, and in terms of which we have to interpret what happens to our lives in order to understand them. So death is not the final point but the starting point.

The imagination as such is not the final point but the starting point. Shakespeare must have realised this from the very moment he decided that he was going to turn Cardenio's story into a play – a lost play that we may never see. The point is that the movement from story-character, from imagined life, into a real character, is a giant leap for mankind, as Neil Armstrong suggested. And it is still with us in every step we can take in our own

Spanish edition of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* from André Brink's library. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1957, illustrated by Salvador Dalí, bought by Brink in Madrid in 1964. PHOTO: Karina Brink

Pages from two editions of Cervantes' *Don Quixote/Quijote* from André Brink's library. Spanish edition – Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1957, illustrated by Salvador Dalí, bought by Brink in Madrid in 1964. Afrikaans edition – Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2010, translated by Brink in 1966. PHOTO: Karina Brink

world, which is not just a matter of conflict, or a constant struggle between the real and the imagined, but is an inextricably interwoven text of the real and the imagined.

One sees all of this in so many ways and on so many levels in this amazing book. As we have seen, the first time Dulcinea is mentioned she is a peasant girl in the next-door village of Toboso. Don Quijote has only heard about her and in his mind he transforms her into this magical princess worthy of the exploits of a knight-errant, Don Quijote de la Mancha, adding his region of La Mancha, that central rosetta of Spain, to his name, to give him, as Shakespeare would call it, a local habitation and a name. The same applies to Dulcinea, originally called Aldonza Lorenzo, whom he transforms into Dulcinea, a musical sound, and she becomes del Toboso, 'of Toboso'. He makes her incarnate Toboso, just as he, with Sancho, incarnates the concept of Spain through many centuries. This novel was written at the very end of the age of the *conquistadores*, when the new generation of Spanish knights-errant set out across the Atlantic and colonised so much of what is now South America and Central America among the Incas, among the Maya, among the people who may or may not have been the Aztecs. Those things really happened. Those fantastical exploits came, at that stage, to define what Spain was about. And coming at the end of that, it is as if Cervantes is looking back over this tremendous century and saying that all that has been happening to Spain, to us, really can be summarised in the nutshell of the life of the Knight of the

IN THIS REGARD, AMADIS OF GAUL WAS THE FIRST JAMES BOND

Sad Countenance. It is almost as silly and ridiculous as the exploits of a Don Quijote setting forth across the plains of La Mancha, across the Sierra Morena, into Andalusia, and in the final journey, all the way to Barcelona, where one of his final and great adventures is set, where else but in a printer's shop. This real man, conceived from the innumerable imaginings of the Amadis novels, who finds a face and a life story, returns to print, returns to a bookshop, a printer's shop, and is gathered into the reality of the fiction of books. But it starts, to a very large extent, as I have so briefly illustrated, with the concept of Dulcinea del Toboso, this girl, this very ordinary young woman, who becomes in his mind the woman worthy of all the exploits he undertakes, and to whom he can dedicate each one of his famous victories, and who can illuminate everything that happens in his life, all the terrible sufferings that he has to go through. Because it really is unbelievable in every sense, especially the strictest sense of the word. It is unthinkable that what happens to him and, perhaps to a lesser extent, to Sancho could possibly happen to an individual, and that he could come unscathed out of such experiences. A modern parallel that has occurred to me is to compare Don Quijote's exploits with those of Tom and Jerry in their cartoon. In almost every single adventure, poor Tom is pulverised, cut up, destroyed, so that there is literally nothing left of him. And yet, when the next episode starts, there he is, alive and very much kicking and jumping around. The same happens to Don Quijote. I think one has to approach it with exactly the same mindset.

And all of that applies equally to Dulcinea del Toboso. Whenever Don Quijote does manage to score a victory in some encounter, immediately the vanquished person is sent off to the village of El Toboso, where he has to pay homage to the lady Dulcinea to tell her that he has been sent to her by a knight in armour. Most of those people do not actually bother to go there. What really happens is that when they do get to her, nobody seems to be interested, least of all Cervantes. So Don Quijote goes through all these motions all the time as he faithfully sticks to the rules of chivalry. We should never forget that the first thing Cervantes wanted to do when he set out to write this novel was to show how ridiculous a century of novels about knights-errant had been. He wanted to show all of that nonsense, the ridiculous extremes they had been prepared to go to in their storytelling, and to show how they had taken generations of European readers quite literally for such rides. In this regard, Amadis of Gaul was the first James Bond. And this is the model on which Don Quijote images himself, and Cervantes wants to point out the ridiculousness of this, to show that this world of fiction, when measured against the possibilities of the real, is really just a load of shit. He manages that, precisely because he shows Don Quijote being so totally ridiculous. But the amazing thing is that he is so much more than just ridiculous. In an unexpected way, he may prefigure somebody like Camus with his interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus.[3] Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to push his huge rock up against the steep side of a mountain, not for 10 years or 20 years or 50 years but for all eternity, knowing that every time he gets to the top, it is going to roll down again. But Camus' hero continues, never gives up, knowing that he will never get the rock there, and that he is doomed to fail, but never accepting that his action is going to stop. It is this indefatigable effort of the Camusian hero to carry on with an absurd task, and to have the satisfaction of knowing that he did not give up, that redefines the hero for our time, transforming the hero not into the one who conquers, but the one who manages to survive. And Don Quijote is the first survivor in this particular sense, even though in the end even he has to accept death. But he accepts it on his own terms in those wonderful, bleak, resigning and triumphant words: 'Gentlemen, let us go step by step, for already there are no birds left in last year's nests' – words I believe Shakespeare would have been proud to have written himself. It is interesting, of course, just in passing, that Shakespeare and Cervantes were perfect contemporaries, to the point where they both died, unless we are mistaken about the dates we have come to accept for Spain and England in the early 17th century, on one and the same day.

ENDNOTES

1 | William Shakespeare, *Double Falsehood*, ed Brean Hammond (London: Methuen Drama, 2010).

2 | Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972).

3 | Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955).

Rereading Blake's Lyric 'Never seek to tell thy love'

John Higgins

When invited to give a talk in the Great Texts lecture series, the first thing that came into my mind was this lyric by the British 'Romantic' poet, William Blake (1757–1827):

> Never seek to tell thy love,
> Love that never told can be;
> For the gentle wind does move
> Silently, invisibly.
>
> I told my love, I told my love,
> I told her all my heart;
> Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears –
> Ah, she doth depart.
>
> Soon as she was gone from me,
> A traveller came by
> Silently, invisibly –
> He took her with a sigh.

I wondered: why did that lyric come straight into my head? A 'great text' is usually a canonical text, and many, many more obvious choices might have occurred to me for a public lecture on a great canonical text: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* – hundreds, thousands of different texts. So why this lyric? Of course, I had no immediate idea. So this essay is, in part, about trying to find out why this particular text came to mind. One simple answer is that for a text to become a canonical text, a great text, it has to be reread by people. It has to be read by the same person more than once, indeed, reread many times, many many times, over that person's lifetime. I'm sure that all the contributors to this volume have written about how involved they've been with the texts that they have discussed, from Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, to Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. At the same time, for a text to become a canonical text it is important that it is reread, not just by one person, but by many different people in different times, in different places, and even across different continents and cultures through the power of translation. It is only if it enjoys that capacity for rereading that a piece of writing can claim to become a great text, a canonical text. A text becomes canonical because there's something in it that remains profoundly puzzling, and that makes you want to find out why that text should fascinate you so.

When I first read Blake's poem sometime in the mid-1960s in a library book, I was about 14 or 15 years old. At around the same time, one of Blake's engravings, *Albion Rising*, appeared on the cover of a book called *Children of Albion: Poetry of the 'Underground' in Great Britain*, edited by Michael Horovitz, and published in 1969.[1] The engraving represents the spirit of Albion arising triumphantly to lead the way towards a future for humanity that was glowing and glorious, and was eminently suitable for the cover of a countercultural book of poetry from Britain in the 1960s.[2] In fact, I used to carry that book around with me everywhere, and even went to the trouble of buying (at a time when money was short for a working-class kid) a special plastic cover that I could put the book inside to help preserve it – it worked well and I still have the book, which shows how canonical texts can stay with you, quite literally.

The *Children of Albion* collection is full of references to Blake, both in the editor's explanatory Afterwords, and in many of the poems themselves. There is, for instance, this delightful lyric by the

‘Liverpool poet’ Adrian Mitchell, which I think sums up the spirit of Blake as he was being read in that very particular time and place, the 1960s. It is called ‘Lullaby for William Blake’ (1968). It begins, like this, with an unforgettable image:

> Blakehead, babyhead,
> Your head is full of light.
> You sucked the sun like a gobstopper.

And ends with the words:

> Always naked, you shaven, shaking tyger-lamb,
> Moon-man, moon-clown, moon-singer, moon-drinker,
> You never killed anyone.
> Blakehead, babyhead,
> Accept this mug of crude red wine –
> I love you.

This, of course, is not quite what we academics think of as canonical poetry, but it perfectly represents that cultural moment in its looseness, its jazzy, improvised, vocal energy, its assault on the Establishment and its poetic canons. It’s an example of that loose, jazzy, 1960s kind of thing that made the idea of poetry available to a much wider and broader audience than ‘official’ poetry did. For the editor of the collection, the spirit of Blake (or, as we shall see later in this discussion, a certain reading and representation of the spirit of Blake) summed up the energy and intention of the whole anthology, dedicated as it was to the great spiritual, anti-materialist and anti-war aesthetic that pervaded Sixties counterculture.[3] Blake – this Blake of *Albion Rising* – was a key figure and reference point here. Remember, for a moment, how, in the USA, the poet Allen Ginsburg was directly inspired by a visit from Blake’s spirit, who read his poetry to Ginsburg in a voice like God. Ginsburg was possessed by Blake, as were many 1950s and 1960s countercultural figures. And hence Horovitz’s claim, in the Afterwords, that 1957 was ‘the second homeward coming of Blake on Earth’.[4] ‘Immersed in poesy and painting,’ he continued, ‘I let in clearer glimpses of Blake’s vision of a community of love!’[5]

This was 1968 – the ‘summer of love’ – a moment in which Horovitz and others were seized by the ‘apprehension of a vast dread change which would blot out war and exploitation’ – and notably, of course, the Vietnam War – ‘and free the oppressed millions for brotherhood was as real for Blake as it (intermittently) is for us’.[6] As a boy of 14 or 15 years old, I certainly wanted to be one of those ‘usses’, and perhaps particularly so when it came to the new politics of dialect and regional speech, being a kid from a working-class Yorkshire family. Very importantly, Horovitz is saying, ‘dialect and regional speech are revivified and the once obligatory superior accents of BBC and Bossman forgotten’.[7] What I’m pointing towards here is, in other words, a first part of the answer to the question: why should this lyric have come into my mind when asked to give a talk on a great text? For the answer, of course, has to be, on the one hand, a profoundly personal one, but, on the other, a complex social and political one. For one of the meanings of the great 1960s slogan, ‘the personal is political’, is the implicit recognition that the personal is woven from the particular strands of meaning, interpretation and opportunity that constitute the larger impersonal narratives of culture and politics. It was this particular selective reading of Blake –

Albion Rising or *Glad Day*, an engraving by William Blake.
Permission courtesy of The British Museum

that glorious image of *Albion Rising* – that first enthused this young, adolescent mind to quite an extraordinary degree in and around the 'summer of love'.

Indeed, I need to make a personal confession here: I was enthused to the extent of committing what we might call a canonical crime. For, you see, this particular poem, 'Never seek to tell thy love', was not one of the poems in Blake's most popular book, the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*; nor was it available in the cheap Penguin selection of Blake's work that I had. I only found it by chance in the Oxford *Author's Edition*, and this was a book that was prohibited to me by its hard-back price. I borrowed it from the Wibsey branch of the Bradford municipality public library system, where I used to go and borrow books every few days. It was due back on 10 February 1971 and, gosh, is there going to be a big fine when I take it back! But I had to have that book; I had to have that text: it took ownership of me, it possessed me enough for me to do anything to possess it. It meant so much to me, though I didn't know quite what, but I had to find out and couldn't let it go. And that's a big part of what a canonical text is.

Another part of that is the power of the canonical text to draw you into wider discussions, to seek to understand what in the text fascinates but maybe also resists you. For the boy who loved literature in the 1960s, inevitably the fascination with Blake led to reading what the canonical critic T S Eliot had to say about him, writing from a very different cultural and political space than that occupied by Michael Horovitz. Perhaps every adolescent's favourite critic – and for more than one generation, and in more than one country, he is canonical also – is T S Eliot. In the Faber edition of his *Selected Essays* – for years, only available at great expense in hard cover, with that beautiful blue paper cover – Eliot wrote about Blake, and it was clear that Blake posed a problem for him.[8] In many ways, Blake was exactly the kind of individual, anti-authoritarian writer that Eliot the critic could not stomach ('a naïf, a wild man, a wild pet for the supercultivated'), but that Eliot the poet found he had to admire.[9] He wrote of Blake in the following, deeply intriguing terms that went against the sweetness and light of the 1968 'summer of love' version, but which touched on something I found in 'Never seek to tell thy love'. Eliot found Blake to be at one and the same time both an attractive and a repulsive poet, and both his distaste for Blake and his own fascination for him is apparent in the key word with which he chooses to capture that fascination and distaste. It is Blake's 'peculiarity' that is the focus, a peculiarity more than tinged with unpleasantness. Blake's writing has a peculiarity that 'is seen to be the peculiarity of all great poetry', and Eliot seeks to contain and characterise this by noting that his writing embodies what is 'merely a peculiar honesty', one that, 'in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying'. It is, he concludes, 'an honesty against which the whole world conspires, because it is unpleasant. Blake's poetry has the unpleasantness of great poetry'.[10]

That was a very interesting thought to wrestle with: the idea that great poetry could be unpleasant, that there might be something more than sweetness and light in Blake's vision.

But now let's turn to the Blake lyric itself. There's certainly something unpleas-

ant going on here in the speaker's love for the young woman.

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart;
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears –
Ah, she doth depart.

Something unpleasant and disturbing in that love that causes the beloved to flee, trembling, cold, 'in ghastly fears'.

Now, from this point, the form this essay is going to take is that of a commentary (an interpretation, a discussion) of these three stanzas; a 'slow reading' of them. But I want to do this in a way that illustrates some more of what it means for a text to be a canonical text, and particularly the way it is read in different periods. For, after all, what does it mean to reread? You can reread the text hundreds of times in a casual way – you can chant it, you can repeat it – but eventually you'll go blind to it, and it will make no more sense than you can get from repeating a word as a mantra so that it loses its play of meanings. Rereading as opposed to repeating texts is actually a way of making connections to other texts, and the possibility of making these new connections and developing new insights depends in large part on what currents of thought are available at any particular moment in historical and cultural time.

So, let me try to illustrate this by saying that we'll approach the first stanza in the terms offered by the culture of criticism as it was in the early 1970s when, if I remember correctly, a certain strict kind of grammatical or linguistic analysis was the one you would very likely apply to the reading of a poem, as someone studying literature under the sway of the 'practical' or formalist criticism of that particular cultural moment.[11]

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart;

Let us pause here and examine the semantic instability of 'thy love'. One thing English is not very clear about – although it's absolutely clear in Latin and other languages – is the difference between accusative and dative cases. Of course, in real life you know the difference between 'I kicked him' (accusative) and 'I kicked the ball to him' (dative). One is a direct object of the verb: he is directly kicked; while the other one – 'I kicked the ball to him' – is the indirect object of the verb 'to kick'. Here, though, in this poem, it's not quite clear – it's indeterminable, in fact – what 'thy love' is referring to. The phrase is repeated and transformed through the course of the poem – 'thy love', 'my love', 'my love', 'my heart' – and you'll see that you can never finish reading the poem, on one level, because you can never quite rest on quite what the status of 'thy love' is. In the first line of the poem, 'Never seek to tell thy love', 'thy love' seems to be in the accusative case, with 'thy love' referring to the feeling inside that you want to articulate but – as the second line fills out – is


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Bad Timing: a sick film by sick people for sick people
NB: MUSIC FOR INTRO — VAN MORRISON: LET THE SLAVE!

a love than can never be told, cannot be articulated. 'Thy love' is the direct object of the telling; it is the love that you feel for someone else, the love that you possess for someone else.

This assumption feeds into the second stanza, 'I told my love', and here your first inclination is to read back in the text to make connections, to read 'my love' as referring to 'thy love', which is the love that you have for someone else in the accusative. But then why is the phrase 'my love' repeated?

Nothing in a text can be repeated without creating a difference of some kind. You're going to feel a little unsettled by a repetition like that. And because, in the following line of the stanza, it says: 'I told her all my heart', where the form 'her' indicates the dative 'I told to her', it's easy to then see, in the first line of the second stanza, some hesitation between the accusative and the dative, the direct object and the indirect object, and it is precisely this hesitation that fuels the poem on this syntactical level. 'I told my love'; 'I told her'; what did you tell her? 'I told my love to my love'. There is an indecision that you can never really settle on. You can settle on it once, read it again, then settle on it the other way around. It generates that mobility that is essential for the desire and the possibility of rereading a poem, that it doesn't immediately make sense. Indeed, I'd venture to say that this is one of the defining features of all of Blake's writing, what I would call its difficult simplicity (recalling one of my favourite Thelonious Monk compositions – Monk is also a composer of difficult simplicity – *Ugly Beauty*). There is nothing difficult in any of these words, they are not words you have to look up, they are all very simple words, but because of this syntactical tension, there is an almost irresolvable difficulty in them that keeps you interested, that moves you along, that keeps you reading and rereading.

That kind of reading concentrates on formal properties of the poem, its syntactical structure, and so on, and it leads, as we have seen, to some interesting problems. But if a text is to be a canonical text, if it is a text that is reread, then there may also be other ways of rereading it, of looking at it again, and not only within academic scholarship. I want to look at another way of rereading the text, one performed by the great British filmmaker Nicholas Roeg. His early films include *Performance* (1970; with Mick Jagger), *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976; with David Bowie) and *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession*, which was released in 1980, with Art Garfunkel, Theresa Russell and Harvey Keitel in the leading roles.

The hypothesis I put to you is that, whether Roeg knew it or not, *Bad Timing* is a remake or reactivation or rereading of Blake's lyric, 'Never seek to tell thy love'. In particular, it's a rereading, or reinscription, or reinterpretation, one that takes the syntactical ambiguity we discussed a moment ago, and brings out the emotional and psychical trauma that is at work in the difficult simplicity of that syntax. *Bad Timing* was released, not without difficulty, in 1980. It was to be distributed by the Rank Organisation, but after the first few showings the spokesman for Rank showed something of the same distaste towards the film that T S Eliot had evidenced towards Blake. *Bad Timing* was a very unpleasant piece of work. In fact, it's 'a sick film made by sick people for sick people'.[12] He was repulsed by it. In other words, the film generated some of the genuine uneasiness

associated with Blake's peculiar, disturbing honesty. But let's have a look at a brief sequence that makes some connection to Blake entirely explicit. Here are Alex and Milena enjoying the intense intimacy and closeness of their 'sensual obsession', before its obsessive qualities become apparent.

Recorded Visual Image	Recorded Phonetic Sound	Recorded Musical Sound
[Medium to Long Shot] Alex and Milena half-naked in bed, drinking champagne. Alex reads.	Alex (reading): "What is it men in women do require? / The lineaments of gratified desire. / What is it women do in men require? / The lineaments of gratified desire. Milena: Good. I like that.	Billie Holiday sings 'I'll be seeing you'.

You'll see that my characterisation of the film as Blakean is not entirely unsubstantiated. In the opening sequence that you've seen, there's Alex, the psychiatrist, and Milena reciting poetry to each other in bed, and one of the poems is a poem from the same manuscript as 'Never seek to tell thy love'. It's a poem called 'The question answer'd', also from the 1793 *Notebook*.

All very straightforward, it seems, until you begin to read the poem. 'Read', here, has a very specific sense, as the art or skill that we teach and indulge in at universities. It means to read with an open mind, to read, not just quickly and for consumption, as with a beach book or holiday read, but slowly, and asking questions of what you read, of what, exactly, is going on in the text that you are reading. 'What is it men in women do require? The lineaments of gratified desire.' To an alert reader there's something surprising in the answer to the question. You might think that what men (and women) require might simply be the gratification of desire, gratified desire. Let's now perform a typical reading experiment, a working with the text in the laboratory conditions of close reading, and let us ask a mathematical-style question.

Let's put, on the top of the equation, 'gratified desire'. Let's put, underneath, 'the lineaments of gratified desire'. Subtract the one from the other in a properly scientific fashion, in order to see what the surplus of meaning is. (I put it this way as a gentle parody of how we're supposed to do things for the National Research Foundation and UCT's research modules – in a proper scientific way.)[13]

Gratified desire
– The lineaments of gratified desire
= (surplus of meaning – lineaments)

You'll see that there's a difference between 'gratified desire' and 'the lineaments of gratified desire'. As you read casually, your eyes just go over it. But if you read slowly, you ask yourself the question: what is the difference between 'gratified desire' and 'the lineaments of gratified desire'?

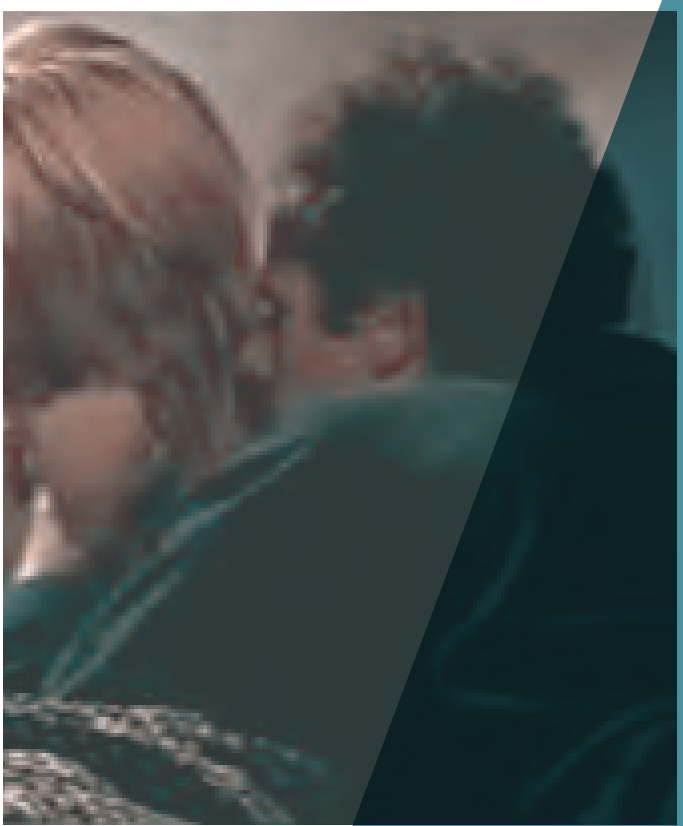
Of course, much of that depends on the rather unfamiliar word 'lineaments',

which can mean the expression on someone's face, the appearance of gratified desire. But for Blake, if we read as a scholar, an investigator, as someone curious, into Blake's word, we'll see that 'lineaments' had a very precise sense for him. And we can see that sense of the word in a number of his comments in the *Descriptive Catalogue* he published for one of his few exhibitions of his prints and etchings (to which, I think, 24 people came to his brother's house in September 1809; his talent was not widely recognised at the time). Another peculiarity of a canonical text is that, like Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, it can be almost entirely ignored at the time it first appears, and it is only through the passage of generations that the text takes on substance and force as people discover ways to read into it, and satisfy their curiosity. For Blake, a 'lineament' was a particular kind of line, something he referred to as 'the bounding line', the line that describes the shape or boundary of bodies. But here is where it gets very interesting: the bounding line or lineament describes the shape of bodies, but not real actual bodies.[14] Blake famously didn't like all this modern stuff, this realist painting, which he thought was muddy, too full of colour, trying to be too gross, earthy, and didn't have the high art of reaching toward ideal forms through and across the grossness of earthly flesh. He preferred lineaments.

'Clearness and precision,' he writes, 'have been the chief objects in painting these pictures. Clear colours, unmuddied by oil, and firm and determined lineaments unbroken by shadows, which ought to display and not to hide form.'[15] Because form, for Blake, was something of the eternal, something of the ideal, something above and beyond the merely earthly and earth bound. 'The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: that the more distinct, sharp and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art.'[16] And here you can see the complications begin to emerge.

'How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line that has infinite inflexions and movements? Leave out this line and you leave out life itself. All is chaos again,' he asserts.[17] The difficulty there is that the lineament, the bounding line, the line that identifies, is the one that enables you to distinguish one face from another face. And yet, for Blake the mystic, the earthly body was never the true body. So the lineament, the bounding line, is a very curious thing. It's a way of drawing the ideal of a person or an object, getting rid of the fleshy, gross, real substance that realist artists painted. It wants to get through the gross flesh of reality to reach the lineaments of the eternal. So when Blake asks, 'What is it men and women do require?', it's not gratified desire, but rather the *lineaments* of gratified desire. It's that which has the appearance of, reaches out to, but goes beyond the flesh to get to and achieve gratified desire.

And this is precisely what Roeg's film *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession* is about. In it, Alex and Milena meet in Vienna and fall in love – or lust, or passion, or however you might describe this 'sensual obsession' – and they have a love affair that finishes disastrously. He gets very jealous of other people she speaks to whom he suspects are her boyfriends. She's always drunk, she's a wild character, perhaps even a



Alex (Art Garfunkel) and Milena (Theresa Russell) in Nicolas Roeg's *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession* (1980). Permission courtesy of Jeremy Thomas (producer)

hysteric; while he's a very crisp, restrained, anal-retentive kind of character. He does work for NATO spying on people and doing psychological profiles. In many ways he's really the opposite of her: where he is rule-rigid, she is wild and flowing. So they break up; there are a lot of drunken late night phone calls and so on; they get back together now and then; it's the 'same old story' (as the Billie Holiday song that concludes the film has it). What made this film a 'sick film' was that, one night, Alex responds to one of Milena's calls for help, after she's been drinking too much and has tried to commit suicide. He goes to her cluttered untidy apartment, finds her virtually unconscious in the first stages of a doped coma, and has sex with her barely conscious body, the rape which the detective investigating the affair surmises. This very controversial and explicit rape is why the Rank Organisation said that this is a sick film made by sick people for sick people.[18] I want to suggest that the film is sick in much the same way as Eliot described Blake's poetry as unpleasant. It gets through to some extremely uncomfortable facets of human life and nature, the ambivalence at work in the dynamics of desire and possession.

Let's go back to that question of who 'my love' is, who 'thy love' is. Who does that love belong to? Alex is possessed by his love for Milena, his sensual obsession, as the subtitle of the film has it, which means that his feelings on their splitting up are partly of rage and anger. If you can imagine Alex speaking this poem, what I'm saying is that the film is a kind of speaking of this poem:

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart;
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears –
Ah, she doth depart.

Alex's telling of his love is the story of the film, culminating in his enjoyment of her comatose body. The film ends with him glimpsing her in New York, a face departing in a yellow taxi-cab. She has experienced just exactly what his sensual obsession with her amounts to. To quote another apposite lyric (adjacent in the 1793 *Notebook*) by Blake:

Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a hell in heaven's despite.

In the end, Milena comes to be, for Alex, something that he wants to be directly his – his possession. Let's go back to those lines about 'gratified desire'. Blake made an important elision here. 'What is it men *of* women do require' was the first version. To require something *of* someone is to ask them politely if you can have it. 'Can I please have a glass of water from you?' It's a request. To require something *in* somebody is very different, and more of a demand than a request. This is particularly so if we bear in mind what I said earlier about 'lineaments' being as it were an ideal image that you find in somebody, but that you may be projecting into them, rather than it being there. Where they become a screen on which you are projecting your needs, your desires, the possibilities for gratified desire. To become a screen on which someone else's desire is projected means that you become an object of their gaze, if you like.

And it's this dynamic that a different phase of theoretical/analytic understanding engages with around the time of Nicholas Roeg's film. Literary and cultural criticism makes a really quite dramatic shift from formal readings of poems, attentive to syntax and so on, to cultural, political and psychoanalytic ways of reading, and particularly ones that are intensely powered by the moment of Western feminism, in which the work of Freud (another thinker whose 'peculiar honesty' can easily become 'peculiarly terrifying', to borrow Eliot's terms again) plays a significant role.[19] In the figure of Alex – as also in the Scotty of Hitchcock's extraordinary film *Vertigo*, which we could say is another remake of the same Blakean dynamic ('the lineaments of gratified desire') – we have the embodiment of a psychoanalytic concept. For there is a technical term for Alex's feelings for Milena (and Scotty's for Madelaine), which treat her both as a person he speaks to and requests something of, but also wants to own, control and dominate, because there's something inside her – some lineament necessary to the gratification of desire – that he wants to have. The name for that oscillation between the two positions (dative and accusative; possession and person) is ambivalence.

In his great late text, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Freud, thinking about society, begins to ask the question: what would you think if somebody came up to you and said, 'Love thy neighbour,' as the Biblical injunction has it.[20] He said that it sounds absurd; people are not like that. But then there's a tension in ambivalence. Ambivalence is a description of this oscillation on a personal level, in which love (and in a country of family murders such as ours you don't need to insist on this very much) is inextricably entwined with the possibility of hatred; they're two sides of the same coin. Freud puts it this way in 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', one of the extraordinary essays that make up the *Metapsychological Papers* (written after the First World War has started, a burst of extraordinary energy, nine weeks in which he writes seven papers):

> The history of the origins and relations of love makes us understand how it is that love so frequently manifests itself as 'ambivalent' – i.e. accompanied by impulses of hate against the same object … If a love-relation with a given object is broken off, hate not infrequently emerges in its place, so that we get the impression of a transformation of love into hate … the hate acquires an erotic character and the continuity of a love-relation is assured.[21]

'The hate acquires an erotic character, and the continuity of a love-relation is assured', even though the love relation itself has been broken off. If you can't have love, in other words, then you can at least hate the person, and still maintain the intensity of a relation to them, though now transformed into something opposite or ambivalent. Isn't this precisely the case with Alex and Milena in *Bad Timing*? The ambivalence Alex feels is precisely that sketched out in Blake's lyric 'Never seek to tell thy love'. If you tell your love ('my darling, I love you'), it can sound fresh and wholesome; but Blake warns us never to seek to articulate this, because somehow inside that love, that desire for possession, there is also the possibility of violence and hatred, present in the desire for absolute control, so that it is no surprise that the

beloved might depart, trembling cold and in ghastly fears. Your love is sick.[22]

Freud is sometimes thought of as a person who wrote only about the individual, but this, in my mind, is a real mischaracterisation. His work was essentially about the relationships between people in familial and social bonds. Ambivalence, as well as being something that describes the feelings one person has for another person that they're in love with, also has, as it were, a social manifestation; and it's the key to understanding many of the tensions both within and between societies. This comes through, particularly, some 15 years later, as Freud begins to describe the dynamics of the phrase 'love thy neighbour': extending intimate personal love across the social bond. On the one hand, he writes (positive side), 'Civilisation is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, after that, families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity: the unity of mankind'.[23] We might say this is a kind of Desmond Tutu approach to the social order. But, for Freud, there's not only this positive side. Freud is very disturbed, in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* and elsewhere, to find that within all that positive energy, inextricably entwined with it, there is something disturbing, something dark. It comes through, first of all, in the text, in some hesitations about loving your neighbour. 'Not merely is this stranger in general unworthy of my love,' he continues, 'I must confess that he has more claim to my hostility, and even my hatred. He seems not to have the least trace of love for me, and shows me not the slightest consideration.'[24] Following that line of thought, Freud expands and gets into a kind of frenzy as this other side of the social bond comes through. 'Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved,' he insists:

> The neighbour is, for them, not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone to satisfy their aggressiveness on them; to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him. *Homo homini lupus*: a man is wolf to man.[25]

Civilisation and Its Discontents itself is an ambivalent text; ambivalent about the social bond, pulling people together through Eros, driving them apart through the dark destructive forces.

Here we can approach the third stanza of the poem in a different moment: this moment, our moment. This moment of xenophobia and difficult violent potentials in South Africa around the figure of the stranger.

> Soon as she was gone from me,
> A traveller came by
> Silently, invisibly –
> He took her with a sigh.

Who is this stranger? What is a stranger? A part of the natural world, it seems of the wind, gentle, invisible. But we all know, as textual analysts, that if someone says there's a gentle wind that moves silently and invisibly, you can't call that up in your mind without its negative touching it somewhere. The gentle wind presupposes, for it to make sense as a gentle wind, a violent wind, a hard rain, a violent, destructive force, also a part of the natural

order. So who is this stranger? To understand something of what the stranger is or can be, let's go back to Blake's idea of lineaments, and to the associated idea of distinguishing one person, one countenance, from another.

In this mode of apprehension (in both senses of the word, perceiving, and perceiving through the lens of fear), other people may become a screen on which you project your fears, desires and fantasies, in an act that places them, not in the reciprocal position of another speaker whom you might require something of, but as an object that you see something in, whether it's there or not. A stranger is a neighbour; someone close to you, close enough to be seen, close enough to be touched. You don't know them, but you project onto them things you think you know. A stranger can come to represent, as Freud's slightly hysterical writing tried to capture (with a bit of overemphasis, probably); a stranger is you, projected back at you in all the forms of violence and control and hatred that you have within you. The stranger can be you. The stranger who comes by is then a screen on which is projected the darker side of the social bond. And Freud begins to think, in 1930, with anti-Semitism becoming ever stronger and more visible in Germany (this is still some years before he has to flee for England), that society isn't just a happy place full of Eros; it is a dangerous and ambivalent space. 'It is clearly not easy for men to give up on the satisfaction of this inclination to aggression,' he warns – just as it's not easy for Alex to give up on his desire for Milena.[26] 'They don't feel comfortable without it. The advantage that a comparatively small cultural group offers of allying this instinct of an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It's always possible to bring together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over who receive the manifestations of aggressiveness.'

'In this respect,' remarks Freud with dry irony, 'the Jewish people, scattered everywhere, have rendered most useful service.'[27] And elsewhere in the text he talks about how the Aryan ideal developing in Germany is very glad to have the Jews to set itself against; just as collectivities in Khayelitsha or elsewhere can still come together in acts of violence against perceived strangers.

Blake's poem is a poem about the reality of ambivalence; a poem that embodies – in its syntax, in all its suggestiveness – the reality of ambivalence. 'Never seek to tell thy love/love that never told can be'. For it's not one thing; it's not just love, it's also hate. Desire is also fear. Satisfaction is the fear of losing satisfaction.

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.

ENDNOTES

1 | Michael Horovitz (ed), *Children of Albion: Poetry of the 'Underground' in Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).
2 | Blake's inscription reads: 'Albion rose from where he laboured at the Mill with Slaves: giving himself for the Nations he danced the dance of Eternal Death', signifying (as David Bindman puts it) 'the annihilation of selfhood … a radiant image of spiritual regeneration'. David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), 179.

3 | Fredric Jameson's essay 'Periodizing the Sixties' is a useful reference here, and noting particularly its important reminder that 'the 60s was the period when all these "natives" became human beings, and this internally as well as externally: those inner colonized of the First World – "minorities", marginals, and women – fully as much as its external subjects and official "natives"'. See Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory, Vol 2: Syntax of History* (London: Routledge, 1988), 181.

4 | Horovitz (ed), *Children of Albion*, 316. Blake was born in 1757.

5 | Ibid, 320. So many of Blake's insights seemed to read as the organising slogans of 'free love', as, for example, many of the Proverbs of Hell in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* such as 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom'; 'He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence'; 'Damn braces: Bless relaxes'. William Blake, *The Complete Writings of William Blake, with Variant Readings* (London: Oxford, 1972), 150–152.

6 | Horovitz (ed), *Children of Albion*, 345.

7 | Ibid, 326.

8 | TS Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

9 | Ibid, 317.

10 | Ibid, 317.

11 | For a very useful and brief discussion of some of the changing modes of literary critical analysis in the Cambridge of my time, see Raymond Williams's essay 'Crisis in English Studies' in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1984).

12 | Nick Hasted, 'Sick, sick, sick, said Rank', *The Guardian* (Manchester, UK), 15 August 2000, accessed 31 October 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2000/aug/15/artsfeatures.edinburghfilmfestival.

13 | For more on this, see Chapter 3 '"It's literacy, stupid!": declining the humanities in NRF research policy' in my *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press, 2013).

14 | As is evident enough in the comparison of the idealized but sexless lineaments of Blake's Albion with the sensual lineaments of Milena (Theresa Russell), as pictured in Fig 2 and 3.

15 | Blake, *Complete Writings*, 564.

16 | Ibid, 585.

17 | Ibid.

18 | Roeg was himself explicit about the dynamics of the film, noting how 'the actors were frightened when they realised the disgust you feel when you can't control yourself. It's an extraordinary, horrible crime, rape.' Nick Hasted, 'Sick, sick, sick, said Rank', *The Guardian*, 2000.

19 | As in the work of such crucial figures as Juliet Mitchell, Jacqueline Rose, Denise Riley, Mary Ann Doane and many others.

20 | For a useful discussion around this topic, see the essays in Slavoj Zizek, Eric L Santner and Kenneth Rheinhard, *The Neighbour: Three Enquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

21 | Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Standard Edition*, 24 vols (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1976), Vol XIV, 139.

22 | As another Blake lyric, 'The sick rose' warns. 'Oh rose, thou art sick!/The invisible worm/That flies in the night,/in the howling storm,/Has found out thy bed/Of crimson joy:/And his dark secret love/Does thy life destroy'; Blake, *Complete Writings*, 213.

23 | Freud, *Standard Edition*, XXI, 122.

24 | Ibid, 110.

25 | Ibid, 111.

26 | Ibid, 114.

27 | Ibid, 114.

HOW HAMLET BECAME MODERN

Sandra Young

A novelist friend of mine dismissed with a cynical quip any expertise I might have hoped to claim in telling her the subject of my essay.[1] '*Everyone* is an expert on *Hamlet*,' she said, 'anyone who has had a minor Oedipal temper tantrum.' Though not everyone would be so quick to dismiss Hamlet's turmoil, or to use the language of Oedipus to do so, there is indeed something about the play that is deeply familiar and inflected with post-Freudian psychoanalysis. 'The experience of *Hamlet* is almost always that of recognition,' writes Harvard professor Marjorie Garber. 'It could be said that in the context of modern culture – global culture as well as Anglophone culture – one never does encounter *Hamlet* "for the first time".'[2]

Why is that? Why does it seem that Hamlet is so intimately familiar, and that we know the motives and impulses that are hidden even to Hamlet himself? Is it because we recognise in Shakespeare's tragic hero the self-doubt, the conflict between filial duty and inner yearnings, and the fraught self-examination that have come to characterise existence in late modernity? Or is it simply because we have learned to see him, as Margreta de Grazia puts it, as 'the most valued character in our cultural tradition'?[3] We all have a stake in this Hamlet, a character with 'an inner being so transcendent, he barely comes into contact with the play from which it emerges'.[4] That 'inner being' in the language of this play may seem familiar, more than four centuries after it was first performed, but the route to familiarity is a complex one, its insights self-reproducing. Shakespeare's audiences would have brought perspectives of their own to this play, and the diverse sets of audience in the 21st century do the same. These interpretative frames are not internal to the play and the meanings they generate are not self-evident or inevitable. If we trace the history of critical responses, it becomes possible to open up a critical gap between what we think we 'know' about Hamlet and the possibility that there are other ways of seeing him.

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JUDE LAW

It may be obvious to audiences, since Freud, that Hamlet is caught in a vortex of tormented, inward-looking indecision and Oedipal self-doubt, but he only came to be that through the preoccupations of, first, post-Enlightenment Europe and, second, post-Freudian theories of subjectivity and sexuality. I would like to examine how Shakespearean critics and theatremakers have contributed to the formation of this

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Hamlet, and then see where that might leave us, as 21st-century inheritors of this play.

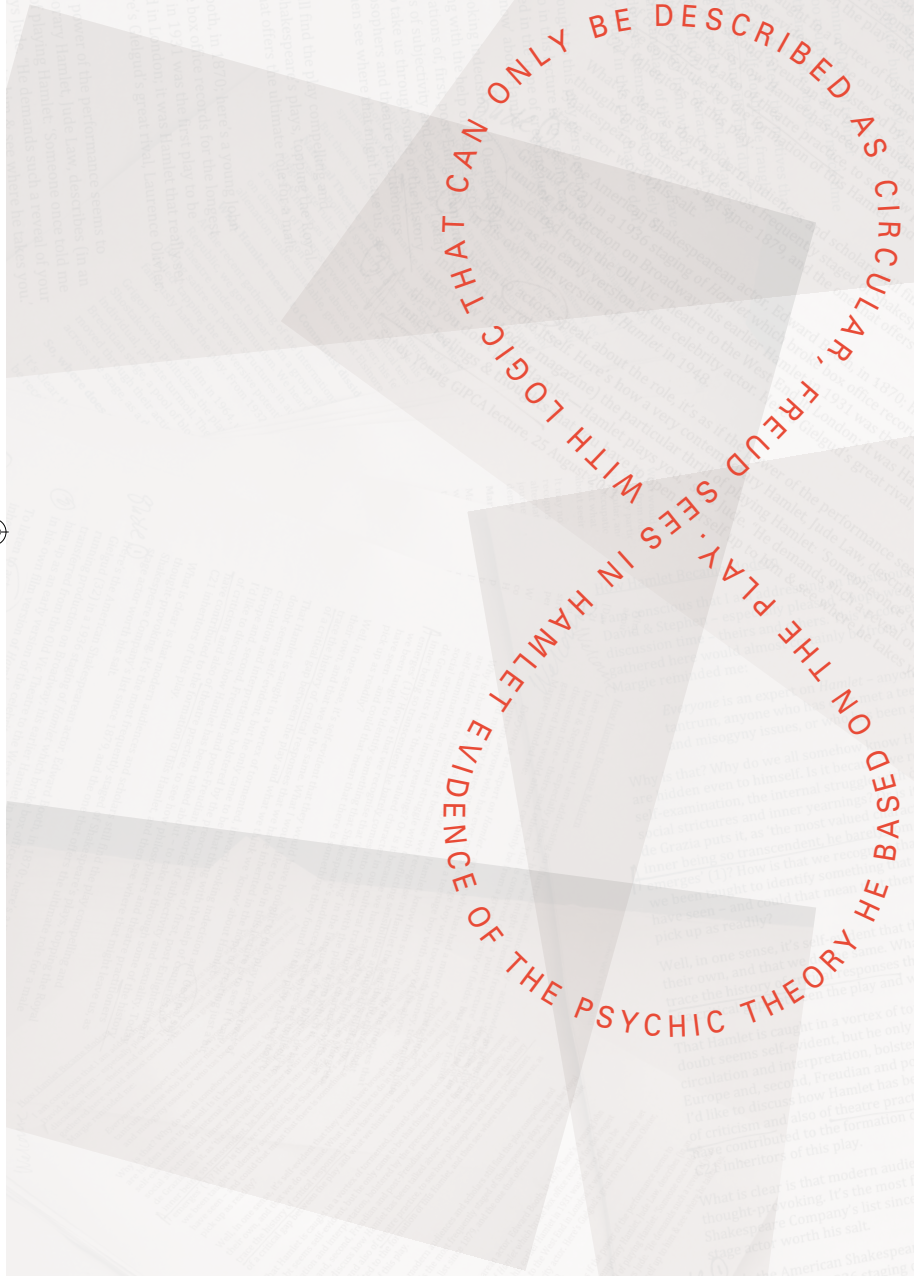
What is clear is that modern audiences and scholars still find *Hamlet* a compelling and thought-provoking play. For a long time, it has been the most frequently staged of Shakespeare's plays and is almost always in performance somewhere across the globe. Hamlet offers the ultimate role for a male stage actor.[5] John Gielgud's strong association with Hamlet is what ultimately set him up as an early version of the celebrity actor. Contemporary actors, too, speak about the role as if the power of the performance inheres in the character himself. This is how a very contemporary Hamlet, Jude Law, describes the particular thrill of playing Hamlet,[6] in an interview with Adam Green in *Vogue* magazine:

> 'Someone once told me that you don't play Hamlet – Hamlet plays you,' says Jude. 'He demands such a reveal of your inner feelings and thoughts that you have to open yourself up to him and see where he takes you.'
>
> Jude adds, 'You see Hamlet struggling with these questions about why we're here and what the work of life is, but ultimately, as with all great writing, the answers are really left up to us. At the heart of this character is someone we all recognize as ourselves.'[7]

What the actor feels he recognises in the character is the internal wrestling and seemingly universal angst that does not need further explanation. This Hamlet seems to have an almost spiritual hold, so deeply does he see into the psychic struggles of actors and audiences alike. But even a brief look into performance history over the last 100 years or so demonstrates that the Hamlet 'we' seem to 'recognize as ourselves' is one that came into being through specific staging interventions that secured a firm relationship between the play, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the preoccupations of generations of theatremakers.

A key figure in the development of this Oedipal Hamlet is Sir Laurence Olivier. It was precisely through an appropriation of psychoanalysis that Olivier developed his own, distinctive incarnation of Hamlet after John Gielgud's legendary performances in the 1930s. Olivier's Hamlet in the 1937 production at the Old Vic was to be the making both of Olivier as a serious actor and of the Hamlet familiar to 21st-century audiences. Philip Weller attributes the 'decisive turn' in modern constructions of Hamlet to Olivier's powerful incarnation as Hamlet,[8] though for Weller it was only in Olivier's 1948 film version[9] that his unmistakably Oedipal Hamlet was more fully realised, through canny filmic devices, like lingering close-ups of the royal bed, more than one 'suggestive embrace between mother and son', and the casting of a 27-year-old Gertrude to Olivier's 40-year-old Hamlet.[10] The result of this coupling of Freud with Shakespeare's best-loved drama was decisive: 'Both Hamlet and Freud are cultural icons, and Laurence Olivier, aided by modern sensibilities, seems to have forged an iron link between the two.'[11] The Oedipal framework persists in performances of Hamlet only because it seems so familiar that its constructedness is hardly visible. We can see how this myth has been created and sustained in popular culture by stepping aside to take note of other alternative interpretative contexts across the globe and the distinct 'Hamlets' they generate.

What of Hamlet's status in the world of the academy? Scholars still have much



to say about him. A statistical survey of submissions to *Shakespeare Quarterly*, a leading international Shakespeare journal, during 2010 bears this out.[12] Unsolicited articles about *Hamlet* were by far in the majority, at 48. The next most researched play, *Othello*, yielded only 28 articles. The ratio becomes even more dramatic in respect of articles accepted for publication on the basis of assessors' reports: 14 articles about *Hamlet* were accepted, whereas the next closest was only six.[13] This is not necessarily because the psychoanalytical model predominates; on the contrary, scholars have contested its prominence for some years now and have moved on to consider alternative interpretative lenses and significations, as these statistics attest.

What makes *Hamlet* and its principal character so compelling that scholars, theatre practitioners and audiences return to the play repeatedly? Perhaps it should not be surprising that Hamlet, the character, is deemed so significant and substantial a character: the play offers him more air time, proportionally, than any of Shakespeare's other characters. He is given more words, more questions, and more soliloquies with which to address himself to his audience. More than a third of the play's lines are spoken by Hamlet. We are given access to his inner questioning and to his struggle to 'fit' himself to appearances. His meditations on how to 'be' in the world have lent themselves to reflections by others on larger metaphysical questions. This is not necessarily because of the rich, brooding quality of his internal world, per se, but because he draws attention to it. It might be *this* that most sets him apart: his explicit attempt to find a language to talk about the self. Hamlet approaches his own quandary with the probing sensibilities of a scholar, but without resting in the apparent certainties of book learning. His struggles have resonated for scholars and theatregoers in part because he has found a way to speak of them. Far from undermining his coherence as a subject, his self-doubt in fact secures it. It is precisely this self-questioning that has made him a figure for the kind of subjectivity that has come to be seen as 'modern'.

Marjorie Garber has called Hamlet the 'premier western performance of consciousness'.[14] Her care in signalling the specifically Western nature of this interiority alerts us to the *particularity* of the philosophical tradition that conceives of subjectivity in such individualistic terms. For much of the 20th century, Shakespearean criticism seemed to affirm Shakespeare's genius and strengthen his association with a sentimentalised, necessarily male, individualistic subject. Increasingly, however, Shakespearean scholars have distanced themselves from this mode. The late Joel Fineman described the 'sentimental allegiance to the idea and the idealization of the autonomous human and humanist subject' as 'the greatest weakness of much contemporary Shakespearean criticism'.[15]

If the 'Shakespearean subject', and Hamlet in particular, provided the dominant image of modern subjectivity for much of the 20th century, what has it taken to imagine him differently? Tracing the trajectory of Hamlet's journey to the place he occupies within our cultural imagination demystifies him somewhat and open up new possibilities for imagining him in the 21st century. Margreta de Grazia has spent the last couple of decades

doing just that, initially through examining editing practices, that is, the way the plays have evolved and solidified under the signature of something we now know as 'Shakespeare' through the work of his 18th-century editors, in particular Samuel Johnson and his *Complete Works*. More recently she has turned her critical lens to the increasing 'abstraction' of Hamlet, the character, from the rest of the play.[16] His 'disengagement from the land-driven plot' has the effect of depoliticising the play as a whole and removing the fraught social dynamics from view.[17] The 'abstraction of the main character' is also a 'precondition for the modernity ascribed to him'.[18] The relationship of influence works in both directions, however: Hamlet himself offers to modern conceptualisations of subjectivity a peculiarly agonising and self-conscious interiority. But the most powerful narrative influencing what can be seen of Hamlet is that of psychoanalysis. Since Freud, Hamlet's psyche has become disengaged from the political plot and an inexhaustible site of interpretation. Before I turn to Freud to see what he makes of Hamlet, I would like to highlight two significant implications from De Grazia's recent work.

First, *Hamlet* was not always interpreted in this way, nor was it much admired as a play. Shakespeare's contemporaries were not uniformly generous in their responses, and some condemned the play as 'backward' and 'antiquated' for its fixation with murder, madness and revenge. Samuel Johnson, editor of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, disassociates his 18th-century England from Shakespeare's barbarous times: 'The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity.'[19] But in the early 19th century, Coleridge was able to find in Shakespeare a language and a paradigm he could identify as truly 'modern', elevating Shakespeare above his contemporaries for his characters' capacity for reflection. Coleridge's treatment of Hamlet as an inspiration for a particular kind of introspective subjectivity changes him: once Hamlet is 'perceived as psychological, *Hamlet* begins to look contemporary'.[20] Coleridge's estimation also transforms Shakespeare into an icon. The discovery of the 'psychological' in Hamlet, De Grazia argues, is what 'lifted Shakespeare out of his dramatic contest with the ancients'.[21] The celebration of Hamlet in these terms elevated an interiority that detached the psyche from social conditions and gave birth to the new bourgeois subject.

Second, De Grazia would have us recognise that the critical fascination with Hamlet's 'antic disposition' (1.5.192) – his apparent madness, initially feigned – and with what goes on in his psyche, has had the regrettable effect of making psychic disorder the overarching preoccupation of *Hamlet* criticism. This has made it hard to read Hamlet's behaviour as satire and harder still to recognise the play's critique of the social conditions that give rise to Hamlet's malaise. De Grazia accuses generations of critics of misreading Hamlet's odd behaviour as signs of 'psychic disorder' on the basis of an interpretative framework that is too highly individualised. In truth, she argues, these 'irregularities' are the 'signature stunts and riffs of the Clown, madman, Vice, and the devil: all stock figures of privation [in Elizabethan theatre practice] and therefore suitable role models for the dispossessed

prince'.[22] The intense, exclusive focus on Hamlet's psyche – and on his madness, feigned or otherwise – emerges out of misreadings that ordinary members of Shakespeare's own audiences are less likely to have fallen into because they would have been familiar with the figures of satire most frequently drawn upon in Elizabethan theatre.

De Grazia alleges that, over the last 100 years or so, Hamlet's interiority has been focused on to the exclusion of all else. And yet, if we examine Hamlet's soliloquies, we might well find grounds for thinking of this play as preoccupied with the struggle to articulate what goes on 'inside'. However, if we bear in mind that Hamlet comes to us via the theatre, it becomes easier to see that we don't have access to Hamlet's 'real' interior. Nor *is* there a 'real' interior that hasn't been drawn through Hamlet's words. Rather, as David Schalkwyk has shown,[23] what is noteworthy about Shakespeare's play is the attempt to register, in the theatre's very public scene of articulation, the difficulty of representing feeling and consciousness, particularly where public life is besieged and the body politic has turned 'rotten' (1.4.90). *Hamlet* isn't so much about the *nature* of inwardness, per se, as an opportunity to think about the *language* of subjectivity, spoken outwardly.

Hamlet has given critics in the 20th and 21st centuries rich opportunities to reflect on the capacity of language to represent interiority – the relationship, in other words, of inner feeling to its expression. It may turn out that this is Shakespeare's true achievement in this play: his contribution to the development of a poetic subjectivity, as Schalkwyk invites us to see. When Hamlet challenges the inadequacy of conventional words and mourning practices to give expression to his grief, he powerfully registers his protest at a society in which the private realm of grief has become taken over by the imperative to display acquiescence to an illegitimate sovereignty. Hamlet's challenge is not a repudiation of public expressivity in favour of an 'authentic' inner realm. In responding to Gertrude's appeal that he put aside his 'so particular' grief ('cast thy nightly colour off'), Hamlet's retort reveals the tension in this relationship between form and feeling, that is, between the external 'trappings' of grief (1.2.86), and 'that within which passeth show' (1.2.85). In this way he brings the question of expressibility to our attention.

In this exchange Hamlet denounces the deficiencies of *mere* display and *empty* form, but he also powerfully draws attention to the phenomenon of form and its relationship to inner feeling – the difference between what 'seems' and what '*is*' (1.2.77). Even as he refuses the empty displays of mourning – the 'inky' black cloak, the 'river' of tears, the dejected behaviour and all 'shows of grief' which 'alone' cannot 'denote me truly' – his words nonetheless give expression to his grief and to his right to mourn, regardless of the needs of what Gertrude euphemistically calls 'Denmark'. Hamlet's censure is not a rejection of words and rites of mourning in favour of the mystery of that which escapes language – as though outward and inward worlds were wholly separate. We come to regard Hamlet's 'interiority' only because he presents it to us for reflection. But his is an interiority that is related to social context, as Schalkwyk argues in his recent study of the significance of Shakespeare

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for Nelson Mandela and his comrades imprisoned on Robben Island: '*Hamlet* reveals the political nature of even the most private relations.'

The shortcoming of decades of Shakespearean scholarship and theatre practice, then, is not an immoderate focus on Hamlet's inner world, per se, but the pervasive assumption that his interiority is somehow divorced from its political context.[24] 'Inner' and 'outer' are both subject to the vagaries of history, that is, the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' and its 'sea of troubles' (3.1.1751–1752). Treating the language of interiority as subject to history brings into view the political pressures with which Hamlet is wrestling. What has militated against this wider view is the prodigious influence on decades of theatre practice and scholarship of an unsubtle version of Freudian thought.

OEDIPUS

Freud's deployment of Hamlet in developing his theory on the Oedipus complex has had a massive impact on the place Hamlet has come to occupy in popular culture over the last century, though this intense focus has come at a price. After expounding on the myth of Oedipus Rex in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud turns to *Hamlet*, distinguishing it from the ancient myth of Oedipus but, even as he does so, entrenching their connection:

> Another of the great creations of tragic poetry, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, has its roots in the same soil as *Oedipus Rex*. But the changed treatment of the same material reveals the whole difference in the mental life of these two widely separated epochs of civilization: the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind.[25]

This early exposition of his repressive hypothesis was written in 1899. Prior to that, however, in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, dated October 15, 1897, he describes the revelation that comes to him while watching a production of *Hamlet*:

> Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy, and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the full quantity of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one.
>
> Fleetingly the thought passed through my head that the same thing might be at the bottom of Hamlet as well. I am not thinking of Shakespeare's conscious intentions, but believe, rather, that a real event stimulated the poet to his representation, in that his unconscious understood the unconscious of his hero.

With logic that can only be described as circular, Freud sees in Hamlet evidence of the psychic theory he based on the play. In fact, the acclaimed psychoanalytic critic Norman Holland, writing in 1964, understood the direction of debt in this way: 'It is not so much that Freud brought the Oedipus complex to *Hamlet* as that *Hamlet* brought the Oedipus complex to Freud.'[26]

Feminists, wrestling with some of the harsher implications of Freud's interpretation of the Oedipal myth, slip into this circularity, too, by holding up *Hamlet* as evidence of the hypothesis that it engendered, even when questioning the

implications of Freud's reading of the play for its misogyny and normativity. Notice the circularity here in a passage from Janet Adelman:

> Literalized in the plot, the splitting of the father thus evokes the ordinary psychological crisis in which the son discovers the sexuality of his parents, but with the blame handily shifted from father onto another man as unlike father as possible – and yet as like, hence his brother; in effect, the plot itself serves as a cover-up, legitimizing disgust at paternal sexuality without implicating the idealized father.[27]

Hamlet becomes the exemplar of 'the ordinary psychological crisis', 'literalized in the plot', that gave rise to Freud's understanding of this crisis in the first place. Now so familiar it barely needs further explanation, the contours of his psychic crisis are made universally applicable. And yet this 'universality' emerges out of Freud's very particular reading of the play. It is worth noting that the Algerian psychologist and radical anti-colonialist, Franz Fanon, rejected Oedipus and what he called its false claim to universal applicability.[28]

It is not 'wrong' or illegitimate to use Shakespeare in this way. But the larger claims that seem to accompany an Oedipal Hamlet are not as dependable as they have come to seem after decades of repetition. In contexts where Shakespeare and his plays are understood to be relevant for *all* time, it will be hard to recognise that *Hamlet* has had its own biography and that the way it has been received and performed over centuries has been born of the preoccupations of each historical moment.

THEATRE PRACTICE

This overwhelming preoccupation with Hamlet's interiority, lifted from its social context, has been fostered over decades of criticism and theatre practice. For example, in the 2009 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of *Hamlet*,[29] director Gregory Doran made very particular choices in constructing his inward-looking hero. Doran cuts precisely those lines from Hamlet's soliloquy that signal Hamlet's concern with those who labour, as Carolyn Sale points out:

> Cut from Gregory Doran's production of *Hamlet* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2008 are the seven lines that link Hamlet's tortured consciousness, in his most famous soliloquy, to the concerns of others, ranging from those suffering from 'the oppressor's wrong' or 'the law's delay' to those 'grunt[ing] and sweat[ing] under a weary life' (3.1.70–76). It is hard to imagine why Doran needed these seven lines to go. What could the cuts possibly have been designed to gain? A minute of playing time?[30]

Any attempt to explain these excisions as timesaving measures would be unconvincing, as these remarks suggest. Clearly there is another rationale at work, informed by a commitment to the detached, self-preoccupied Hamlet that audiences have come to value.

This is not to say that Doran's interventions are 'wrong' or that he is not at liberty to make them. His excisions merely demonstrate that staging decisions contribute to the creation of a very particular incarnation of Hamlet, a long way off from the character that began to take shape with the First Quarto in 1603. Doran himself would acknowledge as much. He

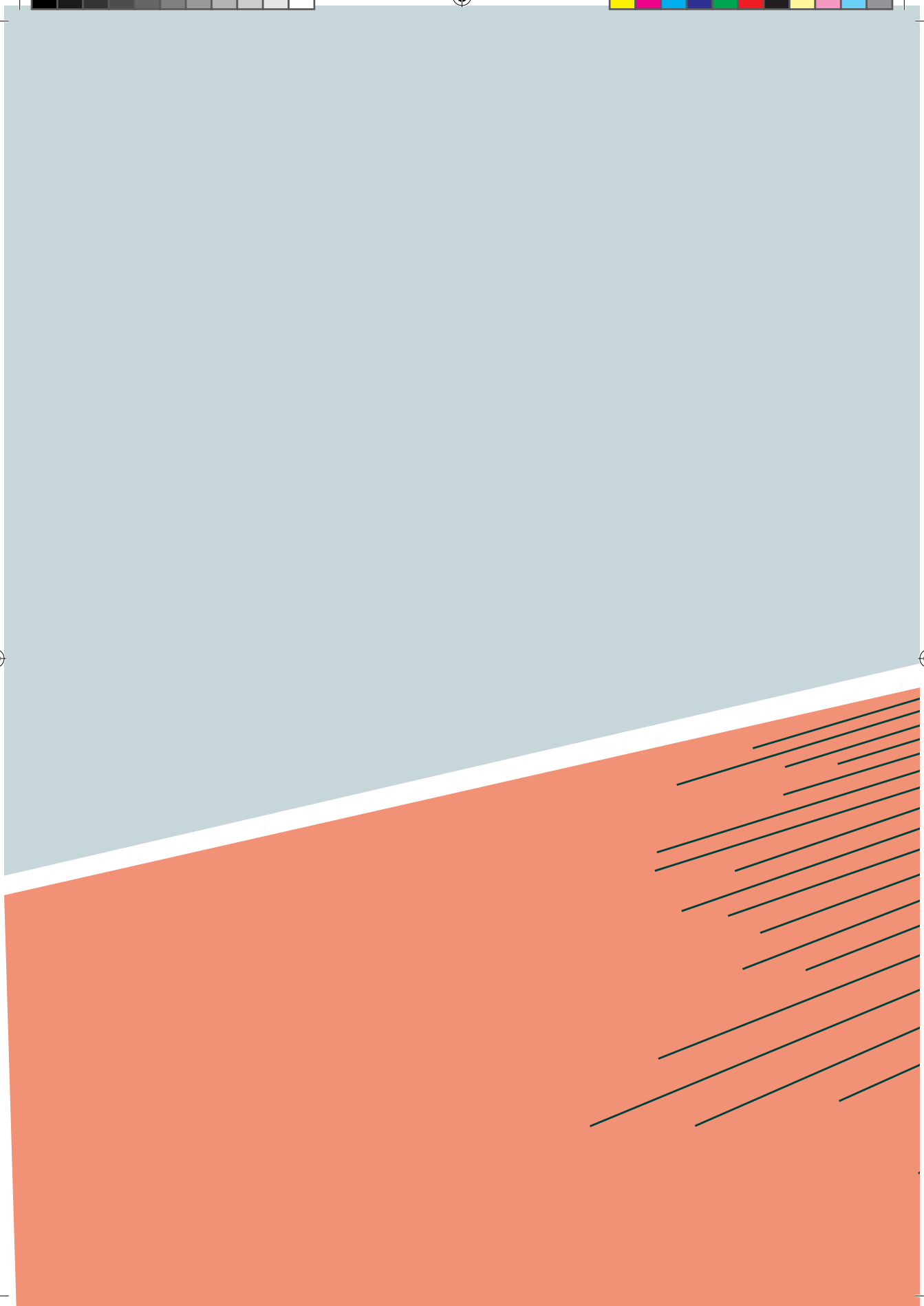
articulates his rationale for making these particular cuts in this way:

> Perhaps the most radical thing we've done is move the 'To be or not to be' speech from after the point at which the players arrive at Elsinore to before, to the moment just after Hamlet has seen the ghost of his father. It is the cold light of day. He is in a bleak place. It feels more psychologically 'right' than in the versions that have that speech occurring after his spirited attempts to expose Claudius.
>
> Deciding what to cut depends on what your priorities are. As Jan Kott wrote in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, an inevitably shortened *Hamlet* 'will always be a poorer *Hamlet* than Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is; but it may also be a *Hamlet* enriched by being in our time'.[31]

Doran is right – 'deciding what to cut depends on what your priorities are' – and he is at liberty to make whichever staging choices he would like to, according to his creative vision. And his choice to move the famous soliloquy in this way is not as radical as he suggests, given that it appears in this way in the 1603 First Quarto version of the play, and has become an alternative staging choice.[32] But it is worth noting the terms with which he offers an explanation – that it 'feels more psychologically "right"' – and reflecting on the effects of his projection of this vision onto Hamlet and onto *Hamlet*. Moving the famous soliloquy away from its placement in the midst of the action of the play into a moment of even greater solitude turns his suicidal indecision into a direct response to the shock of seeing the ghost of his father. Obliterating the presence of the labouring classes from Hamlet's attentions has implications for cultural politics, too: for Carolyn Sale, 'Doran's *Hamlet* licenses those who do get to experience the play in performance to dismiss such people from their imaginations.'[33]

Theatre critics, too, participate in the creation of this insistently Oedipal Hamlet. In September 1992 reviewer Paul Taylor from the British newspaper *The Independent* declares Alan Rickman's Hamlet 'a prince short of passion', denouncing him, in part, on the grounds that his verbal wrangling with Gertrude, played in this production with both mother and son on all fours, demonstrated, a 'great deal of effort, but next to no oedipal charge'.[34] Hamlet is thus not really Hamlet without outward evidence of his internal psychological struggle, rendered in specifically Freudian terms.

And yet, increasingly, theatre practitioners are choosing to deliver alternative interpretations, drawing attention to Hamlet's internal struggles as well as the play's discomfiting exposé of illegitimate social power. The National Theatre production of *Hamlet* in 2010[35] created a repressive Denmark whose political system depended on mechanisms of surveillance and control. Hamlet is never alone on stage. The paranoia of an illegitimate ruler is signalled in the presence of a security guard or informer in every scene. Rory Kinnear's Hamlet is unquestionably intense and anguished, but his struggle is placed within a context of hyper-surveillance and political tension. The production becomes a comment on dispossession and the abuse of power. Hamlet's feigned madness seems a sensible strategy; his alienation is understandable in an Elsinore that has been transformed into a police state, in a damning indictment of repressive political regimes.



Vaneshran Arumugam as Hamlet in a collaborative production by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Baxter Theatre Centre in 2006, directed by Janet Suzman. Permission courtesy of The Baxter Theatre Centre

Dissident theatremakers working under tyrannical regimes have long understood the implicit social critique in the play. At a 2011 gathering of the International Shakespeare Association in Prague in the Czech Republic, delegates were treated to a conversation about theatre production 'In the Cold War Years' between theatre directors Vlasta Gallerová (of the Kolowrat Theatre in Prague), Karel Kříž (of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), and Robert Sturua (of the Shota Rustaveli Dramatic Theatre in Georgia, Eastern Europe). For these directors, *Hamlet* had been a symbol of freedom from tyranny and an effective vehicle for protest. Stalin agreed: he famously hated the play and from 1932 to 1954, any staging of *Hamlet* in Soviet Russia was forbidden. (Stalin died in 1953.) The directors spoke of their strategies for making the play function as a biting critique of authoritarian power, what Ann Jennalie Cook, in introducing them, called 'tapping the subversive potential inherent in the play'. Veteran director Robert Sturua gave an example of a production that gave striking expression to the relationship between individuals and the social order where the body politic was compromised: on a stark Brechtian stage, a pool of blood remained throughout the performance, and as the characters moved through their actions, each of them walked through the blood, leaving red footprints across the stage, a reminder of the tacit complicity of each citizen surviving under a brutal regime.[36]

The South African Baxter Theatre/RSC production of *Hamlet* in 2006[37] also highlighted the abuse of power. Critics were quick to pick up the echoes between John Kani's Claudius and Zimbabwe's aging dictator, Robert Mugabe. For director Janet Suzman, the parallels are articulated in terms of power: 'Tyranny is also at home in Africa.'[38] For Peter Holland, however, the significant parallel to be identified is between Nelson Mandela himself, and the characters played by John Kani, the 'righteous old Hamlet, doubled with Claudius'.[39] The interpretative resonances are shared in both directions: Mandela lends to Claudius his righteous dignity and statesmanship. The appearance of Vaneshran Arumugam's Hamlet in the garb of a prisoner turns his 'antic disposition' into the subversive strategies of a political activist. For Peter Holland the South Africa-specific subtexts were not easy to decode: 'Clearly he is reiterating in another register his sense that Denmark is a prison, and that he is being detained in Elsinore against his will, but what other connotations does this particular kit bring with it in South Africa?'[40] Holland wonders what African language Claudius uses to pray, registering subtly, as he does so, a sense of exclusion. The difficulty of cultural translation has always been true, of course, but not always as visible.

In the 400-odd years of its life, *Hamlet* has travelled far from Stratford and has accommodated appropriations beyond what its playwright could possibly have foreseen. The play has found its way into multiple contexts across the globe. Its hero has become 'our Hamlet' through a myriad of localised adaptations that are able to draw on myths and interpretative traditions – in a manner not dissimilar, perhaps, from Freud's Oedipal Hamlet. In India, for example, *Hamlet* has often been read in light of the epic poem 'Mahab-

harata' in *The Bhagavad Gita*, perhaps best known in Sanskrit literature for Krishna's 'Dialogue of the Soul'.[41] Here Krishna advises the warrior Arjuna to do battle with his kin so that good may triumph over evil. Krishna offers Arjuna the perspective that allows him the impetus to loosen his attachments. This perspective, rooted in the spirituality with which he is able to make sense of himself and his world, liberates him to act in accordance with dharma (duty or fate) rather than an individualised 'I'. This 'indigenised' Hamlet, in Poonam Trivedi's formulation, is far removed from the Hamlet that has emerged out of a tradition that looks to Freud for its interpretative framework.[42]

The influence of historical context on what can be seen of a literary work is particularly striking in respect of drama, which is only ever fully realised in the moment of performance, brought to life in the ephemeral presence of a particular audience. What we seem to recognise in Hamlet, it turns out, is as provisional, as located, and as specific as the cultural context in which we have come to 'know' him, and ourselves.

ENDNOTES

1 | My title is indebted to Margreta de Grazia and the question she asks of the play in an article titled, 'When did *Hamlet* become modern?' *Textual Practice* 17, no 3 (2003): 485. A version of this essay was first published as 'Recognising Hamlet' in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 26 (2014): 13–26.
2 | Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Random House, 2004), 466.
3 | Margreta de Grazia, Hamlet *without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.
4 | Ibid.
5 | Royal Shakespeare Company dramaturge Rebecca Brown describes Hamlet as 'the most complex and coveted role in classical theatre, attracting the leading actor of every age' ('Stage history,' *Royal Shakespeare Company 2012*. accessed 19 October 2012, http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/hamlet/stage-history.aspx).
6 | *Hamlet*. Directed by Michael Grandage. Performed by Jude Law. 2008. Wyndham Theatre Company. Theatre production.
7 | Adam Green, 'Jude Law: You don't play Hamlet, Hamlet plays you,' 9 September 2009. http://www.just-jared.com/2009/09/29/jude-law-vogue/.
8 | 'Tyrone Guthrie directed Laurence Olivier's attention to Ernest Jones's book, *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*, which contained the article on "Hamlet and Oedipus". And the stage and film history of *Hamlet* took a decisive turn – for better or worse.' See Phillip Weller, 'Freud's Footsteps in Films of *Hamlet*', *Literature-Film Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (1997): 120.
9 | *Hamlet*. Directed by Laurence Olivier. Performed by Laurence Olivier. 1948. Film.
10 | Phillip Weller, 'Freud's Footsteps in Films of *Hamlet*', *Literature-Film Quarterly* 25, no 2 (1997): 121.
11 | Ibid, 124.
12 | I thank David Schalkwyk for sharing these statistics with me informally during his tenure as editor of *Shakespeare Quarterly*.
13 | The 2011 special issue, *Surviving Hamlet*, was put together by virtue of the strength and number of these unsolicited submissions and not as a result of a call for papers, as per the usual mechanism for a special edition.
14 | Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Random House, 2004), 4.
15 | Graham Holderness's and Joel Fineman's respective critiques were arguably not so much catalysts but indications of a new wave of more politically inflected materialist and historicist scholarship, reflected also in Catherine Belsey's prior attempt to historicise the construction of the subject in the early modern period in *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* and in the upsurge of publications that followed, with essay collections such as *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, in particular the essay by Katherine Maus that places Hamlet's inwardness within the context of English Renaissance social culture, and more recently Jean Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow's collection, *Marxist Shakespeares* (2001), as well as monographs such as Lisa Jardine's *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (1996), whose chapter on *Hamlet* makes a case for understanding the 'unlawful marriage' of its title as a 'cultural and historical' matter rather than reason to

accuse the character of Gertrude. More recently still, scholars have been alive to the issues of power in *Hamlet* (see Anselm Haverkamp's Foucauldian interpretations in 'The Ghost of History: Hamlet and the Politics of Paternity' in his monograph *Shakespearean Genealogies of Power* (2012) and a collection edited by Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus that attempts to unravel entirely Shakespeare's association with humanism, *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (2012). See Joel Fineman, *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Canon* (Boston: MIT Press, 1991); Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985); *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed by Ivo Kamp, (New York and London: Verso, 1995); *Marxist Shakespeares,* ed Jean Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (New York and London: Routledge, 2001); Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996); Anselm Haverkamp, *Shakespearean Genealogies of Power* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012); *Posthumanist Shakespeares,* ed Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus (London: Palgrave, 2012).

16 | Margreta de Grazia, Hamlet *without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

17 | Ibid, 1.

18 | Ibid, 3. As De Grazia shows, this is in keeping with accounts of the 'grand narratives of history': for Karl Marx the 'delinking' of human beings to land becomes a precondition for modern social and economic organisation.

19 | Quoted in De Grazia, Hamlet *without Hamlet*, 9.

20 | De Grazia, Hamlet *without Hamlet*, 18.

21 | Ibid.

22 | Ibid, 5.

23 | Schalkwyk unsettles the opposition between inner and outer by reminding us that interiority 'is a function of linguistic use in publicly accessible contexts'. See *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 109.

24 | See David Schalkwyk, *Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 116.

25 | Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1995), 264.

26 | Norman Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 59.

27 | Janet Adelman, '"Man and Wife Is One Flesh": *Hamlet* and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body', in *Hamlet*, ed. Susan Wofford (St. Martins/Bedford: Boston, 1994), 263.

28 | Andreas Bertoldi, 'Shakespeare, psychoanalysis and the colonial encounter: The case of Wulf Sachs's Black Hamlet' in *Post-colonial Shakespeares,* ed Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 237.

29 | *Hamlet.* Directed by Gregory Doran. Performed by David Tennant. 2009. Royal Shakespeare Company. Film.

30 | Carolyn Sale, 'Capital against capital: Shakespeare after globalization' (unpublished paper, International Shakespeare Association Conference: Prague, 2011), 5.

31 | Natalie Hanman, 'Who he? RSC tries to save Tennant's Hamlet from his fans', *The Guardian,* 5 August 2008, http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/aug/05/david.tennant.hamlet.

32 | See a list of significant 'Q1 productions' in Neil Taylor and Ann Thompson's introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare* edition of *Hamlet* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 38–39.

33 | Sale, 'Capital against capital,' 6.

34 | Paul Taylor, 'A miss, a very palpable miss: Paul Taylor reviews Alan Rickman's Hamlet at the Riverside Studios, directed by Georgian Robert Sturua, and finds a prince short of passion,' *The Independent,* London, 17 September 1992.

35 | *Hamlet.* Directed by Nicholas Hytner. Performed by Rory Kinnear. 2010. National Theatre Company. Theatre production.

36 | Emerging out of this tradition, too, is Grigori Kozintsev's famous Russian film version in 1964, using Pasternak's translation and set to a score by Dmitri Shostakovich. Kozintsev politicises the play, whereas Olivier's 1948 film performance had deliberately focused on Hamlet's individual, private turmoil.

37 | *Hamlet.* Directed by Janet Suzman. Performed by Vaneshran Arumugam, Dorothy Ann Gould, John Kani. 2006. Baxter Theatre/Royal Shakespeare Company. Theatre production.

38 | Quoted in David Blair, 'Shakespeare, the Storyteller of Africa', *The Telegraph*, 19 April 2006.

39 | Peter Holland, 'Theatres for Shakespeare,' *Shakespeare Survey* 60 (2007): 290.

40 | Ibid, 291.

41 | I thank Poonam Trivedi for her generous and detailed explanation of the influence of this interpretative framework of *Hamlet* in India (in a personal conversation at the University of Cape Town, 13 August 2011).

42 | For further insights into what Trivedi has called 'indigenized' Shakespeares, see her essays, 'Interculturalism or indigenization: Modes of exchange, Shakespeare East and West' in *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries in Performance*, ed Edward J Esche (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2000), 73–88; and 'Reading "Other" Shakespeares' in *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures*, eds Pascale Aebischer, Edward J Esche and Nigel Wheale (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 56–73. Elsewhere Trivedi has explored the ambiguous term 'folk Shakespeare' to claim an 'adaptive, indigenized staging of Shakespeare' which, she argues, is not new in India, though in the past 'academia has largely ignored or dismissed it as "not Shakespeare"'. See Poonam Trivedi, '"Folk Shakespeare": the performance of Shakespeare in traditional Indian theater forms,' in *India's Shakespeare,* eds Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 172, 174.

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

These Things Do Happen

This essay is about a suite of etchings. There are two elements to the discussion. The first is a consideration of great texts: Nicolai Gogol's short story 'The Nose' and its translation into another text, Dmitri Shostakovich's opera of the same name, with a look at some of the ideas that come through the two texts. The second element is to relate these texts to work that I have done, and as a starting point I look at a series of etchings that were made over the last three years, during the period in which I've been working with the short story and with the opera.The etchings were made as a sketchbook of ideas, of different thoughts – putting down on paper, or in this case on copper, notes to think about when doing the opera production, or to take into other work that is related to the opera, but not specifically in the opera. For example, there's no horse called for in the music of the libretto, but somehow the nose on a horse was an image I needed, and I had to find it in the opera – or some logic for it. So one of the arguments I'll be making is about the primacy of the image. The images are the opposite of the essay. This essay is a reconstruction, a reflection, starting with ideas, as if ideas have primacy, rather than saying that the images just arrived. Somehow or other one tries to justify them in terms of ideas. It's a particular kind of practical epistemology I'm interested in: how one finds meaning in the world through the activities one does in it – in my case, either working on copper or paper or with actors on stage, rather than starting with a clarity of thought that one then tries to illustrate in the work one does. Most of the ideas that come through here are somewhat tendentious in that they're reconstructions of an idea after the event, though of course it is never quite as simple as that. The process is made up not only of the objects that you make; part of making those objects has to do with ideas that are sedimented down in different layers inside you – from books that you've read, arguments you've heard, thoughts that are there. I'm primarily interested in this layering of different thoughts, and the way in which we delve and certain thoughts emerge – the control and lack of control we have over our thinking and who we are. This, I try to relate to the etchings, and to other grammars, other ways of finding the rules that a situation demands.

The etchings come about with the character of the Nose, based on the character from the Nicolai Gogol story 'The Nose'. Chekov described this story as the greatest short story ever written. Gogol wrote it in 1867. The story recounts the history of a collegiate assessor, a Russian bureaucrat named Kovalyov, who wakes one morning and finds that his nose is gone. He spends the rest of the story trying to track down his nose. He eventually finds his nose, which is now of a higher bureaucratic rank than he is, and refuses to speak to him. He goes to a newspaper office to put in an advertisement about his nose, but the newspaper office won't take advertisements about noses. He goes to the chief of police, but, of course, the chief of police is absent.

In the story, and in the opera particularly, the absence of the nose is very often referred to by Kovalyov. In the opera, the most poignant music is the music of Kovalyov mourning the lack of his nose. There is one sequence where the singer simply stands and weeps for about three minutes. It is very quiet music, he is

watched by 20 newspaper clerks sitting on shelves around him, and he simply has to have the courage to stand still, wherever he is on the stage, and just quietly cry. The task for the actor was to allow himself to do that without dramatising it. Head in the hands, or sniffs were not allowed – he simply had to stand still and weep. There is the embarrassment we always have of watching an adult cry in public – there's something terrifying about one's helplessness in the face of it. In the opera, this is the emotional centre. For us, it is a joke, but for the person on whom the joke is played it is a tragedy.

In terms of doing the production, that was one of the tasks of holding it together. In the opera itself and in the story, the Nose itself is met once in the cathedral, when it refuses to talk to its former owner, but after that it is absent. There is a character of the Nose in the opera and he sings for all of two minutes in the entire opera, which is frustrating for the singer who has the role, particularly as he is required to sing in a really nasal voice.In the opera there's a lot of music in which nothing happens on stage. Anything can be portrayed; you can do what you like with it. This, for me, became a chance to look at the Nose at large, the Nose going on his own journey. What is the life of the independent Nose, divorced from Kovalyov? And the series of etchings follows this journey.The etchings are done as sugar lifts. The principle of an etching is that you begin with a smooth sheet of copper, and any damage, any injuries done to this copper are referred and sent back to you once the copper plate is inked up. So you take a copper plate, you damage it in one way or another, you cover the surface with ink, you wipe the ink off the surface, and the only place the ink remains is where there has been damage to the surface of the plate. That is an etching, and your print is a record of what has happened to the copper. This damage is done either with a sharp tool, such as a burin, where you scrape right into the metal and you cut it out and get a little shaving; with a drypoint, where you just scrape into the metal with either a sharp or blunt instrument; or with acid. When using acid, you cover the plate with an acid-resistant varnish, scratch through the varnish in one way or another, put the plate in acid, and where the varnish had been the acid bites in, and when you ink it up, the ink stays in those areas into which the acid has bitten. You can get a great tone on an etching plate by covering it with a fine dust and allowing the acid to bite around that dust. Normally, what happens is that you paint out all the areas you don't want the acid to reach, leaving only certain sections of the plate exposed, and those go in the acid.

A sugar-lift etching is made, in my case, with condensed milk and Indian ink. You paint this sticky mixture directly onto the copper plate and, when this is fairly dry, you cover it with a thin acid-resistant resin or varnish. You then place this in warm water, which makes the sugar expand and burst through the varnish. You can then put that in the acid, and the acid will bite everywhere you've made your lines. That's how these etchings were done. The lighter grey is achieved simply by leaving it in the acid for less time, so less damage is done to the plate by the acid, such that it can hold less ink; leaving it in the acid for a longer period gives the darker grey or the black.

Fig 1

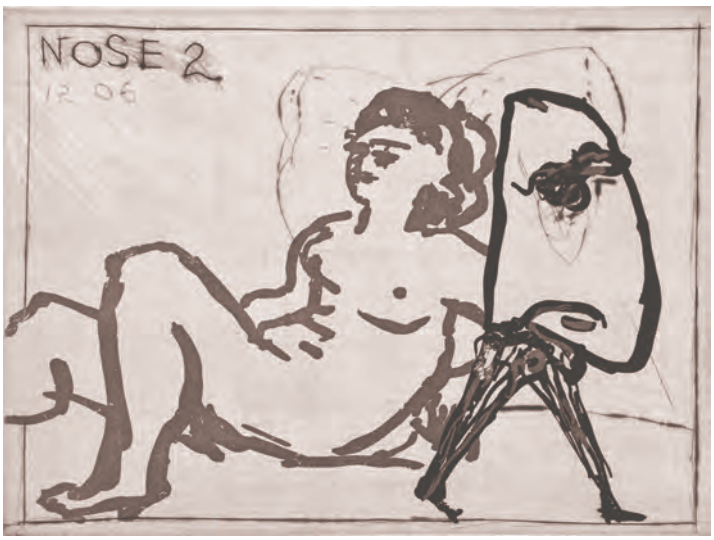


Fig 2

Figs 1 – 30
Etchings from William Kentridge, The 'Nose' Series, 2007–2010
Etchings on Somerset Velvet, Soft White 300 gsm
Image Size: 19.8 x 14.8 cm
Plate Size: 40 x 35 cm
Editions of 50
Printing: Jillian Ross, Niall Bingham and
Mlungisi Kongisa at David Krut Workshop

The plates [Fig 1 and 2] show a mixture of three techniques. There is sugar lift, where you see the figure of the woman and the nose. There is drypoint, where you simply scrape into the plate and you get a rough burred line. You can see the rough edges of thick, mucky ink, and then quite fine ink. Then you get a very clean line, like the lines of the 'N', 'O', 'S' and 'E', which are engraved – using a burin that cuts into the metal and sets off a little shaving of copper, so that you get a very clean line. These were the very simple techniques used in this set of etchings.

Fig 3 is an etching of the Nose and Tatlin's monument, which he designed for the Third International. Tatlin's original monument was made just after the time of the Russian Revolution of 1917, so in the era before Shostakovich wrote his opera. Gogol wrote his story in the 1860s, and Shostakovich wrote his opera in the 1920s. My interest was to take the work that Gogol had written and look at it in terms of the period in which Shostakovich was writing his opera. This Monument to the Third International was designed to be a tower that was going to be 400 metres high, and have a congress of people in a revolving theatre. It was to be a huge structure, based partly on the Eiffel Tower, but, of course, it was never made. What was made, by art students in Moscow, was a six-metre-high model of the tower, which was paraded through the streets. There was both a film and a photograph taken of this. I had seen the photograph, and there was a memory of the photograph, and there was a drawing of the memory of that image done onto the copper plate, and then a print of that plate, and then a photograph of that print, and then a digitising of that print into the computer, and then a projection onto the screen. So what you're seeing is a projection of a digitisation of a print (reversed of course) of a drawing of a memory of a photograph of a model of an idea by Tatlin. We go through this process because one of the things I'm interested in is the analogue nature of memory, and the analogue nature of the way we live in it. The fact that every shift, from the idea to the model to the photograph to the print to the projection, is an imperfect rendering of it. We're not in an age of digital copying of things with exactitude. It has to do with understanding our memory as analogue, rather than as digital, and with the failures of memory being some of the most productive and important parts – the failures of understanding, the possibilities for productive misunderstanding and mistranslation. Nabokov, when he writes about Gogol, says, 'How can any of you who only speak English understand Gogol at all?', the way that many people say, 'Oh, you can't understand Rilke if you don't understand German'. And it's true, one can't understand Gogol and one can't understand Rilke in the same way, but there is much to be said for *not understanding* in the same way, and for *misunderstanding* in different ways. I've never been to Dublin, but I have a very clear sense of Dublin from *Ulysses*. It may be a completely false understanding of the city, the streets may not look anything like I've imagined them, but nonetheless it exists as a coherent image of a possible Dublin.

One of the journeys taken by the Nose entailed me trawling through boxes of many postcards, and taking out all the ones that I hadn't ever wanted to work with or to look at again, and allowing the

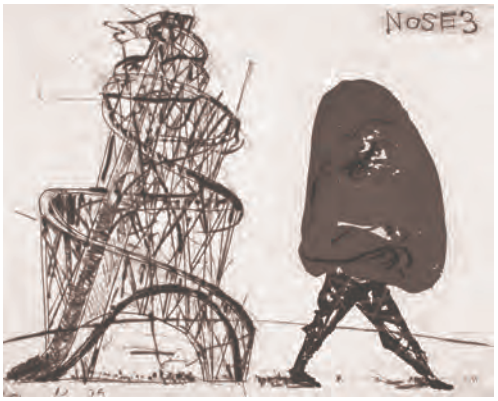


Fig 3

Fig 4

Fig 5

Fig 6

Fig 7

Fig 8

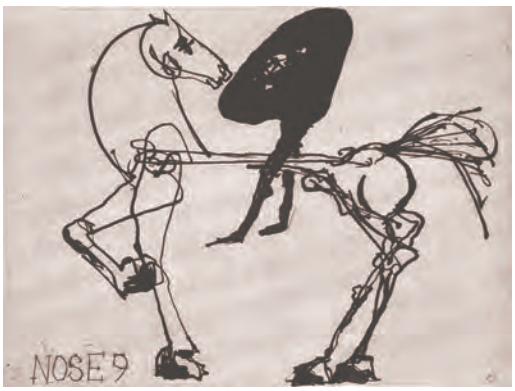


Fig 9

Fig 10

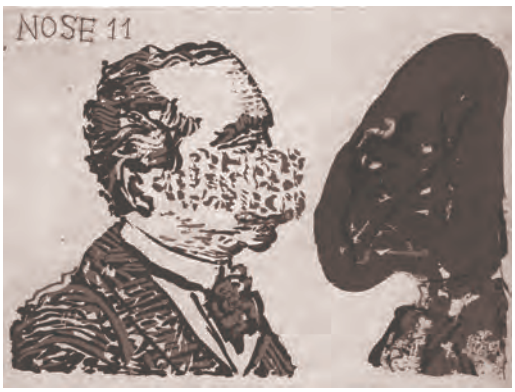


Fig 11

Fig 12

Fig 13

Fig 14

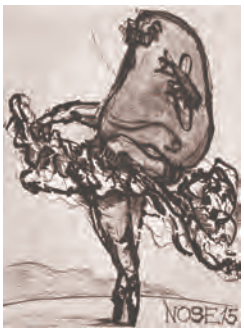


Fig 15

Fig 16

Fig 17

Fig 18

Fig 19

Fig 20

Fig 21

Fig 22

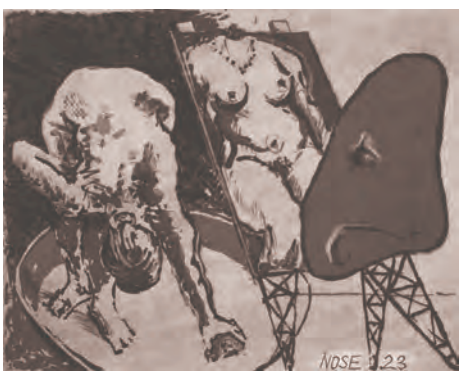


Fig 23

Fig 24

Fig 25

Nose to enter all of those images. This [Fig 4] is a Manet; a lady with a beautiful pink hat that the Nose visits. It became clear at one stage that we were going to need a sequence of the Nose in love. Kovalyov spends the story terribly embarrassed by the fact that he doesn't have a nose, because how is he going to talk to all the pretty women he wants to see. Maybe, he thinks, his nose has been taken from him by the mother of a woman he doesn't want to marry, to force him to marry her.

Fig 5 is a reference to the newspaper scene, in which Kovalyov goes to place an advertisement for the return of his nose. The newspaper clerk says that it is impossible to place this advertisement – 'we have to think of the reputation of our newspaper'. At the end of the short story, when the Nose is back on Kovalyov's face, the author reflects back on the story that he's just told us. He says, 'Only now, after much reflection, can we see that there is a great deal that is very far-fetched in this story.' This is what Gogol writes about the story he has just finished telling us. 'Apart from the fact that it's highly unlikely for a nose to disappear in such a fantastic way, and then reappear in various parts of the town dressed as a state counsellor, it is hard to believe that Kovalyov was so ignorant as to think that newspapers would accept advertisements about noses. No, I don't understand it, not one bit, but the strangest and most incredible thing of all is that authors should write about such things. That, I confess, is beyond all comprehension. No, I don't understand it at all. Firstly, it's no use to the country whatsoever. Secondly, but even then, I simply don't know what one can make of it. And yet, if you stop to think of it for a minute, there is a grain of truth in it. Whatever you may say, these things do happen in the world. Rarely, I admit, but they do happen.'[1]

Fig 6 was a page of a sketchbook in which I had been taking notes of images to make for the etchings, and I decided to make an etching of the sketchbook. There was a megaphone for the Nose to talk into, there was a horse for it to be on, there were bits of the newspaper, and I simply made an etching of that page of the sketchbook. This is what I wrote when I first thought, 'What do I say about this print?' Then I tried to remember what had actually happened when I made that print. It had nothing to do with the sketchbook at all. This is what happens when you try to reconstruct an idea after the image. In fact, what I think I was doing was testing to see whether one could do a perfect circle with a dipping pen and condensed milk on an etching plate. And to see how fine a line one could get with a dipping pen, and then testing various images out. This was a test plate at the side, and then I decided to etch it, so it's really a print of an etching before it became an etching.

There's something about a man trying to prove his civic greatness that is slightly ridiculous. If he just stands up it is always too small and does not work. If you put him on a pedestal, it is slightly better. But put him on a horse and he immediately becomes heroic. There's something about the shape of a horse, the way a horse fits snugly between one's legs, that makes a horse seem made for a person sitting on it, on top of a civic monument. One of the things that the Nose wanted was the civic monument, to be turned into an equestrian statue. My task was to find out whether

I could make a horse that was not worthy of being an equestrian statue [Fig 7 and 9]. The horse, of course, has many references, obviously from *Don Quijote*. One has to take the precursors of Gogol, and Cervantes is a very clear and earlier precursor in the way in which he was both the author and denies authorship of what he is writing. But also in the way in which the horse, Rocinante, becomes such a central character in the imagination of everyone who has ever come across *Don Quijote* in one form or another. Of course, there's also the horse in *Animal Farm* – George Orwell writing about what happened to the revolution in Russia, where the horse stands for the labouring masses of the Soviet Union. I discovered that, try what you might, a horse stays heroic. Even when it is reduced to the most minimal set of sticks and lines, it somehow holds its own. I think that is why we are always so keen to be portrayed on horses – a horse will make up for any lack that we have.

Fig 10 is the Nose in love. One must understand there is an Eros to printing itself. The etching press has what is called a bed. There is a blanket that goes across the bed, and one is always afraid of dirtying and getting stains on the blanket. We're always concerned with the clean sheet of the piece of paper. We etch either in terms of a spit bite or a foul bite. There's a drypoint. There is an extraordinary Eros within the printmaking process itself.

Now we come to the section in which the Nose is lost [Fig 11]. One of the questions, when making the opera production, was how to represent this on stage. The Nose itself was represented on stage in two forms: either in terms of a projection, or sometimes also in three dimensions as a papier-mâché nose running through the crowds. But for the singer, who is supposed to not have a nose, the character who has lost his nose, we tried many different things. We tried covering it with a white piece of paper, and he just looked like Hannibal Lecter – we just saw shadows and strange shapes. The make-up artist of the Metropolitan Opera was very disappointed that we didn't want huge prosthetic make-up that would expand his whole face at the front. In the end, we decided to leave his nose as it is and hope that no one would notice. Which was, in fact, fine, because he fears he's lost his nose more than he necessarily has lost his nose. But we spent many, many weeks and many different experiments at the beginning trying to solve what was actually a non-problem.

It taught me a lot about masks. One thinks of a mask as being about the mask itself. When someone puts on the mask, what you see is the mask. But, in fact, the opposite happens. When someone puts on a mask, what you see is the body. If you put on a mask and someone moves, what you are intensely aware of is what their body is doing as they are moving. You may look up at the mask, but essentially it enlarges every gesture. The red nose of a clown is really just the smallest mask. What that tiny mask does is magnify what the rest of the clown's face is doing. So you see the eyes and the mouth with great clarity, because the nose is covered up with a tiny mask, which you would assume takes your attention, but which in fact deflects your attention. This absence makes everything else around it very clear.

When one thinks of the group photographs taken during the Soviet era,

the photographs in which Trotsky was airbrushed out – like a nose disappearing, he's disappeared – one is acutely aware, in every group photograph from the Soviet Union of that era, of trying to see what has been airbrushed, who's there and who's not there. Instead of making us forget Trotsky, it makes us remember him 15 times more – either because he has literally been airbrushed out, or because he might have been, and we're trying to track any possibilities of that.

There's a famous photograph of Lenin, taken just after the 1917 revolution. It was taken on the balcony of one of the the prima ballerinas of the St Petersburg ballet, Matilda Kshesinskaya. The Bolshevik Party took over her mansion, and Lenin famously stood on her balcony and gave his speech; this is what we see in the photographs. A few years later, Levitsky, the great Constructivist artist, designed a podium with the idea of Lenin making further speeches on it. Before the podium was built, Lenin had died and things had changed, and Levitsky never got to build it. It was another monument, like the Tatlin monument, that existed as a possibility rather than as a fact. One of the strengths of both of these things is that they exist as a possible image and thought in our head rather than as a mass of concrete and steel. To make this image [Fig 12], I simply used my studio stairs, and as with a number of these images, they are composites – in this case, a photograph of my legs with a paper cut-out of the nose. That is, in fact, the way that most of the animations for the opera production were done. Very simply.

The opera was written in 1928; in 1930 it was performed for about six performances, and then it was stopped. From then on, things got worse for Shostakovich. *Pravda* declared that his music was muddled and not music, and in 1934, at the Writer's Congress, Socialist Realism became the dogma for artistic production. Shostakovich himself was never arrested, and was never thrown in the Gulag, but we have to remember what happened in that era. For some people this was proof of the fact that he was simply a party hack following the dictates of the orders from above, and other people say, no, in fact, he was a secret dissident all the time. But the thing we have to understand is that neither being a faithful follower of the party nor a determined opponent to it counted as a real factor in deciding whether you survived or didn't survive the 1930s. There were both strong opponents and very loyal followers who were destroyed by Stalin. So that ceases to be a question. Shostakovich himself did survive, but there were many people, like Meyerhoff, the great antinaturalist director, who was so influential on the way we think about theatre now, who didn't survive. He was arrested in 1939 and shot in 1940. But from that period on, Shostakovich certainly was living with a packed suitcase next to the door, waiting for the three-in-the-morning knock.

In 1926 – two years before Shostakovich wrote his opera – Anna Pavlova came to Johannesburg. They built a special small stage for her in the Zoo Lake, and that's where she danced. Afterwards, she left her ballet slippers with someone who'd helped her at the concert, who was, in fact, the mother of Ingrid de Kok, the Cape Town poet. This was an image [Fig 15] based on Anna Pavlova. The Nose, at one stage, was going to confront Anna Pavlova and then

Fig 26

I thought, what the hell, let him take her over entirely. There is something about the ability to give these extraordinary qualities to this Nose, to this invention, that is not bound by the limitations of our lived reality. I didn't feel I had to be able to dance like Anna Pavlova to put her in the animations. When I was young, my sister had many ballet books, and there were photographs of Anna Pavlova and other dancers. Growing up, my daughters didn't have any of these great ballet books, but they did have a series of wonderful children's ballet books called *Angelina Ballerina*, who is a mouse ballerina. And I suddenly realised, one of the images of the Nose [Fig 16] has to do with *Angelina Ballerina*.

This is a series [Fig 17–21] of Central Committee members, some of whom survived the purges in the 1930s to the early 1940s, some of whom did not. Zinoviev was shot in 1936, and he'd been a member of the Central Committee since 1922. These images were marked down as remembering. In the opera itself, which is set earlier, there is no place to explicate fully the post-history of the story. But in this set of etchings and in other works that came out of the project, there is a series of other references further on and further backwards, and forwards too. Kamenev was shot in the first show trial. Molotov, we must remember, was a member of the Central Committee until 1956, and only died in 1986 at the age of 95. And Kalinin.

It is interesting how close but also how different Russian writing, the Cyrillic script, is to the Roman script. 'HOC' (the series is called 'Ad Hoc') is pronounced 'nos', and means 'nose' [Fig 22]. An 'H' in Russian is an 'N', and a 'C' is an 'S'. Stamps from the USSR used to have the letters 'CCCP'. I was always astonished at how you could get from 'CCCP' to 'USSR'. There's something about that shift in orthography that corresponded to the strangeness and distance that we all had to that part of the world. For many years, the whole of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Bloc, had to be taken on trust as even existing. South African passports could not ever get us there. It was news from some completely different part of the world that it was there at all. It was extremely strange for us in South Africa, it wasn't just like American anti-communism. The contradictions here are very interesting and complicated, and it is astonishing if you think of the route we have taken, from parts of us that seem so rooted in United States and in Europe, and other parts that have such a different trajectory to where we are now. The fact of the Communist Party and its connection to where we are now is either ignored or very troubling in other parts of the world. But I'm sure that many readers of this essay would have known people who were either in the underground of the Communist Party, or were connected to it, or had a sense that it existed around us. What could be more absurd than our own South African national fencing champion being the person who blew up the Koeberg nuclear power station? These are the contradictions that we live with, and the shift in lettering, for me, is a distant reference to the state of contradiction.

One of the things that I was interested in doing in the opera production was to understand our complicated and troubled relationship to this part of history, of the world, and of the 20th century. For me, it became very important that the opera was not simply an elegy for what hap-

pened – what Stalin did to the arts in the 1930s – which is the easy route that people want; but rather, also, to understand it as a celebration of the possibilities that existed, that were stamped out, but that existed nonetheless as possibilities. To understand that contradiction is central to where we are. The first opera I did was Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which for me was an opera about the Enlightenment. The point about the Enlightenment is that it is certainly our least-bad best option in which we are living. However, we have to understand that *part* of the Enlightenment – not the whole of the Enlightenment – was the whole colonial enterprise, and that part of the Enlightenment were the genocides that happened in the colonial era – not necessarily in its name, but ineluctably connected to it. But we acknowledge that the fact of the Herero genocide of 1904 is not enough in itself to make us throw out the whole Enlightenment project.

For me, at this time particularly, it is important to go back to the different roots of emancipatory possibility and to ask: where did things start to collapse in the whole socialist project that existed? One can trace back the Enlightenment project to one of the founding myths of Western civilisation: Plato's myth of the cave, bringing lightness to dispel darkness (obviously, one of the fundamental ways in which we still see ourselves). One of the other fundamental stories that we try to understand and use to make sense of the world has to do with the relationship between masters and servants. And it was being solved – how does one negotiate, how does one end the tyranny of one person over another? Hegel had his solution, saying, 'With the triumph of the Napoleonic armies at Jena in 1806 we had World Spirit coming to know itself, and we had the creation of the citizen'[2] – the citizen was going to be the site of the end of struggle. Then we had Marx who said, 'No, the end of the master–slave dialectic is going to be the proletariat coming to know itself'[3] – that is to say, the proletariat will be the new citizen. And then we had Lenin saying, 'No, in fact, it is not going to be the citizen or the proletariat, it is going to be the Party.'[4] So this – and it is not something that simply existed in 1917 – is part of a long tradition of an idea developing. One has to understand that it is not a matter of saying that Stalinism was a mistake in the process. One can trace the roots of Stalinism in Leninism, all the way back into the very origins of it, in the same way that one can trace colonialism and the damage that it did right back into the very heart of the Enlightenment, but still try to hang on to the emancipatory moment within that. This is a long discussion of one rather stupid etching. But it has to do with hope as a political category. Of what is still possible. Of not saying that, because this has been a disaster, the entire enterprise, or the entire impulse behind the enterprise, has to leave. This, in a strange way, comes back to when Gogol writes, saying, what is the purpose of this story? Who does it help? It doesn't help anyone, it is of no use to the country. The value of the story is precisely in its not having any use to the country, not having an instrumental function, in showing rather the possibility of imagination, and of thinking in a completely different way.

When I went to school, in the first year I was there we had pencils, and in the second year we had dipping pens. The instruction we were given for using a dip-

ping pen was that we had to do what was called copperplate writing, which is light upstrokes and hard downstrokes. We'd get a big blob of ink, and we'd try it again and the nib would snap. In the third year of school, long before any of us had mastered copperplate writing, Bic came in with ballpoint pens, and that all disappeared. I never mastered it. On copper, great engravers manage to do beautiful copperplate writing, and it is an extraordinary skill that was explained to me by someone who once saw my engravings at an American university, and who said, 'Come, I'll show you how to do engravings. You've got to sit parallel to the table, feet together, with your one arm flat, and don't turn the plate, and don't turn the bureau.' I still could not do copperplate. So this [Fig 24] is an etching of the idea of copperplate. A drawing of the possibility of writing, rather than actual copperplate.An etching is also a testing of ideas. In making an etching, there are three different stages. You have your damaged plate that has been inked up. The plate goes under a roller where it is subjected to enormous pressure with a sheet of paper on top of it, so that the ink from the plate goes on to the sheet of paper. It comes out the other end, where you lift off the blanket and take off the sheet of paper, and then you have what is called a proof, an image of the plate as it is inked up. That is like a logical syllogism. You have a proposition, which is your drawing on the plate, and you send it through a process, and at the end you see if the proof works, if you believe the proof. If you don't, you change your first proposition, and send it through the press again, and see the print that emerges on the other side.

In the same way that 'hoc' means 'nos', means 'nose', 'xxx' is Russian for 'laughter'. The 'x' is like a 'ga' (as in *gaan huis toe*) – so this [Fig 28] is actually 'ga-ga-ga'. In the opera there are many sequences in which a lot of laughter is written, and there's something fantastic about the contradiction of ordered laughter, laughter on command – the conductor does his nod and the whole chorus bursts into laughter. This is an etching of laughter.

At the end of the opera, of course, the Nose returns to Kovalyov's face. He wakes one morning, the Nose is back on his face, and that's the end of the story. Then the question is: what happens to the Nose that has been leading its independent existence? It is past its use value, it has tried to make it into the ranks of the world, it has tried to be in love, it has tried to be an equestrian statue, but, in fact, it is back on Kovalyov's face. It has come to the end of its time, and in the proper way of the 1930s, the way that it is done is not with a firing squad but with a single bullet to the back of the head [Fig 29 and 30]. In the great book, *Darkness At Noon*, Arthur Koestler's attempt to understand what had happened in 1930s Russia, the end of the book also is simply a bullet to the back of the head, which is described simply as a blip on the surface of history.These are the set of prints. It's not so much a question simply of how these relate to the opera or the story as I have described it, but trying to understand: what is it to make these prints? What is it for Gogol to have set out to write that story or for Shostakovich to have made his opera? What is it that we do when we try to make some artificial artefact, some piece of art in the world? Nabokov, the greatest writer on Gogol, writing apropos of Gogol – but it's a thought that

Fig 27

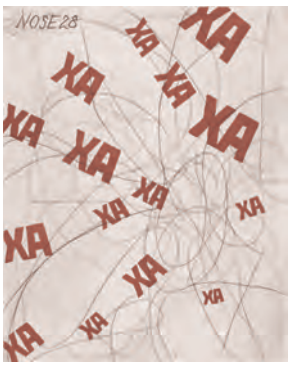


Fig 28

Fig 29

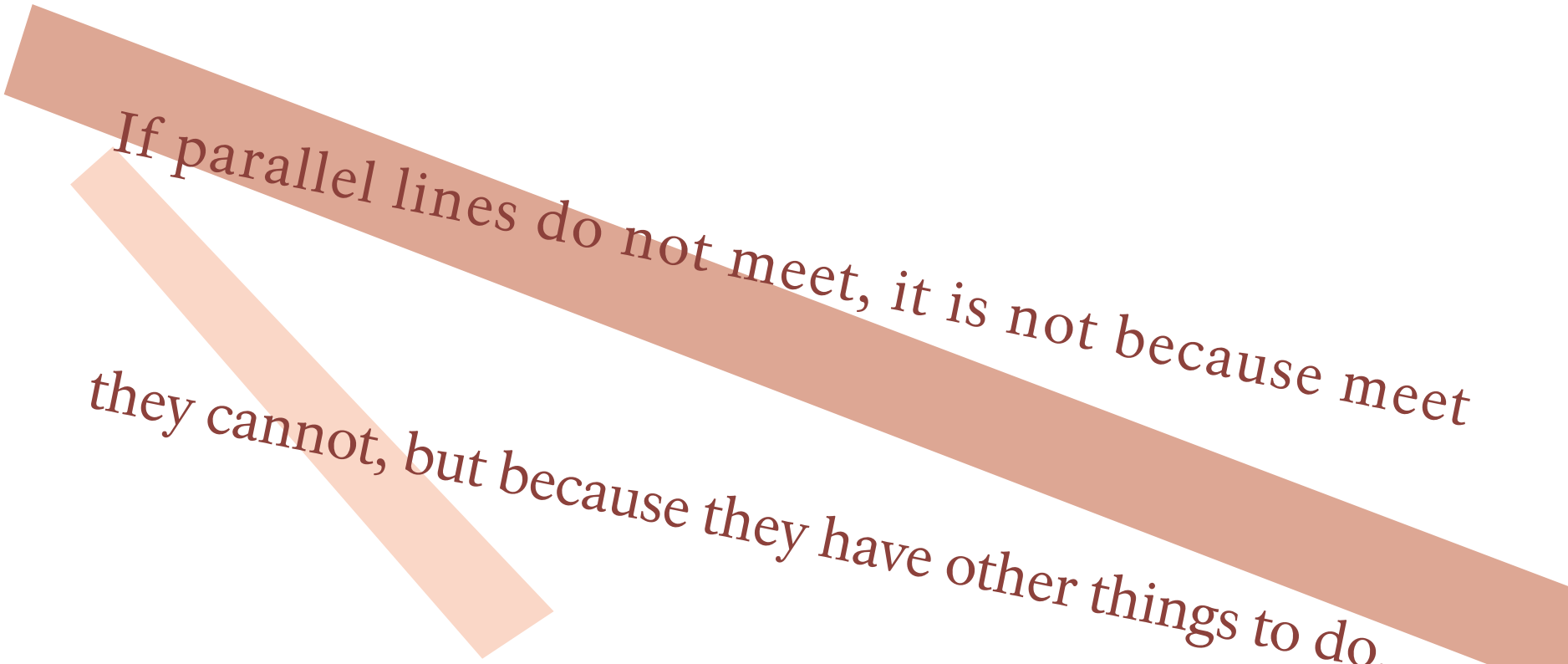
Fig 30

goes a lot of extra ways as well – writes: 'If parallel lines do not meet, it is not because meet they cannot, but because they have other things to do.'[5] There's a sense in which, when you live your life, there's a beginning and an end and no stopping – it's a one-way journey the whole way. One of the things about making art is that it is an attempt, in the parallel journey of making art and living, to make things that can go back in time, that can stop, that can do a side loop, that can take their own journey, that we can come back to and reread and resee. They are milestones along the way, as we go through life (which we know is going to end at a very finite, definitive time), making a parallel line that goes off on its own side journeys on the way. The nature of those side journeys has to do with trying to understand the grammar of each of those journeys. I described in some detail the technical way of making an etching, because, with these prints, the rules – the grammar of them – have to do with what the medium itself makes possible.

Gogol is working with words and ideas, and with the relationship between describing the world and the world itself. He locates himself very clearly in the area one could call the absurd. The absurd is not the same as the comic, it is not the same as the dreamlike, it is not the same as the ridiculous. It has to do with understanding the shifts that actually exist in the world, and then following such a shift, or such a change of premise, to its ultimate conclusion – how far can one push that along? If you say that a fundamental shift in the world is that a nose can separate from its owner, how can we follow that with the greatest assiduity, to see where that will lead us? What is entailed by it, what are the rules of that game? This has to do with the importance of play. That is not to say that play is simply childish activity, but that play is giving yourself over to other rules; rules that may be ad hoc, that may be gratuitous, but nonetheless following those rules with great seriousness of purpose. In dreams those rules constantly shift and change, and that is why there is nothing more boring than listening to other people's dreams, while one's own dreams are completely fascinating. So this is not necessarily the same as dream logic, although it is related, but about understanding impossibility and contradiction as central to who we are and how we operate in the world.

ENDNOTES

1 | Paraphrased from the last paragraph of Gogol's story *The Nose*. Nikolai Gogol, 'The Nose', in *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans Ronald Wilks, (London: Penguin Books, 1987 reprint) 42–70.
2 | Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Neue Zeitung* (Jena, Germany) 17 April 1806, 4.
3 | Karl Marx, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Zurich, Switzerland) 12 December 1861, 17.
4 | Vladimir Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*, uncorrected manuscript proof (1901) 32.
5 | Reported in private conversation, a third- or fourth-hand report – an alleged line from an alleged book…



I want to begin this discussion about the process of making *The Flower of Shembe* operetta from a mantra – a statement that I have been preaching to myself: *We are not pure*. We haven't been pure since nearly the beginning of time. I'm very particular about my thinking in relation to historical purity or familial purity because I come from a family of very highly respected composers, musicians and inventors of instruments.

THE PROCESS OF SHEMBE MUSIC

Neo Muyanga

Scene from *The Flower of Shembe* operetta, composed by Neo Muyanga, directed by Ina Wichterich, co-produced by Neo Muyanga and Youngblood Arts and Culture Trust. Left to right: Chuma Sopotela, Siphumeze Khundayi, Kabi Thulo and Faniswa Yisa ©neosong.net

When I was a boy, my grandfather, who came from Inhambane in Mozambique, used to say to us, 'Our family,' and he'd say this with a straight face, he would say to us, 'Our family invented two things. We invented music and we invented magic.' This was a children's story that we all learned, we accepted, and we believed because he was our *grandfather god* – you know, in our culture they say that your parents are your gods; well, he was very much that way. Often when people want to know about my interest in music and my background in music, the story that comes to the foreground is the one about my family having been a family of timbila inventors. A timbila is a percussion instrument that is the forebear of the xylophone, the marimba – all of those tuned percussion instruments really stem from this one particular instrument called the mbila. The families that invented the instrument each had their own tuning. Each house would have a very specific tuning mode, temperament and scale. So if you knew enough background of timbila, just by hearing an instrument played somewhere, you would know who had made it. Timbila music is generally played in huge orchestras of at least 20 people, usually a lot more, made up of members of the same family. Exponents of this art form today do it with all ages of their family – cousins, friends, people who live in the villages – so when you hear this music you'll hear a whole tribe together.

It is often shocking for people when they hear timbila music. When I tour and travel and play music, such as the music of the group Conjunto Ndzumbé de Bairro, from Nampula in Mozambique, people say to me, 'Well, that's very nice, but do you play any African music?' And I say two things to them. One is, 'This tribe plays what is considered by many musicologists to be some of the most harmonically, melodically complex material in the world.' It is not all in the major scale, it is not all played as happy music. The other part of the story for me is Maskanda. Musicians in Zululand call themselves *umaskanda*, since *ukukanda* is to turn and fix a thing like an instrument so that it behaves differently. These are traditional musicians who use a guitar or a concertina. The idea of them playing on traditional instruments, or the idea of playing only happy, major-scale music – ideas of this nature, existing in neat little boxes – these ideas have all but gone out of the window. And they went out with the time of purity that was never here for us.

I find it easy to talk about my father's side of the family because it's well documented. I listened to some recordings from the Muyangas, some of it composed about 150 years ago, in UCT's music library. The question I asked myself then was, I wonder what window I could find to have conversations about my mother's family and Zulu heritage, because often that doesn't come out when I discuss my musical influences in the public sphere. My mother's maiden name is Shembe, and there is an argument in the family about whether or not we are related to the prophet, Isaiah Shembe. There seems to be

an assumption that we are, although there is a little bit of fear about claiming that connection, because the Shembe Church is one of the oldest religious institutions in the country, and on the continent probably. It was founded by Isaiah Shembe – some say in 1910, others say in 1912, and there are a few people who also claim 1908. He is alleged to have formed a movement called iBandla la maNazaretha after having walked up a hill to hear from God. At the top of the hill, God said in very clear terms, 'You must found a church.' And when Shembe came down, he said to the people in his clan, 'I have a mission. We are starting a church.' He was a very mysterious character, seen in very different ways by different people. He was actually a very modern character. Sometimes this shocks people, the idea that a Zulu man could have been so modern, an urbane contemporary, at the beginning of the 20th century. People forget that modern education, as we know it, arrived here through missionary schools at about the same time it arrived for working-class people all over the world, including the British homeland within the Empire. It was around the time of the industrial revolution that everybody had to go to school, everybody had to learn a skill, and education became a window through which people could achieve a kind of social mobility of sorts. So it was around this time that people such as Shembe and Magema Fuze were active. Fuze was a writer, a journalist, about whom my friend Hlonipha Mokoena wrote a great book called *Magema Fuze: The Making of a Kholwa Intellectual* (2011). There were many of these men, and sometimes women, who were very active in literary and artistic circles. Many of them were missionary educated. This included people such as Tiyo Soga, who came from the Eastern Cape, and went on to study in Glasgow, Scotland under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church, learned a lot of traditional Scottish tunes, came back to the Eastern Cape and then transformed them into 'traditional Xhosa songs'. He transplanted Xhosa text onto these melodies, and these harmonies became very popular traditional songs in the Eastern Cape. So, for a long time, that hybridity has been our education – our university, if you like.

So I work very much with the sense of the corrupt, the impure. Part of it is through training, of course, and part of it is through accessing something a bit more visceral. The organisation or ensemble I build or bring together is made up of people who are part school trained, learned; and part visceral, or anger-driven or hope-driven or happy-driven. Together we invent a language that isn't quite easy to articulate.

The members of the Shembe community are very particular about sharing their story freely and openly because, for a long time, they have suffered ridicule, having been seen as a congregation of the illiterate or voiceless. This is despite claims in newspapers that the church now commands a following of about 10 million, and is allegedly worth – or at least one of the factions is worth – over R3 billion, making it one of

the biggest players on the South African stock exchange. There were many stories when I was growing up about the mysterious Shembe and how he inspired suspicion in many kwaZulu husbands because so many women used to like him and gather around him. So the men thought, 'No, no. This man is dangerous.' And of course the colonial government was suspicious of him because they believed that inside his church he was preaching anti-imperialist rhetoric, that he was a political radical. The Shembe Church is one of the few organisations in the world that has threatened to sue FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football). In fact, they successfully won a settlement from one of FIFA's associated product developers. When the World Cup was coming to South Africa, just before it began, a claim was laid by a faction of the Shembe Church for the invention of the vuvuzela – the single-pitch trumpet used at soccer matches locally, which came to be used in campaigns to market the World Cup. Eventually the Shembe faction won a settlement in the case, and now apparently get 10 per cent on every single vuvuzela that is made globally.

Knowing and hearing these stories and reading about this, I thought, 'Okay, I'm not going to mess with these guys, but I do need to know what this story of great Shembe is,' because it is a story that I find has beautiful potential to tell with pictures and with movement. I began by asking my mother. 'Mother, is it true that we are related to God, since Shembe, to members of his church, is the Messiah, the representative of God on Earth?' My mother laughed, and never bothered to answer my question. So I had to look at other external sources for material, and there's quite a lot written about Shembe, often by scholars in America. That sounds strange until you realise that a lot of Wesleyan schools are very powerful missionary schools with links across the world, and it is claimed that Shembe was influenced by Methodist teachers. It's also claimed that he was very keen on studying the Coptic Orthodox Church in Ethiopia.

So I looked at some of these details and learned a number of fascinating facts about the man. I was looking to make up a myth now, and I wanted to invent a completely new story, so that I wouldn't be sued by anybody, but so that I could still tell an intriguing and exciting tale about a person of similar character. Then I found out how his birth was apparently predicted. In the 1940s and 1950s, anthropologists were commissioned to gather stories by Shembe's first son, Galilee Shembe. One of the stories Reverend Jomo from the church told the anthropologists was that Shembe's mother was told as a young girl to keep herself pure – to keep herself clean and sacred, morally and sexually – because she was going to give birth to a representative of God. Shembe comes from the Mtungwa clan. The clan uses the symbol of the fish (*iNhlanzi*) as their totem – again, quite Messianic. And while Shembe was alive, he conceived liturgical texts

for the church that he established, and he told people who were his 'reporters', his biographers, that he'd invented these stories, these parables, he'd invented songs and dances and the strict and simple white uniform. He was also very fashion conscious, as you will note. He was the only person at the time when he was the leader of the church who wore black. Everybody else wore white, pure white. To this day, you still see a sea of Shembe people all in white, and the high priest wears black with a collar of white. Shembe told his biographers that he heard the voice of God as three young women. The voices of women apparently constantly surfaced in his prophecy, in his design, in his way of thinking about communicating with the realm of the Real. There were always these three invisible mysterious entities with young female voices that came to him.

HE WAS THE ONLY PERSON AT THE TIME WHEN HE WAS THE LEADER OF THE CHURCH WHO WORE BLACK. EVERYONE ELSE WORE WHITE, PURE WHITE

The story of the Messiah, of course, is how we tell the story of the hero. One of the stories we know is that of Mithra, who seems to have been a deity that was worshipped by the Indo-Iranians in 1350 BC. Because lots of festivals, lots of tributes are paid to this particular deity, during the time of the Roman Empire, there were lots of tablets and honours given in tribute to Mithra. The festival of Mithra at the height of the Roman Empire was celebrated to culminate on 25 December. It is believed that this is why 25 December has come to be Christmas Day today. Another messiah is Jesus, who is rather well-documented and, of course, well known to *all* pious people.

There's another story of Saint Yared, who was a 6th-century prophet in Ethiopia, who is credited with inventing the liturgical traditions of what was then a part of the Alexandrian Empire. He invented forms of music with drums for the church. He invented what some Ethiopians to this day still use as musical notation. He also apparently influenced some of the thinking of Shembe, and we, in coming to the story, wanted to create our own version of what this might be, our own picture of the Shembe character.

I took a drawing made by our director, Ina Wichterich, and animated it into a musical frame that moves and bounces about, and that became the image for the poster for the production. We called this production an operetta because it's quite short – about an hour long. An operetta tends to mean it is quite a light story, and this production has its moments of levity, but is also quite an epic cliché story. Cli-

Scene from *The Flower of Shembe* operetta. Left to right: Sean Oelf, Luvuyo Mabutho, Thabisa Dinga ©neosong.net

ché, for me, is another word that calls up the 'impure'; it is the thing that we walk over and over and over until we have assumptions about it. My influences for the story begin with the tradition of the Chopi and the kind of music that those orchestras make. And because I come from Soweto, and I used to go to school just around the corner from Gibson Kente's workshop, Bra Gib is a very, very strong influence.

One of the departures for me is that I have been influenced by various music-theatre traditions, including opera. The idea of the opera, how grand it is and how it also costs grand amounts of money to make is something that I discuss often with my friend Bongani Ndodana-Breen, the wonderful opera composer. What intrigues me more, though, is how people make theatre and tell musical stories here in South Africa. Think back to what township theatre felt like: start with *King Kong* in 1959, then you have *uMabatha* in 1972, which is the Zulu *Macbeth*, which actually toured the United Kingdom and played at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Later on, in the 1980s, you look at things like Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina*, which went on to win a Tony Award. For a time, it defined the sound of music theatre in the SADC (Southern African Development Com-

Scene from *The Flower of Shembe* operetta. Left to right: Lungiswa Plaatjies, Sean Oelf, Chuma Sopotela (in pool of water), Thabisa Dinga, Siphumeze Khundayi, Kabi Thulo. Just visible in the back: Neo Muyanga (conducting), Benjamin Jephta (contrabass) and Toni Paco (drums) ©neosong.net

munity) region. And you look at how that was created; those kinds of productions were created generally by directors and producers who had large companies of people who were not paid, necessarily – people who hadn't been trained in a school, but who learned the ropes from a maestro. An experienced person like Bra Gib would say to them, 'I'll do you a favour. I'll make you something in life by giving you skills. In return, you give me 10 of your best youthful years.' And he'd tour people around the country. They did it on a shoestring, and they would play in small halls, and they would rent a bus. They didn't have many sets, and would set up the thing and play it, often without special lighting provisions like we have today. They would have just a floodlight in the room, and that was the tradition of story-telling here. That was the tradition that I was informed by – as well, of course, as learning in the rarefied tradition of big professional theatre houses. Another tradition that informs my take is Beijing Opera.

My big influences do come from Italy, a place with which I have a love/hate relationship. I have to admit that it is *home*, to a certain extent, so some of my references have come from there. When I started thinking about details that I had read and heard about to do with

Shembe, the original Shembe, the stories that kept coming back were those about his death. He died, according to one of the reports from members of the Church, on a day that he'd appointed. When that day came, he gathered his most important generals around his deathbed, and he anointed a successor, and then proceeded to close his eyes and leave. That's the story within the tradition. But there's another story that's been doing the rounds for many years. Some claim that it was invented by colonialists or jealous members of other tribes that lived nearby. This is that Shembe claimed he was like Elijah, and that one day he would jump off a cliff and fly up into heaven. So the story told is about how he went about gathering different little bird feathers and stuck them onto himself. He gathered his flock of followers to witness him take a walk to the edge of a cliff from whence he jumped and promptly fell to his death instead of flying up into heaven. I heard this story again from one of my cast members while we were discussing the production, and she said to me, 'Oh, you mean Shembe, that guy who fell off a cliff thinking he could fly with birds' feathers?' Unless you are a member of the church, that's one of the stories that lives in the popular imagination. So the idea of flying, the idea of *people* flying, started to intrigue me quite a lot, and I started having quite detailed discussions with Ina, the director, and Craig Leo, our designer, about how we could help our key character to fly – there was something about reclaiming and redeeming the myth about his death that I wanted to tackle. So I started looking at images of designs for flying in the theatre. It turned out, interestingly enough, that Italians during the Trecento period – artists and engineers in Florence – were also very preoccupied with this idea.

Of course, Leonardo da Vinci also famously produced drawings of flying machines. Not many people know that Da Vinci also worked in the theatre, and he learned some of his trade from technicians and engineers who used flying machines to amaze people inside the courts of the different palaces where they were employed.

Then I started to think about ways in which we could make our characters fly. This project inspired me to take a keen interest in design, and so I took some time and made some animated designs to explain what I was seeing in my head that could spark a set of discussions with my stage director and the designer. We spent months looking at those and finding different tricks and different ways. Some worked; others didn't work.

There were some very interesting moments in the production process, because essentially, the dreams become manifest *physically* in the operetta, and the physicality didn't work with the physicality we find in spaces like the National Gallery in the Company Gardens, where we initially planned to stage *The Flower of Shembe*. When I told people we were planning to stage the production at the National

Gallery, I often heard the response, 'Yeah, but the Gallery – so … pompous, so strange, so alien, so small. Isn't it playing to the elite? Isn't it this? Isn't it that?' The interesting thing about the Gallery, for me, is that there once was an arts minister, Pallo Jordan, who liked to say, 'This Gallery isn't working, because black people don't go into the National Gallery since they think it's a prison.' I have asked a number of black people I know, and some do go in and some don't. We have these mythologies about how we use space and what is allowed and what isn't allowed, politically or otherwise. What interests me is taking a character like Shembe – because of what people think or don't think about that name – and putting him in a place of prestige and saying, 'There.' After that, you can do anything that you like. So I was thinking very much like the producer at this point. We were pushing in and we were going to make it happen there. Then, with only two weeks to go before the opening, the National Gallery director called to say, sorry, they could not put up our production as it was going to be too big. And we had to move the whole production to Artscape theatre centre, retaining the same production dates. So things turned out differently, but that was our thinking at the time.

The operetta tells the story of the new messiah – she happens to be a girl this time – and it generally follows the accepted trajectory of somebody who has a hefty destiny, of being told, 'You are not like others. You have to be separate because your job here is to be the salvation of everything and everyone and to be the grey space, the place of interface, the place that takes in poison and impurity, and breathes out sustenance.' And so, of course, her first reaction is, 'No, thank you.' There are parts of the piece where we explore reasons why she may or may not have to submit to a certain kind of destiny. In the end, she has to submit. That's what destiny is: we don't actually have a choice. So she does ultimately succumb and does ultimately become that which she is meant to be. But before she does that, she has to go through a number of trials – we have seven in the piece. The first trial is to face a gang of alligators, which comes from a story that I read about in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* about the schools of Horus. There were two schools of initiates of Horus: the first is the school of the Right Eye of Horus. It lasts 12 years, and it is the school of the masculine: of force, of learning how to control from within and to put it without. It is very much Sun Tsu's *Art of War*. So it is about contrasting fear and control. The second school, which is the Left Eye of Horus, is the female school, which tells us something about our evolution as beings and about learning. The female school comes second. It is the school of emotion, and it is all about coming to a peace within. Another challenge in the piece is a trial for Addis, which is what our Shembe character is called. The reason for this is that 'Addis' means 'flower'. In a story about the young mother of Shembe

Animation stills from *The Flower of Shembe* operetta. ©neosong.net

it is claimed that she went into the fields and ate wild flowers when she was told by angels that she would give birth to a prophet, or a messiah, and that is what brought the holy spirit into her.

A further challenge or trial is when the initiate faces a loss of identity. I had an experience when I first went to the desert, the Namib desert, and my first impulse was, 'Wow! This is wonderful! I am free: it's so open and anything could happen.' The next moment, my reaction was, 'I could get lost.' Not just physically – you could get lost to yourself. A loss of identity, a loss of parameters, can be one of the most frightening things to live through. So she goes through that and, ultimately, one of her final trials is working with or through detachment. Addis is particularly attached to the character of her mother, Anharit. In our interpretation of the story, *I think* Addis actually fails this test. By *fails*, I mean she refuses to detach, and because she refuses to detach she has to return to the world that she left, to fight what would have been a spiritual battle *physically*. Now, I'm sure you have all seen countless movies that look like this, feel like this. We're hoping to use that cliché to open a window, because the wonderful thing about cliché is that, if it's pre-established – very much like Kathakali theater in India – the images are very well known. One movement, one eye signal represents a whole narrative; you don't have to spell things out anew. So, we're using image, symbol, design and tableau to give a narrative where some might use a lot of text, and it's proving quite a challenge for the members of our cast who are actors.

Actors say, 'But you haven't given me a reason to move from this point of anger to that point of resolution! I have to have a reason!'

And I say, 'You don't need a reason. Just jump!'

So all of these are very interesting discoveries around working with different media. Meanwhile, the musicians, of course, are looking at the actors or dancers, and trying to get their *feet* to hit the right downbeat every time. And the actors are saying, 'But what are you talking about? I'm moving, I'm dancing! Just keep playing!' It's a very interesting journey to try and put these elements together.

In 2010, I asked three of the most interesting writers who happened to be in Cape Town at the time – Gabeba Baderoon, Rustum Kozain and Henrietta Rose-Innes, the bearers of names that could spell out a genealogy of settlement at the Cape – whether they would be prepared to be directed by an intuition of mine and speak at the same event, for 15 or 20 minutes, on a favourite page of reading. Each showed the relevant page to the audience. The results were spectacular, ranging from Baderoon's interest in postcolonial style to Kozain's working through Serote's poem 'City Johannesburg' and Rose-Innes's discovery of the imaginative experiences encoded in J G Ballard's science fiction. The pieces are better read than summarised. They bear out my guess that the page is as basic a unit of syntax for the writer as the sentence, the paragraph and the chapter. This may be a phenomenon we can only identify in retrospect as the fixed and beautiful Gutenberg page recedes before the great and unstoppable digital revolution with all its unknowable consequences for literary construction.

– *Imraan Coovadia*

a page

GABEBA BADEROON
RUSTUM KOZAIN
HENRIETTA ROSE-INNES

SEX, LOVE AND HISTORY, BUT ALSO THIS

Gabeba Baderoon

I first read Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart* as part of a book group. I couldn't find a copy of it in any bookshop that I visited, so I did a most uncharacteristic thing for me – I got the Kindle version. But the first time I encountered *A Life Apart* was by means of the most ancient technology of all – the *author* himself, who was standing next to Henrietta Rose-Innes at a literature festival, where he read from this incredible work, an extract of which follows.

> Paper covers stone. Stone breaks scissors. Scissors cut paper. Paper cuts him, has always done. Not just those occasional cuts when he is impatiently opening the rare envelope in his pigeon-hole, no, not those. It cuts him into new shapes, new forms, until there is no he anymore, but a cipher, a shadow, dependent on other things for his very existence. Sometimes while papers and their resident words slip and slide into him, drowning him under so that he can't take so much life in its burning bright rush inside him, he casually looks up to catch the face of someone in the window opposite his desk. For the space of something not calibrated in human time, only registered by the sudden sway of his heart towards his throat, he does not recognize that the unmoored face looking back at him is his own. He is goosepimpled by his own presence, or a deferred version of himself, as if he is not really there. He chances upon Edmund Spenser's dedicatory epistle to Lady Carey: 'Therefore I have determined to give my selfe wholy to you, as quite abandoned from my selfe …' His eyes stop at *quite abandoned from my selfe*. Yes, this is it; he has found confirmation in another page, in other words, of what happens to him. But there is no he left when he reads. So who is it that looks at him from the impressionable glass? Words for him are like the sporing rust on metal – they eat away at him until there is only an unidentifiable husk. He has become nothing.
>
> These presences and shadows scare him sometimes. He has taken to sitting with his back firmly pressed to the corner where two walls meet at right angles. He has become like a cat: at least two sides are covered and nothing can startle him from behind. Whatever encounter there is in store for him will be face to face; he's prepared for it, ready to look it in the eye.
>
> Look her in the eye if she comes back again.
>
> So far, she hasn't come back while he has been in the room, but occasionally, when he returns at night, turns the key in the lock, pushes the door open and, leaning forwards, quickly switches on the light with an outstretched arm while standing outside, he knows she has been in the room. No, nothing has been moved or hidden, nothing has been disturbed. There is no trace, no evidence, only a gathering together of the air into its normal Brownian motion after it has been sliced through and agitated by a recent presence. It is like water restored to calm after the ripples generated by a lost stone have died out but the water still remembers. The air in his room sometimes has that quality of remembrance. That's all. And he's afraid of that memory of air.[1]

I feel as though I've just told you everything. But, perhaps I might say a little about what the novel attempts to do. If I were to tell you where this novel was located, I would say it is an exemplarily postcolonial novel in the sense that its protagonist is a young Indian student,

Slow fall of light. PHOTO: Dorn Hetzel

named Ritwik, who comes from India to England to study at Cambridge. So, in many ways, he's embarked on that promised journey to the centre, to the metropole. But because it is an enormously intelligent novel, and enormously aware of the history that it is both echoing but also resisting, of course, it doesn't believe the fairy tale that is promised by joining the centre and one of the most elite institutions that should promise a way out of the legacy of the postcolony. So it presents us with a fairy tale of what education can bring us, and then it shows that to be a false promise.

It also has a bracing honesty about sex and about the fragility of love, and sometimes the promise of those two together. But again, as we know from novels and their promises about love and happy endings, that also is a fairy tale. The selected passage is from the middle of the novel, and it gestures to the pitiless beginning of the novel. It also prefigures an utterly comfortless ending to the novel. So it proves to us that the promise of love can also be a fairy tale, but it does not leave us with that. There's another kind of fairy tale, another fiction, which is embraced completely in this excerpt. And that is the fiction of fiction, of literature – of what it means to encounter a work of writing so transcendently good that you *lose* yourself, you disappear, and your being dissipates in the complete absorption of what this piece of writing has achieved. Mukherjee does this exquisitely on more than one occasion, and he gives us this fairy tale, this fiction about fiction, in resistance to those other fairy tales that I mentioned earlier on.

In the pitiless beginning of the novel, the gesture of being unable to enter his room until he's reached in to switch on the light while standing outside, points to how perverted our experience of education can be; how failed that promise of disappearing into something superb and transcendent and timeless. He is taught at first with a brutal form of rote learning, an emptying out of the self in order to fill it with whatever will get him, eventually, to Cambridge. So his idea of another experience of fiction altogether is written against this filling up of brutally imposed words.

The other fairy tale, the one about love, he explores, again, through fiction. So what Ritwik does in his time at Cambridge, is he writes back on the theme, a minor theme – the idea of a small, unimportant passing. Experiences that suddenly gain a central meaning constitute a major formal theme of the novel. So he finds a very minor character in a very minor novel by the Nobel Prize-winning Indian author, Tagore, and he writes an entire novel in response to this forgettable character. Through this minor character and this minor exercise by a student dodging his homework at Cambridge, we learn a version of Indian colonial history, which is unavailable to us in any other way. So, we learn a steep and deep and intense version of history, which can only come from the fiction of fiction.

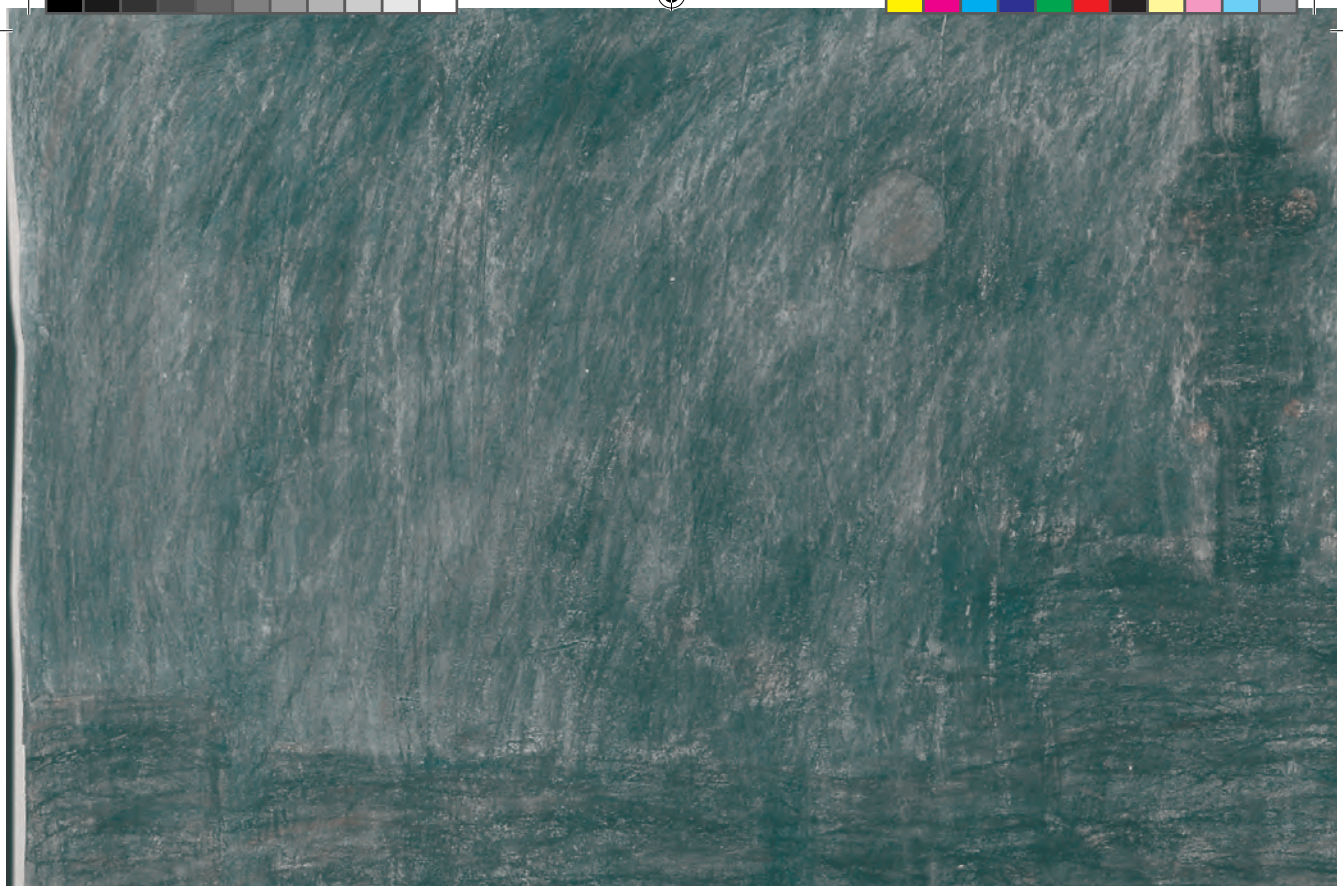
I want to end with another little excerpt, which is a demonstration of how beautifully written this book is, and leave you where you should be, which is with the words of Neel Mukherjee himself.

But first, let me tell you again why I chose this book. As both Rustum [Kozain] and Henrietta [Rose-Innes] point out, this is a fantastic exercise – to be asked to choose your favourite page. Now, of course, this led to endless conversations with all my friends, who cried, 'What? One page? One favourite page?' And then we were comforted with the words, 'Well, one of your favourite pages.' Still I had to think … 'Well, do I say *Wuthering Heights*? That particular moment that I read about when I was 12 and kept going back to – that moment where Catherine is speaking and Heathcliff is hidden, and he hears what he shouldn't hear, and their entire lives change forever … That one?' Or that last page of *Disgrace*, which I once made the mistake of reading to a class of literature students, and then started to cry, because that is what that last page and a half does. Or anything else … And then I remembered this monthly experience of mine – a small reading group that I attend. I'm one of those people who abhorred study groups and group activities of all kinds, until I was invited to give a talk about *Disgrace* to a book group, and two of the women in the group enjoyed thinking about our conversation so much that they said, 'Let's form a secret book group that we won't tell anybody else about, and we promise we will actually read the books.' This has been going on for three years, and we meet secretly every month. So I tried to remember the most evocative discussion that we've had, and it was about this book. There are many others that it could have been. So, what is the novel about? Sex, love, history, but also this: 'And here, the gratuitous tyranny of memory seized him. And no place, no time was safe, and he was a mere nothing to that event he had never, never thought about, never remembered, till it was everything.'[2]

MONGANE SEROTE: 'CITY JOHANNESBURG'

Rustum Kozain

City Johannesburg
This way I salute you:
My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
Jo'burg City.
My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets
For my thin, ever lean wallet,
While my stomach growls a friendly smile to hunger,
Jo'burg City.
My stomach also devours coppers and papers
Don't you know?
Jo'burg City, I salute you;
When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
I leave behind me, my love,
My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust,
My death
That's so related to me as a wink to the eye.
Jo'burg City
I travel on your black and white and roboted roads
Through your thick iron breath that you inhale
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.
Jo'burg City
That is the time when I come to you,
When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,
That is the time when I leave you,
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness
On your cement trees.
And as I go back, to my love,
My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,
Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,
I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
And everything about you says it,
That, that is all you need of me.
Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,
Listen when I tell you,
There is no fun, nothing, in it,
When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions,
Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,
Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,
Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.[3]

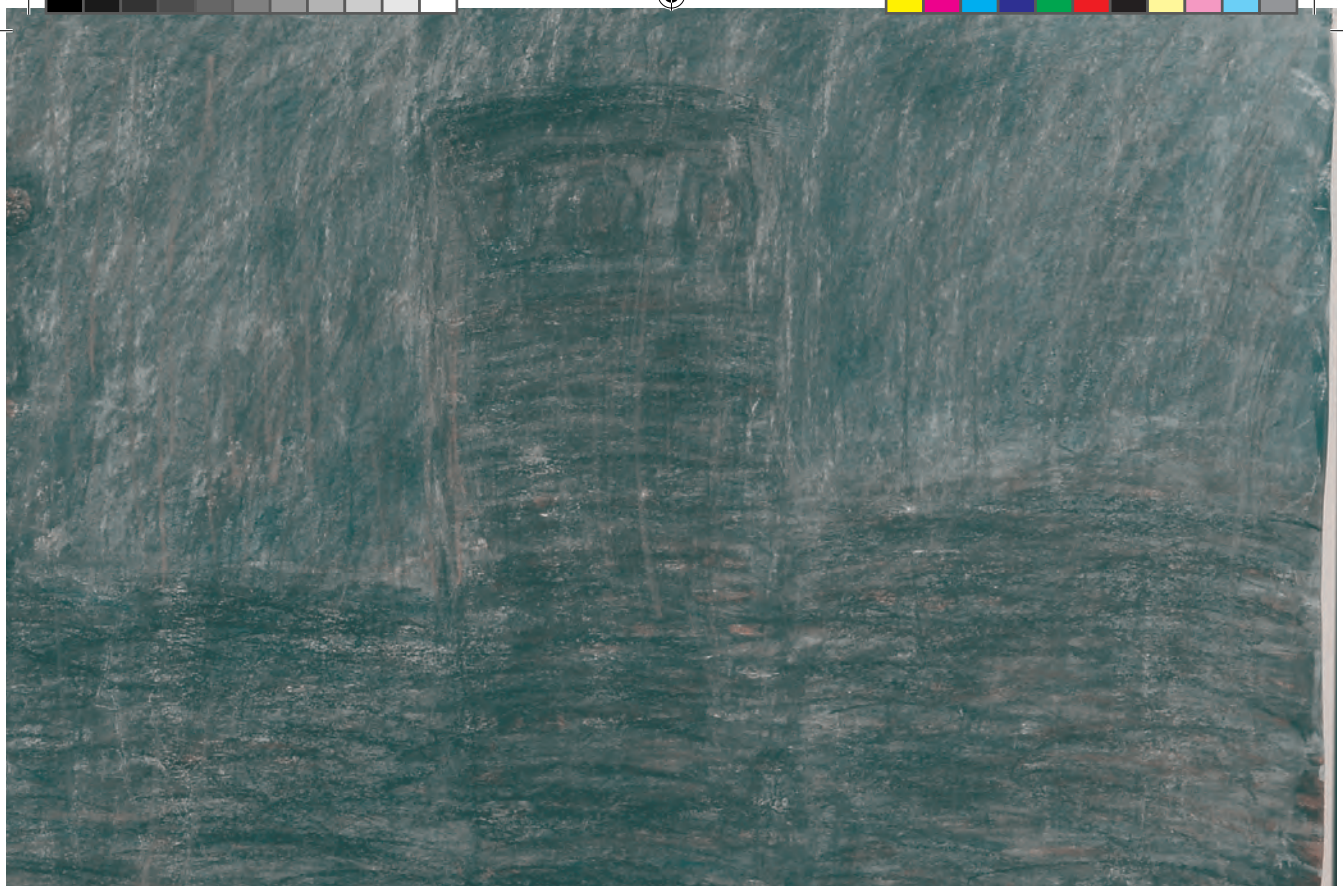


Maybe one of the reasons I like this poem is because I'm not a native Capetonian. I come from a small town, Paarl, and I have an ambivalent relationship with Cape Town because of that background. And because ambivalence is a central part of Serote's poem, I think that's probably one of the reasons I identify with the poem and why it's also a favourite poem for me.

Many of you – if you were born around about the time of the moon landing or before that, if you went to school in South Africa in the late 1970s up until about the late 1980s – may be familiar with this poem, but I only discovered it when I was in first year at university in the late 1980s.

Now, I have many favourite poems and many favourite pages, but I chose to discuss a poem, because, as the truism goes, poetry is very much a stepchild in the literary world, not just in South Africa, but almost everywhere. I also chose this poem in particular because I get quite irritated with the almost universal assumption in South Africa at present, and often expressed in our books' pages, that what people call 'struggle literature' is or was boring, that it was one-dimensional, lifeless and so on. Of course, people often dismiss things out of ignorance – they encounter one example and dismiss a whole genre on the basis of that one example. Someone hears a 50 Cent song and dismisses the tradition of hip-hop music that is now almost 30 years old.

In conjunction with the sense that 'struggle literature' is one-dimensional or boring, there's also the belief or assumption that political art, in itself, is necessarily boring, lifeless or one-dimensional, unless, of course, among certain commentators, the political content of that poetry is Eastern-European dissidence.



David Koloane, *Smoky Cityscape II*, 2008, mixed media on paper, 87.5 x 189 cm.
Permission courtesy of David Koloane and the SABC Art Collection

The dominant theme of the poem is easily read – anyone can see that the poem is really just an expression of a black urban experience, of a working-class black urban experience in the South African city of the early 1970s. But what's interesting for me is that the poem is more than that – it's an *assertion* of a black urban identity, an assertion which, at that time, was radically at odds with apartheid's insistence on an African identity as tribal, rural and tradition-bound. This apartheid-manufactured identity was one of the pillars by which apartheid could justify the creation of the Bantustans and the maintenance of pass laws.

What makes the poem great is that its existence alone denies and defies a large historical force. In this sense, it can be said that the poem as an artefact transcends its own history. That's really what one wants art to do – one wants art to transcend the context of its creation so that it can speak to us beyond that time. It escapes this historical context by virtue of defying that context and, in a way, creating its own history.

I also chose the poem as an antidote to any arguments that would want to consign a literature from a specific period in South Africa to the proverbial dustbin of history. With its assertion of an urban identity, the poem enters a great Modernist tradition. The repetition of 'Jo'burg City' in that salute to the city recalls some of the repetitions in TS Eliot's 'Preludes'. For me, this is also important, because when we talk of Modernism with a capital 'M', we often think only of cultural production – as far as English literature is concerned – we think often of cultural production that is confined to the metropoles of England and the United States, and seldom do we think of the extensions of that Modernism in terms

of geography and time, so that a poem like 'City Johannesburg' becomes more than what commentators might consider a mere protest poem.

It is a protest poem – I don't want to take that away from the poem. But I also want to think about how the poem makes us reconsider what we *mean* when we say 'protest poem' or 'struggle literature'. In my mind, 'City Johannesburg' enlarges our notion of what we might mean when we say 'protest poem' because, while it is a protest poem, it is also writing itself into a tradition of urban poetry, like T S Eliot's 'Preludes', and it's not all just a collection of archaic slogans, which I imagine is what people might mean when they dismiss literature from the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa as one-dimensional.

The poem is intriguing to me also because of its ambivalences: it is not simply a rejection of the cold-hearted city; it also salutes the city. The ambivalence lies in the gesture of a salute: a salute is both a gesture of respect or praise, and a gesture of subservience. So what I find fascinating about the poem is that – and I'll mention some elements of traditional praise poetry that it uses – in its very form it enacts an ambivalent relationship between a working-class black identity and the city. As a salute itself, the poem is a gesture of respect and an admission of subservience.

The first line of the poem, 'This way I salute you', employs a rhetorical form common in praise poetry, the generic form of which would be: 'This is what I'm going to say now'. 'This is what this poem is going to be (a salute)' and then the poem says what it said it would be saying. This opens a number of elements from praise poetry in the poem. There's the repetition of the salute itself, the address to the city, which is now both respectful and also subservient. There's the heaping up of noun phrases at the end of lines, for instance, 'My dongas, my dust, my people, my death' – a very characteristic element of praise poetry.

What Serote is doing by using that tradition of praise poetry is assigning himself the position of a praise poet, which is not simply one of praising an entity or a king or chief. The praise poet typically would have the licence – and the duty – to engage in criticism of the figurehead or whomever the poet is addressing. The role that the speaker in this poem then takes on is a role of ambivalence or, rather, a double role: to praise and criticise. I like this poem because it's not simply dismissing the subject matter as one would expect from a protest poem. As it bemoans the speaker's life in the context of the great city as a *terrible* life, it simultaneously acknowledges and asserts that identity borne by the city.

The upshot for me – because I belong to the Marxist tradition, in which people are interested in how the politics or the content of an artefact relates to its form as well – is that this poem fuses those two things almost seamlessly. The form of the poem – its formal aspects, such as the apostrophic salute, the repetition and noun clusters from traditional praise poetry – is very closely allied to the theme of the poem. The poem asserts a modern, urban black identity in defiance of apartheid by fusing a metropolitan tradition – poetry about the city from the Romantics onwards through Modernism – with a local tradition, a multilayered quality that belies any suggestion that the 'struggle literature' of the 1970s and 1980s – and political literature in general – is necessarily one-dimensional.

LODESTARS OF FIXATION

Henrietta Rose-Innes

I've enjoyed being asked to pick 'my favourite page'. I like this focus on the physicality of text; on the page as artefact. It's made me think about how I recall written words – visually, spatially – and has unearthed a very specific memory of early bookish enchantment.

Mine is a nostalgic choice: the beginning of a short story by the great science-fiction writer JG Ballard. I first read 'The Voices of Time' when I was about 11 years old. Here is the first paragraph:

> Later Powers often thought of Whitby, and the strange grooves the biologist had cut, apparently at random, all over the floor of the empty swimming pool. An inch deep and twenty feet long, interlocking to form an elaborate ideogram like a Chinese character, they had taken him all summer to complete, and he had obviously thought about little else, working away tirelessly through the long desert afternoons. Powers had watched him from his office window at the far end of the Neurology wing, carefully marking out his pegs and string, carrying away the cement chips in a small canvas bucket. After Whitby's suicide no one had bothered about the grooves, but Powers often borrowed the supervisor's key and let himself into the disused pool, and would look down at the labyrinth of mouldering gulleys, half-filled with water leaking in from the chlorinator, an enigma now past any solution.[4]

I have strong sense associations with this passage. It takes me back to the old Cape Town City Library, then still housed in the City Hall. I remember precisely the look of the page, the book it was in, its place on the shelf, the situation of the shelf in the science-fiction section and that section within the library. I recall the hardness of the little round stool I sat on to read, and the yellow covers in which many of the science-fiction books were bound. I believe I even remember the exact moment I first laid eyes on Ballard's words.

They marked a transition in my literary development. At the time, I was reading a lot of fantasy, and I was drawn to this particular book because I loved Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*. Peake's (extraordinary) novella *Boy in Darkness* happened to be bound in a volume with the piece by Ballard,[5] whom I hadn't read before; so, pleasingly, I was introduced to a new favourite by an older one.

I'm glad I found him that way. If I'd had the means to download Mervyn Peake back then, I wouldn't have made that kind of discovery. (Serendipity: one of our unanticipated losses in the move to digital texts.) Nor, I think, would my memory be embedded in so much sensuous context: the library, the book, the quality of light.

Ballard is probably best known outside of science-fiction circles for his memoir, *The Empire of the Sun*. He wrote a great many other books, of course. Such is the influence of his bleak futuristic visions (eminently appealing to an angsty adolescent), they have given rise to a dictionary definition:

> **Ballardian**, adj: resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels and stories, esp. dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes, and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments.[6]

'Ballardian' implies a certain apocalyptic melancholy, and a set of distinctive visual to-

A copy of *The Inner Landscape* featuring 'Boy in the Darkness' by Mervyn Peake; 'The Voices of Time' by J G Ballard; & 'Danger: Religion!' by Brian W Aldiss. Cover art by Davis Meltzer. PHOTO: Henrietta Rose-Innes. Permission courtesy of The Permissions Company, Inc, Permissions Agency for the Hachette Book Group USA, Inc

tems. Much-repeated motifs include 'birds, flying machines, ruins, beaches, obscure geometric designs'.[7]

'The Voices of Time' is classically Ballardian, containing all the signature elements: the cool detachment of both tone and protagonist; the meticulously crafted sentences; the cast of eccentrics driven by arcane desires. There is also an intense, almost fetishistic fascination with one particular feature of the blighted urban landscape: the dry swimming pool. Much remarked on by enthusiasts, this is an image that Ballard would revisit again and again in his fiction.

The writer himself said that 'Voices' was the one story by which he would choose to be remembered, encompassing his most deeply felt concerns:

> The sense of isolation within the infinite time and space of the universe … and above all the determination to break out of a deepening psychological entropy and make some kind of private peace with the unseen powers of the universe.[8]

After that arresting opening paragraph, the rest of the piece might strike a reader as somewhat incoherent: crowded with dazzling imagery, but lacking a clearly discernible plot. We are presented with a progressively somnolent hero, a zoo of grotesque animals that have developed untenable mutations in response to heightened radiation, and a series of numerical messages from distant stars, counting down to the end of the universe. The story is convoluted and exceedingly strange.

But plot was never Ballard's forte; neither was his characterisation, which Martin Amis – a long-term, devoted if occasionally conflicted admirer – describes as 'hardly more than a gesture'. Ballard's male characters, Amis elaborates, 'are morose and fixated, his women spectral nonentities, his minor figures perfunctory grotesques'.[9]

The writing's power, then, lies elsewhere. Ballard's unique strength was his capacity for obsession, which he recruited as a creative technique:

> I would say that I quite consciously rely on my obsessions in all my work, that I deliberately set up an obsessional frame of mind. In a paradoxical way, this leaves one free of the subject of the obsession.[10]

Ballard's obsessional subjects were often visual: objects or elements of landscape. Where did these hypnotic images come from? The deep workings of one's own mind are not always, or even usually, knowable. This mysterious realm was fundamental to Ballard's writing: he was entranced by the explorations of the unconscious represented by psychoanalysis and by surrealism – which he embraced 'like a lover'.[11] He would quote, approvingly, the symbolist artist Odilon Redon, whose art put 'the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible'.[12]

The genesis of many of Ballard's fixations became startlingly visible, however, more than 20 years into his career, long after 'The Voices of Time', with the publication of the largely autobiographical[13] *Empire of the Sun*. This acclaimed book recounts Ballard's childhood in the British enclave in Shanghai during the Second World War, when he was separated from his parents and held in various Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. As a young boy, he suffered disease, starvation and violent trauma, and saw many deaths. In one scene, the young Jim witnesses the white light of the first H-bomb detonating in the distance. It was this shattered, chaotic and

inhuman landscape that forever marked his literary imagination:

> I assume that I looked back on Shanghai and the war there as if it were part of some huge nightmare tableau that revealed itself in a violent and gaudy way … that remade world that one finds in surrealism. Perhaps I've always been trying to return to the Shanghai landscape, to some sort of truth that I glimpsed there. I think that in all my fiction, I've used the techniques of surrealism to remake the present into something at least consonant with the past.[14]

Empire of the Sun is a nightmarish vision, fascinating in how it lays bare the source of so many of Ballard's hallucinatory themes: the crashed airplanes, the empty airfields and abandoned buildings, the swampy bodies of water, the wrecked and useless machinery of war, the bloody conjunction of technology and the violent human psyche – and, of course, those swimming pools, which we encounter in 1960 in 'The Voices of Time'. They were everywhere in the shattered landscape, remnants of the decadent lifestyle enjoyed by the British in Shanghai before the war:

> Ah, drained swimming pools! There's a mystery I never want to penetrate – not that it's of interest to anyone else. I'm never happier than when I can write about drained swimming pools and abandoned hotels. But I'm not sure if that's decadence or simply an attempt to invert and reverse the commonplace, to turn the sock inside out. I've always been intrigued by inversions of that kind, or any kind. I think that's what drew me to an interest in anatomy.[15]

It was moving, and curiously disconcerting, for long-term fans of Ballard's speculative fiction to see revealed the real-world origins of so much of the Ballardian mystique. Still more disorienting, *Empire of the Sun* was written for a general readership, not a science-fiction one – and was hugely successful with that audience. As Amis wryly puts it: '[H]is long-serving followers and addicts felt as if the street drug-pusher had been made chairman of Du Pont Pharmaceuticals.'[16]

Ballard's obsessions become his readers', too. Many eminent writers, notably the science-fiction writers Bruce Sterling[17] and China Miéville,[18] have acknowledged his liberating influence – particularly in contrast to mainstream science fiction of the 1960s, the height of the genre's 'golden age', which tended towards heroic exploits in space and was seldom technically experimental. Ballard pioneered a new terrain: his apocalyptic landscapes were expressions of the psychopathology of modern existence. 'The biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is *inner space*, not outer, that needs to be explored,' he famously wrote. 'The only true alien planet is Earth.'[19]

Such earthbound alienation resonated with me from the start, and those empty swimming pools lodged in my youthful head. Only now, though, do I realise how much they haunt me. Similar images of distinctly Ballardian abandonment surface often in my writing, in the service of my own 'invisible'. I fear I may also have a somewhat Ballardian deficiency when it comes to those stand-bys of the creative-writing course: plot, characterisation, dialogue. It comforts me to think that these might be leanings, or perhaps blind spots, that I share with the master.

Not that I think that my writing is Ballardian, but I have certainly absorbed his attraction to the potent, cryptic object, and

especially to vistas of manmade ruination. I'm not sure why these empty places captivate me, but I am by no means alone in this: a fascination – even a relish – for gothic urban decay is a feature of our current cultural landscape.[20]

Ballard let me see these preoccupations as legitimate subjects for the literary imagination. And this is what has most affected me: a writer's serious and unflinching pursuit of the *idée fixe*, of his own inner strangeness. I believe that the process of writing over the course of a lifetime is, among other things, an attempt to fathom private obsessions. Finding Ballard as a child made me feel that this was not, after all, an absurd endeavour.

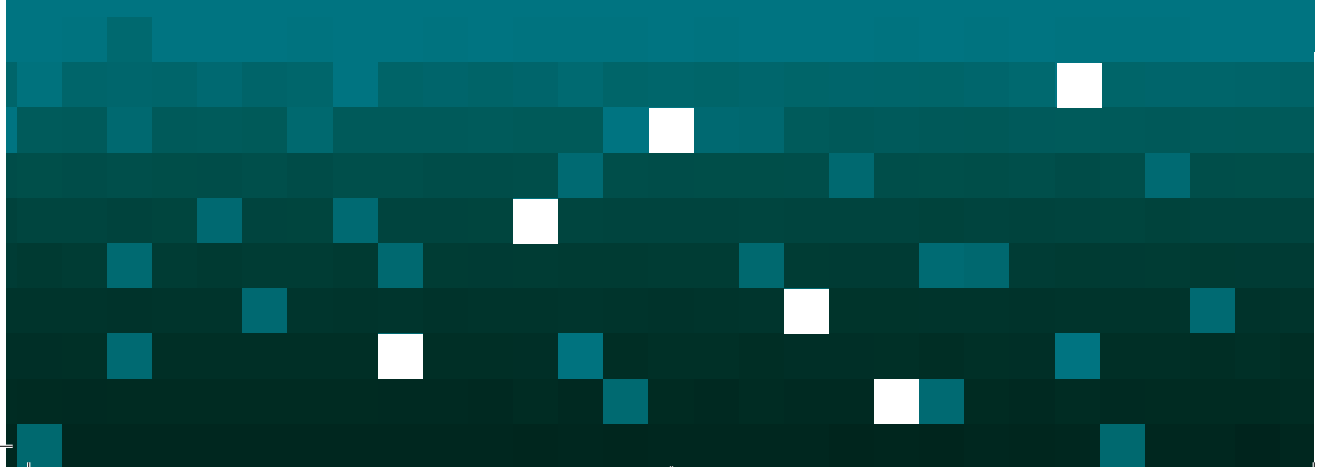
If I could say that I have any kind of governing code about my own writing, it is to follow that lodestar of fixation, the thing that exerts a terrible fascination – even if it's not yet clear to you why this might be so, or if these desires result from some trauma you might not be ready, consciously, to examine. Even if what you are drawn to is an empty swimming pool, and you only discern its significance to yourself or to the world 20 years later. Really, what else is there for a writer to do but follow such compulsions? Why else would anyone want, so urgently, to write?

ENDNOTES

1 | Neel Mukherjee, *A Life Apart* (London: Constable, 2010).
2 | Extracts included with the kind permission of Neel Mukherjee.
3 | Mongane Serote, *Selected Poems,* ed MV Mzamane (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1982). Poem included with the kind permission of the author.
4 | J G Ballard, 'The Voices of Time', in *The Complete Stories of J G Ballard* (New York: Norton, 2010), 169.
5 | Brian W Aldiss, J G Ballard and Mervyn Peake, *The Inner Landscape* (New York: Paperback Library, 1971).
6 | 'Ballardian', *Collins English Dictionary*, accessed 8 November 2014, http://www.collinsdictionary.com.
7 | China Miéville, 'In Disobedient Rooms', *The Nation*, 15 March 2010, http://www.thenation.com/article/disobedient-rooms.
8 | J G Ballard, *The Best Science Fiction of J G Ballard* (Panther: London, 1977), quoted in L J Hurst, 'The Voices of Time by J G Ballard: a review', *Vector,* 1997.
9 | Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché*: Essays and Reviews 1971–2000 (London: Vintage, 2002) 101.
10 | Thomas Frick, 'J G Ballard, The Art of Fiction No. 85', *The Paris Review*, 94 (Winter, 1984); as an example of this technique, Ballard described writing about an ashtray in such minute detail that one forgets that it is an ashtray.
11 | James Campbell, 'Strange Fiction', *The Guardian*, 14 June, 2008.
12 | Frick, 'J G Ballard, The Art of Fiction No. 85'.
13 | This would be followed in later years by the similarly fictionalised memoir *The Kindness of Women* (1991) and the memoir *Miracles of Life* (2008).
14 | Frick, 'J G Ballard, The Art of Fiction No 85'.
15 | Ibid.
16 | Amis, *The War Against Cliché*, 107.
17 | Chris Nakashima-Brown, '"Child of the Diaspora": Sterling on Ballard', *Ballardian*, 7 October, 2005, http://www.ballardian.com/sterling-on-ballard.
18 | Miéville, 'In Disobedient Rooms'.
19 | J G Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millenium* (New York: Picador USA, 1962), 197.
20 | See, for example, Lauren Davis, 'Why are we so fascinated by photographs of decaying buildings?' *io9*, last modified 28 November 2013, http://io9.com/why-are-we-so-fascinated-by-photographs-of-decaying-bui-1473075079.

Haunted by Waters

DUNCAN BROWN



In our family, there was no clear line between religion and flyfishing.
Norman Maclean (1)

Water, of course, haunts fishermen. They see in it all possibilities and many dangers, not to mention great beauty.
Craig Nova (71)

Dead friends and all the other accumulations. More than time, trout caught, or detailed lists, they're what make you an old timer on a piece of water.
John Gierach (70)

This essay is based on the second chapter of my book entitled *Are Trout South African?*[1] I need to say a little about the broader project before I move into the specific discussion of being 'Haunted by Waters'. In the book, I focus specifically on the introduction of trout to South Africa, and debates about their continued presence here. There have been many studies that use animal and plant species – herrings, cod, salmon, horses, cattle, maize – as ciphers in the writing of economic histories. While I refer to the economics of trout at various stages, this is not my focus. Rather, I am interested, in line with my background as a literary studies scholar, in the cultural and social issues around species like trout in South Africa, and more broadly the place of that which is termed 'alien' in the post-colony, though I do also pay attention to scientific arguments about biodiversity and species interaction.

Several 'exotic' fish have historically been imported into South Africa: various carp species; largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass; bluegills; rainbow and brown trout; and, with less success or more limited range, some salmon species and golden trout (the latter actually a colour variation of the rainbow trout), largely into stillwaters in Mpumalanga as unusual 'trophy' species.[2] Of these species, the carps, basses and trouts have adapted best to local aquaclimates and become an integral part of the sport of recreational angling in the country (and to a lesser extent subsistence angling, some of it 'illegal'), sustaining between them a host of magazines devoted almost entirely to their pursuit.

My interest in trout is threefold. At the outset I must admit that I am a flyfisher, with memories of learning to flyfish for trout with my father that stretch back more than 30 years, when there were no dedicated flyfishing shops in the country. You bought your flies from the local hardware shop, and fishing with a fly was some sort of obscure, fringe activity. Being a flyfisher has been part of who I am for much of my life; it is constitutive of my identity in fundamental ways. From my rods unfurl lines into past and future generations. The Osprey 5/6 weight with which I often fish stillwaters is a present my siblings and I bought for my father on his 70th birthday, and which I inherited from him on his death in 1998. In the days when as an adolescent or young adult I frequently bumped heads with him, fishing always remained a way of talking about other things. In the faded, gentle, floral surrounds of the hospice in which he died, towards the end he hallucinated about catching two four pounders, which – with some awkwardness and self-consciousness – I

pretended to release for him off the end of the bed. His face showed the combination of pride and humility that always characterised his landing a good fish. On my second fishing trip after his death (on the first I drew a blank), I looked down in wonder at the two four-pound trout on the stripping apron of my float tube, which I landed at Triangle Dam in Underberg using his rod. If truth be told, they may have been closer to five pounds, but perhaps they looked smaller from where he was.

On the pinboard beside my desk at home is a picture of me holding that rod, arced with the weight of one of the dozen trout I caught, along with a bout of severe bronchitis, float-tubing in sub-zero temperatures in mid-winter on a dam outside Mooi River with my brother-in-law. Using the same rod, along with the reel and line that were given to my father as farewell presents from his last position as headmaster, my son Michael recently landed a fine fish at Lourensford. My other rods all have, or are accruing, their own stories, of fish, people and places, including the four-weight four piece that I built myself, and that now spends most of its time in the hands of my son, and with which he learned to flyfish in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands, and the Orvis T3 – a Porsche amongst the Golfs that make up the rest of my stable of fishing rods – that my wife Tracey gave me as a present, and that is exquisite both to look at and fish with. Even here, on my writing retreat at Groot Brak during which I wrote this section (as well as another unrelated and more conventionally 'academic' piece[3]), I look out over the river, and have a flyrod, flybox and polarised sunglasses to hand, in case a tailing grunter or charging garrick appears to lure me away from more mundane research matters.

My second reason for writing about trout is more academic. Questions of indigeneity, and of the right to belong or be part of, raise themselves with greater or lesser degrees of complexity, aggression or insistency in public and private discourses in South Africa and many other postcolonial societies. Whether framed in terms of what one should plant in one's suburban garden, who has the right to 'speak for', what the priorities of state policy should be, who may work or reside in the country, or what is the basis for land claims, questions of who or what is 'natural' or indigenous to an area consistently return, despite abundant evidence that the essentialisms and selective histories that often underlie such arguments do not withstand even the most cursory scrutiny. Environmental discourses of 'indigenous' and 'alien' can cross very quickly into the human-political domain. Mulcock and Trigger quote Stephen Jay Gould in this regard – 'How easy the fallacious transition between a biological argument and a political campaign' – and they note that '[s]ubtle linguistic assumptions and linguistic slippages such as those that are commonly found in discourses about nativeness, naturalness and belonging can have significant implications'.[4]

Thirdly, and related to the second (and perhaps first) reason, is the increasing attention paid in literary and postcolonial studies to issues of environment and ecology, and especially the environmental transformations that colonial and imperial histories have wrought upon the (post)colony. There have been horrifying and hubristic interventions made by colonial authorities, whether in terms of the introduction of species (rabbits in Australia, black wattle, brambles and prickly pears in South Africa), physical alterations such as building dams or irrigation schemes,[5] or the unintended and accidental introduc-

tions of species, such as khaki-bos and black jacks in the animal fodder brought into South Africa. Leaving aside the more extreme and obvious problems such as those mentioned above, my question is: at what point do changes to landscape, fauna and flora become historical – for better or worse part of the history of human settlement in the region? Humans have always had an impact on the environment (and despite how we may feel about this, extinctions have also been part of the biological history of our planet).[6] Amongst many possible examples, one can mention the leafy vegetable *Corchorus olitorius* (more commonly known as Tossa jute or *ewedu*), which originates in tropical Africa, and whose seeds were carried across the globe by slaves. Its distribution is a vegetative narrative of imperial and colonial atrocity and survival. It has been grown in Egypt, under the name *mloukhia*, for so long that many regard it as the national dish.[7] In terms of what we classify as indigenous, how far back do we turn the clock? And does the trout, which I am using partly as metonymy for settler history and whose forebears arrived in South Africa at around the same time as mine, have a legitimate place in the landscape? Like so many other species that have their origins outside the subcontinent but are part of our everyday register of South Africanness – Nguni cattle, *Africanis* dogs, mealies, bushpigs, pumpkins – has it become, if not indigenous, then at least indigenised?

In his introduction to the fascinating volume entitled *Toxic Belonging: Identity and Ecology in South Africa*, Dan Wylie writes of the tension between 'indigeneity' and 'settlerdom': 'This aspect of belonging provides the impetus behind a vast amount of South African historiography: indeed, it would not be too much to say that this tension *is* South African history'.[8] Specifically in relation to environmental debates, how and where do we factor in the complexities of the cultural, social and symbolic, which are integral to human understandings of their interactions with all forms of life, in many cases to their very sense of being and belonging? This is certainly the thinking behind the plea from the Federation of Southern African Flyfishers (FOSAF) in calling for 'social' as well as 'economic and environmental' issues to be considered in debates about biodiversity, rather than a narrow focus on 'the interactions between indigenous and alien biota' that has characterised the debate so far.[9]

Notions of identity and belonging are bound up with historical engagements with landscape, whether through intimate knowledge, such as that reflected by the 19th-century /Xam Bushman narrator //Kabbo in the Bleek and Lloyd archives, spiritual attachment through ancestral graves, or transformation through human intervention.[10] In a society such as South Africa, or any other postcolonial society, that history is complicated by the settlement of people, fauna and flora from 'elsewhere'. As Crosby notes, human settlers came to the colonised world not as individual immigrants but 'as part of a grunting, lowing, neighing, crowing, chirping, snarling, buzzing, self-replicating and world-altering avalanche'.[11]

Writing about South African Indian identity in relation to Durban, and especially Cato Manor, Ronnie Govender articulates a sense of individual and communal identity through the transformations of vegetation wrought by the 1860 settlers. The narrator of one of his short stories talks of 'paw-paw, avocado, mango, guava, jack fruit, curry leaf and other

'To say that I am a flyfisher means that I value solitude, that I make time for beautiful places.'
PHOTO: Hugh John Agnew Brown, with graphic variations

exotic plants brought over from India in the nineteenth century by indentured labourers' being as 'natural as daylight'.[12] As an ex-Durbanite, like Govender I can no more imagine Durban without its palms, mango and avocado trees, flamboyants, guavas, jack fruits and bougainvilleas (and yes, even Indian mynahs) than I can Stellenbosch without its oak trees and vines, Johannesburg without its mine dumps, or Underberg and Nottingham Road without their trout. Memorably, Nelson Mandela made a similar, though unintentional, claim when in his opening parliamentary speech he referred to the jacarandas of Pretoria as treasured symbols of South Africanness.

Writing about white identity in South Africa in *A Change of Tongue*, Antjie Krog narrates a conversation with two black colleagues about the possibility of whites' belonging in this country:

> 'The moment you learn to live the black life of risk, you will become one of us.'
>
> 'Bullshit,' Mamuka says sharply to Ghangha. 'She can never become black. She will always be a … what did they call Max du Preez the other day? – a kangaroo! Her people have been living here for generations, surviving, but when we see her, we know she is a kangaroo from elsewhere. Still, we like her, and we live with her. And she, for some reason, likes us and prefers to live with us.'

Krog's response is sharp: 'I am stunned. Of all things! A bloody kangaroo, hopping around in the Free State.' But she finds in the non-indigenous but ubiquitous eucalyptus (blue gum) a metaphor for her place in South Africa:

> I would have preferred something like … well, like a eucalyptus tree. From elsewhere, granted. But impossible to imagine a South African landscape without it. Small towns, farmyards, railway lines, forests, windbreaks. The eucalyptus towers over so many memories. It's used in mines, in pole fences, furniture. It is a handy tree. Tenacious. *'n Windskerm*. It's true that nothing will grow under it, that it consumes more water than other trees, but it has turtle doves in its leaves and sheep in its shade. And where it is desolate, there it grows. And it gives great honey.[13]

What the vegetation of Cato Manor represents for Ronnie Govender, the poet Douglas Livingstone found in water, especially the littoral zone that he explored in literary and scientific terms as bacteriologist and poet. Perhaps part of my attraction to his work is in my own sense of affinity with water.

One of the most famous, misquoted and misunderstood lines relating to fishing is that with which Norman Maclean ends his famous novella, *A River Runs through It:* 'I am haunted by waters'. And those five words are my 'great text' for this essay.[14] The sentence is frequently rendered as 'I am haunted by water' (singular). As any flyfisher will tell you, that plural is crucial. Maclean is not referring to the element, water, but to the plural of something known as 'a water': a stream, river or lake, whose characteristics and quality are known and loved, about which there are stories upon stories, and whose name conjures up fish and fishers, past and present. The names trip off the tongue like verbal alchemy. Locally – Loch Ranoch, Stagstones, the Potts, the Little

Mooi, the Umzimudi, the Smalblaar, Thrift Dam, Gubu, the Bushman's, the Elandspad. Further afield – the Tay, Henry's Fork, the Frying Pan, the Test, the Avon, the Spey, the Snake, the Beaverkill, Lake Tahoe. And, as Paul Waley asks in an article about Japanese waterways and the symbolic associations of fish: 'What's a river [or water, I would add] without fish?'[15] Craig Nova captures this exquisitely: 'I like to sit where I can watch their sides flashing when they feed on the bottom, and I take pleasure in them, in their presence, the gift they bring to ponds and streams, and I know at these times what dullness there would be to water without them'.[16]

Such 'waters' become points of reference in writing and talking about flyfishing. For the renowned flyfishing author, John Gierach, the modest and intimately known brown trout stream that flows past his home, the St Vrain, becomes a shorthand way of describing other streams with his fishing friends: 'Like the St Vrain, only with cutthroats', or 'twice the size of the St Vrain', they would say.[17] For me and my family, Lake Isabella, the Umzimkulu and Triangle Dam in Underberg, and more recently the Lourens in Somerset West, have become such reference points. 'About the same size as Isabella', we might say, 'but with bigger fish'; 'like the Umzimkulu on the Lower Ericsberg beat'; 'Like Triangle, with the same weed drop-offs'; or 'about the size of the pool near the top of Beat Two on the Lourens'.

There has been a great deal of emphasis in recent academic study, in particular that of postcolonial studies and postmodernity, on displacement, mobility and border crossing, and the constructedness of identity. But notions of place, belonging and home, and the implication of human identities with those of other species, remain compelling, and are increasingly returning to critical attention.[18] To talk of belonging or identity in these ways is not to imply some pre- or supra-linguistic connection with place or other species, an unmediated (mystical?) connection with earth or its non-human inhabitants, which I find disabling in arguments such as these. Nor is it to suggest that such identity formations may not also be fraught with contradiction and pain. In this respect, I find positions like the one adopted by Tracy Morison problematic. She says, for example, that 'traditional cultural stories of indigenous southern African people' may 'promote an understanding of selfhood that allows us to bond with the animals, recognize our place in the world and thereby behave with ecological integrity'.[19]

'Ecological integrity' is fine, if needing some unpacking, but 'bonding with animals'? How do we 'bond' with species for which we may be legitimate prey: great white sharks; lions; crocodiles? As a body-boarder who spends many hours in the sea, I have gone out of my way to avoid 'bonding' with any sharks whatsoever! Does the cheetah 'bond' with the impala, the trout with the mayfly? Or do we 'bond' only with selected, non-threatening and 'appealing' species, rather than impressive, but malodorous, creatures such as Komodo dragons? Morison claims later in her article that Mary Oliver's poetry emphasises our place 'in the family of things'.[20] While I acknowledge interdependence amongst creatures, I am not sure that 'family' is the correct metaphor for a system in which predation is a fundamental logic.

These ideas engage me, both as an academic and in my more philosophical moments on the water (yes, when the fishing is slow). I want to explore them a little further. The

work of Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow is useful in this regard. In *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature* they point out that '[t]o date, environmental scholarship has given insufficient consideration to the deep connections between identity and the natural environment'. Instead '[e]mpirical research on environmental topics frequently poses questions as objective matters for natural science'. So the key questions become: Is the average global temperature increasing? What are the likely effects of the destruction of rainforests on the extinction of species?; and environmental problems are seen as the result of technological advances by human society, which accordingly need technological solutions.[21]

But, they argue, there has been 'an increasing recognition that environmental degradation is not purely a technological question, but is partly behavourial and attitudinal as well. This recognition has focused more attention on the ways in which people think about the environment.' While it might seem that the 'hard' sciences are primarily to blame for removing the human and affective from environmental debates, Clayton and Opotow point out that even the social sciences often understand the 'human relationship with nature as a disinterested one' and construe people in 'economic rather than affective terms – as caring for the environment primarily because it furnishes us with resources'.[22]

As I indicated earlier in my discussion of Tracy Morison, understanding the 'affective' in this context is not simply to claim a Romantic imaginative affinity with 'Nature'. Instead, it is to acknowledge the symbolic, cultural and imaginative in human/non-human interactions, while maintaining that these interactions are simultaneously scientific and economic. In fact, it is precisely to deny the imaginative/scientific dichotomy. As Clayton and Opotow point out, the categories of 'nature' and the 'natural' themselves are anything but unproblematic. These theorists argue that 'nature' and the 'natural environment' have tended to be understood as 'nonhuman surroundings', and that this implies a distinction between that which is 'untouched' and that which is 'the result of human influence'.[23] That understanding, despite being pervasive (think of all those 'unspoilt', 'pristine' places advertised, often with macabre irony, as the site of a new residential or holiday development), is deeply problematic, as it separates out the 'human' from the 'natural' and indeed the biological and ecological.

Clayton and Opotow claim in contrast that 'Nature has long been subject to human influence through what is planted, supported or tolerated, and what is exterminated either directly or through elimination of habitat.' And they quote McKibben's famous statement that there is no more 'nature' in the traditional sense: 'By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial'.[24] Any argument that attempts to separate the 'natural' from the 'human' and 'social' is, for me, a non-starter. Several theorists have argued for the significance of the 'natural' in human identity formation. Not having a background in psychology, I cannot properly evaluate the persuasiveness of such arguments.[25] But I would note that this is not a new line of thinking, although it is now being taken up with increasing nuance and theoretical sophistication.

There have been various attempts to theorise such identity formations through concepts such as 'biophilia', 'deep ecology', 'ecopsychology', 'eco-feminism', 'ecological

identity', 'eco-theology', 'environmental identity', the 'environmental/ecological self' and so on, which I do not wish to discuss here, partly because I think some of them are misguided or misleading, and partly because they imply the necessity for a change in identity formation, which is not necessarily germane to my argument here. While insisting on the need for awareness of and action in relation to environmental threats, what I am exploring is an engagement with fauna and flora that is both 'already in place' and 'everyday', this latter term not implying that it is not also characterised by wonder (if wonder is not part of day-to-day experience, what is it part of?). While an attachment or engagement of human identity with the natural world may be assumed to be a positive thing, it does not necessarily issue in the 'family of being' described by Morison above. Such attachments are often strongly felt, and lead to group formations and the 'othering' of those perceived to be in opposition or threatening.[26] At least two colleagues have told me, in relation to this project and a prior book I wrote on 'identity and belonging' that they have no sense of attachment to place at all.[27] One said that she could live anywhere, as long as it had an international airport; and another said she felt more at home in the streets of New York or London than anywhere in South Africa. Although, perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that they do have a sense of place: it is just not here. So be it: there are many ways to be human, and I have the same intense dislike for prescriptiveness as the famous flyfishing author John Gierach, who comments that being 'left alone is one of the great under-rated pleasures of life'.[28]

Clayton and Opotow extend their discussion of identity and environment specifically to the notion of 'place' when they argue that, 'consistent with psychological research on "place attachment" … emotional connections to particular environmental aspects of places people have lived – rocky terrain, harsh winters, and the ocean shore – serve to shape individuals' self-definitions'.[29] As their examples suggest (and this is partly behind my discomfort with some of the 'eco'-identity theories mentioned above), an engagement with place is always necessarily specific, local and time-bound. Steven J Holmes says that '[o]ur experience is never of "the earth" as an actual whole, but of some particular place on the earth, a place defined by both physical boundaries and by the actions, concepts, meanings and feelings that we enact within (or with) it – boundaries and behaviours that in turn play a role in defining us'. He argues that 'it is the specificity of place that allows it to serve as a basis for reflection of individual identity; or perhaps place and selfhood are mutually defining'.[30]

Place theory has begun to assume greater presence in human geography and environmental studies. John Cameron points out in an essay entitled 'Responding to Place in a Post-colonial Era: An Australian Perspective' that, between 2001 and the time of writing (2003), at least three major international conferences had been held in Australia with the subtitle 'sense of place'.[31] Coming at these debates initially from the field of conservation, he notes: 'I became interested in how place relationships tended to disappear from the discourse [of conservation] as the debate moved from the local to the state, and then the national level.' And he writes of those people – 'small-scale farmers, suburban women, indigenous people' – 'involved in conflicts over urban development and agriculture whose

voices of place attachment were marginalised because they didn't fully accord with the positions of the main protagonists'.[32] Reflecting on the work of the Sense of Place Colloquium, a group of Australian scholars whom he convened to think through these matters, Cameron insists on talking not simply of 'place', but rather a 'sense of place', which accords with the notion of 'waters' and their significance for flyfishers, which I explored above. He begins with the definition of 'place' put forward by Relph: 'those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other'. 'To put "sense of" in front of a word,' Cameron expands, 'is to bring attention to the individual experience, so that a sense of place refers to the ways in which people experience the intertwinings of meanings, activities and a particular landscape, as well as to the felt sense of belonging to a place that emerges from those experiences.' And he stresses that 'sense', in his usage, 'does not refer simply to the physical senses, but to the felt sense of place and the intuitive and imaginative sensing that is active when one is attuned to, and receptive towards, one's surroundings'.[33]

For Cameron, and I would agree with him, engaging people in debates about conservation through their sense of place is potentially more productive than 'fear of ecological catastrophe, appeals to the moral rights of other species or to a vision of ecotopia', especially as a sense of place involves 'not simply the affective response to a particular place that people might have; it includes a growing sense of what the place demands of us in our attitudes and concerns'.[34] Of course, the question 'whose sense of place?' is crucial, and political and economic factors are deeply embedded in these issues. In making the claim that trout and their waters, or fish more generally, are significant to the sense of place of many people, I am not suggesting that it is *the* way to relate to 'natural' environments, nor that it is superior to that of farmers, hikers, surfers, foresters, rock-climbers, suburban gardeners, rural village dwellers and so on. I am simply insisting that it is valid, complex, and should be reinserted into debates about trout and their presence in South Africa.

I also acknowledge fully the colonial history in which trout are implicated; not to do so would be ignorant, perverse or willfully stupid. As Massey notes, arguments about a sense of place are often perceived as reactionary, as a retreat from modernity or postmodernity into a world in which 'places have single and essential identities, and are marked with clear boundaries that define a community on the inside that derives its sense of belonging from association with the place, and in counterposition with "Others" on the outside of the borders'.[35] I hope it is clear that this is not the case I am making. But Massey also points to the weakness in the counterargument made in terms of globalisation, which does indeed 'shrink the globe' for the wealthy and the players in the world of global capital. But it effectively confines poorer communities increasingly to smaller and smaller areas, either because of the widening wealth differential, or because the shift from road, rail and sea travel to air travel has meant a reduction of the former, and has ensured that opportunities for travel are beyond the means of so many.[36]

To say, as I did at the outset, that my identity is constituted at some fundamental level by being a flyfisher is to say that I make time for beautiful places. That I am blessed by encounters with otters, dabchicks, fish eagles, malachite kingfishers as much as with people.

That the world that I see in two dimensions must be imagined, and can only be imagined – rarely seen – in three. That I value solitude as well as quiet company. That I am frequently humbled by failure. That I know the places I love intimately, in all their moods. That there are trout that I know individually from their lies in the river. That with rod in hand I must modify my behaviour to encounter another species. As Robert Traver has famously said:

> I fish because I love to; because I love the environs where trout are found ... because in a world where most men seem to spend their lives doing things they hate, my fishing is at once a source of endless delight and an act of small rebellion; because trout do not lie or cheat and cannot be bought or bribed or impressed by power, but respond only to quietude and humility and endless patience.[37]

But perhaps I am a flyfisher because, above all, I am 'haunted by waters'.

ENDNOTES

1 | A version of this has been previously published in Duncan Brown, *Are Trout South African? Stories of Fish, People and Places* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2013).
2 | Bruton and Merron (1985) claim that 20 alien fish species have been introduced in total. PBN Jackson, 'Economic Value of Introduced Fishes with Special Reference to Trout', *Ichthos* 1 (1986): 7.
3 | An article entitled 'Writing Belief, Reading Belief: Adam Ashforth's *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* and *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa*', *Scrutiny2* 17, no 1 (2012): 61–75.
4 | Jane Mulcock and David Trigger, 'Ecology and Identity: A Comparative Perspective on the Negotiation of "Nativeness"', in *Toxic Belonging? Identity and Ecology in South Africa,* ed Dan Wylie (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 179.
5 | See William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 130–147.
6 | Ehrlich and Ehrlich claim that of the approximately half billion animal species that have ever lived, only 2% are extant today, with the rest having evolved into new species or (most often) become extinct. Quoted in MN Bruton, 'Introduction', *Ichthos* 1 (1986): 3.
7 | Sarah Melamed, 'The Incredible Journey of Corchorus olitorius', accessed 5 September 2010, http://www.sarahmelamed.co./2010/07/the-incredible-journey-of-corchorus-olitorius/2010.
8 | Dan Wylie (ed), *Toxic Belonging? Identity and Ecology in South Africa.* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 8.
9 | WR Bainbridge and Ilan Lax, 'A Pragmatic View of the Trout Debate', *Piscator* 137 (2005): 15–20.
10 | See Duncan Brown, *To Speak of this Land: Identity and Belonging in South Africa and Beyond* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), 7–35; and Dan Wylie, 'Stealing Identities? Appropriations of //Kabbo's Oral Testimonies: An Ecocritical View' in *Toxic Belonging? Identity and Ecology in South Africa,* ed Dan Wylie (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 78–103 for a discussion of //Kabbo's narratives in this regard.
11 | Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism and the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 194.
12 | Ronnie Govender, *'At the Edge' and other Cato Manor Stories* (Pretoria: Manx, 1996), 120–121.
13 | Antjie Krog, *A Change of Tongue* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2003), 274–275.
14 | Norman Maclean, *A River Runs through It and other Stories* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 104.
15 | Paul Waley, 'What's a River without Fish? Symbols, Space and Ecosystem in the Waterways of Japan', in *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations,* ed Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 159–181.
16 | Craig Nova, *Brook Trout and the Writing Life* (Hillsborough, North Carolina: Eno Publishers, 2011), 36.
17 | John Gierach, *Sex, Death and Fly-Fishing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 68.
18 | Amongst many possible examples, I would cite Edward J Chamberlin, *If this is your Land, Where are your Stories? Finding Common Ground* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006) and Julia Martin, *A Millimetre of Dust: Visiting Ancestral Sites* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2008) as examples of the former trend; and Wendy Woodward, *The Animal Gaze: Animal Subjectivities in Southern African Narratives* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press,

'From my rods unfurl lines into past and future generations.' PHOTO: Tracey Brown

2008) and Dan Wylie (ed), *Toxic Belonging? Identity and Ecology in South Africa.* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) as examples of the latter. My own study, *To Speak of this Land,* took the question posed in Chamberlin's title as a central provocation.

19 | Tracy Morison, 'Our "Place in the Family of Things'": A Story of Animals, (Re)Connection and Belonging in the World' in *Toxic Belonging? Identity and Ecology in South Africa,* ed Dan Wylie (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 62.

20 | Ibid, 67.

21 | Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow, 'Introduction: Identity and the Natural Environment' in *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature,* eds Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 2003), 3.

22 | Ibid.

23 | Ibid, 6.

24 | Ibid.

25 | See Harold Searles, *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and in Schizophrenia* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1960) or Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) on the significance of the natural environment and the non-human in the development of the self.

26 | As Clayton and Opotow argue: 'Thus nature-oriented activities can elicit strong social connections that take on intensified meaning in environmental conflicts between those who want to interact with nature in one way and those wishing to interact in another. Those working to preserve a forest become "us", while those who log the forest become "them".', 'Introduction', 9.

27 | See Brown, *To Speak of this Land.*

28 | John Gierach, *Death, Taxes and Leaky Waders* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2002), 490.

29 | Clayton and Opotow, 'Introduction', 9.

30 | Steven J Holmes, 'Some Lives and Some Theories', in *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature,* eds Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 2003), 30.

31 | John Cameron, 'Responding to Place in a Post-colonial Era: An Australian Perspective', *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era,* William M Adams and Martin Mulligan (eds) (London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan, 2003), 178.

32 | Ibid, 173.

33 | Ibid.

34 | Ibid, 174, 176.

35 | Ibid, 182.

36 | Ibid.

37 | Robert Traver, *Anatomy of a Fisherman* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 10.

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND KARL MARX

Reading The Gettysburg Address and The Address from the International Working Men's Association to President Johnson[1]

ZACKIE ACHMAT

LINCOLN AND MARX

On the occasion of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth, the pro-slavery terrorist, and his band of Southern slave-power conspirators, Karl Marx wrote an obituary published as *The Address from the International Working Men's Association to President Johnson*. In part, this eulogy reads:

> Even the sycophants who, year after year, and day by day, stick to their Sisyphus work of morally assassinating Abraham Lincoln, and the great Republic he headed, stand now aghast at this universal outburst of popular feeling, and rival with each other to strew rhetorical flowers on his open grave. They have now at last found out that he was a man, neither to be browbeaten by adversity, nor intoxicated by success, inflexibly pressing on to his great goal, never compromising it by blind haste, slowly maturing his steps, never retracing them, carried away by no surge of popular favour, disheartened by no slackening of the popular pulse, tempering stern acts by the gleams of a kind heart, illuminating scenes dark with passion by the smile of humour, doing his titanic work as humbly and homely as Heaven-born rulers do little things with the grandiloquence of pomp and state.[2]

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Respect for Lincoln, 'a man, neither to be browbeaten by adversity, nor intoxicated by success', is memorialised for future generations by one of the greatest intellects of all times – Marx. In his lifetime, Lincoln often had to admonish both loved ones and opponents – tempering 'stern acts with the gleam of a kind heart' and 'illuminating scenes dark with passion by the smile of humour'. This trait illuminated by Marx is recognised by most people who knew Lincoln as a family member, friend, colleague, opponent, comrade or even enemy. According to Marx, Lincoln was 'one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great without ceasing to be good'.[3] His assessment of Lincoln is shared by one of his great contemporary biographers Doris Kearns Goodwin, who writes that 'his success in dealing with the strong egos of the men in his cabinet suggests that in the hands of a truly great politician the qualities we associate with decency and morality – kindness, sensitivity, compassion, honesty and empathy – can also be impressive political resources'.[4]

Two men, assumed over time by individuals, movements for change and governments to be ideological and social adversaries, are the subject of this essay that examines the relationship between Lincoln and Marx during the Civil War. Marx followed the Civil War in all possible detail for that time by reading newspapers, speeches and documents, as well as correspondence with soldiers such as his friend Joseph Weydemeyer. Marx and Friedrich Engels analysed rigorously, wrote lyrically and engaged passionately as activists against what they called the 'pro-slavery rebellion' of the American South.[5] Their analysis and practice of class, race and social revolution was transformed by the Civil War.[6]

Marx and Lincoln's relationship was not a personal one, but a minor political collaboration across the Atlantic, with the participation of Friedrich Engels, in the prosecution of the Union's war aims. The Lincoln-and-Marx collaboration, despite its fleeting and impersonal

nature, is imbued with immense political, historical and theoretical significance that can illuminate contemporary struggles for democracy, freedom, equality, dignity and social justice. First, it is necessary to remember the United States and the world in a time of slavery.

SLAVERY AND INEQUALITY

Lincoln, Marx and their intersecting relationships with the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries cannot be understood without first speaking of colonialism, slavery, class oppression, gender inequality and racial domination. My essay is an attempt to pursue this discussion from the vantage point of contemporary struggles for local and global citizenship. Lincoln and Marx's political engagement was located in the world's then first and lone democratic republic's struggle for survival in a time of slavery and bondage.[7]

For Marx and Engels, slavery was not simply a cruelty condemned through abstraction. It affected people from Africa and it demonstrated the hypocrisy of Europeans who disguised its function as a system of capital accumulation. Marx maintained that slavery in Roman law reduced a person to an *instrument vocale* (an instrument with a voice) as opposed to an animal, which is an *instrument semi-vocale* (a semi-mute instrument) or a lifeless implement classified as *instrument mutum* (a mute instrument).[8] The combination of slavery based on commercial exploitation and wage labour would inform Marx and Engels' theory and practice, exposing it as a global system that linked four continents – Europe, North America, Latin America and Africa – as the source of trade in human beings. On 26 June 1857, Lincoln would argue that:

> The Republicans inculcate, with whatever ability they can, that the negro is a man; that his bondage is cruelly wrong, and that the field of his oppression ought not to be enlarged. The Democrats deny his manhood; deny, or dwarf to insignificance, the wrong of his bondage, so far as possible, crush all sympathy for him, and cultivate hatred and disgust against him ... [They have] done all in [their] power to reduce the whole question of slavery to one of a mere *right of property*.[9]

Lincoln and Marx both illustrated a progressive understanding of the context of slavery, the system, its brutality and the struggles against it.

Reading Lincoln and Marx on the Civil War, I argue two propositions: first, that the American Civil War was fought within the law on the basis, and mainly within the limits, of its Constitution to preserve freedom, equality and republican government; and second, that it achieved revolutionary objectives as a consequence of unparalleled violence, with the mobilisation of public opinion. What commenced as a counter-revolution against the aims of the American Revolution in 1776, its revolutionary anti-colonial Declaration of Independence and its human rights-based Constitution, became a revolution that extended its gains by abolishing slavery. The Constitution and Declaration of Independence constituted the banner that Lincoln used to prosecute the war with the aim first to maintain the Union and later to abolish slavery.

Second, Lincoln and Marx understood that this war had significant global implications and that victory required building a global moral consensus for the Union. Both of them were actors in the construction of the global moral consensus to end slavery and establish freedom in the United States of America.

For free black people, slaves, abolitionists and other opponents of slavery, the Supreme Court had set the ground for confrontation with the power of 300 000 slave-owners who controlled the lives of nearly four million slaves. On 16 June 1858, Abraham Lincoln was nominated by the Republican Party as its candidate for US senator opposite Northern Democrat Judge Stephen Douglas, against whom he lost. Douglas had defended the right to extend slavery into new territories under the banner of 'states' rights'. In accepting his party's nomination, Lincoln declared, 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' His 'House Divided' speech was regarded as a declaration of war by the South. Lincoln was nominated to run for President of the United States of America in 1860, and he pledged not to give an inch of free soil to slavery, but instead to uphold the Constitution. Slavery could exist in the South as the Constitution required, but no new slave state could be admitted to the Union. Lincoln's election on 4 November 1860 gave impetus to the Secession and Civil War. Six weeks later South Carolina voted to secede from the Union and called on all slave states to follow suit. On 8 February 1861, the Confederate States of America adopted its Constitution that proclaimed no law 'denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed'.[10] Two weeks before Lincoln's inauguration on 18 February 1861, former senator Jefferson Davis of Virginia was elected as provisional president of the Confederate States with former congressman Alexander Stephens of Georgia as his vice-president.

The Confederate Constitution – the basis of rebellion by the nine slave states – legally protected slavery. In other words, *and* in the language of the times, the constitutional protection of 'property in man' on the basis of law and practice was the basis of the war. Confederate Vice-President Alexander Stephens declared that the Southern Constitution rejected the original Declaration of Independence and the 'prevailing ideas entertained by … [Thomas Jefferson] and the leading statesmen at the time … that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically'. Stephens regarded those ideas as 'wrong' because they 'rested upon the assumption of the equality of races'. Instead, he argued:

> Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery – subordination to the superior race – is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.[11]

The destruction of this social system that Stephens described and defended also weakened, but did not eradicate, the ideas and ideology of racial domination

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and subordination. Today, their ghosts haunt every part of the planet in the struggles and the fears of all people.

The battle lines drawn, the Union dismembered, the troops assembled, the contest ensued and claimed more than 600 000 soldiers' lives on either side, with countless casualties. The number of civilian deaths and casualties is not known. This war cruelly affected every person on the soil of the United States of America. It was also a contest that mobilised the propertied aristocracies and working classes of Britain and Europe, as well as the middle-class intellectuals, journals, newspapers and activists across the Atlantic. Karl Marx and the members of the First International spoke the following words to a global community of activists: '[I]t fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.'[12] Victory was never certain. The slave states had unmatched ideological unity, and most of the officers of the US army had deserted the Union – its greatest loss was that of General Robert E Lee, who decided he could not fight against his home state of Virginia. The Confederacy could also rely on supporters in the North, mainly those in the Democratic Party. Abroad, Prime Ministers Palmerston and Gladstone in Great Britain, together with British industrialists in the cotton and shipbuilding industries, and Louis Napoleon in France, were in the vanguard of the support for the Confederate cause. On the other hand, Lincoln faced an ideologically divided Union in the North. A minority of the people supported the abolition of slavery and an even smaller number supported equality between black and white people. The majority regarded black people as inferior, but they also supported the Union. The Northern masses would fight against secession but not for the abolition of slavery. However, the foundation on which Lincoln rested was the near universal sentiment that slavery was wrong and that not an inch of free soil should be given to slave-owners. The dominant ideology of the Republican Party and most people in the North was based on free labour – the idea of equal opportunity through work.[13]

THE MEANINGS OF GETTYSBURG

On New Year's Day in 1863, after six months' notice to the slave states of the Confederacy, Lincoln's Final Emancipation Proclamation was issued. It freed slaves in the rebel states and required that the army and navy recognise as well as maintain the freedom of slaves. The proclamation asked slaves to desist from violence except in self-defence and, where possible and allowed by their former masters, to work for a reasonable wage. One of the most revolutionary acts of the Emancipation Proclamation accepted former slaves into armed service of the United States of America. The Emancipation Proclamation and Union victories in 1863 placed the Confederacy under enormous pressure. Union armies that had been occupying the South now had access to former slaves not simply as labour but as soldiers. When freed, they followed the army, and many fought in critical battles. Confederacy citizens

FOR

A

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THE NORTHERN POPULATION

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started placing pressure on their government. For instance, on 2 April 1863, hundreds of women – the wives of metalworkers in Richmond, Virginia, home of the Confederate capital – marched to the governor's office to demand bread. After a brief riot and the direct intervention of President Jefferson Davis, they reluctantly dispersed.

Davis could stop a food riot but not the Union army on the Mississippi River. General Ulysses Grant's celebrated victory at Vicksburg, Mississippi, prevented the South's use of the great river. The Confederate Territory had been split and the resolve of its people weakened, but the armies of the South were not yet defeated. In June 1863, General Robert E Lee led 70 000 men into Pennsylvania. In Chambersburg, they pillaged and looted. Most seriously, according to McPherson, 'Southern soldiers also seized scores of black people in Pennsylvania and sent them south into slavery.'[14] For a month, the Northern population and press panicked. The British Parliament, on Louis Napoleon's prodding and with the impetus of Lee's march into the free state of Pennsylvania, then prepared to debate recognition of the Confederacy. The motion was defeated because the British ruling-class antipathy to the French Emperor was stronger than its desire to recognise a slave state. At Gettysburg, the stakes were enormous: the North could be occupied; Washington DC would be threatened; the Emancipation Proclamation would be endangered; the November elections for Congress would see the defeat of the Republicans; the European powers would recognise the slave states; and secession could succeed. The costs to both sides would also be enormous in what would become known as the decisive battle of the American Civil War. Seven million rounds of ammunition were fired during a three-day battle from 1 to 3 July 1863 in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. More than 50 000 casualties on both sides, including almost 10 000 deaths, were recorded later.

The sacrifice by the Union soldiers at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on that day helped secure freedom, equality, dignity and democracy for the United States and globally. Abraham Lincoln addressed its significance in 271 words that forever memorialised the battle and all who perished in the Civil War.

> Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.
>
> Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this ...[15]

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is remembered as one of the most important and beautifully crafted speeches of any US president. Its profound themes reverberate and enable us 'to converse with the dead, the absent and the unborn, at all distances of time and space'.[16] In it, Lincoln mourns the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands who lost their lives and many more who were wounded in the 'great civil war' and it has the empathy

of a father who had lost sons, a man who had lost friends in the war and a president more than any before then or since who saw soldiers and people buried daily in Washington DC. It is a call to arms for all people to complete the unfinished work to secure a democracy based on the values of freedom and equality, one that 'shall not perish from the earth', and still echoes for local and global citizens everywhere. Harriet Beecher Stowe, one of the great women abolitionists of the time and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, wrote that Lincoln's writing was direct, 'brief, condensed, intense and with a power of insight' that made him 'well-understood by the people, and that since the time of Washington, the state-papers of no President have more controlled the public mind'.[17]

GETTYSBURG AND THE GENESIS OF A REVOLUTION TO FREE LABOUR

The American Revolution of the 18th century defeated the racist, pro-slavery counter-revolution that erupted, but the Civil War in the main never formed a part of the historical imagination or the political and theoretical education of activists in the 20th century. However, Marx, together with Engels, understood the enduring relevance of the battlefields of the war on the lives of succeeding generations. For them Lincoln's words meant, above all, struggle. When Lincoln declares that the United States of America was 'conceived in Liberty' and 'dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal', he combines the revolutionary aims of the Declaration of Independence with that country's Constitution.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt argues persuasively that the fundamental difference between the revolutions of America and Europe was the nature of the US Constitution. For her, the US Constitution was not founded on the simplistic notion of the limitation of governmental power to protect the individual but on the balance of power between branches of government to enhance liberty and the 'pursuit of happiness' of all people. In this endeavour, the limitation against intrusion must be understood. In other words, the US Constitution is a foundation on which liberty and equality must be enforced, built and extended – it is not simply a check on government. The European revolutions for liberty and equality had to contend with a feudal system that affected the majority of people, while in the US, except for slavery, such entrenched inequalities in power did not exist for the majority of people. Arendt writes: 'The American Constitution finally consolidated the power of the Revolution, and since the aim of revolution was freedom, it indeed came to be … the foundation of freedom.'[18] Arendt distinguishes between 'the power of the Revolution', which in every sense means the power of the people, and 'the aim of revolution', the fact that everyone is 'born equal' and with inalienable rights that include 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. This principle animated Lincoln's life and work because of his unshakeable belief in equal opportunity as the basis for personal and social progress. He wrote:

> The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with

which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This, say its advocates, is free labor – the just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all – gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.[19]

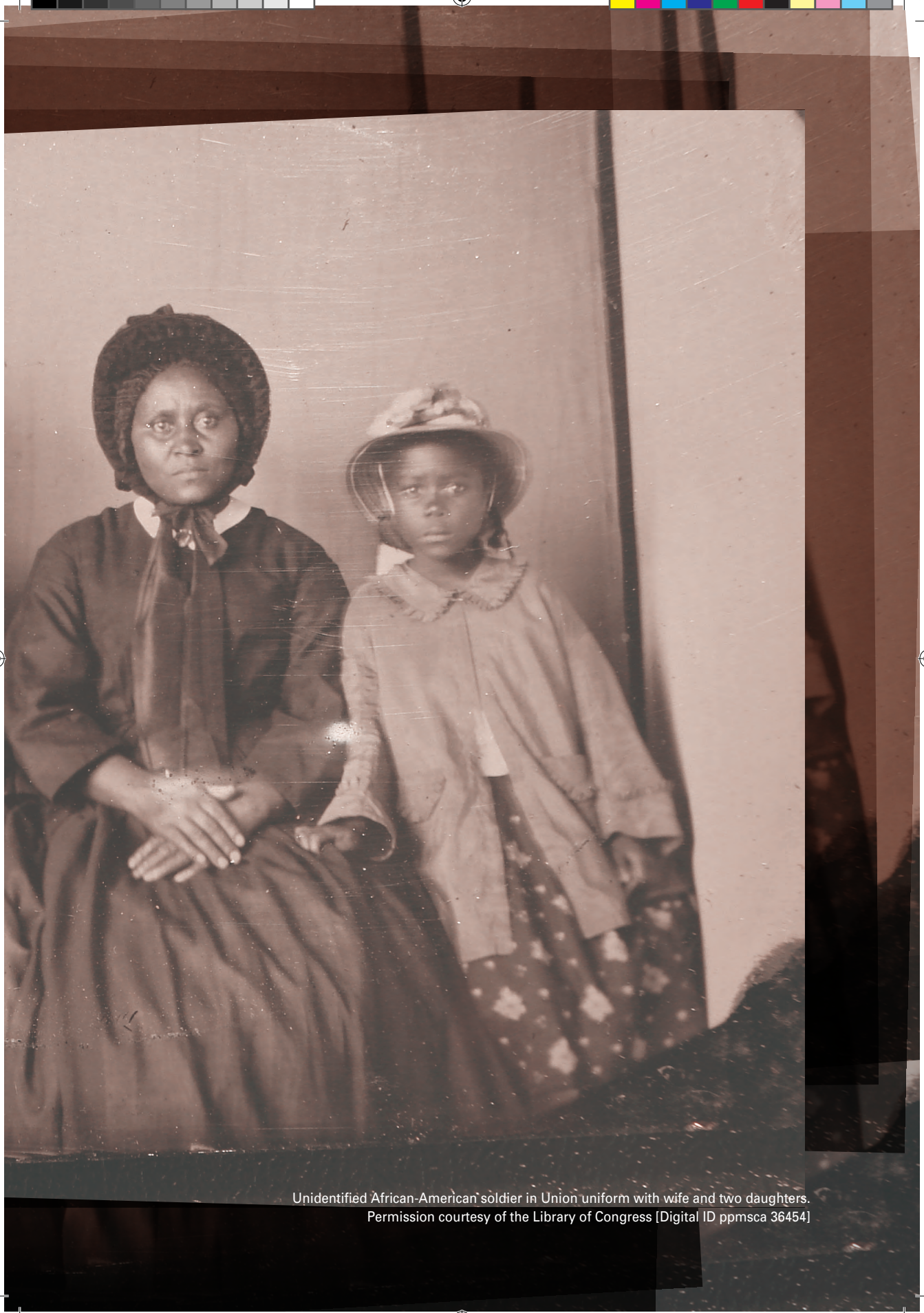
Renouncing the revolutionary aim that everyone is created equal and entitled to human rights undermined the promise of freedom and progress. The counter-revolution by slave-owners and their leaders had to base its rejection of the Constitution and Union on the renunciation of the aims of the Revolution. Lincoln addressed these questions in his critique of the Dred Scott decision, a speech that has not received philosophical or political recognition for his practice as president and its implications for contemporary struggles. He writes:

> Chief Justice Taney, in his opinion in the Dred Scott case, admits that the language of the Declaration is broad enough to include the whole human family, but he and Judge Douglas argue that the authors of that instrument did not intend to include negroes, by the fact that they did not at once, actually place them on an equality with the whites. ... I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects ... They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit.[20]

For Lincoln the aims of the Revolution are clear, but what could he mean by the assertion that the framers of the Constitution 'meant simply to declare the right' that all men are created equal 'so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances might permit'? At the time of the First Inaugural Address and the secession, he declared unequivocally that the aim of the government was to ensure that the Union survived intact on the principle of not ceding any free soil to slavery.

> Plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy. A majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks, and limitations, and always changing easily, with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people ... Unanimity is impossible; the rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy, or despotism in some form, is all that is left.[21]

The idea that minorities can secede after losing an election must destroy democracy, because the principle of majority rule, one of the aspects together with the enforcement of freedom and equality, would then be impossible. The statement of the government's war aim in Lincoln's First Inaugural Address defined the war as a defensive war to protect the aims of the Revolution and its power, the will of the people. Or, as he argues in the Gettysburg Address, the duty to ensure 'that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth'. This was not a war to end slavery. On 26 November 1864 Marx wrote to his uncle Lion Philips:



Unidentified African-American soldier in Union uniform with wife and two daughters.
Permission courtesy of the Library of Congress [Digital ID ppmsca 36454]

> When you reflect, my dear Uncle, how at the time of Lincoln's election 3½ years ago it was only a matter of making *no further concessions* to the slave-owners, whereas now the avowed aim, which has in part already been realised, is the *abolition of slavery,* one has to admit that *never* has such a gigantic revolution occurred with such rapidity. It will have a highly beneficial influence on the whole world.[22]

Marx had read Lincoln, studied the Civil War and wrote extensively on the British government's support for the South. Lincoln loved reading and he was an avid reader of newspapers. He wrote: 'A capacity, and taste, for reading, gives access to whatever has already been discovered by others. It is the key, or one of the keys, to the already solved problems.'[23] However, during the war he could not read newspapers. Instead, his secretaries prepared a press digest for his attention from a few key newspapers. One of these newspapers Marx had contributed to since the early 1850s – *The New York Tribune*. Horace Greeley was its editor, an abolitionist, a critic and supporter of Lincoln. The *Tribune* was then the largest newspaper in the world, with a circulation of 200 000 copies. On 11 October 1861, *The New York Tribune* published one of the most detailed analyses by Marx on 'The American Question in England'. Marx showed a detailed knowledge of US history, addressing every assault by the slave-owners on the values and principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, including a legal understanding of the Dred Scott decision, which sought to diffuse slavery through the 'Federal Power' of the Supreme Court 'as the law of the American Constitution'. Occasioned by the vitriolic response of the English press to a letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Lord Shaftesbury, a former critic of slavery, now a supporter of the South, Marx's article traversed the history of the conflict.

> Mrs. Beecher Stowe's letter to Lord Shaftesbury, whatever its intrinsic merit may be, has done a great deal of good, by forcing the anti-Northern organs of the London press to speak out and lay before the general public the ostensible reasons for their hostile tone against the North, and their ill-concealed sympathies with the South ...
>
> 'In the first place,' says *The Economist,* 'the assumption that the quarrel between the North and South is a quarrel between Negro freedom on the one side and Negro Slavery on the other, is as impudent as it is untrue. 'The North,' says *The Saturday Review,* 'does not proclaim abolition, and never pretended to fight for Anti-Slavery. The North has not hoisted for its *oriflamme* the sacred symbol of justice to the Negro; its *cri de guerre* is not unconditional abolition.'
>
> Now, in the first instance, the premiss must be conceded. The war has not been undertaken with a view to put down Slavery, and the United States authorities themselves have taken the greatest pains to protest against any such idea. But then, it ought to be remembered that it was not the North, but the South, which undertook this war; the former acting only on the defense. ... It confessed to fight for the liberty of enslaving other people ... The Confederate Congress boasted that its new-fangled constitution, as distinguished from the Constitution of the Washingtons, Jeffersons, and Adams's, had recognized for the first time Slavery as a thing good in itself, a bulwark of civilization, and a divine institution. If the North professed to fight but for the Union, the South gloried in rebellion

for the supremacy of Slavery. If Anti-Slavery and idealistic England felt not attracted by the profession of the North, how came it to pass that it was not violently repulsed by the cynical confessions of the South?[24]

Exposing the South's 'fight for the liberty to enslave other people', Marx rejected the opinions of the ruling-class newspapers that the South was simply fighting for its own freedom. He understood that Lincoln posed the war as one of defence of the Constitution. By the time of the Gettysburg Address, the Civil War had been raging for more than two years, the counter-revolutionary South was bleeding and the Emancipation Proclamation had come into effect, but Lincoln's assertion that the United States was based on liberty and the proposition of equality for all was always central to his thought and practice.

Lincoln was re-elected in November 1863 by an increased majority, and Marx wrote to Lincoln on behalf of the International Working Men's Association prior to the Second Inauguration. The letter presented to American Ambassador Charles Francis Adams in November 1864 reads, as follows:

Sir,

We congratulate the American people upon your re-election by a large majority. If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war cry of your re-election is Death to Slavery.

From the commencement of the titanic American strife the workingmen of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class. The contest for the territories ... was ... to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the emigrant or prostituted by the tramp of the slave driver ...

The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.[25]

Two months later, on 1 February 1865, Marx writes excitedly to Engels:

You must excuse the scraps of English in my epistle as there was a *sitting of the council* yesterday which lasted until *one o'clock*. ('Liquor' and 'smoke' are *banned* from these *'sittings'*.) The first thing was the answering epistle from Lincoln, which you may find in tomorrow's *Times* and certainly in *The Daily News* and *The Star*. In the reply to the *London Emancipation Society* ... published in yesterday's *Evening Star*, the old man drily dismisses the fellows with two formal clichés ... whereas his letter to us is in fact everything we could have asked for, and, in particular, the naive assurance that the *United States* could not involve itself directly in *'propagandism'*. At any rate, it is the only answer so far *on the part of the old man* that is more than a strictly formal one.[26]

Lincoln's reply was transmitted through Ambassador Adams:

Sir,

I am directed to inform you that the address of the Central Council of your Association, which was duly transmitted through this Legation to

the President of the United [States], has been received by him.

So far as the sentiments expressed by it are personal, they are accepted by him with a sincere and anxious desire that he may be able to prove himself not unworthy of the confidence which has been recently extended to him by his fellow citizens and by so many of the friends of humanity and progress throughout the world.

The Government of the United States has a clear consciousness that its policy neither is nor could be reactionary, but at the same time it adheres to the course which it adopted at the beginning, of abstaining everywhere from propagandism and unlawful intervention. It strives to do equal and exact justice to all states and to all men and it relies upon the beneficial results of that effort for support at home and for respect and good will throughout the world.

Nations do not exist for themselves alone, but to promote the welfare and happiness of mankind by benevolent intercourse and example. It is in this relation that the United States regard their cause in the present conflict with slavery, maintaining insurgence as the cause of human nature, and they derive new encouragements to persevere from the testimony of the workingmen of Europe that the national attitude is favored with their enlightened approval and earnest sympathies.

I have the honor to be, sir, your obedient servant,
Charles Francis Adams[27]

Beecher Stowe's tribute in February 1864 to Lincoln illustrates the centrality of the idea of free labour to Lincoln's experience. She writes:

> Abraham Lincoln is in the strictest sense *a man of the working classes*. ... His position now at the head of one of the most powerful nations of the earth, is a sign to all who live by their labor that their day is coming. Lincoln was born to the inheritance of hard work as truly as the poorest laborer's son that digs our field.[28]

SOCIALIST INTERNATIONALISM AND GLOBALISING THE CONFLICT

Global citizenship is an exercise of solidarity with oppressed, marginalised and vulnerable people everywhere. Free people everywhere have the duty to defend these rights everywhere they are violated and to secure their redress. Global citizenship also encompasses the principle of a positive solidarity to improve the conditions of oppressed and marginalised people across the planet. This both Lincoln and Marx understood. After his Second Inaugural Address Lincoln accepted honorary membership of the New York Workingmen's Democratic Republican Association. This occurred after race riots in New York, encouraged by the Democrats against the Emancipation Proclamation. I cite his reply extensively because he defines global citizenship as solidarity across race and class.

> You comprehend, as your address shows, that the existing rebellion, means more, and tends to more, than the perpetuation of African Slavery – that it is, in fact, a war upon the rights of all working people. ...
>
> None are so deeply interested to resist the present rebellion as the working people. Let them beware of prejudice, working division and hostility among themselves. The most notable feature of a disturbance in your city last summer, was the hanging of some working people by other working people. It should never be so. The strongest bond of human sympathy,

outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues, and kindreds. Nor should this lead to a war upon property, or the owners of property. Property is the fruit of labor – property is desirable – is a positive good in the world. That some should be rich, shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprize. Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another; but let him labor diligently and build one for himself, thus by example assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built.[29]

I quote what most socialists would describe as a contradictory impulse in Lincoln's thought – his argument that the 'strongest bond of human sympathy, outside the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues, and kindreds. Nor should this lead to a war upon property, or the owners of property'.[30] The significant question must be his thought and practice to secure human freedom and equality through a moral consensus against slavery and the rights of working people everywhere. This was not a recent expedient thought as a consequence of the Civil War. Lincoln's internationalism had its roots in global solidarity with democratic revolutions.

Lincoln was wrongly and condescendingly described as an aboriginal with no horizon beyond America by the *éminence grise* of American literature, Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'He was thoroughly American, had never crossed the sea, had never been spoiled by English insularity or French dissipation; a quite native, aboriginal man, as an acorn from an oak; no aping of foreigners, no frivolous accomplishments.'[31] But Lincoln, like Marx, had a principled internationalist outlook, writing, for example, a resolution on behalf of the citizens of Illinois to Hungarian freedom fighters in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution. The smug Northern elite, its academics, politicians and many of its writers (Walt Whitman being an exception) misconstrued the self-taught lawyer's lack of formal education for ignorance. Like the Southern ruling class, they underestimated Lincoln. Marx and Engels understood the value of his work and it directly influenced their understanding of international working-class solidarity and political economy. John F Welsh has argued that 'the Civil War prompted Marx to pursue major reconstruction of *Capital*, eventually centering the work on the lived experiences of workers under capitalism'.[32] Welsh correctly identifies the influence of the Civil War on Marx's work but reduces it to its impact on political economy, the writing of *Capital* and the lived experience of the working class. The relationship between Lincoln and Marx, the aims of the American Revolution, namely liberty and equality, and the prosecution of the Civil War on a democratic basis – the building of socialist solidarity – all elude this otherwise commendable effort by Welsh.

On 25 July 1867, in the preface to Capital, Marx tantalisingly invoked Perseus, the son of Zeus and slayer of monsters, to explain the impact of the Civil War on the European working class and its more or less brutal or humane struggle based on its political strength.

Perseus wore a magic cap down over his eyes and ears as a make-believe that there are no

> monsters. Let us not deceive ourselves on this. As in the 18th century, the American war of independence sounded the tocsin for the European middle class, so that in the 19th century, the American Civil War sounded it for the European working class. In England the process of social disintegration is palpable. When it has reached a certain point, it must react on the Continent. There it will take a form more brutal or more humane, according to the degree of development of the working class itself.[33]

Almost 20 years later, on 5 November 1886, Engels would elaborate this idea of 'a more brutal or humane' struggle that depends on 'the degree of development of the working class'. In his Preface to the English translation of *Capital*, when speaking of the economic crisis born of competition to the British economy from Germany and the other European countries, Engels concludes:

> England is the only country where the inevitable social revolution might be effected entirely by peaceful and legal means. [Marx] certainly never forgot to add that he hardly expected the English ruling classes to submit, without 'a pro-slavery rebellion', to this peaceful and legal revolution.[34]

The European ruling classes, such as the German ruling class led by Otto von Bismarck, would all struggle under the dual impact of universal male suffrage of free labour in the United States and the revolutionary organisation of the working class in Europe.

Marxist and socialist historiography claimed and proclaimed the legacy of the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the great movements of working and poor people in Europe and the former colonial world. For many generations, activists globally sought inspiration from the European and Chinese revolutionary models for political, economic, social and practical struggle. We ignored the United States because of an imperial appropriation of US history. All of us vaguely recalled that Karl Marx had 'in passing' made comments about the American Civil War. Marx himself understood the legacy of Lincoln differently and in a revolutionary manner. One of the finest appreciations of Lincoln is recorded in *The Address from the Working Men's International Association to President Johnson*, written by Marx after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, as quoted at the beginning of this piece.

> Lincoln's murder was tragic but his philosophy and practice lives not only in the defeat of the slave-owners but in our struggles. Even Marx underestimated the towering intellect of this president and single-minded son of the working class. Lincoln's legacy is best encapsulated in these words from his speech on Dred Scott, words that demonstrate that the struggle for freedom, equality, dignity and social justice is a permanent struggle.
>
> I had thought that the Declaration contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere ...
>
> The assertion that 'all men are created equal' was meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.[35]

I had thought that the Declaration contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere ...

ENDNOTES

1 | A special thanks to Rob Petersen for making me watch the TV series *Gettysburg* a number of years ago. To this event I owe an intellectual interest as exciting as the many I had as an activist over more than three decades. He also allowed me access to his library and the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* as part of hospitality in his home. Quintin Combrink and Gavin Silber provided research assistance. And, as always, Gavin was a critical reader along with Dalli Weyers. Jack Lewis insisted that I complete the paper and the Open Society Institute's Global Fellowship programme allows me to do this work.

2 | Originally published in *The Bee-Hive Newspaper*, No 188, 20 May 1865, accessed 9 September 2015, https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1865/johnson-letter.htm. .

3 | Ibid.

4 | DK Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2006), xvii.

5 | K Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books in association with *New Left Review*, 1976), 517–518.

6 | The impact of the pro-slavery revolt on the theoretical understanding of Marx and Engels is discussed below. For now a single footnote will suffice. In *Capital, Volume 1* there are more references to the American Civil War than to the French Revolution and none to the Revolutions of 1848. Marx followed the politics and struggles of the United States because he understood the centrality of its emergence as a global capitalist power. For instance, referring to the Civil War he writes in a footnote: 'An American revolution and a universal crisis were needed in order that working girls [in Lancashire], who spin for the whole world might learn to sew.' Marx gives an enticing theoretical hint at the relationship between unpaid domestic labour, sexual reproduction and capitalism through his analysis that the cotton crisis and unemployment caused by the American Civil War gave working 'women ... sufficient leisure to give their infants the breast, instead of poisoning them with 'Godfrey's Cordial' (an opiate) ... But from this we see how capital, for the purposes of its self-valorization, has usurped the family labour necessary for consumption.' K Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 517–518.

7 | The United States was the only Republican government based on universal (predominantly white) male suffrage and the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. The French Revolution was defeated and France had an Empire ruled by a reactionary Louis Napoleon. The aristocracy and anti-Enlightenment social forces had been reinforced throughout Europe and they were openly in solidarity with the South.

8 | K Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 303.

9 | A Lincoln, *Speech on the Dred Scott Decision at Springfield, Illinois*. 26 June 1857.

10 | Section 9(4) of Article I of The Constitution of the Confederate States of America, in J Roper (ed) *The American Civil War: Literary Sources and Documents* (Sussex: Helm, 2000).

11 | A Stephens, *The 'Cornerstone' Speech*. 21 March 1861.

12 | K Marx 'Address of the International Working Men's Association to President Abraham Lincoln', Originally published in *The Bee-Hive Newspaper*, No 169, 7 November 1865.
13 | Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labour, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) is one of the best studies on the ideology of free labour and free soil of the Republican Party and most Northern and Western States.
14 | J McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom – The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 649.
15 | A Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*. 19 November 1863.
16 | A Lincoln, *Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions*. 11 February 1859.
17 | H Beecher Stowe, 'Abraham Lincoln' in *The Lincoln Anthology,* ed H Holzer (New York: Library of America, 2009), 88.
18 | H Arendt, *On Revolution* (Great Britain: Pelican/Penguin Books, 1973), 154.
19 | A Lincoln, *Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society,* Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 1859.
20 | A Lincoln, *Speech on the Dred Scott Decision at Springfield,* Illinois (1857).
21 | A Lincoln, *First Inaugural Address* (1861).
22 | *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol 42 (1988), 46.
23 | A Lincoln, *Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society,* Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 1859.
24 | K Marx, 'The American Question in England', accessed 9 September 2015, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/10/11.htm. .
25 | K Marx, 'Address of the International Working Men's Association to President Abraham Lincoln'.
26 | *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol 42 (1988), 73.
27 | 'Reply of Ambassador Adams to the International Working Men's Association', accessed 9 September 2015, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/lincoln-letter.htm. .
28 | H Beecher Stowe, 'Abraham Lincoln', *The Lincoln Anthology,* ed H. Holzer (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 85.
29 | A Lincoln, *Reply to New York Workingmen's Democratic Republican Association*. 21 March 1864.
30 | T B Peterson, *The Life, and Martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln* (Philadelphia: T B Peterson, 1864), 177.
31 | R W Emerson, 'Remarks at the Services Held in Concord', *The Lincoln Anthology,* ed H Holzer, (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 177.
32 | J F Welsh, 'Reconstructing Capital: The American Roots and Humanist Vision of Marx's Thought'. *The Midwest Quarterly* 43, 3 (2002): 275.
33 | K Marx, 'Preface to the First German Edition of *Capital* Volume One', accessed 9 September 2015, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm.
34 | F Engels, 'Preface to the English Edition of *Capital* Volume One', accessed 9 September 2015, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p6.htm.
35 | R P Basler (ed), *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001), 361.

Black Reconstruction: A Work in Progress

Nicholas Mirzoeff

I want to remember *Black Reconstruction* by W E B Du Bois, first published in 1935, as a too-often overlooked classic of African American history, politics and theory. The subtitle of the book explains the project: 'An essay toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America'. An extended analysis of what Du Bois called 'abolition democracy', it's also a vital text for our own time. The legacies of North American slavery now come with proper names: Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and so many more. *Black Reconstruction* echoes with such resonance – it's a book driven by the crisis of 1930s fascism to revisit the abolition of slavery and the legacy of the Haitian revolution. I first came across it while writing my own book *The Right to Look*.[1] In this book I describe the history of visuality – how power visualises history to itself. This power says to us, like the police: 'Move on, there's nothing to see here.' This history is known to an extent. Far harder to see is its counterpoint that I call countervisuality. Du Bois helped me to see how democracy and education were central to that countervisuality both in the 1930s and 1860s. I added 'sustainability' to that list as a modern way of expressing the goal of the formerly enslaved: 'forty acres and a mule', the essence of General Sherman's famous Field Order no 15 in 1865, giving former plantation land to the freed. So this is a book that is alive today, like all great texts, still challenging assumptions and preconceptions today as much as it did when it was first published in 1935.

It was an astonishing accomplishment. Du Bois's reconfiguration of Reconstruction ran against a 60-year-old Confederate history that had, until then, portrayed the enslaved as loyal to their owners, and Reconstruction as something between a disaster and a crime.[2] Du Bois gave his readers as many of the words of the historical actors as he could to contrast them with the then so-called 'scholarly' accounts. The blatant and overt prejudice in these supposed histories makes shocking reading today.[3]

But this is not just about history. The end of the American Civil War ushered in some extraordinary experiments with radical democracy. And we have just experienced some of our own in global social movements that have arisen since 2011. Implicit in the movement was the renewal of what Du Bois called 'abolition democracy'. Du Bois's account of this democracy stressed the central place of the global South as both a site of reaction and of resistance. The South is not simply a geographic location but what Enrique Dussel has called a 'metaphor for human suffering under global capitalism'.[4] This concept of the 'South' emerged from the post-slavery Atlantic world as a means of thinking through its legacies and of imagining an alternative future. It was the site of an emergent internationalism, just as today we are trying to create a global social movement.

Abolition democracy begins, in Du Bois's account, with the Haitian Revolution (1791–1805), the first successful revolution by the enslaved. What does freedom mean in such a democracy? It can mean 'free' as non-slave; 'free' as 'able to enter into contract'; or finally 'free' as being without price. Any autonomous claim to selfhood is contested within capitalist ideology. Capital, after all, might lionise the free encounter of autonomous beings, as epitomised

by contract law, but it refuses the ideas of freedom from cost or freedom from profit. One reason that Haiti was so terrifying to certain people in the 19th century was that its constitution forbade 'white' people from owning property of any kind on the island. However, anyone who lived in Haiti was to be defined as 'black', so this was not a racial project but one about belonging. The apparently surprising re-emergence of direct democracy as central to the planetary resistance against financial globalisation is, then, of centuries' standing: more exactly, it is a latent potentiality within capitalist modernity that authority has tried but failed to expunge.

The story of Du Bois's book began with the 20th century. In 1900, he spoke to the Pan-African Conference in London, held after the Universal Exhibition of that same year in Paris. Du Bois was not sanguine about the prospects for the century ahead, declaiming: 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line'.[5] His prescient remark was made in the face of the then relatively new legalised segregation of the United States. It was in 1892 that Louisiana segregated its railways. The Supreme Court upheld the creation of so-called separate but equal facilities in its 1896 case, Plessey *versus* Ferguson. A mere four years later, it might not have been clear to everyone how far-reaching this decision was to prove. In his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois expanded on this insight and developed his vital concept of double consciousness. For the citizen deemed second-class, Du Bois understood, 'one ever feels his twoness'. A person of colour lived life as if behind a veil, designated as a permanent 'problem'. Furthermore, in his 1910 essay, entitled 'The Souls of White Folk', Du Bois emphasised the material advantage that lay behind this division: 'Whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen.'[6]

At this point in his career, Du Bois trusted in the concept of the 'talented tenth', the elite of African American life, who were to make it self-evident that such segregation was an error. By the 1930s, he no longer felt confident in that approach. He set aside the 'talented tenth' in favour of his defence of what he called 'the Negro race' as a whole in the work of Reconstruction. Reconstruction was perhaps the most radical moment in American history, in which African American freedmen and -women implemented one of the most thoroughgoing transformations of society ever seen. It extended from the end of the war in 1865, to 1877, when planters and those who considered themselves white regained power in the South. So comprehensive was their refutation of the principles of Reconstruction that the entire period came to be seen as a dreadful mistake. Historians produced volume after volume purporting to show how terribly the states had been administered and how dreadfully the white population had been abused. So accepted was this view that it came to be known as the Dunning School, after a Columbia University professor of that name. Most people did not, of course, read these books. Their negative view of Reconstruction was reinforced by popular culture. D W Griffith's epic 1918 film of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, *Birth of a Nation*, was so celebrated that President Wilson had it screened at the White House. So toxic is its racism that I hesitate to show it in a class without careful

preparation. African American legislators from South Carolina are shown without shoes, leering at white women, eating with their hands in the Assembly, and so on. Later, the message of white Southern suffering after the Civil War was reinforced by the eternally celebrated *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

So Du Bois had to start at the beginning. His first reconceptualisation was to assert that the slaves had not been freed. They had liberated themselves by means of what he called a general strike. As soon as hostilities commenced, the enslaved left the plantations and headed north. The Sea Islands of South Carolina were captured in a swift attack by Union forces in 1861, causing the plantation owners to flee in disarray. With the Emancipation Proclamation still two years off, the status of the enslaved Africans left behind was unresolved, in a kind of juridical no-man's-land. It was clear enough to many African Americans that this kind of freedom was better than none and enslaved Africans from across the South made their way behind the Union lines. For Du Bois, writing in 1935, such actions showed that this mass migration was not a casual activity but a general strike of the enslaved, a decisive move to end forced labour: 'This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps half a million people.'[7] Even today one can read historical accounts claiming that the abolition of slavery had been inevitable since 1776, as the logical end point of the Declaration of Independence. Du Bois and many other African Americans insisted, to the contrary, that slavery was ended by the enslaved themselves.

Timothy O'Sullivan, who later became famous for his photographs of the American West, captured the 'general strike' against slavery as official photographer for the Army of the Potomac.[8] At the Old Fort Plantation, Beaufort, O'Sullivan took a group photograph of well over 100 African Americans. There was no leader present, or any suggestion of a hierarchy. Men, women and children are gathered together in a collective assertion of their right to look and therefore be seen. Under slavery, the enslaved were forbidden to 'eyeball' the white population as a whole, an injunction that was sustained throughout the period of segregation and is still active in today's prison system. So the simple act of raising the look to a camera and engaging with it constituted a rights claim to a subjectivity that could engage with sense experience. The photograph can be seen, then, as depicting abolition democracy. On the Sea Islands, the space between regimes became a space without regime, abolition democracy.

AS CHARLES SUMNER, A PRO-RECONSTRUCTION SENATOR FROM MASSACHUSETTS FAMOUSLY SAID: 'THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS BECOME THE CUSTODIAN OF FREEDOM.'

NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF

Reconstruction mobilised a social imaginary centred on democracy, education and sustainability. No state afforded African Americans full equality before the law before Reconstruction. The Supreme Court decided, in a case known as Dred Scott, that no African American could be a citizen. That was in 1857 and it serves as a useful correction to the idea that the United States Constitution always implied full freedom and equality, as is often suggested. The 1866 Civil Rights Act and the passing of the 14th and 15th Amendments were what made that equality a fact. The 14th Amendment has served to protect and extend the rights of women and sexual minorities in our own time. As Charles Sumner, a pro-Reconstruction Senator from Massachusetts, famously said: 'The federal government has become the custodian of freedom.'[9] These debates echo down to the present in the guise of proponents of states' rights opposing the federal government. For some people, the very idea of an African American president means dramatic expansion of federal protections because of the long memory of Reconstruction. Reconstruction was by far the most radical period of US history, much more so than the celebrated 1960s. As historian Eric Foner reminds us, it was also 'the period of the greatest domestic terrorism in American history'.[10] That is to say, terrorism *by* the white population that founded the Ku Klux Klan and other supremacist organisations *against* the formerly enslaved in the period, which also gave meaning to the word 'lynch'.

Working only from published sources, because as an African American he did not have access to Southern archives, Du Bois showed how the freed nonetheless created new political, financial and educational networks. Just as in Haiti and revolutionary France, the franchise was expanded beyond people of means; new state-organised education was created; and those formerly considered property became owners. So radical was this moment that Du Bois wanted to call it the dictatorship of the proletariat, only to be argued out of it by his more orthodox Marxist friends. Du Bois highlighted the reforms enacted by the 1868 South Carolina Constitutional Convention, whose scandal was that 'twenty-three of the whites and fifty-nine of the colored [delegates] paid no taxes whatever'.[11] It was, argued Du Bois, 'singularly to the credit of these voters that poverty was so well represented'.[12] Today, in the House of Representatives of the United States Congress, there are 257 millionaires, 48% of the total, and the median net worth of Representatives is $966 000. At the state labour convention in 1869, workers further demanded half the crop or a wage of 70 cents to a dollar a day, depending on the nature of the task. At the heart of the freedmen's project was education. Du Bois insisted 'public education for all at public expense was, in the South, a Negro idea'.[13] A school had been opened in Port Royal as soon as it fell to the union forces, and others followed in Beaufort and Hilton Head as early as January 1862.[14] In South Carolina, the new State Constitution of 1868 provided for universal education from the age of 6 to 16, as well as opening schools for the disabled. By 1876, when Reconstruction came to an end, some 123 000 students were enrolled.[15] In the economic field, the Freedmen's Bank in Charleston, South Carolina, held over $350 000 in deposits from 5 500 depositors by 1873, indicating that the labouring classes were the key to the bank.[16] Taken together with the

homesteads, wage labour rates and the right to vote, South Carolina enacted a radical alternative to slavery, by replacing chattel labour with a rights-centered democracy. These forms of abolition democracy so contradicted majoritarian concepts of representation and realism in the United States that even today they sound 'unrealistic', unachievable, even hard to imagine.

Reconstruction imagined, above all, a new order based on 'forty acres and a mule'. Here the resistance of the old order was greatest. Land held and worked in common was the goal of the formerly enslaved across the Atlantic world. In Haiti, after the revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture observed with concern that groups of workers were banding together to 'buy a few acres of land, abandoning plantations already in use to go and settle on uncultivated land'.[17] We can get a sense of what that cultivation might have looked like by comparing two surveys taken of 'Negro Gardens' in Jamaica. In a survey taken in 1811, with slavery in full vigour, each person was allocated a small plot of about half an acre in a rigidly geometric pattern. By 1837, during the 'apprenticeship' that led to full abolition in 1838, the area of each plot was much larger, reaching as high as 16 acres, and the cultivation was shared on each plot among both men and women. Crops grown ranged from staples such as yam, cassava and plantain to cash crops such as sugar cane and guinea grass (for fodder).[18] It seems reasonable to presume that this difference was not due to the attitude of the planters in these locations but reflected how the formerly enslaved envisaged their future. It was clear that this style of cultivation would supply enough to eat and a surplus for local exchange. Observers remarked on the diversity of the local markets, seeing products from hats and sculpted calabashes to fish, fruit and game.[19] In his 1801 Constitution, Toussaint nonetheless required all those who were capable to work on the land unless they had another profession. He forbade anyone from purchasing land in lots smaller than roughly 150 acres, excluding almost all people of colour. His goal was, above all, to generate exports and reinforce the place of the state, especially concerning the necessary military establishment.[20] Workers were no longer slaves, but they were tied to their plantation and under the watchful eye of the new police Toussaint had created, as well as his own 'general police'.

In October 1801 these new rules provoked an uprising throughout the North of the colony by the subalterns who had led the revolution. The formerly enslaved General Moïse, who became their leader, was not only an associate of Toussaint's, but his nephew and adopted son. As the agricultural inspector for the North, Moïse knew the aspirations of the workers and was in favour of dividing the plantations among junior officers (literally, the subalterns) and soldiers from the ranks.[21] While rumours – unfairly – abounded that Toussaint was reintroducing slavery, as the French had done in Guadeloupe, he had legislated the right to 'import' workers from Africa. The dialectic within the revolution between heroes and subalterns had now become an open conflict. With the support of Dessalines, Christophe and the army, Toussaint not only defeated Moïse but had him executed. For C L R James and Aimé Césaire, this moment jumped out of history. Both writers compared Toussaint's situation to that faced by Lenin after the October

THESE FORMS OF ABOLITION DEMOCRACY SO CONTRADICTED MAJORITARIAN CONCEPTS OF REPRESENTATION AND REALISM IN THE UNITED STATES THAT EVEN TODAY THEY SOUND 'UNREALISTIC', UNACHIEVABLE, EVEN HARD TO IMAGINE.

Revolution of 1917, when Tsarist officials and bourgeois economics had to be restored to save the nascent state. Although he shaped the conflict between Toussaint and Moïse in terms of race and imperialism, rather than political economy, James went further and acknowledged the severity of this crisis: 'To shoot Moïse, the black, for the sake of the whites was more than an error, it was a crime. It was almost as if Lenin had had Trotsky shot for taking the side of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.'[22] For James, Toussaint crossed an irrevocable line with these actions. Yet James's proposed solution of a campaign of explanation and mobilisation is unconvincing: such proposals had been made to the subalterns under arms since 1791 and they had always rejected them. This intransigence of the peasantry was to infuriate Marx and led to Stalin's most grotesque excesses. It was only with Gramsci that a communist leader was prepared to think through this contradiction – from within a fascist prison.

In South Carolina, after the abolition of slavery in 1865, having been denied allocations of former plantations, the freed undertook to create their own communities by purchasing land. One example that attracted attention was at Scanlonville. A commune was created by a group of the freed calling themselves the Carolina Land Trust, which purchased land from a former plantation, called Remley's Point, which is now part of Charleston. Very small plots for residences were supplemented with longer plots for collective farming. We should note that one-third of Scanlonville's plots were bought by women. All decisions were taken by consensus. People worked as they were able and willing. Health care was mutual. The *Carolina Courier* published an account of life at Scanlonville in 1873 under the heading 'Negro Communism': 'The land is equally distributed by the officers elected for that purpose among the members of the society, or so much as they may wish to cultivate. Each is free to work as suits him, and each can dispose of his crop as he deems proper.'[23]

Admissions to the commune were by unanimous consent. The freed undertook day labour at 50 cents a day to raise the money for the plots at $1.50 an acre.

When the Federal government did not grant land to the enslaved, Reconstruction governments tried to borrow money to buy it for them. Wall Street financiers would not lend to them. Wall Street, it should be recalled, was the site of New York's own slave market. Its 'wall' was a barrier against the indigenous population, and the future citadel of financial speculation fed off the profits from slavery and land grabs. Transatlantic slavery was a system heavily dependent on debt financing. The slavers borrowed money for the costs of the voyage and the trade goods they exchanged for human property in Africa. These goods were far from worthless and developed into a money form based on copper. The enslaved were themselves purchased by American planters buying on credit. It was only with the sale of the products of the plantation back in Europe that apparent profit entered the system. But this profit was spectacular: one ship, called the *Lively*, left Liverpool in 1737 with cargo worth £1 307 and returned with £3 080 in cash plus a cargo of sugar and cotton.[24] In short, a profit of at least 500%, unavailable anywhere else in the early modern financial system. Often such ventures failed and the financiers absorbed the plantations to create modern fortunes

– against which they later borrowed to fight the Civil War.

So it's one of the more remarkable aspects of Reconstruction that its founding gestures included the abolition of debtors' prison. African American legislators even cancelled the debts of former slave owners, who had mortgaged their human property to finance the Confederate rebellion for slavery. This principled decision was based on the belief that if no person can be property, then no debt can be incurred against them. Upholding that thesis cost Reconstruction a century, because if the plantation owners had gone bankrupt, cheap land would have been widespread, allowing for the formation of land trusts, like Scanlonville, across the South. It would have truly been an American Revolution worthy of the name.

Instead, the plantations survived. Despite Sherman's Field Order, it was sharecropping that became the 'standard' form of labour in the post-bellum South and kept the majority of African Americans in poverty. Sharecropping was a system in which a group worked a given plot of land in exchange for a percentage of the crop, usually to the marked advantage of the planters. The crop share was not made until the end of the year, so a credit system emerged, making it difficult for the sharecroppers ever to lay their hands on money, let alone accumulate capital.[25] Du Bois represented this reversion as a second civil war, 'a determined effort to reduce black labor as nearly as possible to a condition of unlimited exploitation and build a new class of capitalists on this foundation'.[26] During Reconstruction, farm workers organised to try to improve their conditions, in which their crop shares ranged from a tenth to a third, while wages were at no more than 50 cents a day, resulting in farm strikes in 1876.[27] There were those, such as the freedwoman Harriet King, who refused to do this work and encouraged others to join her. She was beaten and jailed for her trouble. The Bureau of Freedmen insisted on the freed signing year-long labour contracts that locked them into disadvantageous situations. After the end of Reconstruction, no other redress was available. Cotton was best suited to sharecropping and by 1870 it was dominant across the South. So by the time Winslow Homer depicted *The Cotton Pickers* (LA County Museum of Art, 1876), there was no reasonable doubt that the labour was unfairly rewarded. Homer's painting suggests as much in the disengaged and abstracted quality that the African American women of the title bring to their work. The cotton pickers are overwhelmed by the field in which they find themselves. This is in sharp contrast to Homer's 1865 *The Veteran in a New Field* (Metropolitan Museum, New York), in which a former Massachusetts Union (white) soldier sets about reaping wheat, a crop that implies his ownership of the land.

Outcomes? Caesarism or Jubilee. Caesarism we know. It is fascism, the creation of a Caesar by the police state. Du Bois knew this:

> [T]he current [1935] theory of democracy … that dictatorship is a stopgap pending the work of universal education, equitable income and strong character. But always the temptation is to use the stopgap for narrower ends because intelligence, thrift and goodness seem so impossibly distant for most men. We rule by junta; we turn Fascist because we do not believe in men.[28]

Du Bois was writing at the same time as Walter Benjamin, who was also negotiating how to deal with fascism. For Benjamin, the past would, on occasion, have what he called a 'secret rendezvous' with the present that would allow the energy of previous time to be transferred to the present. In African American tradition, the word for this rendezvous is Jubilee. According to the Bible, the Jubilee happens every seven-times-seven years: at this moment, all debts are abolished, all those in bondage are set free, and all land lies fallow for the year. The Jubilee, as many of the formerly enslaved described emancipation, was the fusion of abolition democracy with sustainability. For had the freed gained land, they could have actively participated in the new democracy. Denied land, they were also excluded from governance. Jubilee resonates across American history as the possibility of renewal. The moment of past emancipation has continued to find resonance in key moments of modern history.

The last campaign of Dr Martin Luther King Jr was the Poor People's Campaign in 1968. Dr King spoke about the campaign in Los Angeles in 1967:

> We aren't merely struggling to integrate a lunch counter now. We're struggling to get some money to be able to buy a hamburger or a steak when we get to the counter. It didn't cost the nation one penny to integrate lunch counters. It didn't cost the nation one penny to guarantee the right to vote. The problems that we are facing today will cost the nation billions of dollars.[29]

What was needed, said King, was 'a radical redistribution of economic and political power'. And so in January 1968, King told his congregation, 'I'm going to Washington to collect', meaning that there had been no reparations for slavery in 1863 when people were emancipated. 'Yet,' said King, 'they were not given any land to make that freedom meaningful.'[30] The Jubilee became financialised because of the refusal to settle for reparations by democratising land. In February 1968, King announced specific demands: $30 billion for antipoverty, full employment, guaranteed income, and the annual construction of 500 000 affordable residences. $30 billion in 1968 would be $200 billion today. In his last sermon in April of that year, King noted that poverty was not new: 'What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will.'[31] The will to Jubilee.

There is a resistance to that will. Du Bois could already see it: '[A] clear vision of a world without inordinate individual wealth, of capital without profit, and income based on work alone, is the path out not only for America but for all men. Across this path stands the South with flaming swords.'[32] The nexus of poverty, poor housing and what Angela Y Davis has called the 'prison-industrial complex' has once again become clearly visible in the American South with the death of Michael Brown at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri, and the failure of a grand jury to indict the officer responsible for any crime. Today, we can think of the South as both the place of resistance and repression, the place from where it will be possible to make change. Du Bois taught us that. Let us hope that we are, finally, able to learn how to live, from him and from so many thousands gone.

[My thanks to Alexandra Dodd for her vital work in transcribing and rendering this text from a talk to an essay.]

Untitled, Slaves, JJ Smith's Plantation, near Beaufort, South Carolina, 1862, Albumen silver print 21.4 x 27.3 cm, J Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. PHOTO: Timothy O'Sullivan. Permission courtesy of the Getty Open Content Program

ENDNOTES

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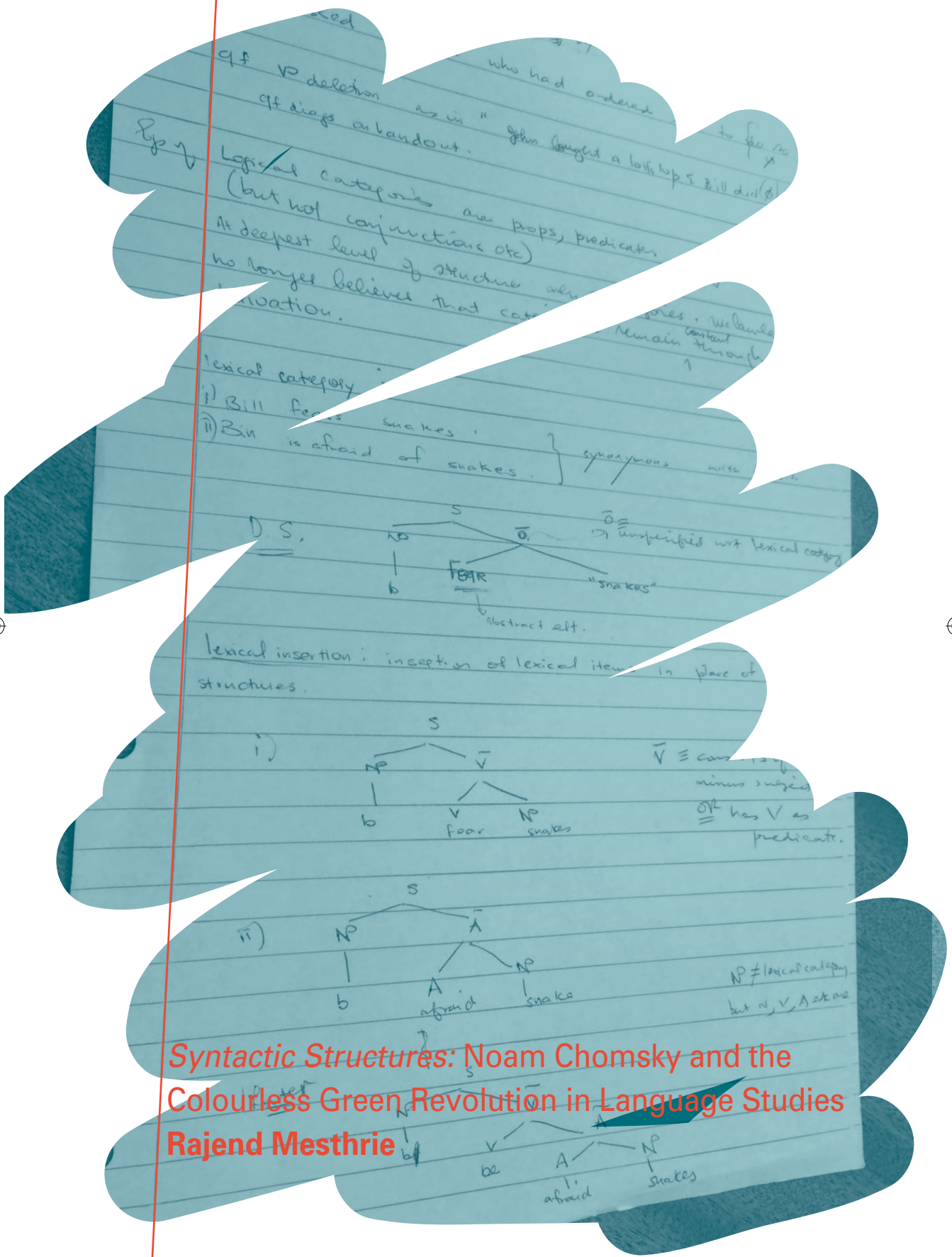


Syntactic Structures: Noam Chomsky and the Colourless Green Revolution in Language Studies

Rajend Mesthrie

It strikes me just how seldom linguistics makes the headlines, how rarely the discoveries of linguists are taken seriously by the publicisers of knowledge and the headline makers. Consider the archaeologists, for example – they have it easy. Take any aging archaeologist discovering even more ancient bones and they are guaranteed headlines in the next day's newspaper. They even get to name those old bones after, amongst other things, the titles of Beatles' songs, like

TO APPRECIATE THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION UNDERWRITTEN BY CHOMSKY, WE GO BACK TO THE PERIOD BC ('BEFORE CHOMSKY') OF THE 1940s AND 1950s

Lucy (In The Sky With Diamonds). Where linguists are concerned, we're almost sure that we've found language-related genes (on chromosomes 7 and 11),[1] but this has not made headlines in any newspaper that I recall, though I did see a passing mention in a South African newspaper in the 'Tonight' section, usually devoted to nightlife and television schedules. So although I'm not strictly a Chomskyan – or even a syntactician – I've set aside my academic specialisation (sociolinguistics) to focus on a great text that is underappreciated by the scientific and academic communities outside linguistics: Noam Chomsky's first book, *Syntactic Structures*. It is not a great book in terms of length, at a mere 117 pages – but it certainly sparked a revolution in language study, soon after its publication in 1957. The resulting new linguistics provided one of the best examples of a Kuhnian scientific revolution and paradigm shift.[2] The book doesn't have all the key terms and concepts we've come to associate with Chomskyan linguistics, but as a first statement it was a radical departure from previous approaches to language. My discussion will not be restricted to this book alone. I will be drawing on a cluster of Chomsky's early publications that fomented the revolution: *Syntactic Structures*, a long review from 1959 of *Skinner's Verbal Behaviour*, and the 1965 book, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*.[3]

To appreciate the scientific revolution underwritten by Chomsky, we go back to the period BC ('Before Chomsky') of the 1940s and 1950s. This might be called the Silver Age of Structuralism. To be a linguist – in the United States especially, but also the in rest of the world – was to view language as a structure. Linguists saw themselves in the business of describing languages, in particular the phonetic and phonological structure of languages, and the internal structure of words (morphology). One of the driving forces of linguistics in the first half of the 20th

century was the realisation that American Indian languages were eroding and that they should be recorded and described before they were lost forever. Many of them have indeed been lost forever. The labels and grammatical characteristics associated with Western languages held linguists in no good stead when faced with languages such as Hopi, Navajo and Apache. And so, linguists went out into the field, particularly interested in coming up with what they called discovery procedures for describing languages. This was also something of a Golden Age of cultural relativism in linguistics, when scholars like Franz Boas and Leonard Bloomfield were struck by the profound differences between American Indian languages and those of the West. In particular Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, cultural relativists par excellence, argued strongly that languages were often cut from totally different cloth, and often cut in so different ways as to constrain their speakers' thinking.[4] Speaking Hopi or Navajo predisposed one to viewing the world in different ways – they would have said radically different ways – from those speaking 'standard average European' languages such as French, English or Russian. This came to be known as the Whorfian hypothesis (or Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) – that languages cannot be compared; that one cannot come up with a common set of underlying principles for all languages, even with respect to something as basic as their tense systems. Even in the parts of speech, the difference between, say, a noun and verb (or entity versus activity) was not universal. A cloud is just about a noun in Hopi in term of its duration, but a wave in the ocean is a verb. You cannot say 'I see a wave' but you would have to say (roughly) 'I see it waving', just as 'lightning' is a verb and not a noun. So the prevailing approach up to the 1950s was that languages were so different that in theory you could come across a new language that differed in limitless ways from all languages previously studied.

This was an important period in the study of indigenous languages throughout the world, when scholarship focussed on phonetics, the internal structure of words, and on semantics. Anthropologists and linguists often worked hand in hand on field linguistics and often belonged to the same academic departments (usually anthropology). A shortcoming of the structuralist theorising was that the analysts had little to say about syntax – the structure of sentences, or how words are put together to make clauses and sentences. The prevailing belief was somehow that syntax was natural, that what you paid attention to was morphology, phonetics and semantics, and that word order and syntax would take care of themselves.

Along came a young graduate from the University of Pennsylvania, who suggested that the structural approach of the time was all very good for describing languages, but it said nothing almost nothing about Language, with a capital L. Chomsky overturned linguistics

from being a descriptive science, whose business was to describe languages, to one that tried to account for how it is that humans know a language, and use it with such facility. In this he (later) drew attention to child language acquisition, the need to study how it is that children acquire language – whereas previously children had been more or less ignored in language study.

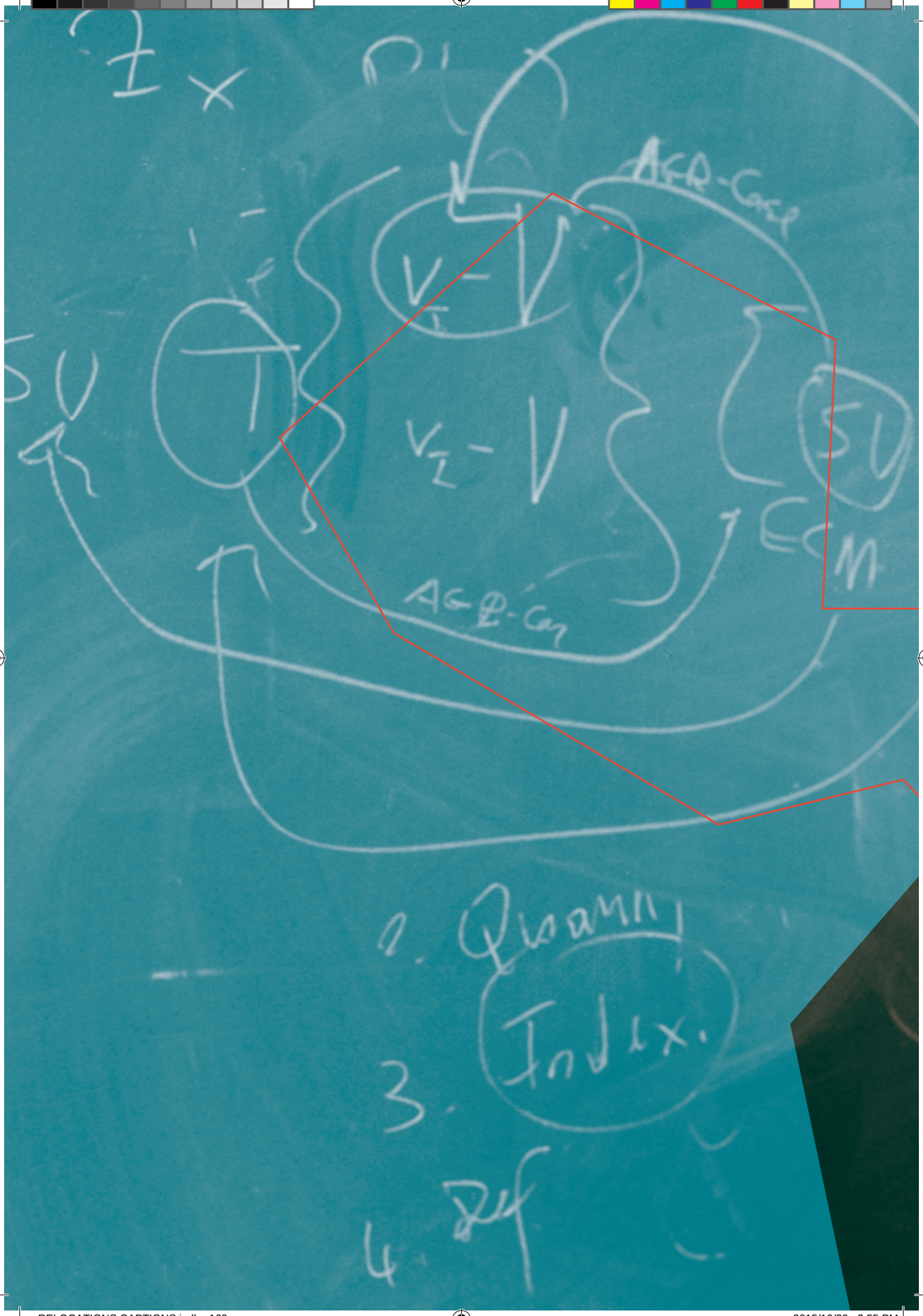
There is a mythology about Chomsky's first work, appropriate to any great book. It is said that the ideas in it were so unorthodox that no American publisher would publish it, and the book was not endorsed by any of the older professors of the time in the United States. *Syntactic Structures* was eventually published in the Netherlands, by Mouton in 1957. In it Chomsky put syntax firmly onto centre stage; as the key component that dovetails with other modules of language, so that the syntax picks on the set of vocabulary (the lexicon), it plugs into the phonology (another separate component) and into the semantics, which specifies the meanings of words and the interpretation of sentences (again as a separate component). The main box, as it were, in this 'modular' view of language was syntax. The separation of syntax from meaning was anathema at the time, and Chomsky came up with some examples to make it easier to understand what he meant. The first sentence remains famous till today: 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.'[5] Some poets have since set this line to poetry, to debunk Chomsky's claim that this is a meaningless, but grammatical, sentence (and hence a strong case for the separation of syntax and semantics). The distinguished British linguist, Sir David Crystal, recounts in his autobiography (*Just a Phrase I'm Going Through)* how he ingeniously worked Chomsky's syntax into a conversation with a stranger on a bus as it went past a garden centre called 'Green Ideas', near Malpensa, Italy.[6] The perplexed look and the subsequent pointed silence from the fellow passenger (an American), however, confirmed the semantic oddity. A second, less well-known sentence given by Chomsky in *Syntactic Structures* is 'Pirots karulize etalically'.[7] The claim made is that these two examples don't convey meaning. You can't have an idea that is green, except metaphorically – and I suppose we're now inured to the metaphor. But it can't be colourless and green; it doesn't sleep; and sleeping furiously doesn't sound quite right. Likewise, 'Pirots karulize etalically' is perfectly grammatical, but perfectly unsemantic (more so than the 'colourless' sentence). Semantics has always been the difficult part of language analysis, but these examples showed that there was a case for ignoring it temporarily and focussing on syntax first, a move that took the revolution forward.

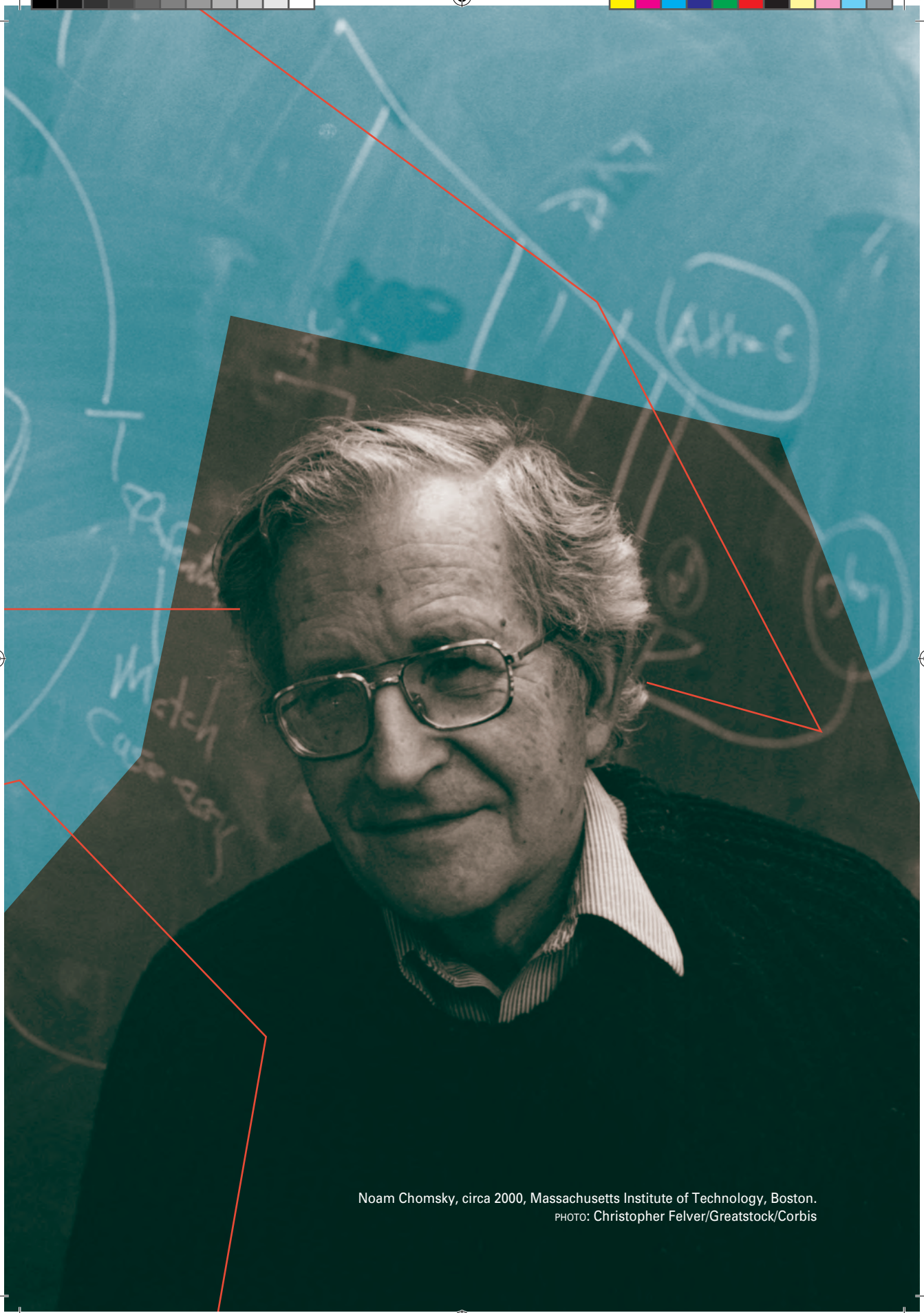
The 1957 book introduced ideas such as 'kernel sentences', that is basic sentences more like core structures than sentences, and 'transformations' or ways of changing these abstract kernel sentences into some other structure. However, terms such as 'deep structure' and 'surface structure', 'competence' and 'performance', are not found in the 1957

book, and would only come in the 1965 work *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. The revolution really got off the ground with Chomsky's (1959) devastating review of Skinner's book *Verbal Behaviour*, this during the heyday of behaviourism in psychology. If the structural linguists could be said to have a general theory, it lay in hooking their discovery procedures for language onto the theory of behaviourism. Behaviourism led scholars to conceive of language as a stored set of patterns, which is over-learnt through constant repetition, experience, detailed training and habit-formation. In this model innovation counts for very little, being reduced to a matter of analogy. In constantly referring to animal communication, Skinner's book *Verbal Behaviour* treated language as a kind of lower-level effect. In contrast, Chomsky claimed the following:

> It is often argued that experience, rather than innate capacity to handle information in certain and specific ways, must be the factor of overwhelming dominance in determining the specific character of language acquisition, since a child speaks a language of the group in which he lives. But this is a superficial argument; as long as we are speculating, we may consider the possibility that the brain has evolved to the point where, given an input of observed Chinese sentences, it produces by an induction of apparently fantastic complexity and suddenness, the rules of Chinese grammar. And, given an input of observed English sentences, it produces by, perhaps exactly the same process of induction, the rules of English grammar. Or that given an observed application of a term to certain instances, it automatically predicts the extension of a class to a class of complexly related instances.[8]

Whereas child language is not discussed further in his first book, the review of Skinner shifts the focus to children learning a language. We are tuned in as children to pick up a language. The revolution starts with the observation that in theory a child can learn any human language. We can't not pick up language, we cannot help ourselves. No child can willingly decide not to learn a language. We are genetically predisposed towards picking up language – which language is determined by interaction with others in the environment, and it is not necessarily the language of the genetic parents. Take the case of forgetful English parents who accidentally leave their one-month-old child at the washroom of Tokyo airport. That child would learn Japanese if she were brought up in a nurturing environment by foster parents in Tokyo. In cases of immigration even attentive parents may have difficulty in passing on their language to children, who tune in to the language of their child-peers more readily. Chomsky speculated, in the quote given above, that we have genetic help of a more general nature in language acquisition – the human mind is innately enabled to learn the structure of human language. Here we must remind ourselves how difficult it is as adults to learn another language. Perhaps you've had the experience of getting distinctions in Italian I (and maybe II), but on arriving at the airport in Rome not being able to say 'Can you direct me to





Noam Chomsky, circa 2000, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston.
PHOTO: Christopher Felver/Greatstock/Corbis

the nearest toilet, I have to go right away.' We may be cognitively advanced as adults, with skills in high literacy and argumentation in our own language, but mastering another speech form is difficult. Contrast that with children, who seem to pick up language in a foreign environment much more easily than their parents. Children have genetic help – and more than that, there's a critical period beyond which it is extremely difficult to learn a language. It is not impossible, but is seldom done with the same facility as children would, and without an accent.

Also impressive from a species' viewpoint is the existence of a timetable to the unfolding of a child's language. Just as we crawl, stand and finally walk in sequence, with language one starts to babble at age 6 to 7 months, say one's first words at about 12 months, graduate to a two-word syntax after 18 months, to slightly longer concatenations at 24 months, before developing facility with simple and then complex clauses. This is a timetable that every child follows till age 5 or 6, by which time the essentials of language are in place. The review of Skinner, and the realisation of the significance of child language acquisition, led to the sprouting of new fields endorsing a mentalistic approach, among them psycholinguistics, cognitive science, artificial intelligence and, of course, generative linguistics as a subfield of linguistics.

Another area not cited above that has blossomed partly because of the generative enterprise is sign language study, a field today taken extremely seriously, as an academic specialisation within some linguistics departments. When I recently revisited the University of Texas at Austin after many years, I was surprised to see the corridors in which we had once studied with audible sound now filled with professors and students talking to each other in sign – talking *linguistics* to each other in sign. That sign language *is* language (a full, complex assemblage of linguistic components) wasn't really appreciated up to the 1950s. William Stokoe, who worked at Gallaudet College in 1955, the most famous centre for sign language studies for the deaf, began to realise that the signs used by his students were of a systematic and conventional nature, reminiscent of speech. Stokoe undertook further linguistics courses at a summer institute with some of the leading linguists of the time, becoming convinced in the process that the discovery procedures of the structuralists for phonetics, phonology and for the structure of words had parallels in sign language. Sign language isn't spoken, and yet has a phonetics and phonology. Stokoe emphasised that the analogues in sign language are, of course, visual, not spoken – key sign language parameters involve the position of the sign, hand configuration, and the movement or changing of that configuration. Sign language is compositional and complex, unlike non-linguistic gestures. Stokoe's work of the 1960s wasn't initially known to the generativists (those who see language as a generative capacity of the mind) because he had not made any connection with Chomsky's theory,

which he was apparently ignorant of. It was only in the 1970s that sign language studies, not just by Stokoe but by researchers in Europe and South America, became seriously integrated into mainstream linguistic study. This was because sign language, too, followed all the classic symptoms of language development that were found in language: sign language children babbled too – with their hands; they made early signs with 'childish' characteristics, in the same way as one might say 'doggy' for 'dog' or 'mum-mum' for 'food' in spoken language. These signs were not in fact recognised 'adult' words but conventionalised child language adaptations. A complete sign language can develop by about the age of 5, just as for children with speech. Even though sign language operated via a different 'channel' or 'modality' from spoken language, it confirmed in a major way the strength of the generative approach. Here was a whole area of enquiry of which the original theorists had been ignorant, but which could be best understood by the principles of that theory.

More than that, there were some very strong parallels about an innate capacity, when deaf children coming into contact with each other for the first time may create their own language. A well-known case is that of Nicaraguan Sign Language which came into being in the 1970s. Prior to that there was no deaf community; there were only individuals more or less isolated from each other. When a vocational school was set up for deaf children in the 1980s, the intention was that they be taught via Spanish and finger-spelling. This initiative was unsuccessful, but outside the classrooms – in playgrounds and buses – children developed a means of communicating with each other. Although the teachers assumed that this was unsystematic mimicry, subsequent linguistic researchers were able to document the growth of a simple sign language eventually 'complexifying' into a full sign language. The genetic capacity for language had come into play. If the channel isn't right – if the physical speech channel doesn't work – the child switches to the tactile and visual channel.

Another area that corroborated a Chomskyan perspective on language was the language of stroke victims. In the 19th century, European physicians sought to understand the breakdown of language that comes with strokes. Aphasia is the medical term for the loss or disturbance of language skills produced by injury to the brain. Two particular types of aphasia have been of especial interest to linguists. Broca's aphasia is manifest in stroke patients who are unable to speak except haltingly, with great difficulty, one or two words at a time. If you are a Broca's aphasic, your understanding of language remains reasonably good – considering that you've had a stroke. It might be that you're increasingly hearing impaired but, factoring out such difficulties, it would appear that the semantic system is largely unimpaired, while the syntactic system is completely gone. It must be most frustrating to be a Broca's aphasic, to understand and think but not be able to communicate in the way one was accustomed all one's life. So here's an example of Chomsky's modularity

being played out in the real world. Contrast that with Wernicke's aphasics, people who are the opposite – who have some malfunction after brain damage and cannot stop talking. Well you may ask again, 'Where's the revolution? I know of many ordinary people who can't stop talking.' But the issue is that this time it is the syntax that remains intact (as hyper-fluent language), while the semantics is dysfunctional – almost a real-life version of 'Colourless green ...' sentences. Wernicke's aphasics have great difficulty making sense; they talk endlessly and fluently while referring to little or nothing at all. If they can't remember a word, they will make up one and carry on – but the grammatical parts, the syntax, the prepositions, articles, the little inflections denoting tense, plurality and the like are all in place. These elements are all missing in the one-word productions of Broca's aphasics.

WELL YOU MAY ASK AGAIN, 'WHERE'S THE REVOLUTION? I KNOW OF MANY ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO CAN'T STOP TALKING.'

So how did linguistics change in relation to the new emphasis on the capacity for language? From the 1960s onwards, the rationale changed from studying a language for its own sake, to studying a language or languages to illuminate the kind of general mechanisms that must be part of what Chomsky called 'universal grammar'. We all have a universal grammar, ergo we can pick up any language we are adequately exposed to as little children. This capacity must be very general – it doesn't have the specific rules of English, Kiswahili, Navajo or Japanese. Nor does it have specific vocabulary, which is clearly picked up by experience in the environment, although general lexical principles are in place, Chomsky would argue, genetically. The aim of Chomskyan linguistics is to study English, Kiswahili, Navajo or Japanese at so fine-grained a level as to infer the underlying principles that they all follow. Early Chomskyan linguistics was enthused with the study of the transformation of common underlying 'deep structures' of sentences to their particular instantiations in particular languages. These kernel deep structures had to be inferred from the study of particular languages. The core of language study, in Chomsky's scientific paradigm, lay in this depth hypothesis. Today *Syntactic Structures* and *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* are not on prescribed reading lists, except in courses on the history of linguistics. The reason is that the model they presented was eventually deemed too powerful to faithfully characterise the human capacity for language. While the goals of generative linguistics remain the same, the models of syntax have evolved considerably.

RAJEND MESTHRIE

While Chomsky is to be taken very seriously, it seems inappropriate that the paradigm should dictate all aspects of language study, as many linguists insisted in the 1970s and 1980s. It is unfortunate that the Chomskyan paradigm had to first fight for the right to exist, and then itself assumed a hegemonic position in the United States to the extent that for a long while you weren't taken seriously if you didn't acknowledge the master and show how your research area fitted in with his voice and paradigm. Sociolinguists have long stood outside that hegemony, insisting that while the study of language acquisition and mental processing is fascinating, it should not marginalise other facets of language use. The actual use of language, its cultural ramifications, the contact between speakers and languages, the way languages change over time, the birth of new languages, and the death of old ones are important too. A Chomskyan insistence on viewing linguistics as the study of the biology of language gives short shrift to the social depth of language, its human and cultural dimensions. Wise linguists know that both approaches are needed for a full understanding deserving the label 'linguistics'.

A passing glance at the origins of language is appropriate here. For some time this topic has been off the linguist's agenda. In the 18th century the Linguistic Society of Paris, tired of the speculative and tendentious discussions on the topic, placed a moratorium on papers on this theme. And that has been more or less the linguist's stance up till about the 1990s. Since then, some linguists have had a nagging feeling that all the world's languages are in fact related, not just by virtue of an abstract Chomskyan genetic capacity, but by virtue of a 'proto' language having arisen at one moment of human history and then diversifying beyond all recognition over aeons. Most linguists hold that going back 7 000 years – which is all we can do, given that we need written records for the comparison of old languages – is far too shallow a time depth in the history of humankind for meaningful theory building about ur languages and language origins. But there are some linguists doing more funky comparisons, who have wilfully suspended all laws of comparative-historical linguistic study and are quite happy to be led by suggestive evidence – the odd word here and there, rather than systematic sets of words. This approach wasn't taken seriously for a long time. However, with the evidence from genetics, the genome project, and the 'Out of Africa' thesis, it's becoming harder to avoid speculation that there was one origin for language early in our history, early enough for its genesis to have been in Africa. The enormous time depth in those first migrations out of Africa, the return to Africa, the move to India and the rest of Asia and Australasia, and then from Asia into Northern Europe and the Americas, would probably account for the radical differences between languages. This cannot be put out as gospel by any means – that all languages are historically one, and related far, far back – but it's no longer a completely reckless idea. The reason one has to be linguistically tentative is that conclusive evidence about lan-

guage differentiation (a single origin or monogenesis versus regionalism or multiple origins in different places) rests upon writing. This practice is less than 10 000 years old, too shallow a time depth for the comparisons that are needed. Bones do not generally have much to tell linguists, as the larynx (voice box) is made of cartilage, ligaments and membranes, none of which survive the ravages of paleontological time. One exception is the small hyoid bone, the only free-floating bone in the human body, which serves to anchor the larynx and vocal tract, and which does survive in the fossil record of early humans (Neanderthals, Cro-Magnons).[9] While a hyoid bone fossil supports the likelihood of language, it cannot tell us anything about the details of that language, or whether there were many languages in use or one. But the external evidence from archaeology and genetics does lend plausibility to the idea that language originated in Africa and was taken around the world, changing immensely over time and space. It would certainly not contradict anything that Chomsky has said about the genetic capacity for language, even though he has wisely abstained from such speculation.

My last word would be to argue that linguistics is a core discipline of the humanities. I've tried to show how linguists have been grappling for over 50 years about what it is that is genetic about what we study, and what is social. The fact that we cannot but pick up a language, that we are predisposed genetically to have and use language, and to acquire the particular language(s) that are played out by interaction in social communities means that linguistics helps us perfectly to understand the yin and yang of the genetic and the social in the humanities.

ENDNOTES

1 | Matt Ridley, *Genome: The Autobiography of a Species* (London: Harper Perennial, 1999), 97–8.
2 | Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
3 | Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957); Noam Chomsky, 'Review of Verbal Behaviour by BF Skinner', *Language* 35 (1959): 26–58; Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965).
4 | See, for example, Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921); JB Carroll, *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge MA: Technology Press of MIT, 1956).
5 | Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, 15.
6 | David Crystal, *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through: My Life in Language* (London: Routledge, 2009), 158–9.
7 | Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, 104.
8 | Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, 12.
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Peter D McDonald

THE SPACE BETWEEN

Ways of Looking at the Art of Xu Bing

I've called this essay 'Ways of Looking at the Art of Xu Bing', which is a useful pointer to my topic. The phrasing is also risky, however, because it makes it seem that we are the only active agents in the process. We look, while the art of Xu Bing, like a docile poodle, sits there being looked at. Though I am going to be talking about the pleasures and perils of looking at his art, I'd like to stress from the outset that it is itself also an active thing. Like any art worth taking seriously, it changes how you see familiar bits of your world. This is particularly true of the effect it has on me as a teacher of literature written in the English language. I spend my working days puzzling, and encouraging people younger than me to puzzle, over sentences like these:

> Maass! But the majik wavus has elfun anon meshes. And Simba the Slayer of his Oga is slewd.[1]

or the seemingly more lucid:

> Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving.[2]

And, one of my favourites, the deceptively lucid:

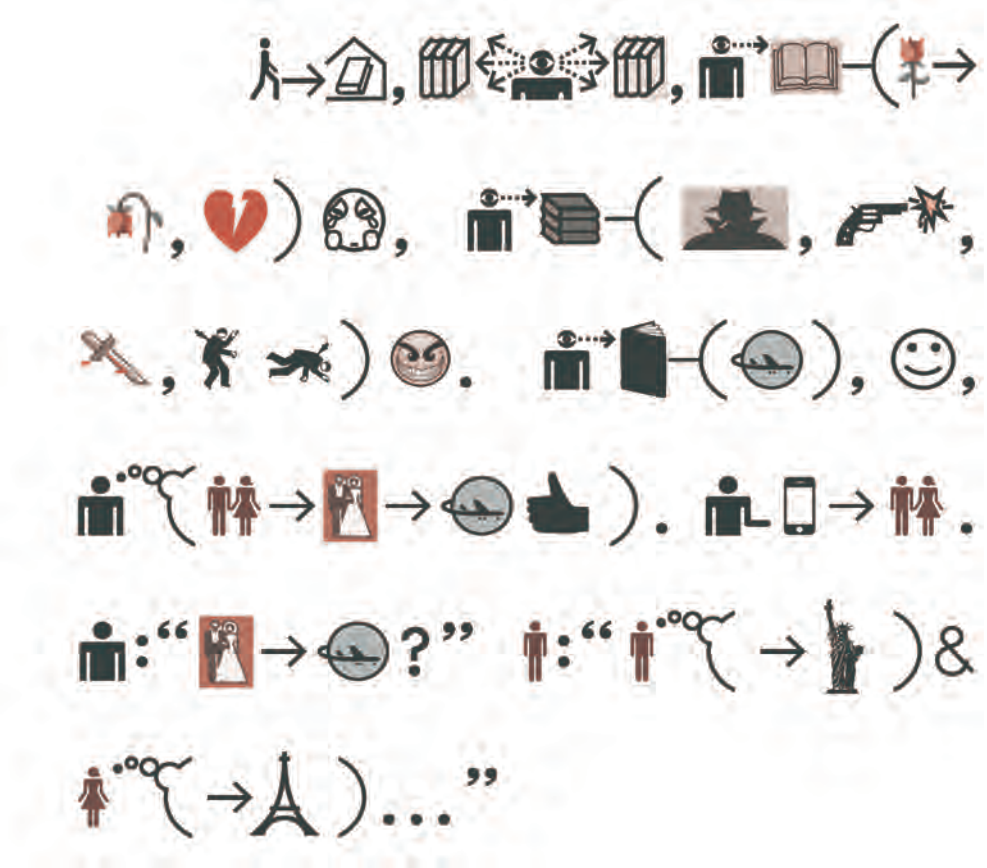
> The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip.[3]

Until I encountered Xu Bing's work, I thought of these as strange English sentences each of which made its own peculiar demands on my literary and linguistic skills as a reader. After discovering Xu Bing, I came to see that they shared something rather obvious, but often invisible to us, especially if English happens to be your first language: they are all English sentences written in what is now generally called the Roman or Latin script, which is itself based on an even more ancient phonetic alphabet. This is worth emphasising because, as Xu Bing's work helps us to see, not all writing systems are like this. Consider the differences between the English and the Chinese systems of writing the word for window, for example:

> English: window
> Chinese: 窗
> Pinyin: chuāng

In the English version, the written word is a representation of speech, and it is generally accorded a secondary status. By contrast, in the Chinese version, at least in traditional script (not in Romanised Pinyin), the written character is part of a distinct system in its own right.

We need to be careful not to overplay these differences, however. The Latin script and the system of writing in English includes a number of non-phonetic markers (for example !"£$%^&*()_+{}:;'/?,.) and in some cases it is not possible to interpret

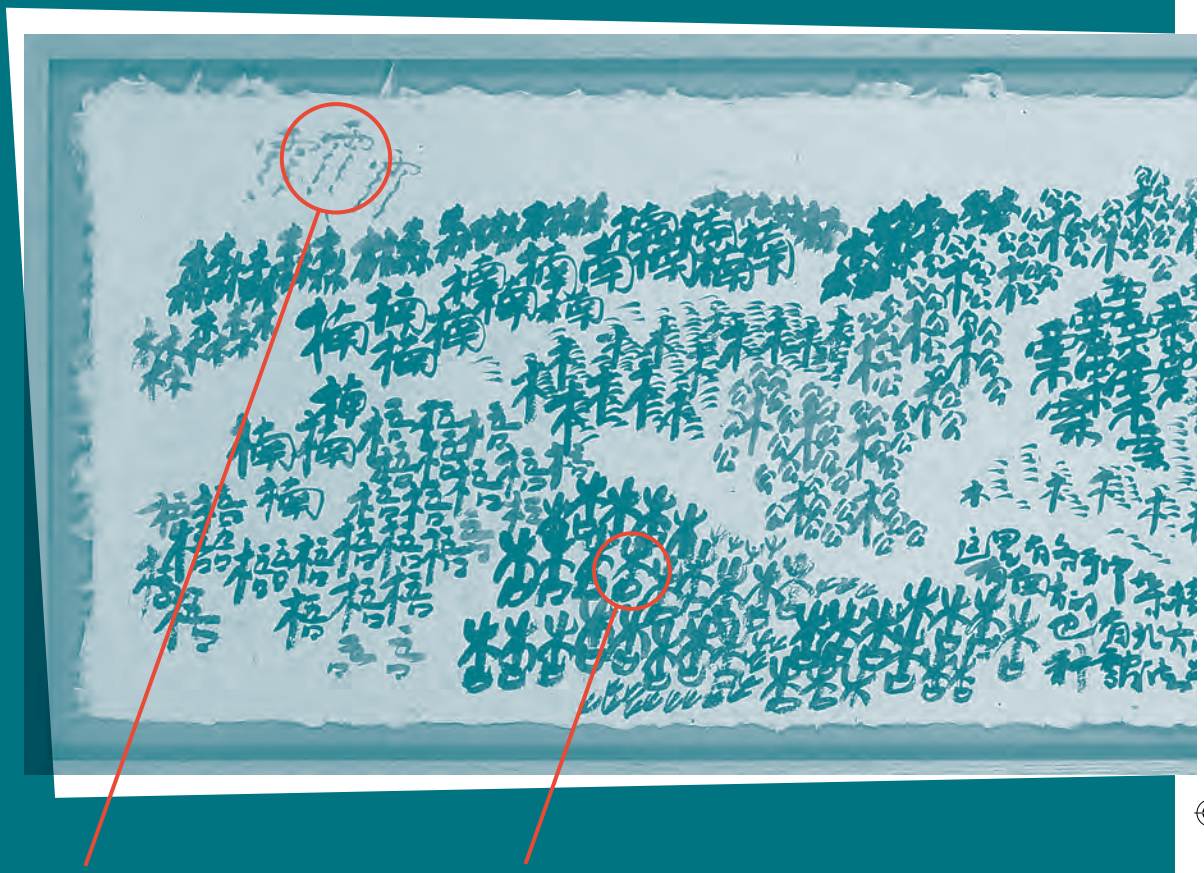


Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground*, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2012. Permission courtesy of Xu Bing Studio. A rough 'translation' of this piece from *Book from the Ground* into English produces something like the following:

> The man then visited a bookshop, where he found a bewildering array of books on offer. He considered a romance story, but he thought that was too sad; then he looked at a murder mystery, but felt it was too violent. Finally, he settled on a travel guide, which he thought might appeal to both the man and the woman. 'After all,' he thought, 'they are getting married and so will be going on a honeymoon.' To be sure he decided to give them a call. 'Will you be flying somewhere for your honeymoon?' he asked. The groom-to-be replied: 'Yes, though I think we are going to New York, and she thinks we are going to Paris … .'

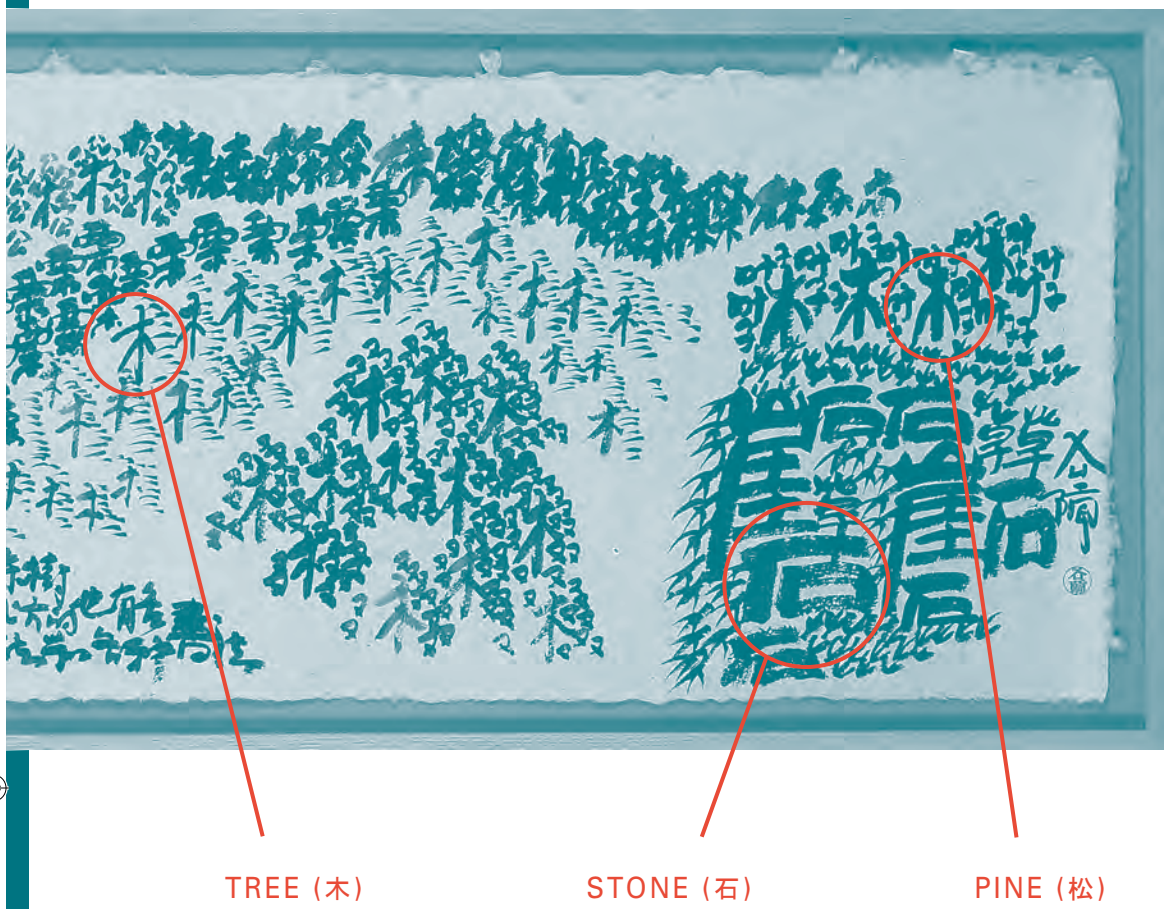
the sounds or the pronunciation from the written marks on their own (for example 'Reading is fun' can be said in at least two ways, meaning two very different things). Moreover, the Chinese writing system includes many phonetic characters (for example 妈 'mother' = character for 'female person' + character for sound value 'mǎ'; while 马 ('mǎ') on its own means 'horse').

It is partly because of the fascination I have with these differences that I found it impossible to resist the allure of Xu Bing's uniquely challenging form of verbovisual art, the range of which is now extraordinary.



PETER D MCDONALD

Given my own interest in writers like Joyce, Beckett and Coetzee, all of whom owe their primary allegiance to what might be called the European tradition of literary modernism, one of the most significant things about Xu Bing's preoccupation with the puzzles of language and writing is that he found inspiration not in any literary traditions, certainly not European modernism, or, for that matter, in any specifically artistic ones, but in the teasing, disorienting traditions of the Zen (or Chan) Buddhist *kōan*, especially as articulated by the Japanese scholar D T Suzuki in his *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), one of Xu Bing's favourite books. The *kōan*, as Suzuki explains, is a short, pithy 'statement or question' intended to encourage novice monks to re-examine all they have 'so far accepted as a commonplace fact' and to challenge their 'former way of looking



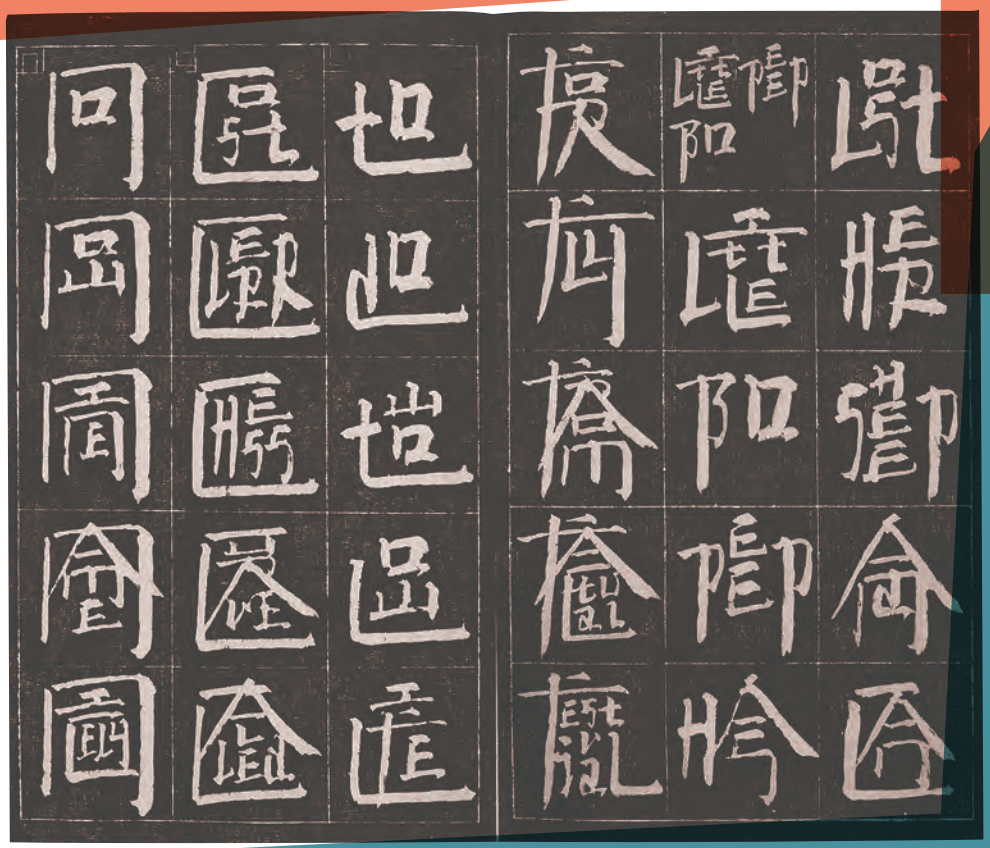
Xu Bing, *Landscript*, 2002. Permission courtesy of Khoan and Michael Sullivan Collection, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

at things'.[4] The influential 18th-century Japanese monk Hakuin Ekaku produced what has become one of the most well known: 'Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?' As Suzuki emphasised, the *kōan* in this tradition is 'neither a riddle nor a witty remark', and it is certainly not a philosophical or literary end in itself.[5] Rather, it is simply a means, a 'leaven', he says at one point, or 'only a piece of brick used to knock at the gate'.[6] The real object of the *kōan* always lies beyond itself. It aims 'to strike at the root of our everyday experience', principally by 'the arousing of doubt and pushing it to its furthest limits'.[7] Having been provoked into an 'inquiring attitude' via the *kōan*, he added, the novice must then 'go on' until 'he comes to the edge of a mental precipice, as it were, where there are no other alternatives but to leap over'.[8] This idea of

the *kōan* as a challenge to look and think beyond our current frameworks and assumptions informs every aspect of Xu Bing's own search, through the medium of his art, for new ways of understanding. For me, it is also what makes his work so compelling and unnerving, whether we are looking at it for the first or the fiftieth time.

To give some sense of what this feels like in practice, I'd like to focus briefly on one of Xu Bing's major works: *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* (2001/3), a site-specific sculpture originally made in 2001 for the Smithsonian's Arthur M Sackler Gallery in Washington DC. A second version has been on display at the US Embassy in Beijing since 2008. Among other things, this work, which obliges us to question the relationship between words and the objects to which they seem so effortlessly to refer, reflects Xu Bing's deeply felt scepticism about literate culture and, more importantly, about literate modes of understanding. This scepticism has a long history in what we still clumsily call 'the West'. In the *Phaedrus*, which is often taken to be the founding text of this tradition, Plato, for instance, has Socrates condemn anyone who thinks 'written words were anything more than a reminder to the man who knows the subjects to which the written things relate'.[9] Plato's Socrates is one of the great defenders of the spoken word, particularly in the form of the dialogue. St Paul of the Christian New Testament took his scepticism further. For him writing is not so much a dispensable aide-memoire as a threateningly murderous force. 'The letter killeth,' he declares, 'but the spirit giveth life'.[10] Such concerns resurface in 'Western' literature as well, perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in Dickens's novels. With his cast of illiterate or semi-literate honourable heroes – Sam Weller, Joe Gargery and Jo, the-crossing-sweeper, to name just three – and his scorn for all official institutions of the written word – think of the spurious verbiage that emanates from the governmental 'Circumlocution Office' in *Little Dorrit*, or the nightmarish documentary maze that is the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House* – Dickens gave Socrates and St Paul's high-minded scepticism a new, more populist life in the English novel. Of course, like his illustrious predecessors, Dickens expressed his anxieties about the deforming effects of writing in writing, an irony that has always haunted this tradition.

As Xu Bing's works repeatedly show, this scepticism has an equally long history in what we still clumsily call 'the East'. This is particularly evident in *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* (2001/3). This vast suspended sculpture is based on the Chinese proverb from which its title is derived, which itself alludes to a Buddhist folktale about a group of monkeys who try to rescue the moon from a well. In the story, the monkeys lower themselves into the well by forming a chain, linking their arms and tails. Once the final monkey reaches its hand into the water, however, they are amazed to discover that what they have been trying to save is merely a reflection. The actual moon, they then see, is still floating serenely above them in the night sky. According to the Smithsonian's website, the moral of this Aesop-like fable is that 'the things we work hardest to achieve may prove to be nothing but an illusion'.[11] Adding a somewhat obscure political dimension to this interpretation, it then links this moral to a statement Soong May-ling, the most famous wife of the Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, made to the US Congress in 1943: 'We in China, like you, want a better world, not for ourselves alone, but for all



Xu Bing, extract, including a rendering of the nursery rhyme 'Little Bo Peep', from *Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, 1994–1996. Purchased with the assistance of the Friends of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 2009

mankind, and we must have it.' Presumably, the implication is that her diplomatic efforts were illusory, though I am not sure.

Xu Bing's explicitly verbovisual rendering of the fable makes this curious interpretation even more doubtful. In his version, the chain of monkeys becomes a colossal interlinked series of a ornately carved wooden signs, representing the word 'monkey' in over 20 languages and almost as many stylised scripts, all made to resemble monkeys, ranging from 'aap' (Afrikaans, Roman) to 'बंदर' (Hindi, Devanagari).

The moral of his fable, it seems, is that all the world's languages, especially in their written or printed forms, strive vainly to grasp the objects of experience, though, in reality, all they point to are reflections of things, not the things themselves. This sounds like a familiar expression of postmodern doubt, akin, say, to the questions the American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth raises about language and representation in his installation series *One and Three Chairs* (1965).

In this series, Kosuth set an ordinary chair alongside a full-scale photograph of it and an extract from Eric Partridge's *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1958) detailing the history of the word 'chair'. The extract shows how the English word, which is derived from the Greek *kathedra*, refers not just to ordinary objects in its literal sense, but to positions of authority in its many figural guises (for example 'a professorial chair' or 'to chair a committee', hence the expression *ex cathedra*, which means literally 'from the chair'). Reflecting Kosuth's playful engagement with Platonic theories of knowledge, the installation asks its viewers to consider the troubled relations among words, images and things. For Plato, of course, all three elements of the installation are only shadowy, imperfect illusions, since the real chair, in his view, is the abstract idea or essence of 'chairness' as defined by the philosopher kings who rule his ideal republic.

With *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon,* Xu Bing took these concerns to another level, reflecting his identification not so much with postmodern conceptualism or Platonic idealism but, as I have suggested, with the 1 500-year-old Zen/Chan Buddhist tradition of 'radical empiricism', as Suzuki termed it.[12] 'All Buddhist teachings as propounded in the sutras and sastras are treated by Zen,' Suzuki explained, 'as mere waste paper whose utility consists in wiping the dirt of intellect and nothing more'.[13] The reason for this is that Zen was, in his view, founded on the primacy of 'simple, unsophisticated experience'.[14] Around this, Suzuki admitted, Zen 'constructs all the verbal and conceptual scaffold which is found in its literature', but, as we have seen in his account of the *kōan*, this remained merely 'an elaboration and artificiality', the 'whole significance' of which is lost 'when it is taken for a final reality'.[15] The *kōan*, he added, once again insisting on its status as means not an end, is 'an index-finger pointing at the moon'.[16] This phrasing reiterated an ancient Zen saying to which Suzuki referred more than once in his introduction: 'A finger is needed to point at the moon, but what a calamity it would be if one took the finger for the moon!'[17] The bearing this has on Xu Bing's verbovisual interpretation of the traditional folktale about the monkeys' delusional rescue mission is not difficult to see; though, if we follow this line of thought to its conclusion, it is no less clear that the message of his *kōan*-like installation is not simply that words should not

be mistaken for the objects to which they purportedly refer. It is, rather, to quote Suzuki again, that the 'tyranny of the name' has to be overcome.[18] 'Life itself must be grasped in the midst of its flow,' Suzuki concluded, since, in the end, 'no amount of reading' can ever be adequate to the intensity of lived 'personal experience', and no 'name' can ever capture the being of things in all their unrepeatable singularity.[19]

Xu Bing's indebtedness to this tradition of 'radical empiricism' is evident in many of his works. It resurfaces in various versions of *The Living Word* (2001–2) installation, which shows the Chinese character for 'bird' (鳥) breaking free of its dictionary definition, returning via a history of writing to its pictographic origins, and ultimately gesturing to the vividly singular reality of living birds as it might be experienced in the world beyond the art gallery.

It is there, too, in *A Case Study of Transference* (1994), arguably Xu Bing's most provocative comment on literate culture. In this installation, two live pigs, one male, one female, one tattooed with nonsense English words, the other with illegible Chinese characters, contentedly get on with their wordless lives, eating, mating and excreting, in a pen strewn with discarded books and newspapers; while the human viewers look on, ideally in a state of awkward perplexity.

Yet it was with *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* that Xu Bing most explicitly aligned his own efforts to find a 'new method of understanding' with the long tradition of Zen Buddhist empiricism and its associated scepticism about literate culture.

So what are we to make of this? How are we to place Xu Bing's identification with this tradition through his work in a wider contemporary context? Is it, for example, best to view his work as part of a newly emergent, hybrid 'world culture'? It is not difficult to see why some might be tempted think so. His project of re-writing English words in Chinese character forms, generally known as 'Square Word' or the 'New English Calligraphy', seems, for instance, to satisfy our contemporary longing for new forms that translate across cultures and that are peculiarly appropriate to our globalised, multicultural times.

In an example from a 1999 exhibition at MoMA in New York, Xu Bing re-wrote the maxim 'Art for the people' – one of Chairman Mao's most important and, for Xu Bing, most enduringly relevant, maxims about art – in square word. For the Smithsonian such crossing over between cultures is equally true of *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*. To accompany the installation, it has created a series of educational resources designed to help schoolchildren 'develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles'.[20] Like campaigns for clean drinking water, this initiative is incontrovertibly a good thing, particularly given the age group (6 to 18) for whom the resources are intended. For children who are in all likelihood emerging from a monocultural family background, *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* has much to teach about cultural diversity, multilingualism and translation. Yet, to my mind, this way of looking at his extraordinarily varied output misses something important about its peculiar and demanding intensity. In particular, by placing the emphasis on 'diversity across cultures', as if cul-

tures are themselves readily identifiable, unitary things, it downplays the extent to which his work confronts challenging questions about the treacheries of translation (think of *A Case Study for Transference*), about the limits of cultural hybridity, and about what it means to be living through our dynamically inter-, rather than multi-, cultural times.[21]

Tellingly, in his own autobiographical reflections, Xu Bing conspicuously refuses to present himself as a free agent who is able to move among the world's cultures, language and writing systems with effortless ease. As he put it in 2001, 'I am incapable of entering culture, and at the same time I am unable to escape it.'[22] The reason for the latter, he says, is that 'your cultural background and your life' is 'not of your own choosing': it is 'decided by fate'.[23] In his case, as the child of academic parents born into Mao's China in 1955, this 'fate' was 'a jumbled knot of socialism, the Cultural Revolution, the Reform Period, Westernization, modernization'.[24] As he sees it, this tangled 'knot' binds him inescapably to a historically specific experience of a very particular, and fraught, cultural moment. Yet, if this speaks to his feelings of inevitable situatedness, it also goes some way towards explaining why he finds 'entering culture' no less taxing. His 'earliest education', which coincided with Mao's writing and other reforms, for example, left him 'confused about the fundamental conceptions of culture'.[25] Later, these feelings were exacerbated as he experienced the effects of censorship, of 'being labelled "the bastard son of a reactionary father"' during the Cultural Revolution, and of discovering, during his own period of re-education, that older cultural traditions continued to survive in remote rural areas of China, despite being officially proscribed.[26] Importantly, his experience of living through Mao's China did not just leave him feeling dislocated. It also shaped his abiding wariness about cultural elites, evident not only in his continued respect for Mao's campaign to promote 'Art for the People', but in his efforts to encourage active participation among all ages and backgrounds in initiatives like the 'Forest Project' and the 'Square Word Calligraphy Classroom'. Art, in his view, as in Mao's, is not an object of contemplation, but a way of acting in and on the world.

The sense of confusion about what might constitute 'Chinese culture' that defined Xu Bing's early experience has remained with him, contributing to his sense of dislocation not just from his 'own culture' but from others as well. 'That which belongs to you is yours,' he says. 'You may wish to get rid of it, but you cannot.' Equally, however, 'there are those things that do not belong to you and, regardless of your effort, will never belong to you'.[27] These observations, which sit uneasily with popular ideas about cultural hybridity and translation, not to mention the basic tenets of 'Western' liberalism, have important implications for how he sees himself as a contemporary artist with a global audience. They also speak to the way we look at his work, since, like Xu Bing or indeed any artist, each of us is the bearer of what the literary critic Derek Attridge has called an 'idioculture'. What every viewer brings to an encounter with any artwork is, according to Attridge, a 'changing array of interlocking, overlapping, and often contradictory cultural systems absorbed in the course of his or her previous experience, a complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually,

emotionally, and physically.'[28] While this 'idioculture' may be 'fated', as Xu Bing puts it, it is not unalterable. After all, as an artist who seeks to disturb 'our familiar patterns of thought' and in the end to oblige us 'to find a new conceptual foundation', this idiocultural 'matrix' is his primary target. Importantly, this way of describing his ambitions as an artist, which, as I have suggested, comes from the Zen Buddhist tradition, has little to do with celebrating cultural diversity or even the promise of a harmonious 'world culture' fostered by translation. Rather, it foregrounds Xu Bing's effort to disclose and then disrupt the boundaries of every viewer's 'idioculture', or, to use his own words, to open up 'the space between understanding and misunderstanding, as concepts are flipped, customary modes of thought are thrown into confusion, creating obstacles to connections and expression.'[29]

For Xu Bing, this disorienting space, which exists beyond the ultimately reassuring promise of translation, is what defines the intercultural world we now inhabit, making it at once a place of infinite inventiveness and endless uncertainty. To my mind, it is also what makes viewing his works a vertiginous experience. Rather than build bridges across pre-defined cultures, each of his works takes us by various routes to the edge of our own 'idioculture', challenging our familiar patterns of thought or our ready-made distinctions between, say, East and West. At the same time, by creating a unique experience of doubt, each work also points beyond itself, like the *kōan* in Suzuki's formulation, to an as yet inconceivable future in which new ways of thinking and looking might emerge. Implicitly inviting us, as viewers, to forget the allure of aesthetic contemplation for its own sake, each work asks us in its own way to 'go on', after we leave the exhibition, until we come, as Suzuki put it, 'to the edge of a mental precipice, as it were, where there are no other alternatives but to leap over.'[30] Not, perhaps, an easy lesson for schoolchildren or for the faint-hearted, but one that, for me, has an urgent significance for our intercultural times.

ENDNOTES

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3 | J M Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), 3.
4 | D T Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (London: Rider, 1991), 104–105.
5 | Ibid, 108.
6 | Ibid, 105–106.
7 | Ibid, 108.
8 | Ibid, 105.
9 | Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans Christopher Rowe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005), 63.
10 | R Carroll and S Prickett (eds), *The Bible: Authorised King James Version* (Oxford: World's Classics, 1997), 224 (2 Corinthians 3:6).
11 | 'Xu Bing: Monkeys Grasp for the Moon', accessed 29 October 2013, http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/current/xuBing.asp.
12 | Suzuki, *Introduction*, 132.
13 | Ibid, 38.
14 | Ibid, 33.
15 | Ibid.
16 | Ibid, 106.
17 | Ibid, 74, 78.
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21 | For a more detailed account of the distinction between multiculturalism and the idea of the intercultural, see Peter D McDonald, 'Thinking Interculturally: Amartya Sen's Lovers Revisited', *Interventions*, 13.3 (2011): 369–385.
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23 | Ibid, 19.
24 | Ibid, 13.
25 | Ibid, 14.
26 | Ibid, 16.
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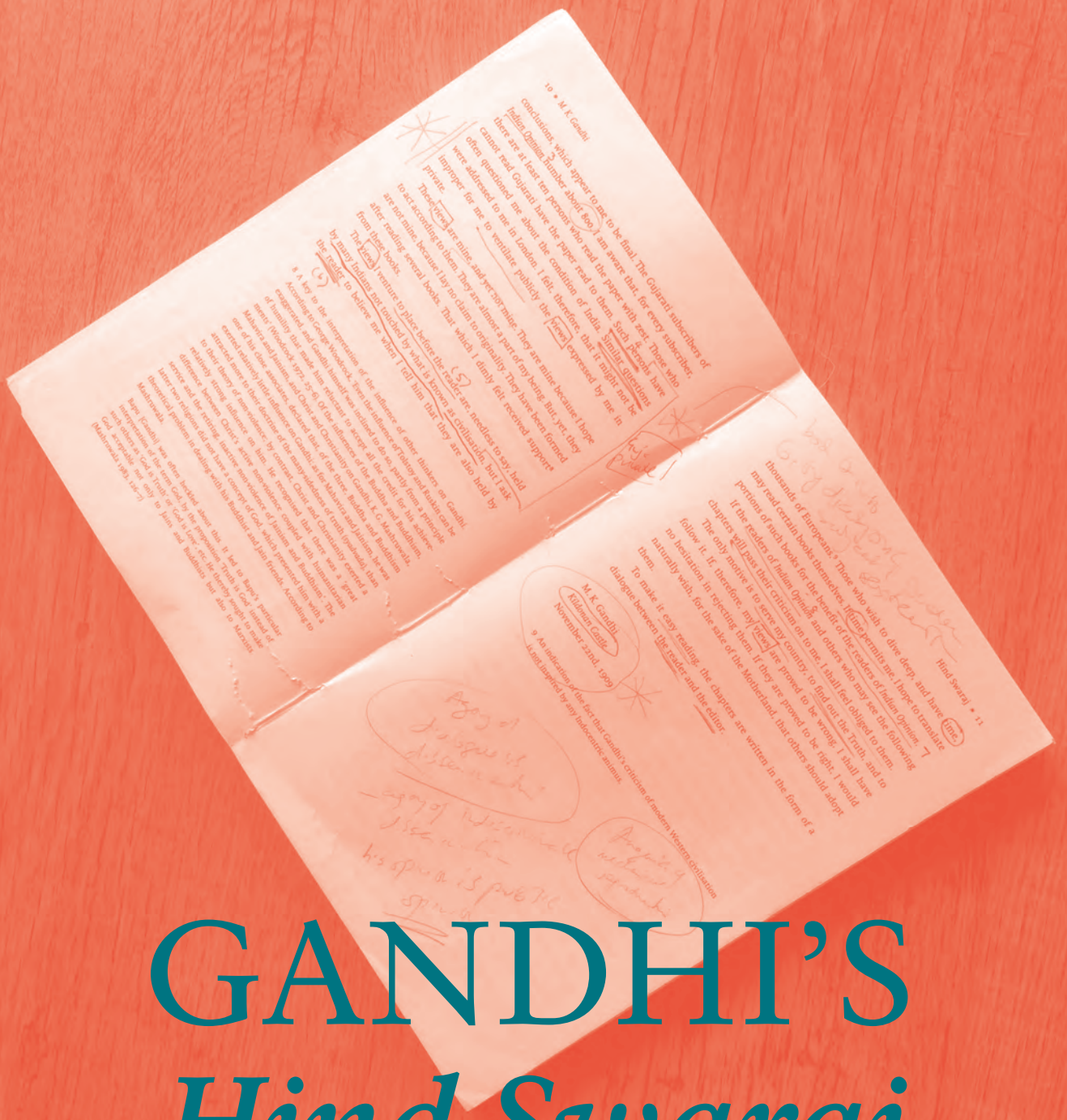
29 | Xu Bing, 'Living Word', 18–19.
30 | Suzuki, *Introduction*, 105.



GANDHI'S *Hind Swaraj*

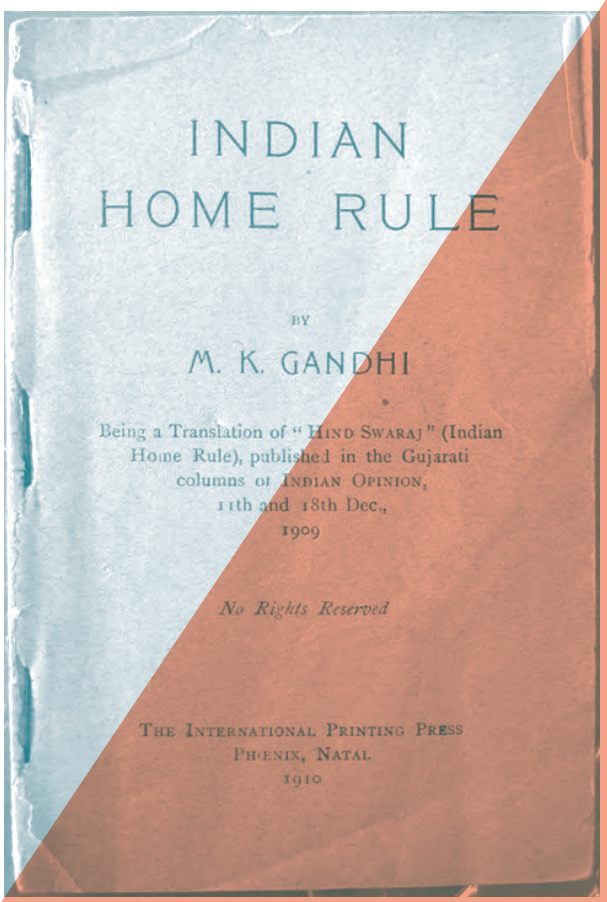
ISABEL HOFMEYR

Hind Swaraj, in which Gandhi set out some of his key political ideas, is one of the world's great texts. While Gandhi wrote voluminously – enough to fill up a *Collected Works* of some 100 volumes – *Hind Swaraj* is the only place in which he expounded his political ideas in book form. This book is hence a key archive of Gandhian thought about nonviolence, civil disobedience and *satyagraha*, or passive resistance, to use the rather inadequate English term. These ideas and practices have played a massive role in 20th-century history, whether in the Indian independence movement, the Civil Rights struggle in the United States, or the anti-apartheid story here. Martin Luther King, Albert Einstein, Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela and John Lennon have gone on record as owing a debt to Gandhi. This small book with its 'mighty message of ahimsa', or nonviolence, as Gandhi described it, is one of the treasures of the world.[1]

The text was originally written in Gujarati, in November 1909, on board ship, as Gandhi returned from England to South Africa. It first appeared in the Gujarati columns of Gandhi's newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, and then again in Gujarati, as a booklet. Gandhi then undertook a translation into English. The first English edition of the text was produced in March 1910, just outside Durban. One rather remarkable feature about this particular edition is that it is well-nigh impossible to find a copy of it in any major library. If you go onto WorldCat, the global catalogue of library collections, it will tell you that there are 'no library holdings found for this item'. There are, of course, entries for the numerous subsequent editions, but nothing for this one. I was fortunate to be able to see a copy through the good offices of Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. There used to be one copy in the Johannesburg Public Library, but it appears to have been stolen. We have then a paradox: the first edition of one of the world's most important books has eluded the world's major libraries. There are millions of copies of subsequent editions, which continue to be printed all the time, but this particular first English edition appears not to have survived.

In discussing this book, I want to explore its themes and ideas, but also talk about the biography of this particular missing edition. In part, this double emphasis draws on scholarship pertaining to book history and print culture, which urges us to understand books not just as words, but as material objects as well. In the words of Roger Chartier, the prominent historian of French print culture, books comprise not only their words, but also the objects that convey those words.[2] I am interested to pursue this double frame of looking at the book as both word and object, since it is a link that is important in Gandhian thought. Gandhi felt that the way in which something was produced should matter to the consumer. So, if something is produced under unethical circumstances, to buy that product is to continue to support that situation. He was, in effect, an early fair-trade proponent, wanting to make sure that the production of any object was ethical at every stage of the process, books included. For Gandhi, what was in the book was as important as how it was made.

Gandhi spent 21 years in South Africa from 1893 to 1914, having come out here as a lawyer. He soon got drawn into the struggle to protect the civil rights of the South African Indian community, and as part of this process, he realised very soon



Title page of a first edition in English of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* or *Indian Home Rule*, published in 1910, owned by Uma Dhuphelia-Mesthrie. PHOTO: Isabel Hofmeyr

the pressing need for a newspaper and a printing press. In 1898 he played a part in the acquisition of a second-hand printing press, which operated from Durban. In 1903, this press began printing Gandhi's newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, which initially appeared in four languages but then fairly rapidly went down to just English and Gujarati. As Uma Mesthrie has demonstrated, this paper initially floundered a bit but soon found its political direction as the *satyagraha* campaigns took off in 1906.[3] These campaigns continued on and off until 1913, and the paper played a key part in them. The newspaper, however, soon proved to be a major financial drain. In 1903, in a well-known incident, Gandhi caught the overnight train from Johannesburg, where he was based, to Durban. On the platform, his friend Henry Polak handed him a copy of Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. The book mesmerised Gandhi and, by the time he arrived in Durban, he had decided to experiment with a rural ashram-like community where Ruskin's ideas of combining mental and manual labour could be put into practice. Towards this end, Gandhi acquired a farm in Phoenix, just outside Durban, and a group of friends and supporters moved there. In 1904, the press was laboriously moved by ox wagon from Durban to Phoenix, and the paper was then produced from there. The *satyagraha* campaigns commenced in 1906, and continued in fits and starts until 1913, when there was a settlement between Gandhi and Smuts.

The year 1909 marked one of the lowest ebbs of the movement, and it is at this moment that Gandhi wrote the *Hind Swaraj*. Support for *satyagraha* had dwindled from thousands to a few hundred, as state repression and deportations took hold. The initial merchant support that Gandhi had attracted dwindled, leaving Tamil hawkers as the main support base. To compound matters, Gandhi had been part of an unsuccessful delegation to London to petition the British government to intervene on behalf of South African Indians. In the wake of this failure, he produced the text in the space of 10 days on board the *SS Kildonan Castle*, writing at a furious pace on the ship's stationery and famously turning to use his left hand when his right hand grew tired. The production of his 'mighty message', at the moment of greatest defeat, is emblematic of broader Gandhian themes. Trials and setbacks are necessary and important. At these times one's ideals and beliefs will be most thoroughly and searchingly tested. Reverses will also allow one to reshape time. Instead of imagining that one's loss represents a catastrophic ending, one can start to imagine time in much longer and bigger arcs. Gandhi was entirely opposed to those who instrumentalised time in urgent, short-term and pressing ways, like, for example, those who said, 'We *must* have independence, and we must have it now.' Gandhi questioned political hastiness, believing that true independence, or self-rule, could only come about when each person had patiently learned to rule him or herself – a necessarily long-term process.

Hind Swaraj takes the form of a dialogue between a Reader with a capital 'R', and an Editor with a capital 'E'. If you look at the text, it rather resembles a play script with these two characters, Reader and Editor. The book comprises 20 shortish chapters with some appendices, and it opens with a discussion on how best to gain political independence for India. The hot-headed Reader, who is generally taken to be a young In-

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dian radical or an extremist in favour of anticolonial violence, pooh-poohs the cautious and petitioning approach of the current notables of the Indian National Congress. In a theme that will become really central to the text, the Editor urges patience and the need to understand the contributions of those who have gone before. This discussion soon leads to the question of what is *swaraj*, or self-rule, and here the Editor slowly starts to challenge the Reader, asking him to think about what will happen when the British leave. If one thinks only of resisting and opposing a colonising force, one doesn't devote enough attention to thinking about what one will do with the freedom one gains. This is a key theme of the text, as it is for all postcolonial societies. What happens after independence, and why does it go wrong so quickly? It is, of course, a question that haunts us in South Africa. The Reader insists that the only way to gain independence is to arm oneself to the teeth. In order for India to become free, it requires arms and ammunition, a navy and an army: 'We must have our own splendour – then will India's voice ring through the world.'[4] In a famous passage, the Editor responds: 'You have well drawn the picture. In effect, it means this: we want English rule without the Englishman. We want the Tiger's nature, but not the Tiger.'[5] This is one of the text's very famous images, and as Anthony Parel notes in his wonderful Introduction to the *Cambridge Edition*, 'The tiger is one of Gandhi's metaphors for the modern state. All tigers seek their prey. It makes no difference whether the tiger is British or Indian.'[6]

This theme of the predatory state opens up into a broader investigation of the grip that bigger systems and structures exercise on us, and how we become enmeshed in them. The Reader hopes to rid himself of the English, but as the Editor shows, he will find himself even more entangled with them through admiring their systems and adopting them holus-bolus. For the Editor, British colonialism itself needs to be understood as part of a much bigger system, which the book calls 'modern civilization', and which we could gloss today as industrial capitalism, with a military-industrial complex. In this system everybody has to consume more and more at a faster and faster pace, until they themselves become machinelike. To grapple then with self-rule and independence requires thinking, not just about India, but this bigger system in which the Indian middle class is heavily invested. Indeed, as the Editor points out, 'the English have not taken India, we have given it to them'.[7] To illustrate this theme, the Editor discourses on the condition of India, showing how it is mesmerised by the speed of trains, and entirely in the grip of lawyers and doctors. The former tend to escalate conflict, while the latter are complicit in overconsumption – repairing bodies made ill in addiction to excessive appetites so these bodies can carry on damaging themselves and return to the doctor. Lawyers too have much exacerbated divisions in India, especially those between Hindus and Muslims. In this analysis, India is in the grip of a false civilisation, which raises the question of what is true civilisation, and how would it make India free? With regard for the first question, *Hind Swaraj* provides the following definition: 'Civilization is a mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves.'[8] This definition says first that civilisa-

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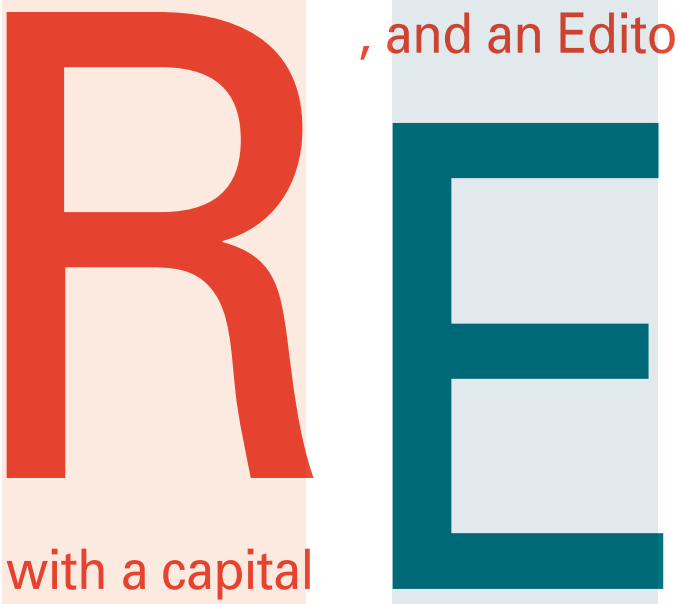

, and an Editor

with a capital

tion is a mode of conduct that precipitates you along a path – the path of duty, which you discover soon is also the observance of morality. This morality entails a mastery over the mind and passions, a sequence of action that will produce self-knowledge or self-rule.

As the structure of this paragraph itself suggests, this is a long process, in which one thing gradually builds upon the other. Importantly, it involves principles *and* action. You must walk down the path. We cannot simply harbour moral ideas, we must perform and observe these – through such slow and painful work, we can accumulate self-knowledge. Also very critical in this equation is the mastery over the mind or passions, a central idea that the mind must learn to control itself: 'We notice that the mind is a restless bird. The more it gets, the more it wants, and it still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become. Ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences. They saw that happiness was largely a mental condition'[9] – as opposed to the happiness of satisfying bodily appetites. It is only through this form of self-rule – effectively rule of the self – that the bigger issue of self-governance or independence can start to have some substance. 'If we become free, India is free. It is *swaraj* when we begin to rule ourselves. Such *swaraj* has to be experienced by each one for himself.'[10]

As Parel explains in his introduction, 'It is axiomatic in *Hind Swaraj* that the good of self-government or true home rule that India achieves will be in proportion to the self-rule that Indians achieve. In other words, true self-government requires persons who rule themselves. That is why Britain cannot *give* self-government to Indians; they must fit themselves for it by undergoing a suitable degree of self-transformation.'[11] Importantly, self-rule can only be a concrete repertoire of practices. There is absolutely no question here: this is not an abstract set of ideas about nation or freedom or rights or equality or fraternity. Gandhi was in fact profoundly skeptical of such grand schemes, in which you could claim rights on behalf of your followers, as some anticolonial leaders believed. For Gandhi, you could only ever claim rights on behalf of yourself, and these rights obviously came with a set of obligations and responsibilities.

Self-rule constituted a kind of practice of citizenship, and as Ajay Skaria has argued, Gandhi refined these practices in the series of ashram communities that he established in South Africa and then in India.[12] In these communities, one had to behave as a neighbour to those who were one's equals. Towards those with less power, one rendered service, and to those (outside the ashram) who had more power – particularly if they abused this power – one practised *satyagraha*, or what the text calls 'love-force' or 'soul-force'. As Parel points out, there was a set of qualifications that ideally you needed to carry out *satyagraha*: temperance, or chastity, a constant search for truth, freedom from possessiveness or greed, and courage, the capacity to overcome fear, including, necessarily, the fear of death.[13]

How have scholars written about *Hind Swaraj*? Before answering this question, it's probably worth putting in a small caveat: some of Gandhi's ideas sound strange to us, because it's important to remember that he was largely a non-secular thinker driven by a search for what he called Truth with a capital 'T'. This was a kind of universal, ethical spirit that he believed inhered in all true religions. We, of course,

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without the ENGLISHMAN.
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but not the TIGER.

read him from a hopelessly secular vantage point in which a discourse of ethical truth sounds odd, if not a bit cranky. We also read him from a world in which we are accustomed to think of politics as centrally concerned with grand and radical schemes: capitalism, socialism, human rights and so on. Gandhi, as we have seen, was highly skeptical of such abstract systems and, as Uday Mehta points out, Gandhi's thinking is actually quite close to that of Edmund Burke, who believed you really should stick with what you know, and not bank on some big, grand radical scheme of whose outcome you can never be certain. But as these grand schemes increasingly unravel, there is a concomitant re-engagement with Gandhi's thought, and one recent and brilliant analysis of *Hind Swaraj* comes from Mehta, a political scientist who focuses on the idea of patience as central to Gandhi's thinking. For Gandhi, the business of developing the self is a painstaking process, which involves what Mehta calls amplifying an inner domain, which is where self-knowledge and self-rule are to be found. Self-knowledge can only come about by patient labour. Mehta describes such patience as a 'psychological adhesive that embedded values into the self'.[14] In pursuit of this ideal, Gandhi turned again and again to the idea of patience, and in *Hind Swaraj* the Editor constantly comes back to this theme. As Mehta indicates, the activities Gandhi came to favour in later life, such as fasting, spinning and silence, embodied patience as a form of pure temporality.

Turning now to some other lines of interpretation, much analysis of the book has been concerned with its historical context and has especially focused on the task of identifying the Reader as a real historical character. The major tradition of this work has been keen to construe the Reader as one or more of the Indian revolutionaries present in London during Gandhi's visit there.[15] Two of the favourite suspects are Shyamji Krishna Varma and V D Savarkar. Krishna Varma was a gifted linguist and the founder of India House at Highgate in London, a famed hub of Indian radical political thought and activism. Gandhi himself stayed at India House in 1906, and had several reasonably cordial conversations with Krishna Varma. Yet by 1909 the differences between them had started to emerge quite crisply, and Krishna Varma's paper, *The Indian Sociologist*, explicitly attacked Gandhi's ideas of nonviolence. The masthead of the paper carried a quote from Herbert Spencer: 'Resistance to aggression is not just simply justifiable but imperative. Nonresistance hurts both altruism and egoism' – the almost exact opposite of what Gandhi was saying. Back in South Africa, *Indian Opinion* took its own small stab at *The Indian Sociologist* by running a piece by G K Chesterton, a famous opponent of Spencer. In the article, Chesterton roundly trashes Spencer, and also notes his influence on Indian nationalism, before going on to observe: '[T]he principal weakness of Indian nationalism is that it is not very Indian and not very national. It is all about Herbert Spencer and heaven knows what. What is the good of the Indian national spirit if it cannot protect its own people from Herbert Spencer?'[16]

The second likely suspect has generally been identified as V D Savarkar, also an India House habitué and very much the brains behind that group. He arrived in London in

There is absolutely no question here: this is not an abstract set of ideas about nation or freedom or rights or equality or fraternity.

1906 and, four years later, was arrested for revolutionary activities and deported to the Andaman Islands, the Robben Island equivalent off the coast of India. Savarkar was an influential presence, not least on Madan Lal Dhingra, an engineering student from Imperial College who assassinated Sir William Curzon Wyllie on 1 July 1909, some 10 days before Gandhi himself arrived in London. In later life, Savarkar was to become a hard-line Hindu nationalist, and one of his followers turned out to be one of Gandhi's assassins.

Another important strand of work has focused on *Hind Swaraj* in its South African context. The book, interestingly, has no clear setting, so there's no absolute indication of where this conversation between Reader and Editor takes place. One of the tasks of the reader is to try to decide where this might all be happening. One response to this implicit question has been to think of this book in a South African context. Seen in this light, Johannesburg becomes one of the models for Gandhi's critique on modern civilisation. In the early years of the century, Johannesburg was a cutting-edge industrial centre, with some of the most advanced mining equipment in the world. Gandhi's critique of modern civilisation could apply as much to Johannesburg as it does to London or Delhi. This insight is important because it reminds us that the book and its ideas are portable. They are not tied to one place, and any reader, consequently, has the freedom to apply them to his or her own circumstances.

Another strong South African trace emerges in the prefatory material to the earliest editions, which identify the Reader as the reader of *Indian Opinion*. In this equation, Gandhi introduces the lowly diasporic reader in Durban or Johannesburg as an important presence in the text and in the debate on defining Indian nationalism. Seen from this perspective, the book becomes an investigation about the idea of India as a kind of dispersed, diasporic place, with the debate of who could, or should, belong to it. Could India include the lowly reader in Durban as much as the Congress grandee in India, or the Indian revolutionary in London? In Gandhi's early thinking, such a lowly reader could indeed belong to India. This inclusiveness arose from Gandhi's early admiration for empire, a form of political organisation that he preferred to that of the nation. This latter aversion to the nation arose in part from the horrors of white nationalism that he witnessed first hand in South Africa. If empire could be made to deliver on its promise of equal rights for its subjects, then it seemed preferable to the narrowness of the nation. Indeed, at least until the 1920s, Gandhi had hoped that India could become a dominion in empire, and that it might include diasporic populations under its ambit. Yet this interpretation of the text has not survived. In part, we can ascribe this to the fact that the early prefaces disappeared from the texts, especially in Indian editions. Furthermore, the empire-wide view that Gandhi held could not survive the pressures of anticolonial nationalism whose object becomes the realisation of a territorialised nation state. As Indian nationalism gained ground, the idea that it might include diasporic members in far-flung places never caught hold.

One final line of analysis is to see this text as one of the great books about reading. The text is after all a tableau of reading and it poses the question, 'How do you read in a world overrun with too much information?' *Hind Swaraj* describes a world flooded with far too many newspapers expressing too many fickle and ill-digested ideas and a system

of life that demands that we do everything faster and faster. In response to these circumstances, the book advocates a form of reading dependent on patience, perseverance, pausing, pondering and contemplating. This idea also forms part of the book's insistence that we should always try to do things at the pace of the body rather than trying to get ahead of ourselves by hurtling along. Reading, of course, is something that absolutely has to go at the pace of the body, and the book reminds us that we cannot circumvent this. The only thing one can do is make a patient pilgrimage through print – reading at the pace of the bullock cart rather than the train, to use two images from the text. These ideas of reading and patience mesh with Gandhi's skepticism about grand, abstract political ideas like nationalism. As Benedict Anderson has shown, nationalism reproduces itself through instrumentalising time, space and language, in newspapers and novels, or what he termed 'print capitalism'.[17] Such a dispensation necessarily requires hasty reading: consuming the date-stamped commodity in the same way, readers come to partake in an abstract and secular idea of national time through which they hurtle even as they are fixed to a boundary of national space. As consumers embedded in market relations, they regard printed language as a commodity that can be bought and sold, kept for a day, and then cast aside.

By contrast, *Hind Swaraj* and the newspaper *Indian Opinion,* from which it came, were very different. Both advocated modes of reading that entailed patience rather than speed. Both were anti-commodities. They never rendered a profit, and they were defined as a form of public service. In fact, from 1912, *Indian Opinion* dropped virtually all advertising (except that for books). Against mechanical accelerated time, *Hind Swaraj* posited slow-motion reading. Against narrow ideas of national space and sovereignty, it stressed a dispersed, deterritorialised form of belonging. Both resist the instrumentalisation of time, space and language inherent in nationalism. As part of this process of slowing things down, Gandhi unsurprisingly favoured the use of the hand press – the slower, the better.

In closing, we look very briefly at some aspects of the production of the text. The first feature worth noting is the heterogeneity of those who worked on the press and the newspaper. Drawn from South India, Gujarat, Mauritius, South Africa, St Helena and Britain, they created a printing and press establishment that combined different genders, races, languages, religions, castes and ages (at Phoenix, even children took on some of the lighter tasks, such as putting wrappers on newspapers – indeed everyone on the ashram had to play some part in the printing process).

The press drew people together from across the Indian Ocean and beyond. By contrast, the print shops in Durban were overwhelmingly white and male. Indeed, in 1896 these printers had been part of a platoon of white workers organised into regiments according to their trade (carpenters, builders, joiners and so on) who had tried to lynch Gandhi on his return from Bombay under the pretext that he was arranging 'an Asiatic invasion'. Printers also believed that he was importing a printing press and bringing in 30 compositors. For these journeymen on the dockside awaiting Gandhi's arrival by ship, printing was synonymous with defending racial privilege. The press of Phoenix was of a different order. It was embedded in a new utopian and cosmopolitan world, where everyone, at least on the face of it, dirtied their hands operating the press – a task in India

usually reserved for the lower castes. As different nationalities, religions and ethnicities worked side by side, the press enacted the modernist ideal of the family business, tied together not by lineage, but by common ideas and projects, and voluntary entrance and exit. The press in Phoenix, then, worked in unusual ways and produced unusual products. One of these was *Hind Swaraj*, a slow-motion, anti-commodity book. Importantly, the first English edition included the phrase 'No Rights Reserved', which again differentiated it from commercially produced books. Gandhi was, in fact, an early open-source man, and the book was consequently intended to circulate as widely as possible.

These features are far removed from what we implicitly today regard as a book. In our modern view, a book is normally copyrighted, it is produced in a national space, and it is a commodity embedded in market relations. Both in its content, its material form and its mode of production, *Hind Swaraj* sought to redefine time, space and the nature of the book itself. Small wonder, then, that the booklet escaped 'capture' by the world's national library depository systems – rather like the tortoise eluded the hare.

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ENDNOTES

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Nothing Extraordinary:

E M Forster and the English Limit

HEDLEY TWIDLE

A Passage to India is a book I taught to first-year students at the University of Cape Town for a number of years; but I want to reassure you that this won't be a rehashing of old lecture notes, and that there is no danger of me confusing you with that younger audience. At least one of you may actually have read the whole novel before this lecture. For many undergraduates, I have come to realise, the role of the lecturer is to provide a kind of sales pitch: the literary equivalent of a film trailer, coming to a lecture theatre near you.

With this book it was a hard sell. 'Absolutely hated *Passage to India*', 'A complete drag and the plot was *boring*' – this was the gist of many feedback forms. One student came up to me and complained that this was a novel in which nothing actually *happens*.

I want to take this very seriously today, the idea of nothing actually happening. Because that student was absolutely right, and making a common complaint about Forster. He is a writer of diminuendos and anti-climaxes: narrative pay-offs don't come when they should. 'E M Forster never gets any further than warming the teapot', said Katherine Mansfield, 'He's a rare fine hand at that. Feel this teapot. It is not beautifully warm? Yes, but there ain't going to be no tea'.[2]

Forster was, famously, embarrassed by the necessity of having to tell a story, weary of the whole vulgar business of plotting. 'Yes – oh dear yes – the novel tells a story', he sighed in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), 'and I wish it was not so, that it could be something different – melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form'. He went on:

> For, the more we look at the story (the story that is a story, mind), the more we disentangle it from the finer growths that it supports, the less we shall find to admire. It runs like a backbone – or may I say a tapeworm, for its beginning and end are arbitrary.[3]

And when we disentangle this particular novel from the finer growths that it supports, we see how stubbornly it resists paraphrase, and how difficult it is to pitch as a movie trailer.

What is it about? The cover of the current Penguin classics edition gives us two women in the mouth of a cave; they are dressed in white and carrying parasols. Taking our cue from this, we can say that *A Passage to India* is about Mrs Moore and Adela Quested. Adela has gone to India to find a husband, taking a passage through Suez on what was unkindly termed 'the fishing fleet'. Like her descendants with their backpacks and *Lonely Planet*s, she wants to see the *real* India – a sentiment that produces wry smiles from the old India hands at the British club in Chandrapore. She is chaperoned by Mrs Moore, mother of Magistrate Ronnie Heaslop, the fiancé to be.

But it is not really about that. The marriage plot is derailed and becomes something else. Mistakes are made, false accusations fly. Within the claustrophobic passages of the Marabar Caves, things go disastrously wrong. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, mistakes and social misreadings are cleared up. Having provided the reader with a pleasurable delay, these points of narrative resistance are removed and the plotting moves with stately assurance toward marriage – as it must in the strict literary definition of a comedy. But in *A*

Passage to India, the muddle is never really dispelled. It keeps hanging in the air, like the echo of the caves that so haunts Mrs Moore, causing her to melt away from the action and expire, unexpectedly and meaninglessly, on the passage home.

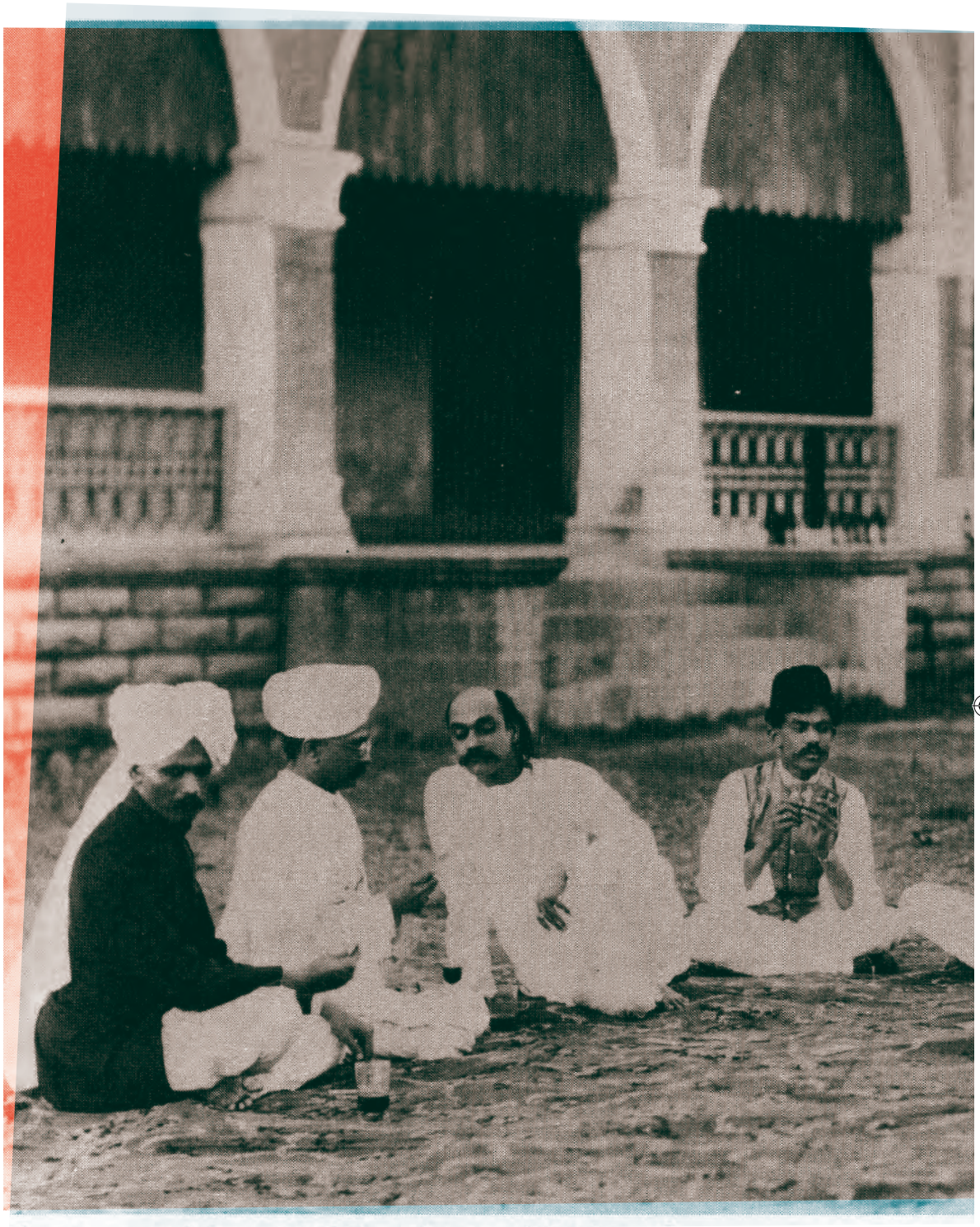
The poster for David Lean's 1984 film of the novel also gives a clue to what it is not. The production was rightly skewered by Salman Rushdie on charges of colonial nostalgia and Raj revivalism. Professor Godbole, the enigmatic Brahman, is played by Sir Alec Guinness, painted brown. In South Africa we are used to seeing our culture heroes played by foreign actors: Denzel Washington as Steve Biko, Michael Caine as F W de Klerk, Idris Elba as Nelson Mandela (forthcoming). But we have yet to endure the spectacle of a Struggle icon played by a Hollywood actor in blackface.[4] Lean treats Forster's novel as a colonial romance, an oh-so-English costume drama, when it is anything but. Although (and perhaps this accounts for some of the undergraduate antipathy) it may look like one at first glance.

So what is it? Near the heart of the novel is the intense but prickly friendship between the Muslim doctor Aziz and the liberal schoolmaster Fielding. And this must be in part a coded, fictionalised account of Forster's life-long (but sexually unrequited) love for a man named Syed Ross Masood, whom he tutored as a young man, and to whom the novel is dedicated. 'My own debt to him is incalculable', Forster wrote in an obituary tribute. 'He woke me up out of my suburban and academic life', and dispelled the Orientalist trappings that the Raj revivalism of the 1980s sought to reintroduce. 'Until I met him, India was a vague jumble of rajahs, sahibs, babus and elephants, and I was not interested in such a jumble; who could be?'[5]

The intense, sometimes erotic charge between Fielding and Aziz has often led the novel to be read as a reflection on the possibility of friendship across cultures, or a broader allegory on Anglo-Indian relations during the final phase of the British rule. These, though, were interpretations that Forster tried to head off. The book 'is not really about politics, though it is the political aspect of it that caught the general public and made it sell'.[6] In a letter to Masood of September 1922, he wrote that he began it as a bridge of sympathy between East and West, 'but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable'. With a winning frankness (but also a rather annoying tendency to deflate his literary achievements) he continued: 'I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits, and I am not interested whether they sympathize with one another or not'.[7]

Not a marriage plot then; not a costume drama. Not any easy allegory about East and West; not a political essay in any simple sense – not that we should ever trust a writer on his own work. We have already begun to stack up the negatives – nots, nevers, nors and nothings – and they continue to multiply in the opening lines of the novel:

> Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. There are no bathing-steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river front, and bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama



EM Forster, the Maharajah of Dewas and others playing *jubu* (a card game), seated in a semi-circle on a rug in a courtyard. Taken at Dewas, India. Permission courtesy of Archive Centre, Kings College, Cambridge

> of the stream. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest.[8]

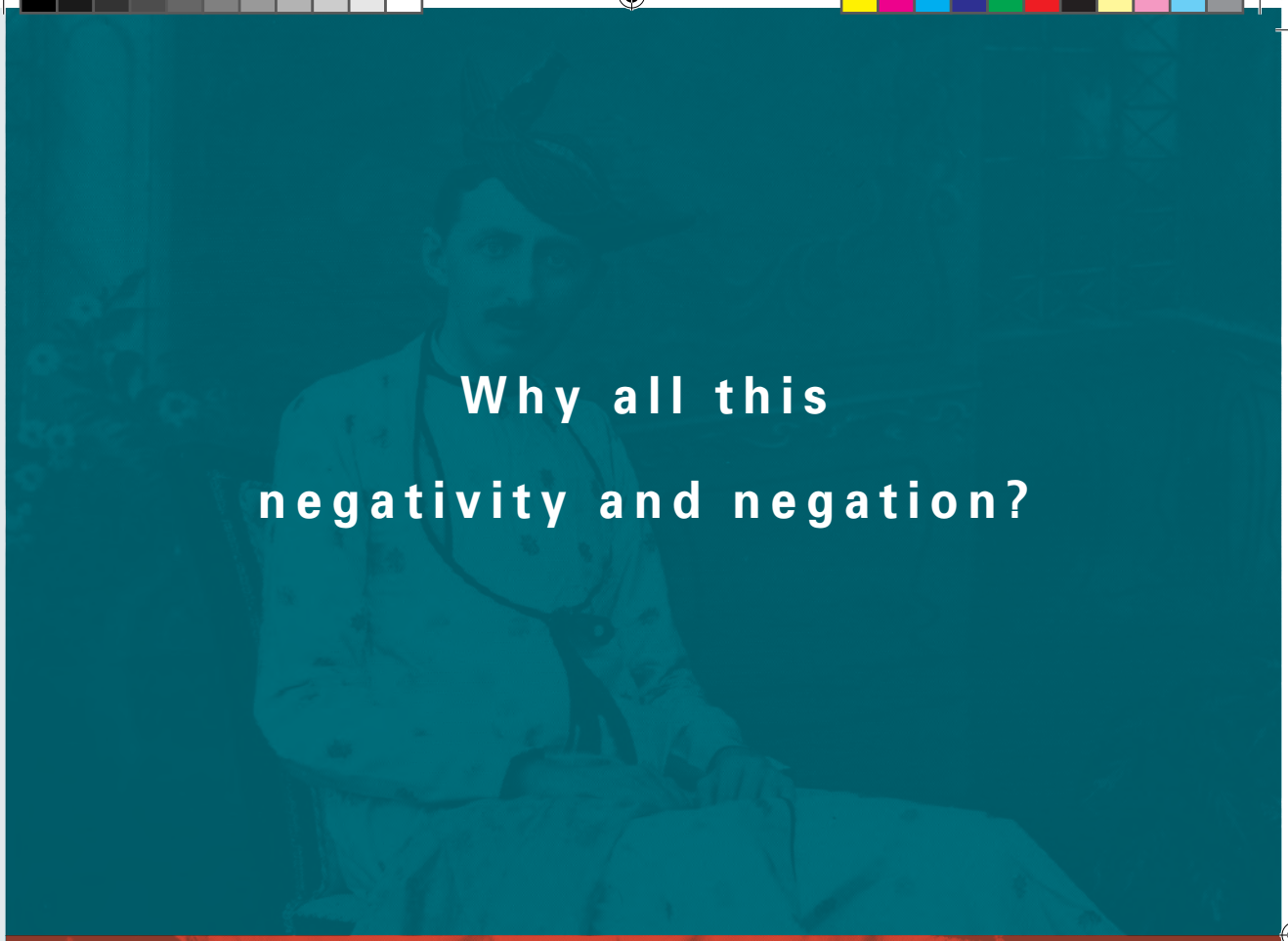
At first glance, this seems to be a standard establishing shot: a confident third-person narrator pans across the topography, slowly releasing the details that build a credible fictional world. In fact, it is not unlike the prose you might find in the *Lonely Planet*, delivering its verdict on some nondescript, north Indian town that a gap-year pilgrim might overnight in on the way to somewhere more mystical.

But from the first word, the confident voice is being troubled by something odd, something awkward in the prose. We begin with an anomaly – 'Except for the Marabar Caves' – a special case; but it is an exception to something framed in the negative: a town that presents 'nothing extraordinary'. That is: an unspoken subtext or paraphrase would suggest that the Marabar Caves are extraordinary. But the syntax goes out of its way to avoid putting it like this, and so does the rest of the paragraph, the chapter – the entire novel in fact, carrying forward this insistence on negative constructions until the famous last words: 'No, not yet'…'No, not there'.[9]

Why all this negativity and negation? Why the convoluted syntax? Why is *A Passage to India* a work about which it is so much easier to say what it is *not*, than what it *is*? Such questions take us from the smallest details of grammar to the biggest philosophical problems that the novel puts to itself. Forster's 'negative capability' (to adapt John Keats), his skill in wielding negative constructions, operates on many levels, and produces many different effects).[10] It also allows us to see why *Passage* is such an uncommon, uncanny text, and one that is hard to place in literary history.

Walter Benjamin wrote that all great works of literature either invent a genre or dissolve one.[11] Literary critics generally pay more attention to the first category: the newness and invention that is embodied in the word 'novel', or the creative ruptures of early 20th-century Modernism, with its manifestos, avant-garde iconoclasm and rejections of the old. But *A Passage to India*, I think, presents us with the rarer, more delicate case of a genre dissolving, dissolving before our very eyes. The result is a great text as problem text, one that arrives at the limit of 'the English novel' and points towards, even if it cannot achieve this itself, 'the novel in English': the proliferation of postcolonial fiction in the second half of the twentieth century.

To plot a longer literary trajectory, let us return for a moment to Austen, of whom Forster was a keen reader. If we look at Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900,* we see his mock-serious attempts to map the geography of her novels. 'Beginnings', 'Endings' and 'Narrative complications' all cluster in a small portion of the British Isles: the south of England, imagined as a network of country estates, spread across the landscape. Another map shows us the sources of 'Colonial wealth in British sentimental novels': *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park* are suddenly linked to the Caribbean; *Jane Eyre* points to Madeira; India is the source for several largely forgotten melodramas, like Amelie Opie's *Appearance Was Against Her* and Susannah Gunning's *The Gypsy Countess*.[12]


Why all this
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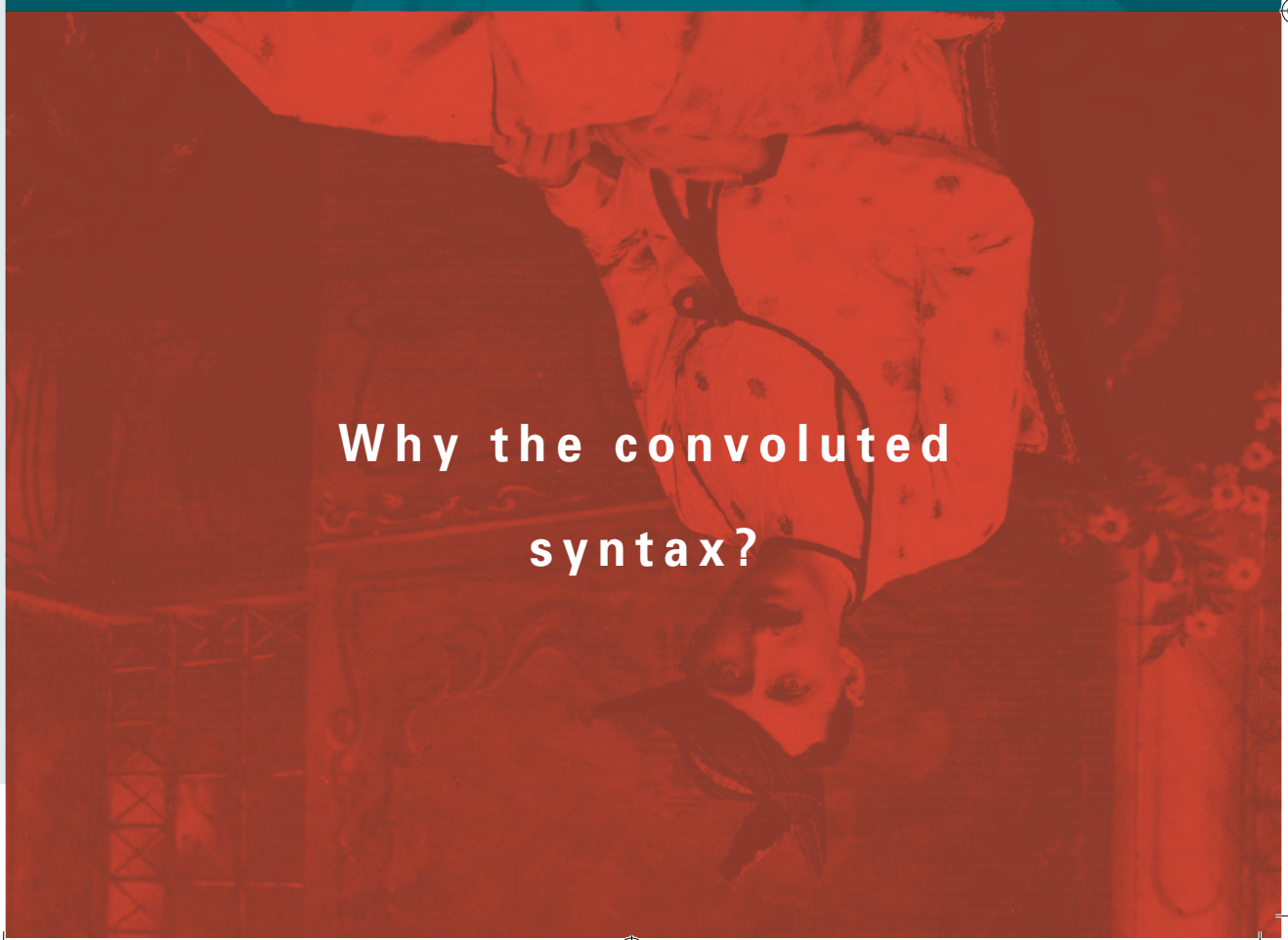

Why the convoluted
syntax?

A Passage to India uproots and relocates Forster's early, very English and Austen-like comedies of manners to an entirely different geography and social context. Or perhaps (in light of the second map) it is more accurate to say that it makes explicit the structures of colonial wealth and power that have always underpinned a certain kind of story that southern England liked to tell itself, circa 1800 to 1900.

Austen remarked that only one or two families were necessary to set a novel in motion; and she spoke famously of 'the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush'.[13] But *Passage* expands the horizon of novelistic attention and awareness immeasurably: it is a book of landforms and caves. It extends to mud, rivers, the sun, ghosts, animal life, insects and the inorganic world. If the three sections of the book can be taken to signal different religions, they also emerge out of the seasons of the Indian year. After the cool hospitality of 'Mosque' and the fractious heat of 'Caves', we have the epilogue, 'Temple', where the prose will try to feel its way into the meanings, and the meaninglessness, of a Hindu ceremony celebrating the birth of Krishna. The rains have arrived and suddenly the text is as flooded as the monsoon landscape all around us:

> Some hundreds of miles westward of the Marabar Hills, and two years later in time, Professor Narayan Godbole stands in the presence of God. God is not born yet – that will occur at midnight – but He has also been born centuries ago, nor can He ever be born, because He is the Lord of the Universe, who transcends human processes. He is, was not, is not, was. He and Professor Godbole stood at opposite ends of the same strip of carpet.
>
> 'Tukaram, Tukaram,
> Thou art my father and mother and everybody.
> Tukaram, Tukaram,
> Thou art my father and mother and everybody.
> Tukaram' Tukaram,
> Thou art my father and mother and everybody.
> Tukaram, Tukaram,
> Thou art my father and mother and everybody.
> Tukaram ...'[14]

In many ways, Forster's inherited literary template simply cannot cope with this flood: it senses its own conceptual horizon, and has found a way to be unusually frank about this. The novel appears shortly after 1922, the great Modernist year of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Wasteland* – which also travels to India's Gangnetic plain in search of spiritual rejuvenation:

> Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
> Waited for rain, while the black clouds
> Gathered far distant, over Himavant.[15]

On the one hand, Forster's work sounds a Modernist note in that way it grapples with the incommunicability of experience – and the personal struggle that it took to finish the novel was immense. It came 14 years after *Howard's End*, and almost never came at all. Between these two utterly different works, Forster worked for the Red Cross in Alexandria during the First World War, and visited India twice, beginning the manuscript there in 1912.

When he returned in 1921 as the Private Secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas Senior, he said of the earlier draft pages that they would 'wilt and go dead' when confronted with the place they purported to evoke: 'The gap between India remembered and India experienced was too wide'.[16]

Also, if we look at a timeline of Forster's life, we see a rather extraordinary thing: that he lived for almost 50 years after *Passage* and never published other fiction in his lifetime – as if he had lost faith in the whole project of the novel as he understood it.[17] He cloistered himself in Cambridge, and Virginia Woolf complained that he spent his days rowing old ladies on the river.

On the other hand, there is a major stylistic difference between *Passage* and the metropolitan avant-garde. In the wake of the First World War, writers like Beckett, Eliot, Joyce, Stein and Woolf opt for a range of formal techniques that seek to model disconnection, randomness and non-linear association on the page, in 'real time' as it were: via montage, jump-cuts, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, pastiche, formal fragmentation. Forster, though, would never do something so jejune as to break syntax in order to convey psychological or social brokenness. In moving so far from the European metropolis and dealing with racial hurt and humiliation, *A Passage to India* sets itself greater challenges than many of the fêted works of high Modernism. But in doing so it refuses a whole range of techniques that seek to model – in a formal, mimetic way – cognitive rupture via linguistic disarray. That is to say: Forster's novel addresses itself to the impenetrability, incoherence and incommunicability of human experience, but it does so in full sentences.

Such sentences – grammatically coherent, immaculately styled – are then carrying an unusually heavy load. They combine Modernist inscrutability with an Austenite prose surface; the most radical scepticism about inherited cultural forms mingles with the most intense stylistic control. And in this sense the thousands of negative constructions scattered through the book might be seen as a kind of tic, a signal that the language is being placed under pressure, and asked to absorb far more than it is used to, or made for.

'The use of negative forms opens constantly towards indeterminacy', writes Gillian Beer. 'To say what something is *not* leaves open a very great area of what it might be'.[18] A double negative ('not bad') does not equal the positive ('good'), and within this asymmetry lies the gap through which *A Passage to India* will try to cram more and more into a certain kind of English sentence. As with the avowedly anti-Modernist Philip Larkin, the prose will often inhabit the most deceptively simple language, even a cliché, and then turn it inside out. In the poem 'Talking in Bed', 'dark towns heap up on the horizon' and two lovers who should be in the heart of intimacy struggle to find a way of speaking to each other:

> None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
> At this unique distance from isolation
>
> It becomes still more difficult to find
> Words at once true and kind,
> Or not untrue and not unkind.[19]

True, kind. Not untrue, not unkind. The poem's whole emotional force resides in the space between those opposed pairs. The quintessential English understatement, normally used to disarm and neutralise, is made to yield a different effect.

George Orwell dismissed double negatives (or litotes, to use the technical term) as a sign of bad writing. In 'Politics and the English Language', he complained of how

'banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not un-* formation'.[20] It is certainly a charge that can be levelled at some of Forster's more purple passages. But while preparing for this lecture, I realised that capably handled negatives, whether single or double, can yield intriguing literary results in all kinds of places.

'She may think that I have forgotten her', sings Bob Dylan, 'don't tell her it isn't so' – which derails a pop ballad, and requires careful deciphering. 'I have not bummed across America / with only a dollar to spare, one pair /of busted Levi's and a bowie knife', writes Simon Armitage: 'I have lived with thieves in Manchester'. It is a poem which eschews the Taj Mahal and other gap-year pursuits for skimming stones across a lake on the moors close to home; and as in Forster's novel, the language falters when it tries to express the inexpressible:

> I have not toyed with a parachute cord
> while perched on the lip of a light aircraft;
> but I held the wobbly head of a boy
> at the day centre, and stroked his fat hands.
>
> And I guess that the lightness in the throat
> and the tiny cascading sensation
> somewhere inside us are both part of that
> sense of something else. That feeling, I mean.[21]

James Fenton's 'A German Requiem' begins as follows:

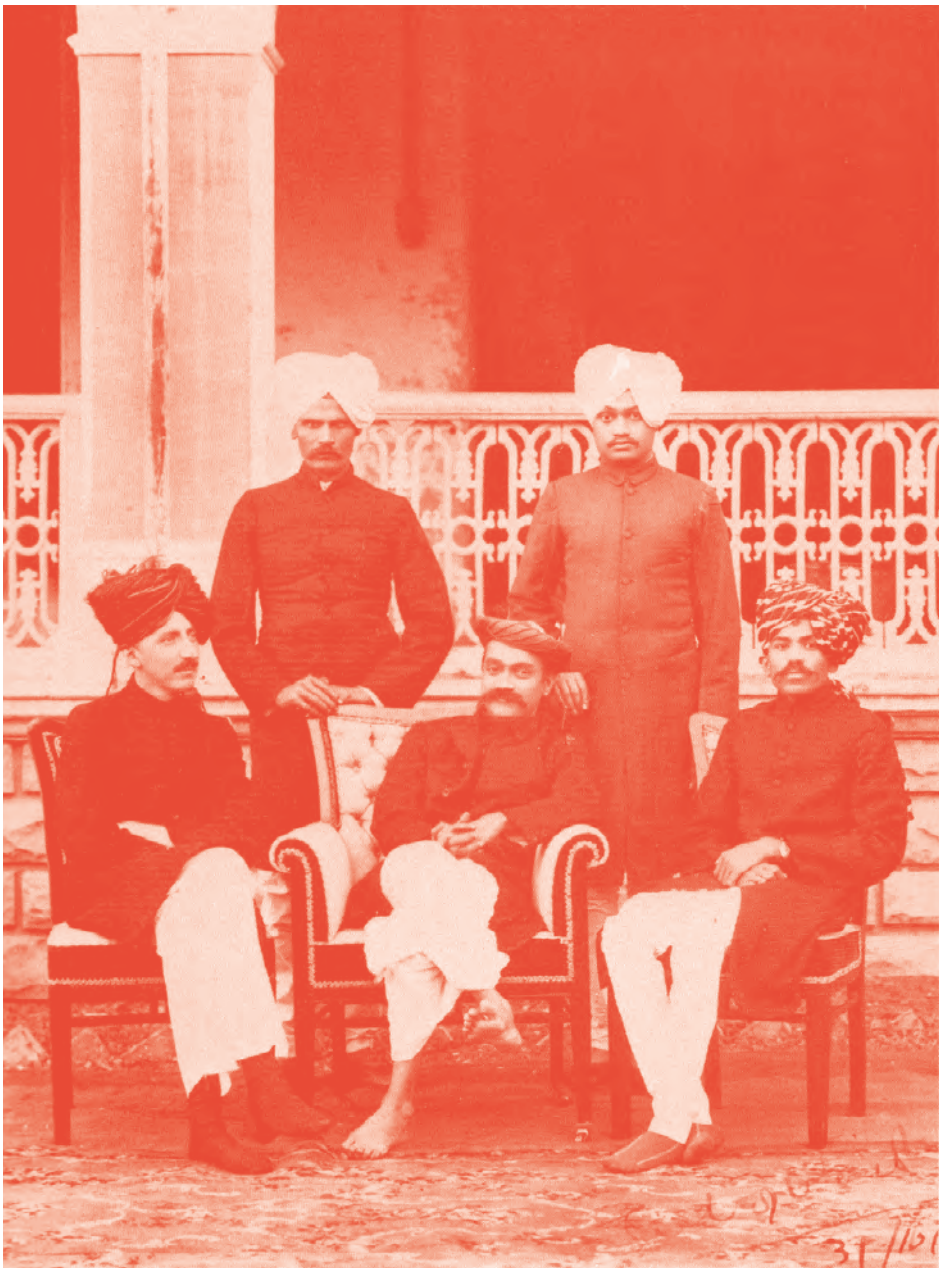
> It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down
> It is not the houses. It is the spaces in between the houses.
> It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist.[22]

What does it mean? That we are formed more by the things we no longer remember than those we do; that all kinds of memory are also forms of mass forgetting? It is a cryptic poem, but its ghost structures find an echo in a place like Cape Town, where so many people were planned out of existence. Or, still thinking about this city, here are some lines from Albert Camus: 'Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking I should like never to be unfaithful either to the second or the first'.[23] How much less that would have been had it read: 'I should like to be faithful both to the second and the first'. *The Plague* also begins in a dull, heat-struck colonial town where something extraordinary will happen; and like Forster's, his work explores the possibilities of empathy in an unjust world. In both, a private, beleaguered liberalism encounters the psychic damage wrought by an immense, trans-individual structure of racialised oppression – the kind of negation diagnosed with such force by Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko.

Finally, there is this virtuoso display, from a United States Defense Department briefing of 12 February 2002:

> We know there are known knowns: there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns: that is to say we know there are things we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.[24]

Donald Rumsfeld shows promise here as a literary critic. In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood outlines a similar argument to distinguish between reliably unreliable narrators in literature (fairly common) and the rarer, more slippery case of unreliably unreliable



Portrait of EM Forster, the Maharajah of Dewas and others in a courtyard, taken at Indore. Inscribed on front of mount by Maharajah of Dewas: 'House party memento, fine combination of varied east and cultured west / Tokoji Rao Puar [signature of Maharajah of Dewas] 31/10/21'. PHOTO: Ramchandra and Pratap Rao. Permission courtesy of Archive Centre, Kings College, Cambridge

narrators. I want to deal quickly with the known unknowns in *A Passage to India* before getting to the unknown unknowns – those moments operating on the outer envelope of awareness.

What happens in the Marabar Caves? It is one of the most famous absences in English literature: a well-known known unknown. If we shift the emphasis of that student's complaint, we can say that *Passage* is less a text in which nothing *happens* than one in which *nothing* happens. That is to say, a quality of nothingness is bodied forth by the language. Nothing attaches to the caves, we are told, a nothingness that may be extraordinary. At the mid-point in the novel, Mrs Moore goes into them and a kind of narrative anti-matter is introduced into the fictional universe, dematerialising everything it touches:

> The more she thought over it, the more disagreeable and frightening it became … The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, 'Pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value.' If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same – 'ou-boum'.[25]

Just after this, Adela enters the Marabar with Dr Aziz, and what happens there remains a mystery. 'I tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an unexplained muddle', Forster wrote to William Plomer in 1934. 'When asked what happened there, *I don't know*'.[26] So nothing does indeed have value, at least as a plot device, or a compositional principle. 'My writing mind is therefore a blur here – i.e. I will it to remain a blur … I wouldn't have attempted it in other countries, which though they contain mysteries or muddles, manage to draw rings round them'.[27]

There is, of course, a dismaying Orientalism to this – another reason why one should never trust the teller, only the tale. It makes India stand for the muddled, the inscrutable, the impenetrable. It produces the kind of 'adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery' which so annoyed F R Leavis, and later Chinua Achebe, about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:[28] 'Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?'[29] It is also disingenuous on Forster's part, since at one point, if you consult the manuscripts, he did know what happened in the Marabar Caves. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say: he didn't yet realise that he didn't know.

In any case, I won't go into what he wrote in that early draft. I want to tiptoe around the entire central section of the novel and all the problems that it throws up for a certain kind of literary analysis. I can use that ponderous academic locution and say: 'This is not the place to consider the problems that a sympathetic postcolonial analysis of the novel creates for a feminist approach' (because excusing Indian men means blaming English women). Or indeed, the fact that Forster's most pointed animus towards the English colonial presence is often aimed at the ladies of the Club (while the men come across as largely de-

cent sorts) – that is not within the scope of this lecture. It's a cheap rhetorical trick, of course, because while saying that you won't be doing it, you do it anyway.

What are the unknown unknowns? This is a novel best approached via its smaller details and distinctive linguistic textures, the finer growths that it deposits or secretes in obscure and unexpected locations within the text. 'Adventures do occur, but not punctually', we are told early on, and the same applies to the insights that the novel releases obliquely, unexpectedly.[30]

A Passage to India is one of the only books I have read more than twice, and what convinces me of its (problematic) greatness is that it is a shape-shifting text. It reads differently each time: different parts come into relief; others recede. The centre of gravity moves and re-sites itself. As a teenager on the Highveld, I was captivated by the novel's landscapes, the temporal and geological reach of Forster's prose. In the opening of 'Caves' we are told about 'the high places of Dravidia': older than anything in the world, never covered by water, watched for countless aeons by the sun, who 'may still discern outlines that were his before our globe was torn from his bosom. If flesh of the sun's flesh is to be touched anywhere, it is here, among the incredible antiquity of these hills'.[31] It is a sentence that shows how far we have moved from Austen's topography, and one of many in the novel where the narrative camera suddenly pulls back, vertiginously, reminding us of everything that can never be contained in its chosen form.

Studying the book as an A-level set-work in Sussex, I had an English teacher who was very English (tweed jackets with elbow pads, bow ties) but also immersed in Buddhism, Sanskrit and the *Bhagvad Gita*. He drew out the 'ou-boummmmmm' of the caves into a full yogic mantra, and pointed out the sly comedy of why Fielding and Professor Godbole are late for the expedition to the caves: because the latter 'had miscalculated the length of the prayer'.[32] He performed Godbole's speeches in an Indian accent, most memorably the one at the end of Mr Fielding's disastrous tea party, when the Brahman chooses what seems the most inopportune and socially awkward moment to sing his song about the milkmaiden calling Shri Krishna: 'Come, come, come, come …' The sniggering of some class members did not dissuade him; he intoned each syllable until we all fell still:

> 'But He comes in some other song, I hope?' said Mrs Moore gently.
>
> 'Oh no, He refuses to come,' repeated Godbole, perhaps not understanding her question. 'I say to Him, Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come.'
>
> Ronny's steps had died away, and there was a moment of absolute silence. No ripple disturbed the water, no leaf stirred.[33]

The next time I read the book was in India, on a gap-year complete with a backpack and *Lonely Planet*. Teaching English in a nondescript town called Jaisinghpur, I was struck by the creativity and felicity that the language took on in Indian mouths. Like the cricket which the students played obsessively during breaks, it had become something utterly and self-sufficiently Indian, entirely unconcerned with comparisons to its historical source. Forster's work helped me to realise this because of the obvious

‘You are a very selfish boy.’

pleasure it takes in Indian English. Here the novel marks a break with much empire writing about the subcontinent: a canon in which the figure of the *babu* Indian (the native clerk who has book knowledge and uses English in ornate but half-baked ways) is held up as a figure of ridicule.

In the works of Rudyard Kipling and many lesser writers committed to the ideology of 'the white man's burden', this is how cultural texts police a central paradox of the colonial project: that while 'progress' in the image of the coloniser was to be encouraged, racial divides should remain in place – native subjects were to be 'white but not quite', in the words of Homi Bhabha.[34] Hence the ridicule and animus to push away those who begin to use and over-use your language with skill and pleasure – a literary version of what Freud called the narcissism of minor differences.

A Passage to India, though, is remarkably free from prescriptive ideas about what English should be, and full of finely rendered conversations. After the portentous opening chapter, we are dropped suddenly into a world of social interchange and linguistic ease as Aziz relaxes with his friends:

> 'No, that is where Mrs Turton is so skilful. When we poor blacks take bribes, we perform what we are bribed to perform, and the law discovers us in consequence. The English take and do nothing. I admire them.'
>
> 'We all admire them. Aziz, please pass me the hookah.'
>
> 'Oh, not yet – hookah is so jolly now.'
>
> 'You are a very selfish boy.' He raised his voice suddenly, and shouted for dinner. Servants shouted back that it was ready. They meant that they wished it was ready, and were so understood, for nobody moved.[35]

In just a few lines of social performance – comic, painful – the text is able to set in motion a range of shimmering ironies with regard to race, gender, class and caste. Such passages also set up the novel's odd rhythm: vast and inscrutable landscapes, then we zoom in to the micro-world of a social interaction. Cosmic meditations on the birth of the solar system – then back to tea parties, gossip, 'the third act of *Cousin Kate*'. In the passage above, it is not clear whether Aziz and Mahmoud Ali are speaking English, or Urdu heard 'behind' the language on the page; but in either case, we see English remade and repurposed – not doomed to endless mimicry (as in V S Naipual's darker moments) but rather a site of creative hybridity which gestures toward the work of Garcia Marquez, Rushdie and their many imitators.

As an undergraduate, I came to feel that this reading was too easy (and also got over my adolescent crush on magical realism). The hookah-smoking is after all interrupted by a rude summons from Major Callendar, and soon Aziz finds himself caught in a net of roads:

> But at last he was rattling towards the civil lines, with a vivid sense of speed. As he entered their arid tidiness, depression suddenly seized him. The roads, named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India. He felt caught in their meshes.[36]

We have a similar net here in Cape Town, a more literary one, stretching across the suburbs of Woodstock, Salt River and Observatory. Tennyson, Pope, Dryden and Swift run one way, bisected by Addison, Burns, Goldsworth and Shelley. Coming off

Lower Main Road, we find the only writer who might possibly have walked down the street named after him: KIPLING.

For the more hard-nosed critic, Aziz will always be caught and demeaned in the meshes of Forster's text. And here it is interesting to trace the divided responses from Indian critics: appreciative remarks regarding its attempt to understand the subcontinent's social and religious systems, set against the accusation that it makes a character like Aziz seem querulous and child-like – an 'inverted toadie', in the words of Nirad Chaudhuri.[37] How, he asks, could Forster write a novel set in this period and make the main Indian character a Muslim? Why is there no voice of emergent Hindu nationalism? Questions of artistic representation inevitably become entangled with matters of political representation. Reading the novel back in the tragically delayed postcolony that is South Africa, Forster's fictional ethos comes to seem even more naïve and hopelessly liberal. If we have heard the message of Biko and Fanon, how seriously can we take his insistence on the sanctity of personal relations?

This, I realised while sitting through graduate seminars, is the kind of approach rewarded by literary studies as a profession. But in setting such store on brushing all cultural texts against the grain, we risk assuming that literary works are automatically more naïve than we are. Time and again, the kind of disciplined literary critique that I was exposed to as a student managed to be both entirely accurate, justified, politically impeccable – and also curiously beside the point. In effect, it asks for a different novel (or play, or poem) altogether, rather than thinking through the work in front of it.

In chapter three Mrs Moore tells her son about how she met a charming doctor in the mosque, but (to Ronny's annoyance) does not indicate that she was talking about 'a Mahomedan'. Flustered, he then proceeds to diagnose the native 'type' that Aziz represents – educated, spoilt Westernised, 'cheeky' – and makes her reconsider her meeting: 'Yes it was all true, but how false as a summary of the man; the essential life of him had been slain'.[38] I think of this when hearing the predictable accusations levelled at the novel: Yes, yes, true, all true: but how false a summary of the whole.

Just after that is what seems to be a throwaway moment, as Mrs Moore goes to hang up her cloak on a peg, but finds it occupied by a wasp:

> Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside a house as out; it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses trees, houses trees …'Pretty dear', said Mrs. Moore to the wasp. He did not wake, but her voice floated out, to swell the night's uneasiness.[39]

Reading the novel again on a Greek island with the hum of cicadas in my ears, I was attuned to all the animals and other, non-human presences that press in from the margins of the text. *A Passage to India* has this oddly ecological dimension, the sense of its human scenes unfolding within a much larger, infinitely complex system.

And if a novel itself is a kind of ecosystem, a tangled bush of relations, then where do its final meanings reside? 'So you thought an echo was India; you took the Marabar Caves as final?' say the palm trees to Mrs Moore as she leaves on a ship from Bombay: 'What have we in common with them, or they with Asirgarh? Good-bye!'[40]

Morgan and Masood on holiday together in 1911 in Italian-speaking Switzerland.
Permission courtesy of Archive Centre, Kings College, Cambridge

Where do the most concentrated or lasting messages of a literary work secrete themselves? In its characters and images? In the course of single, memorable sentences? Or in a larger, more diffuse relation between the parts?

The discursive, meandering character of Forster's writing produces more negatives in the criticism about his work. 'Not quite major' wrote Malcolm Bradbury when trying to rank his achievement;[41] for Lionel Trilling he was 'sometimes irritating in his refusal to be great'.[42] Even Virginia Woolf, whose novels flit so readily between different sites of consciousness, found that her contemporary risked diluting his gifts in trying to do justice to all fictional parties, in trying to be all things to all men (if not, perhaps, to all women). 'If he were less scrupulous', she wrote, 'less just, less sensitively aware of the different aspects of each case, he could, we feel, come down with greater force on one precise point. As it is, the strength of his blow is dissipated'.[43]

Yet this quality is read more positively by Zadie Smith, who applauds him for never settling into the predictable postures of the ageing writer. What's unusual about Forster, she writes, is precisely what he *didn't* do:

> He didn't lean rightward with the years, or allow nostalgia to morph into misanthropy; he never knelt for the Pope or the Queen, nor did he flirt (ideologically speaking) with Hitler, Stalin, or Mao; he never believed the novel was dead or the hills alive, continued to read contemporary fiction after the age of fifty, harboured no special hatred for the generation below or above him, did not come to feel that England had gone to hell in a hand-basket, that its language was doomed, that lunatics were running the asylum, or foreigners swamping the cities.[44]

Still, she continues, 'like all notable English novelists, he was a tricky bugger', and the middle ground that he sought to occupy can seem by turns profoundly ethical and annoyingly non-committal: 'At times – when defending his liberal humanism against fundamentalists of the right and left – that middle line was, in its quiet, Forsterish way, the most radical place to be. At other times – in the *laissez-faire* cosiness of his literary ideas – it seemed merely the most comfortable'. In another essay, she writes about her debt to the tradition of the English comic novel, in which 'there is no bigger crime … than thinking you are right'.[45] As a mode that thrives on the humbling and disciplining of those who take themselves too seriously, it finds rich pickings in the genre of the campus novel. Smith's *On Beauty* is one example, itself a re-writing of *Howard's End*.

A Passage to India takes this comedic insight about the danger of certainty and relocates it to the colonial endgame. Here it begins to take on a much deeper force, as we are made to see the violence that resides in any categorical statement. This applies at first to the racist certainties bandied around the Club; but eventually, as the novel pushes its negatives further and further, it comes to comprehend any form of meaning-making, opening the text out toward much larger philosophical terrains. We can see this at work when the Indian social wasp reappears in chapter four, another minor moment in which we hear of Mr Graysford and Mr Sorley, 'the devoted missionaries

who lived out beyond the slaughter-houses, always travelled third on the railways, and never came up to the Club'.[46] In this brief cameo, they preach about all converts being welcomed into the mansions of our Father's house, but are then questioned by a disembodied narrative voice. Will there be room for the monkeys? And jackals?

> Jackals were indeed less to Mr. Sorley's mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well embrace all mammals. And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps, and was apt to change the conversation. And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud? And the bacteria inside Mr. Sorley? No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing.[47]

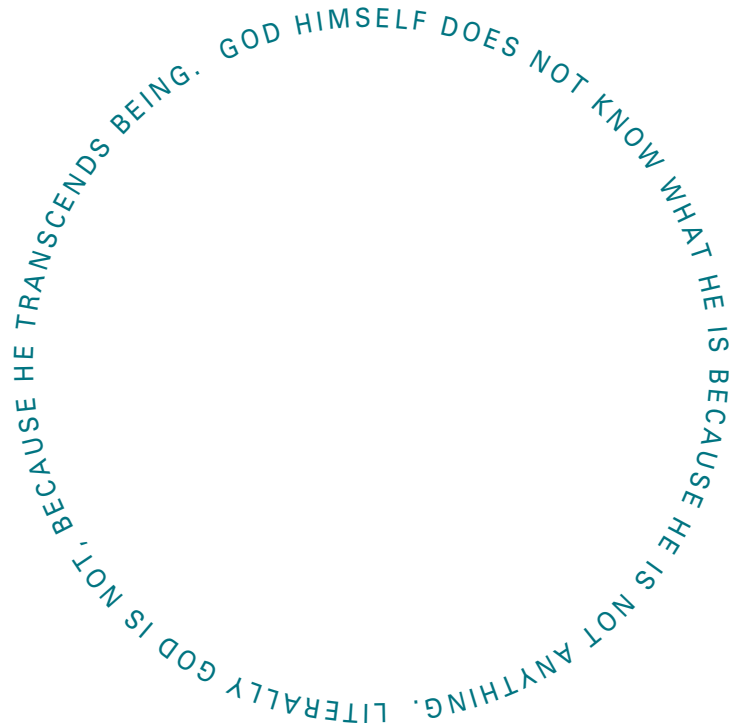
Again, the sudden shift in depth of field: the narrative camera pulls back, the aperture widens. And one sees another of Forster's fictional special effects here: what he called 'rhythm', the repetition of certain motifs (in this case, the wasp) throughout a text, but in a manner that should not allow them to 'harden into symbol'.[48] Rather, we are asked to consider them in terms of a musical analogy: variations on a theme, transposed into different harmonic contexts, emerging unawares from the larger orchestration.

Both techniques are at work as the book moves to a close, producing a series of thought experiments which signal the larger philosophical (and formal) problem the novel puts to itself. We are made to see that any system of meaning must rely on exclusions and discriminations; that all meanings come into being by disavowing other possible meanings; that all forms are arbitrary and limited, including the novel that we are now coming to the end of.

In the closing passages, the camera pulls back one final time as the whole landscape conspires to keep Fielding and Aziz apart:

> 'Why can't we be friends now?' said the other, holding him affectionately. 'It's what I want. It's what you want.'
>
> But the horses didn't want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there.'[49]

The ability of friendship and sincerity to transcend larger political structures; the frank voicing of love between men – these are revealed as impossible within the world of the novel. But at a further remove, the writing gives the sense of a whole literary tradition that has reached its limit. Transplanted to northern India, it probes the limit not only of *the* English, but also of English itself – its own medium, language, tradition, inheritance, structure of feeling, mode of address. 'Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness' – as with David Lurie in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace* (another limit text, in the sense that I have been exploring here), we can sense a particular authorial candour in the acknowledgment that English is 'an unfit medium' for the truth of the late colony: 'arthritic, bygone'.[50] *A Passage to India* arrives at a philosophical insight about the wisdom of uncertainty at an historical moment – the moment of decolonization – that demanded political conviction and collective action.



Placing itself in this impossible position, the book dissolves, and it is seldom that an artwork shows such a powerful sense of its own limitations, the event horizon of its understandings, rushing towards us.

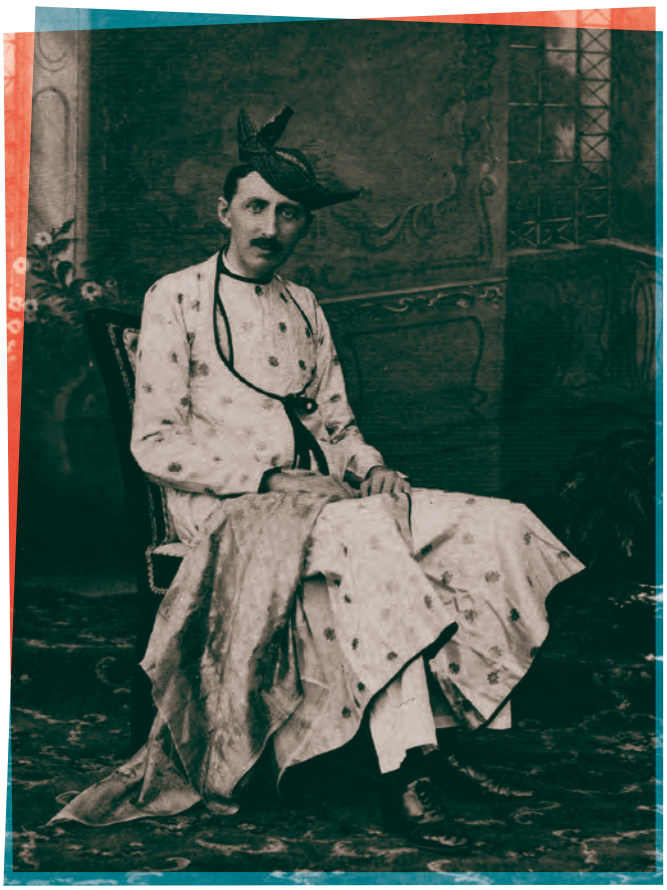
But I am not going to end with that. Instead, there is a more obscure moment, one concerned with Professor Godbole and the wasp. The text is flooded with the monsoon and the festival of Gokul Ashtami, a ceremony that Forster remembered as the strongest and the strangest Indian experience granted him.[51] In the opening of 'Temple', it produces a chapter of lights and misspelled signs, harmoniums, cacophonous music and dancing, greasy rice and papier-mâché cobras. 'All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear'.[52] Is this woolly mysticism and proto-New Age nonsense? Or is it some of the most remarkable English prose of the twentieth century? 'Did it succeed?' asks the narrative voice: 'Books written afterwards say, "Yes". But how, if there is such an event, can it be remembered afterwards? How can it be expressed in anything but itself?'[53]

Without needing to come to a verdict, we can watch a certain kind of English unravelling before us. The knowingness that fortifies the language of Dr Johnson, Austen and Orwell, the ironic distance and empirical control – all of this must now apprehend the unquantifiable dimensions of religious experience: of unknowability, total identification, mantra-like simplicity, submission, surrender.

Having begun with a joke at the expense of students, I should also mention that another member of the class came up to me after a lecture and explained in detail about Apophatic, or Negative Theology. Here we see the furthest reach of the novel's roundabout syntax, for in this tradition, the divine can only be approached via negative constructions – a thought experiment that recurs in all the world's major religions. 'We do not know what God is', wrote John Scot Erigena in the ninth century: 'God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being'.[54]

In this final section, Forster's prose abandons the portentous tone that can attend such mystical pronouncements. It sloughs this off for a playful description of a religion that is able to accommodate practical jokes and clowning, a ceremony not constrained by stultifying notions of good taste. But even as these final sections are ostensibly about Hinduism, I think of them also as a kind of meta-commentary on the novel itself, perhaps the closest we come in the whole book to sensing what it is, rather than what it is not. As Godbole explores the contours of his religious trance, we are told that 'his senses grew thinner, he remembered a wasp seen he forgot where, perhaps on a stone. He loved the wasp equally, he impelled it likewise, he was imitating God'.[55] But then his attention cannot hold, he tries too hard, he loses the memory, but it does not matter:

> Covered with grease and dust. Professor Godbole had once more developed the life of his spirit. He had, with increasing vividness, again seen Mrs. Moore, and round her faintly clinging forms of trouble. He was a Brahman, she Christian, but it made no difference, it made no difference whether she was a trick of his memory or



Professional studio portrait of E M Forster, seated, full length, wearing white robes with embroidered flowers or emblems, over white trousers, a silk shawl resting on his knees and a small dark turban. Taken at Indore, India. Inscribed on front of mount by the Maharajah of Dewas: 'Mr E M Forster in his full official robes at an Indian court.' PHOTO: Ramchandra and Pratap Rao Permission courtesy of Archive Centre, Kings College, Cambridge

a telepathic appeal. It was his duty, as it was his desire, to place himself in the position of the God and to love her, and to place himself in her position and to say to the God, 'Come, come, come, come.' This was all he could do. How inadequate! But each according to his own capacities, and he knew that his own were small. 'One old Englishwoman and one little, little wasp,' he thought, as he stepped out of the temple into the grey of a pouring wet morning. 'It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself.'

ENDNOTES

1 | A longer version of this piece was first published in *English in Africa*, 40:2 (2013): 25–45.
2 | Cited in Zadie Smith's appreciative essay: 'EM Forster: Middle Manager', *New York Review of Books*, August 14, 2008.
3 | EM Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Abinger, 1974), 17.
4 | Although there is, of course, the case of Ben Kingsley as Mohandas K Gandhi. In his essay 'Outside the Whale', Rushdie quotes David Lean on that production: 'I haven't seen Dickie Attenborough's *Gandhi* yet ... but as far as I'm aware, nobody has yet succeeded in putting India on the screen.' Rushdie comments: 'The Indian film industry, from Satyajit Ray to Mr NT Rama Rao, will no doubt feel humbled by the great man's opinion.' In *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1992), 87.
5 | EM Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1972), 285.
6 | EM Forster, *The Hill of Devi and Other Indian Writings*, ed. Elizabeth Heine (New York: Abinger, 1983), 298.
7 | Forster to Syed Ross Masood, 27 Septemeber 1922, quoted in PN Furbank, *EM Forster: A Life, Vol 2* (London: Cardinal Sphere, 1998), 106.
8 | EM Forster, *A Passage to India*, ed Oliver Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 29.
9 | EM Forster, *A Passage to India,* 289.
10 | John Keats, 'Letter to George and Thomas Keats: Negative Capability', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume 2*, ed Stephen Greenblatt et al (New York and London: Norton, 2006), 942.
11 | Walter Benjamin, 'Picturing Proust', in *One-way Street and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2009), 126.
12 | Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800 – 1900* (New York: Verso, 1998).
13 | Jane Austen, 'To James Edward Austen, Monday 16 – Tuesday 17 December 1816', in *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 323.
14 | Forster, *A Passage to India*, 257.
15 | TS Eliot, 'What the Thunder said', in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), 42.
16 | Forster, *The Hill of Devi,* 153.
17 | *Maurice* appeared in 1971, a year after his death.
18 | Gillian Beer, 'Negation in *A Passage to India*', in *A Passage to India: Essays and Interpretations,* ed John Beer (London: Macmillan, 1985), 48.
19 | Philip Larkin, 'Talking in Bed', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton & Company, 2005), 1655.
20 | George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in *Politics and the English Language and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford City Press, 2009), 10.
21 | Simon Armitage, 'It Ain't What You Do It's What It Does To You', *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 4.
22 | James Fenton, 'A German Requiem', in *The Memory of War and Children in Exile* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 11.
23 | Albert Camus, 'Return to Tipasa', in *Summer in Algiers* (London: Penguin, 2005). The lines are used as an epigraph in Stephen Watson's collection *In This City* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).
24 | Donald Rumsfeld, 'Known Unknowns' (US Defence department briefing, February 2002). Available in 'Rum Remark wins Rumsfeld an Award', BBC News, accessed 13 June 2013, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3254852.stm.
25 | EM Forster, *A Passage to India*, 146.
26 | EM Forster, 'Letter to William Plomer, 28 September 1934', in *Selected Letters of EM Forster Vol 2*, ed Mary Lago and PN Furbank (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1985), 125.
27 | Ibid.
28 | FR Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), 177.
29 | Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987*, (London: Heinemann, 1988), 8.
30 | Forster, *A Passage to India*, 43.
31 | Ibid, 125.
32 | Ibid, 132.
33 | Ibid, 87.
34 | Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 126.
35 | Forster, *A Passage to India*, 32.

36 | Ibid, 36.
37 | Nirad Chaudhuri, 'Passage to and from India', *Encounter* 2 (June 1954): 22.
38 | Forster, *A Passage to India*, 50.
39 | Ibid.
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41 | Malcolm Bradbury, *E M Forster: A Passage to India* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 1.
42 | Lionel Trilling, *E M Forster: A Study* (London: Hogarth Press, 1944), 9.
43 | Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of E.M. Forster', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 110.
44 | Smith, 'Middle Manager'.
45 | Zadie Smith, 'Love, actually', *The Guardian*, November 1, 2003.
46 | Forster, *A Passage to India*, 52.
47 | Ibid.
48 | Forster, *Aspects of the Novel,* 116.
49 | Forster, *A Passage to India*, 289.
50 | J M Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000), 117.
51 | Forster, *The Hill of Devi*, 103-106.
52 | Forster, *A Passage to India*, 260.
53 | Ibid.
53 | Cited in 'Apophatic Theology', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apophatic_theology.
54 | Forster, *A Passage to India*, 259.
55 | Ibid, 180.

POSTSCRIPT

Since giving this lecture, I have retired A Passage to India *from the syllabus. In contemporary South Africa, it seems more and more unlikely that a voice as quiet and careful as Forster's could even be heard above the din. In fact, the whole project of trying to hear it, and of spending so much time thinking about a single text, has come to seem faintly ridiculous to me while revising this piece. As such, the centre of gravity of the novel has shifted again, coming to rest in the passage where Fielding is turned out of the Club at the height of the scandal. He looks toward the Marabar Caves from the veranda and looks back on his forty years' experience. He had (we are told) learnt to manage his life, developed his personality, explored his limitations, controlled his passions – and he had done it all without becoming either pedantic or worldly: 'A creditable achievement, but as the moment passed, he felt he ought to have been working at something else the whole time – he didn't know at what, never would know, never could know, and that was why he felt sad'.*[56]

How to Read Lolita

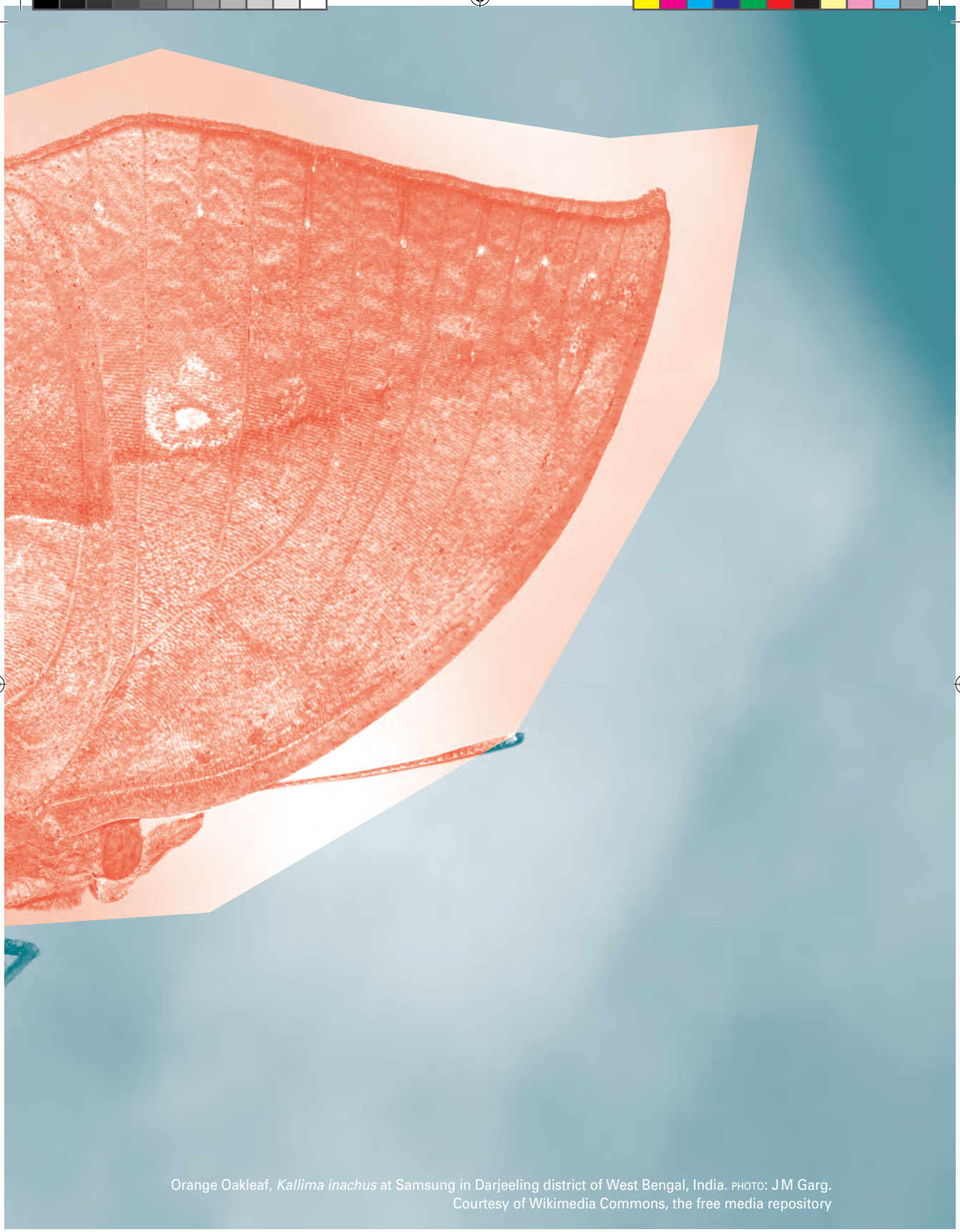
IMRAAN COOVADIA

In his January 1964 *Playboy* interview with futurologist-to-be Alvin Toffler, Vladimir Nabokov defined his life in terms of two parallel activities: 'My pleasures are the two most intense known to man: writing, and butterfly hunting.'[1 2]

Nabokov had reason to delimit his pleasures so carefully in the pages of *Playboy*, especially in the period between *Lolita*'s popular-culture triumph when it was published in the 1950s, with Kubrick's film appearing in 1962, and the 1969 publication of *Ada*, by any measure the most scatological work of his career. While Nabokov insisted that his writing was pornographic neither in intent nor in effect ('I have no interest in pornography and cannot imagine myself being titillated by what I write'), he continued to publish fiction in *Playboy* and allow the magazine to be one of his most generous supporters.[3]

The idea of a self divided and defined by these two pleasures counts among Nabokov's most successful pieces of autobiographical invention. *Lolita*'s critics have dutifully noted Nabokov's lepidoterological activities alongside his development as a Russian- and then English-language novelist. In 2000, the 700-page volume *Nabokov's Butterflies* collected many of his technical writings and drawings, as well as selections from Nabokov's poetry and fiction that touch on the subject of butterflies, in a joint production of the professional guardians of the Nabokov legacy – biographer Brian Boyd, lepidopterist and writer Robert Michael Pyle, and Nabokov's favoured English translator and collaborator, his son Dmitri.

Nabokov's interpreters, including Brian Boyd and Michael Pyle, sense that butterflies interested the writer in a way that is more profound, perhaps, than *Nabokov's Butterflies* makes visible, but without quite being able to explain the nature of the connection between these 'two most intense' pleasures. Nabokov's holiday travels as a collector around Europe and the United States, his use of butterflies and butterfly hunters in poetry and his Berlin-period novel *The Gift* (1963), and his classificatory work at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology in the 1940s, are, I believe, less relevant – at least to the project of understanding Lolita – than one particular butterfly genus, the *Kallima* or dead-leaf butterflies (Fig 1), and the conclusions Nabokov drew from the *Kallima* genus about God's existence, evolution, art and literature.



Orange Oakleaf, *Kallima inachus* at Samsung in Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India. PHOTO: J M Garg.
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository

Fig 1

For Nabokov, the *Kallima*'s imitation of a dead leaf was not merely an interesting entomological phenomenon. It touched on something that was central to his concerns as an artist. Indeed he intended to devote a substantial fraction of his working life, after *Lolita*, to exploring animal mimicry. In 1952, as the manuscript of *Lolita* was almost complete, Vera Nabokov proposed to Houghton Mifflin that the Boston publishing house fund 'one of [her husband's] pet projects … the compilation of a work that would comprise all known examples of mimicry in the animal kingdom'.[4] Vera estimated, conservatively, that 'the research alone would take two or three years'.

The arrangements for this giant encyclopedia were never finalised by Houghton. Nor did the volumes Nabokov subsequently planned on the deployment of butterflies in art and literature materialise. The disparate collection of texts and drawings in Boyd and Pyle's *Nabokov's Butterflies* stands as the remnant of two more coherent projects, on mimicry and the presence of butterflies in culture, that were close to Nabokov's heart.

It was the *Kallima* genus, both butterfly and mimic, that concentrated Nabokov's thoughts, and he made extraordinary claims for their significance. The 'closest reproduction of the mind's birth', he writes, 'is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when one realises a tangle of twigs and leaves is a marvellously disguised insect or bird'.[5] Such moments, when a scene shifts from one framework of perception ('a tangle of twigs and leaves') to another ('a marvellously disguised insect'), are, according to Nabokov, almost co-extensive with consciousness ('the mind's birth').

Indeed, Nabokov argues, the 'fantastic refinement of "protective mimicry" is so exquisite that it far exceeds any predator's perception'.[6] The adaptation far exceeds the requirements of natural selection. The trick-of-the-eye resemblance of a *Kallima* butterfly to a dead leaf can only be appreciated by a being with an aesthetic sense.

For Nabokov, therefore, the presence of the *Kallima* genus, along with other exquisite mimics among the insect and animal kingdoms, goes some way to proving the existence of a Creator. A 'trillion light years would hardly be sufficient … to [endow] a folded butterfly with the exact appearance of a certain variety of leaf with the artistic bonus of a realistic flaw: a small hole eaten through it by someone's larva'.[7] The dead-leaf butterfly is an instance of God's artwork. The two aspects the *Kallima* presents to the observer, as butterfly and leaf, make it a kind of puzzle picture. Moreover, as a butterfly that looks like a leaf that has been eaten by a butterfly larva, the *Kallima* is also a self-reflexive artefact.

In its singularity (unique in 'a trillion light years'), dual aspects, and self-reflexivity, the Kallima is a model for Nabokov's own creation in *Lolita*.

In the same interview Nabokov announced that 'she [Lolita] was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle – its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look'.[8] Nabokov made many retrospective attempts to control *Lolita*'s reception but this is the most accurate formula he gave and it is one that applies equally to the butterfly genus that so engaged him.

The *Lolita* problem – the complicity the narrative elicits from the reader on behalf of its narrator Humbert Humbert – has been more or less neutralised by the novel's late-20th-century canonisation. Where *Lolita* was once criticised for its subject matter and the brief it advances for Humbert Humbert, it has been so assimilated in 50 years that admiring it counts as something like a badge of literary sophistication. The difficult subject matter has almost disappeared from view and the novel can be safely added to the curriculum along with once-controversial works such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. If Nabokov's novel once seemed a cold-blooded and provocative experiment, it is now often viewed as an unexceptional exercise in ethical education.

Brian Boyd, who must be the world's preeminent Nabokovian after the publication of his great two-volume biography, puts it this way: 'Humbert is a moral monster, as the novel shows in such detail. One of the marvels of the book is that while it presents such damning facts it allows Humbert full scope to lure inattentive readers into acquiescence until Nabokov confronts them with their facile complicity.'[9] Humbert Humbert is clearly a 'moral monster', according to Boyd, as demonstrated by 'such damning facts' as occur in the narrative. Only 'inattentive readers' will be taken in by Humbert's performance. And even these 'inattentive readers', once presented with evidence of 'their facile complicity', should be completely cleared of any remaining sympathy for the protagonist. In assigning so explicit and uncomplicated a moral meaning to *Lolita*, Boyd is echoed by influential readers of the novel, from Richard Rorty, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) to Leland de la Durantaye in *Style is Matter: the Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007).

As an account of the novel, this has the advantage of following the model Stanley Fish proposed for Miltonic epic in *Surprised by Sin* (1967). Milton's charismatic Satan captures the reader's sympathy, Fish argued, but only, in a sense, to set the reader up. The poem finally turns to correcting and chastising the reader for 'facile complicity' with the devil himself. Similarly, by Boyd's argu-

ment, in reading *Lolita* we discover the methods that the 'moral monster' Humbert uses to attach our sympathies. So we learn to be better readers, better interpreters of characters, and to be more alert to the shapes of ethical seduction.

I, however, believe the disadvantages of Boyd's interpretation, and of any such interpretation, far outweigh the advantages. Firstly, Humbert's paedophilia, and Nabokov's imaginative rendering of it, mean that the novel's subject matter can never be quite naturalised along the lines of other once-scandalous 20th-century texts in which what was shocking then now seems matter-of-fact.

Secondly, it is not simply 'inattentive readers' who are captivated by Humbert's wit, verbal ingenuity, sarcasm, melancholy, grandeur and intellectual agility, qualities one identifies in the letters and prose pieces of his creator. It is pointless to read the novel while remaining immune to Humbert's language and sentiments. On Boyd's account, it is difficult to understand why one continues to read *Lolita* after one's complicity has been revealed, why a reader cares to follow the simple discovery of a 'moral monster' and be admonished for his or her own moral carelessness, and, indeed, why anyone gives *Lolita* a second, or third, or fourth reading.

Boyd misses the continuous tension between complicity and repulsion, between identification with Humbert's wishes, and recoil at their contents and consequences, a tension which defines many readers' experience of *Lolita* and which makes reading Nabokov's novel an exercise unlike anything else in the 20th-century curriculum.

In fact, there is no final point at which the reader breaks with Humbert (who indeed behaves relatively better in the second part of the novel than in the first). Instead, in my experience at any rate, the reader is more likely to fluctuate between pro- and anti-Humbert positions, never quite able to find a consistent ground for his or her feelings. Complicity comes, goes, and returns throughout the narrative.

This experience – switching between such exclusive perspectives of grand love story and paedophile rationalisation, and between a sense of *Lolita*'s exquisite verbal form and repulsion by its content – is the defining feature of the novel. This dual aspect of Nabokov's novel, which incorporates the mimicry of Humbert impersonating a lover and father as well as Nabokov imperfectly impersonating his own narrator Humbert, may explain why the *Kallima* butterfly should be Nabokov's emblem of his own art.

Complicity begins in *Lolita* with Humbert's opening volley:

> Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in

Fig 2

My wife and my mother-in-law: They are both in this picture – find them, 1915. [Illustration is an optical illusion showing a portrait of the artist's wife, head-and-shoulders, facing left away from the viewer, and his elderly mother-in-law, head-and-shoulders, facing left, with a kerchief over her head.] ILLUSTRATION: William Ely Hill, 1887–1962. Permission courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC

> my arms she was always Lolita. Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer.[10]

The reader notes the riddle ('about as many years') and may or may not stop to calculate it. If you work it out, Humbert is about 38 years old, although he seems to think much like his 50-year-old creator. This opening passage makes us voyeurs alongside Humbert. We learn to call the object of Humbert's obsession 'Lolita,' rather than 'Lola,' 'Dolly' or 'Dolores'. But this is to use Humbert's own love name and thus, in a real sense, to consent to enter his obsession.

Above all, Nabokov's sonic prose touches our readerly senses. The luxurious sensuality of *Lolita*'s prose matches Humbert's corrupt sensuality. It is impossible to read 'tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate' without re-enacting it inside our own mouths. In this way the book, and its narrator, reaches into our mouths, our minds and our imaginations.

If *Lolita* repeatedly invades us with the narrator's thoughts and sensations, there are as many scenes in the novel that sting us for our complicity. Nabokov developed this last technique in *The Enchanter*, the 1940 Russian-language sketch he made in Paris a decade before beginning *Lolita* in earnest and which he long believed to be lost. The short narrative is constructed in the third person and studies a paedophile who marries the dying mother of his target.

In *The Enchanter*, Nabokov already deploys the list of exquisite sensations he will use in *Lolita*, down to the roller skates that leave a notch on Lolita's ankles. On first encountering the girl in *The Enchanter*, the unnamed paedophile registers 'the radiance of her large, slightly vacuous eyes, somehow suggesting translucent gooseberries, her merry, warm complexion; her pink mouth … the coarse strap of the skates'.[11] Here the third-person narrative manages to elicit aesthetic complicity rather than fellow feeling.

Alienation, however, is a more constant, and perhaps even more disturbing, presence in *The Enchanter* than in *Lolita*. The paedophile goes on, for example, to repel the reader by noting that '[S]uch warm-skinned, russet-sheened, open-lipped girls got their periods early on, and it was little more to them than a game, like cleaning up a dollhouse kitchen'.[12] The combination of adult biology and childish imitation of adult behaviour ('like cleaning up a dollhouse kitchen') is uncanny. More disturbing is the fact that this occurs in the narrator's reverie and the reader is directly exposed to his imagination.

Nabokov cast *Lolita* in the first person, a decision that intensifies the reader's proximity to the narrator's desires. Yet *Lolita* is

far less monotonous than *The Enchanter*. On occasion, Humbert does switch to the third-person perspective. After Charlotte Haze's death, he sets out the situation between himself, his newly acquired stepdaughter, and his own conscience:

> More and more uncomfortable did Humbert feel. It was something quite special, that feeling: an oppressive, hideous constraint as if I were sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed. 'You chump,' she said, sweetly smiling at me. '... I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me ...' [Humbert informs Lolita that] 'your mother is dead.' In the gay town of Lepingville I bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary napkins, sunglasses, some more garments. At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go.[13]

Where *The Enchanter* foregrounded the paedophile's interest in his target's menstruation, here Humbert signals a parallel interest but only as one item within a list ('four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary napkins, sunglasses').

Humbert again lapses into the third person when reading, or remembering, a medical description of female pubescence. We seem to be reading over his shoulder: 'Humbert was perfectly capable of intercourse with Eve, but it was Lilith he longed for. The bud-stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years) in the sequence of somatic changes accompanying pubescence. And the next maturational item available is the first appearance of pigmented pubic hair (11.2 years)'.[14] 'Lilith', sometimes supposed to be Adam's first wife, is a figure for demonic sexuality. The passage confronts the reader directly with Humbert's image-making, first by 'bud-stage' and then by 'pigmented pubic hair'. Humbert absorbs this medical language and warps it, the same way he warps the name 'Lolita'. To be enthralled or just charmed by Humbert Humbert, then to be merely horrified, and then to be again sympathetic, and then perhaps again enthralled or horrified, and to be aware of how Humbert's language and imagination invades your own, cannot be simplified into a single recognition of complicity.

Humbert himself undergoes shifts in perception, and recognition, that run in parallel with the reader's experiences. In the most striking representation of voyeurism in the novel, Humbert explains that

> I could list a great number of these one-sided diminutive romances. Some of them ended in a rich flavor of hell. It happened for instance that from my balcony I would notice a lighted window across the street and what looked like a nymphet in the

act of un-dressing before a co-operative mirror. Thus isolated, thus removed, the vision acquired an especially keen charm that made me race with all speed toward my lone gratification. But abruptly, fiendishly, the tender pattern of nudity I had adored would be transformed into the disgusting lamp-lit bare arm of a man in his underclothes reading his paper by the open window in the hot, damp, hopeless summer night.[15]

In his 1951 Cornell lectures, 'Masterpieces of European Fiction', delivered while he was working on the Lolita manuscript, Nabokov comes close to identifying these shifts in focus as the essence of his own fictional technique.

'Masterpieces of European Fiction' limits its attention to narratives involving various physical transformations (Gogol's 'The Overcoat', Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*) but Nabokov treats these changes in shapes as stand-ins for mental and perceptual shifts. Here, as elsewhere in Nabokov's literary criticism, Tolstoy is an admired and distant patriarch while Dostoyevsky is the adversary who is detested in detail. And it is Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky's precursor, Nikolai Gogol, with whom Nabokov identifies as a literary engineer.

In his analysis of Gogol's famous story 'The Overcoat', one of the founding fictions of Russian literary culture, Nabokov announces that 'with Gogol shifting is the very basis of his art (when a sentence blurs and discloses a secret meaning worth the sudden focal shift)'.[16] Indeed, in a paragraph that links butterflies and fiction, Nabokov decides that Gogol's 'stories only mimic stories with plots. It is like a rare moth that departs from a moth-like appearance to mimic the superficial pattern of a structurally quite different thing – some popular butterfly, say'.[17] Reading Gogol means moving from one construction of the facts ('a rare moth') to another ('some popular butterfly') and back again. Nabokov finds 'shifting' not just in the overall framework of the story ('stories with plots') but, in fact, from sentence to sentence.

Elsewhere in the Cornell lectures, Nabokov suggests that 'shifting' in a work of art descends from constant alterations in the realities it reproduces. He proposes the example of 'a painter, [who] having begun a nude of a young female model, might strive for a likeness with such ardor that, as he tirelessly recorded every trait, he would, in the end, find that he was depicting the old woman into which the model had evolved during her plurennial pose'.[18] One might imagine two separate paintings, of the original young model and her much older self, but, given Nabokov's interest in puzzle pictures, it might be better to illustrate his point with a single image, the well-known puzzle picture, usually called *Wife or Mother-in-Law* (Fig 2).

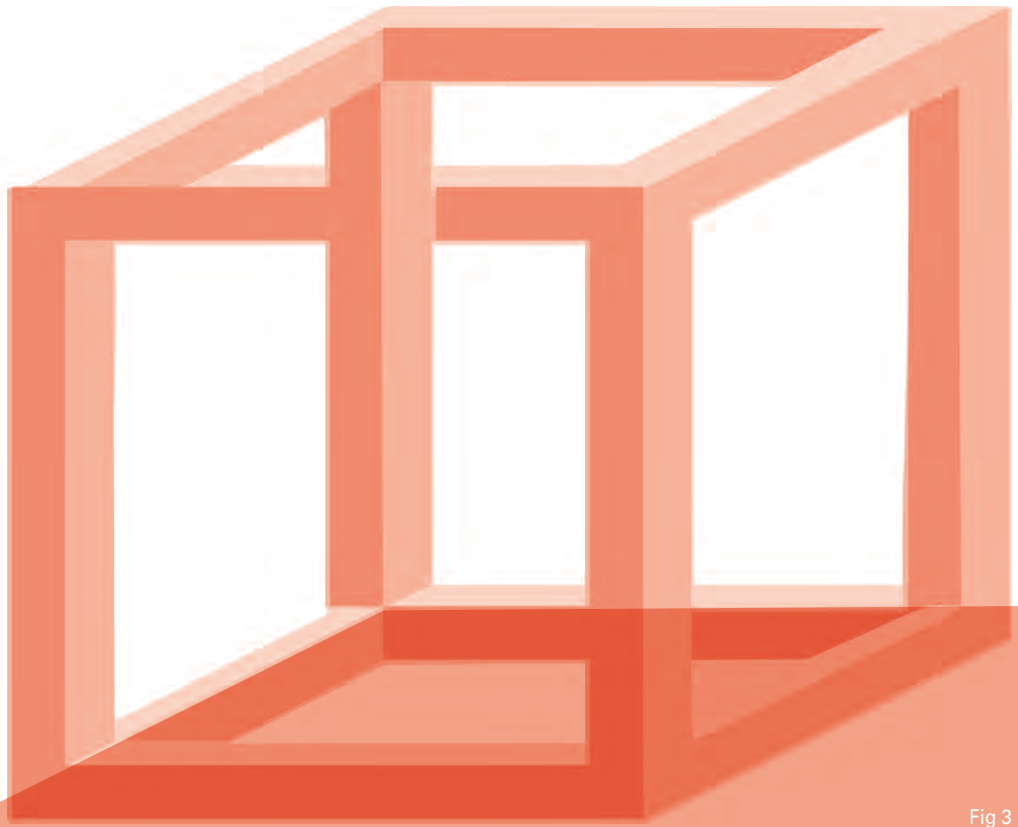


Fig 3

A Necker Cube and the equivalent showing a flat-edge crossing the other, which is impossible in three-dimensional space – it's an optical illusion. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository

Wife or Mother-in- Law, along with similar puzzle pictures like the *Necker Cube* (Fig 3), are staples of early 20th-century psychology, in particular German-language Gestalt psychology. Gestalt (meaning form, or shape) psychology criticised the reductionist imperatives of the Anglo-American human sciences. It argued that visual and auditory perception are top-down pro-

cesses – that melodies, shapes, forms and other patterns are analytically prior to their component parts. Such compositions are constructed and projected by the mind rather than being built out of individual tones, dots or digital elements. One doesn't hear tones and chords first but the shape of a melody into which each tone is fitted. Each element inside a pattern is determined by the overall organisation.

The triangle in the foreground of *Wife or Mother-in-Law*, for example, is interpreted either as the mouth of the mother-in-law, or as the wife's necklace. It can be seen as part of both patterns, over time, but never simultaneously. Similarly, the leftmost vertical line in the *Necker Cube* belongs either to a cube which protrudes out of the paper surface, or to one which projects into the surface.

The *Necker Cube*, which switches repeatedly when observed, is a good example of what the Gestalt psychologists called multistability. A multistable perceptual phenomenon creates distinct and exclusive interpretations in the viewer's mind. These interpretations switch from one to another and back again outside the conscious control of the spectator. Frame-switching is both subjective and spontaneous, as illustrated in Humbert's unhappy experience of window-gazing and, at a broader level, in the reader's experience of *Lolita*.

In *Pnin* (1957), which Nabokov wrote immediately after *Lolita* but which was published beforehand in the United States because of the controversies surrounding *Lolita*, Nabokov reflects on the imaginative materials of the preceding narrative.

Timofey Pavlovich Pnin, a Russian-American academic, is a hapless and amiable version of his creator. On the way to deliver a lecture, Pnin mixes up his notes. Instead of his lecture he finds himself with a student's paper that he has been avoiding reading – Betsy Bliss's essay entitled 'Dostoyevsky and Gestalt Psychology'. The reference could not be better calculated to reveal, and also to conceal or at least to obscure, Nabokov's purpose. Dostoyevsky, like Freud, was a frequent target of Nabokov's criticism. Yet Gestalt psychology, with its interest in puzzle pictures and interpretative instability, would have been likely to engage Nabokov's attention during and after the composition of Lolita, which is the most interesting problem case of literary point of view.

There is a suggestive parallel to Nabokov's interest in the Kallima genus, and in insect mimicry, in contemporary Gestalt psychology, particularly in Wolfgang Metzger's work. Metzger was the most accomplished member of the second generation of Gestalt psychologists, born in 1899, the same year as Nabokov. Metzger served as a student and assistant to the older Berlin scholars Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka. Metzger

published his opus *Laws of Seeing* (*Gesetze des Sehens*) in 1936, during the last full year the Nabokovs spent in Nazi Germany. Nabokov claimed to be unable to read German, after 16 years in Berlin. But he may well have seen a copy of *Laws of Seeing*.

In *Laws of Seeing* Metzger applies his concern for shapes, forms and patterns to the representational arts. We do not see individual words, or elements of literary structure, he argues, but characters, events and, most of all, feelings. Just 'as human feelings are not conveyed by waves of light or by oscillations of air, neither is the particular character or mood that we are able to perceive in nonliving structures, in buildings, mechanical devices, forms of jewellery, and in groups and sequences of tones … these properties have their origin in the grouping and arrangement of parts in larger domains or in the form or Gestalt of these domains themselves and they belong to their innermost nature.'[19] A mood or feeling is the product of the overall organisation of a scene, whether in real life or in a novel. So, for Metzger, '[c]haracter traits and emotional states that we see in other creatures are merely particularly important and impressive examples of Gestalt qualities'.[20]

There is an extensive discussion of animal mimicry and camouflage in *Laws of Seeing*. For Metzger, as for Nabokov, the 'whole world around us is full of puzzle pictures in abundance, often more surprising than the ones the most skilled sketch artist could create'.[21] Indeed, Metzger was fascinated by the very same type of butterfly as Nabokov – the Indian dead-leaf butterfly, or *Kallima paralecta*. *Kallima* interests Metzger because its mimicry extends far beyond a simple image, to its flaws: 'The butterfly that rests on old tree trunks does not just have the dull brown color of the bark, but often also mimics in great detail the characteristic spots, cracks, peeled-off areas, and small lichens of the texture of the bark'.[22]

A *Kallima* butterfly, in other words, is itself a kind of puzzle picture. In each one nature creates an art-like structure, far more detailed than one might expect, and capable of reproducing even the flaws in the living structure ('spots, cracks, peeled-off areas'). This is, above all, a structured image that enables perceptual reversal. Like the *Necker Cube*, or *Wife or Mother-in-Law*, the *Kallima* butterfly is seen as either a butterfly, or a dead leaf, in alteration.

For Wolfgang Metzger, the *Kallima paralecta* proves that evolution exploits the tendency of biological organisms to perceive shape and form, and so 'the world is full of puzzle pictures in abundance'. For Nabokov, however, the *Kallima* genus is, as we have noted, a proof of God's existence and a sample of God's artwork. Nabokov's technical interests in butterflies are far less important, I would suggest, than the association between butterflies and the idea of shifting foci that was central to him in the *Lolita* period.

Indeed he began his Cornell lectures with the following parable about transformation: 'There was a Chinese philosopher who all his life pondered the problem whether he was a Chinese philosopher dreaming that he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that she was a philosopher.'[23] *Lolita* itself – the novel rather than the object of Humbert's gaze – is Nabokov's great puzzle picture, a literary analogue to the *Kallima* butterfly.

Nabokov's interest in self-reflexive structures is typical of the deepest literary and philosophical projects of the early and mid-20th century and goes along with a new emphasis on the relationship between the observer and the observed – observation as an interaction. The problem of self-reflexivity, and its many consequences, are explored in Bertrand Russell's theory of types, Gödel's incompleteness theorem and, to some extent, in physics: in Einstein's special relativity and, of course, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

For Nabokov, the intellectual consequences were not as far-reaching as for Gödel, Einstein or Heisenberg, because these self-referring structures (like the *Kallima* butterfly, which seems to be a leaf that seems to have been eaten by a butterfly) are ingenious inventions of an artist-God. God sets up these self-referring structures as his equivalents of Gogol's stories and Nabokov's novels.

Playboy credits Nabokov with having inspired its August 1976 cover, which, as an image of a woman with butterfly wings, closely resembles the butterfly signature Nabokov used in several of his letters to his friend Edmund Wilson. Lastly, in a letter to *Playboy*'s publisher Hugh Hefner, Nabokov thanks the magazine for publishing an excerpt from *Ada* and goes on to ask, 'Have you ever noticed how the head and ears of your Bunny resemble a butterfly in shape, with an eyespot on one hindwing?'[24] Nabokov's relationship with *Playboy*, and with pornography, can be seen as a *Kallima*-type structure, something that can be seen under one form of organisation or another entirely. But it might be more accurate to say that, in *Lolita*, and in his letter to *Playboy*, Nabokov impresses the form of the puzzle picture on the novel and on Hefner's magazine.

ENDNOTES

1 | First published in Imraan Coovadia, *Transformations*, (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2012), 29–43. Reprinted with permission.
2 | Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 39. See also Ibid, 3.
3 | Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters, 1940–1977*, eds Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 454.
4 | Ibid, 484–485.
5 | Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (London: Gollancz, 1951), 225.
6 | Brian Boyd and Robert Pyle (eds), *Nabokov's Butterflies* (London: Penguin, 2000), 219.
7 | Ibid, 224.
8 | Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 20.
9 | Brian Boyd, Vladimir Nabokov: *The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 233.
10 | Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed Alfred Appel (New York: Vintage, 1991), 9.
11 | Vladimir Nabokov, *The Enchanter*, trans Dmitri Nabokov (London: Picador, 1987), 27.
12 | Nabokov, *Lolita*, 36.
13 | Ibid, 140–141.
14 | Ibid, 20.
15 | Ibid, 20.
16 | Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 56. Emphasis added.
17 | Boyd and Pyle, *Nabokov's Butterflies*, 292.
18 | Ibid, 224.
19 | Wolfgang Metzger, *Laws of Seeing*, trans Lothat Spillman (Boston: MIT Press, 2006), xxii.
20 | Ibid.
21 | Ibid, 1.
22 | Ibid, 65.
23 | Boyd and Pyle, *Nabokov's Butterflies*, 472.
24 | Ibid, 667.

‘The Dead’ in The World: James Joyce’s Travelling Text

Cóilín Parsons

JAMES JOYCE IS A GREAT WRITER – THERE IS REALLY NO DISPUTING THAT, DESPITE VIRGINIA WOOLF'S DYSPEPTIC DISMISSAL OF ULYSSES AS 'THE WORK OF A QUEASY UNDERGRADUATE SCRATCHING HIS PIMPLES'.[1]

But the standard for a 'great text' is higher than the standard for a 'great writer'. The great writer must have style and control, originality and insight; the great text, however, must be a truly worlded text – one that speaks from and to a global perspective. This is not to say that the great text's values are universal, nor that it is universally valued, but that the text continues to have resonance outside of its place and time of provenance. If Joyce is thought to have a great text to his name, it is surely *Ulysses*, a sprawling, encyclopaedic novel that presents the minutiae and effluviae (a 'tongue of liquid sewage', perhaps) of everyday life in the modern metropolis.[2] But 'The Dead', the final story in Joyce's collection *Dubliners*, stands alongside *Ulysses* as a great text, not because of its style and control, nor because of Joyce's hauntingly beautiful attempt to aestheticise an historical problem in the final paragraphs. It is thanks to the resonance of that historical problem itself – of colonial violence, memory and modernity – which endures and travels so well, that 'The Dead' claims its status as great text. Joyce's short story is at once an account of a cramped, suffocating, inescapable party held in a paralytic city, and also an expansive and inclusive engagement with questions of coloniality that are as crucial today as they were in the early years of the 20th century.

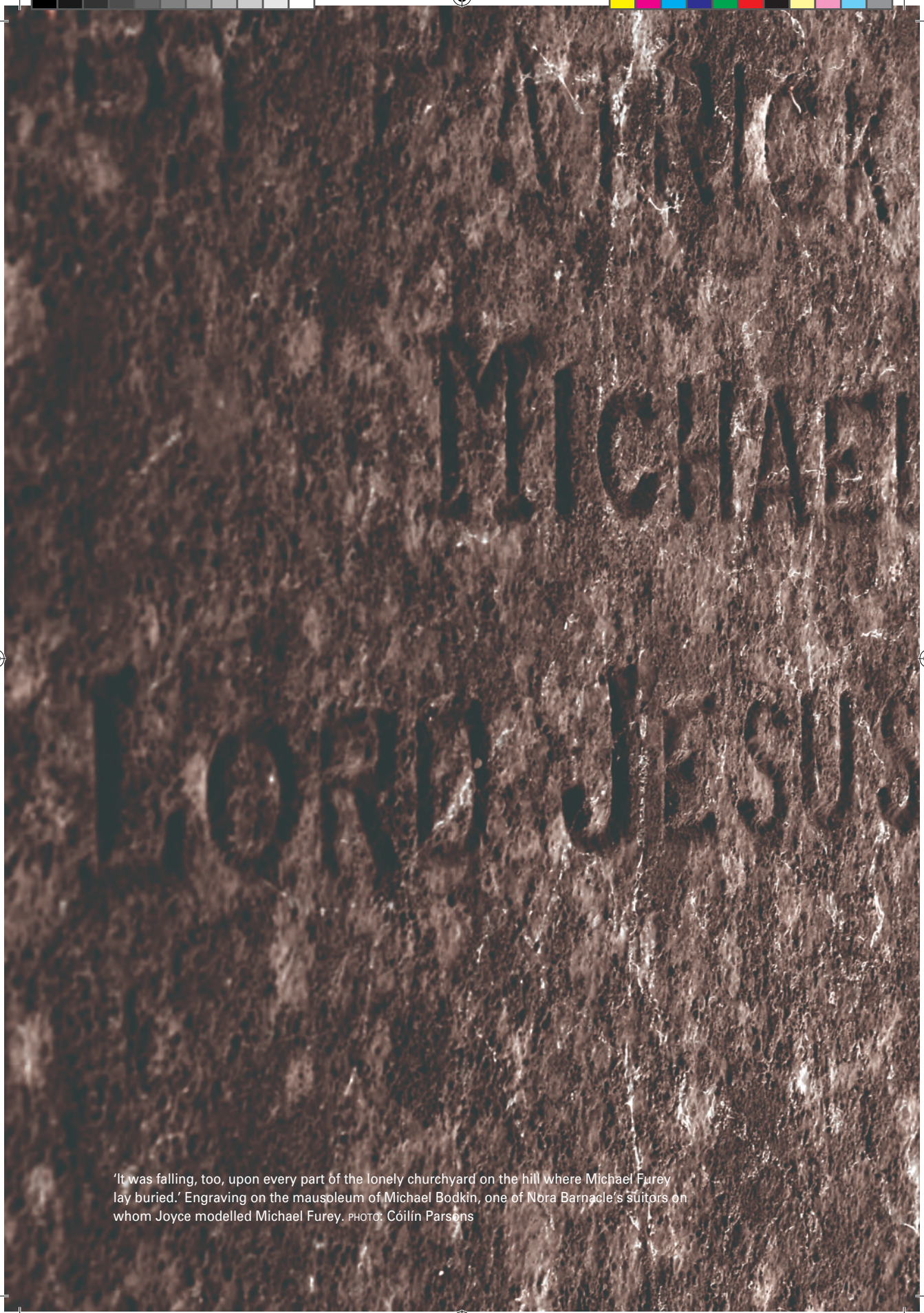
Dubliners opens with three great words that echo throughout the collection and define this book as not simply a collection of stories, but as a short fiction cycle: paralysis, simony, gnomon.[3] Paralysis is clear enough to us. Joyce wrote to his publisher that his 'intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of the paralysis'.[4] The entire country is permanently stuck in a state of political, economic and spiritual impoverishment, and each story is not simply about paralysis, but is also, in a sense, paralytic. Inaction, repetition, cycles of repeated words and images punctuate the collection. Simony, his next term in the secular trinity of mortal failings that defines the collection, is a little more exact. It doesn't quite mean the buying or selling of religious privileges – or bribing your way into heaven – as it does in the church, but the abandonment of principle in favour of advancement. Simony is Joyce's Roman Catholic slant on the Arnoldian idea that age-old systems of thought have atrophied, leaving in their place a vacuum to be filled by who knows what.

Finally, gnomon. A gnomon is the shape that remains when you remove a smaller parallelogram from a larger one – or the shape of the indicator on a sundial. It is the fragment that remembers the whole, the incomplete object, the remainder, the body with a phantom limb, the story with missing information that does not allow the reader to come to any conclusion or decision. So put these three terms together – paralysis, simony and gnomon – and what sort of picture do we get of *Dubliners*? The collection is a series of photographs of a lost city, a city that is the very definition of colonial underdevelopment. The city is afflicted by paralysis engendered by the loss of political and economic power, and simony resulting from a loss of faith in religion and nation. The gnomon does not merely refer to narrative occlusion, but connotes an incomplete city, a city that can only stand in as a pale image of a larger thing, a system of which it is merely a part, and which it cannot fully grasp nor ever become. In the story 'After the Race' the narrator tells us that Dublin 'wore the mask

of capital', an economical expression of an economic relationship.[5] Dublin was formerly the second city of the empire, with its own parliament, thrilling theatre scene and resurgent arts. The union of the kingdoms of Ireland and Britain in 1800 both formalised the relationship between Ireland and England as equal partners in the United Kingdom, and simultaneously sealed Ireland's fate as a backwater of the empire. Dublin lost its parliament, which had afforded at least the Protestant elite some form of autonomy, and for the whole of the 19th century the city was a capital without power, a mere shadow of a capital. But Dublin wore the mask of another kind of capital too. Certain areas had all the trappings of wealth, obscuring the widespread grinding poverty. There was indeed a growing middle class in Ireland in the second half of the 19th century, but this masked the absence of the landowning and capitalist class, who were based in London. Manufacturing and industry grew at a frantic pace in and around Belfast, leaving Dublin as the real capital of not an industrial country, but an agricultural producer of food and raw materials that were shipped across the Irish Sea. According to Karl Marx, Ireland was deliberately cleared of its people in the course of the 19th century and made ready for large-scale, commercial agriculture.[6] In 1841 the population of Ireland was 8 million; 10 years later, the population had dropped by 25%, to about 6 million. By the end of the century the population had fallen further to 4 million, half of what it had been. What drove that population decline? Famine. One million died of hunger and disease between 1845 and 1851, while another million emigrated, mostly to the United States and Britain, drawn by the demand for labour in these rapidly industrialising economies.

What was left behind was in shambles. Joyce's portrait of the city is unflinching, and was too finely drawn for his publishers, Maunsel and then Grant Richards, who delayed the publication of the collection for seven years over concerns about libel. Joyce refused their demands to fictionalise certain names and places, insisting on a verisimilitude that is not surprising for him. Asked to rewrite, Joyce was intractable. 'I seriously believe,' he wrote to the publisher, 'that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking glass.'[7] And again, 'I have written it … with the conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard. I cannot do more than this. I cannot alter what I have written.'[8]

Whereas most of the stories in *Dubliners* are illustrations of Joyce's sense of the paralytic nature of Dublin, 'The Dead' approaches the city with a more generous disposition. When he was thinking about writing the story, he wrote to his brother Stan about what he felt was missing from the rest of the collection: 'Sometimes thinking of Ireland it seems to me that I have been unnecessarily harsh. I have reproduced (in *Dubliners* at least) none of the attraction of the city … I have not reproduced its ingenious insularity and hospitality. The latter "virtue" so far as I can see does not exist elsewhere in Europe.'[9] With an eye to reconciliation, then, Joyce set about telling the story of Gabriel Conroy, his wife Gretta, and his aunts, the Misses Morkan. It is January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany, and Kate and Julia Morkan, two spinsters, and their niece Mary Jane, are hosting their annual party in a house on Usher's Island, in central Dublin. Lily, the



'It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried.' Engraving on the mausoleum of Michael Bodkin, one of Nora Barnacle's suitors on whom Joyce modelled Michael Furey. PHOTO: Cóilín Parsons

housemaid, we learn, is 'literally run off her feet'.[10] Gabriel Conroy is late and has not yet appeared at the house. He does arrive in due course, and for the rest of the story we move fluidly from a straight third-person narration – 'He continued scraping his feet vigorously while the three women went upstairs, laughing, to the ladies dressing-room' – to a narrative coloured by Gabriel's thoughts – 'What did he care that his aunts were only two ignorant old women?' Gabriel's bitterness, his discomfort are clearly colouring the narrative at this point.[11]

Why is Gabriel bitter? The evening starts off badly – his attempt to make polite conversation with Lily as she takes his coat backfires entirely. He notices, with condescension, that she gives his name three syllables, Conerroy, a sign not only of a class distinction, but also of her country origins. When he says, jokingly, that he expects Lily, just out of school, to be married soon, she retorts with great bitterness, 'The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you'. Gabriel instantly colours, 'as if he felt he had made a mistake' but was not sure what the mistake could have been.[12] His failure not only to connect with the girl, but to see how and why he had not connected, is the first in a long line of moments in the course of the night that Gabriel's colour will rise to his face in embarrassment and shame.

Meanwhile, the party continues around him – dancing, merriment, mild and severe alcoholism all swirl around Gabriel until he is drawn into it by Molly Ivors, an acquaintance of his from university, an espouser of the nationalist cause and a proponent of the resumption of Gaelic as a daily language throughout the country as a way of asserting cultural difference from Britain. His encounter with Molly is no more fortunate than that with Lily – she immediately launches into an attack on Gabriel, who has been writing anonymous book reviews for *The Daily Express*, a newspaper notoriously loyal to the British administration in Ireland. Gabriel is vexed, as his cover is blown and he is backed into a corner by this confident, vivacious, politically active Gaelic speaker. When she invites him to visit the Aran Islands, a place of almost mythical status as the heartland of Gaelic culture, Gabriel replies that he plans to go cycling on the continent instead, to keep up his languages, and when Molly goads him for neglecting his own culture and his own language, Gabriel retorts that Gaelic is not his language, 'and to tell you the truth … I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!' The retort, we learn, 'had heated him'.[13]

Having come in from the snowy night, Gabriel is now anxious to escape to the cold again, for everywhere he turns he finds himself confronted, trapped by his own inadequacies as a guest, as an Irishman, and even as a husband – Gretta too implores him to go to the Aran Islands, for she is from Galway city, nearby, but he tells her she can go herself, without him. His biggest test – as an orator – lies ahead. The heat is oppressive, and he escapes to the window – 'Gabriel's warm, trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table!'[14] We, as readers, are being co-opted to Gabriel's position by the free indirect style here – we feel the heat with him, we feel the fear of the impending dinner-table speech, we desire to escape, to touch our burning

cheek against the freezing cold pane and lose ourselves in the blizzard outside.

At length supper is served, Gabriel carves the goose, and it comes time for his speech. Again, his instinct is to flee the scene of his impending embarrassment:

> The patting at once grew louder in encouragement, and then ceased altogether. Gabriel leaned his ten trembling figures on the tablecloth and smiled nervously at the company. Meeting a row of upturned faces he raised his eyes to the chandelier. The piano was playing a waltz tune and he could hear the skirts sweeping against the drawing-room door. People, perhaps, were standing in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the lighted windows and listening to the waltz music. The air was pure there. In the distance lay the park where the trees were weighted with snow. The Wellington Monument wore a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westward over the white field of the Fifteen Acres.[15]

Gabriel is nervous, uncomfortable, discomposed. His fantasies of escape are all westward, in the direction that Molly Ivors and his wife oriented him, but that he had resisted. He delivers the speech, a model of pieties and platitudes that goes down quite well with his middlebrow audience, and the story moves rapidly to the conclusion of the night. Gabriel waits for Gretta downstairs, flush with the triumph of his speech, and impatient to get back to the hotel, to make love to his wife. He turns to the stairs and sees her standing still, listening. 'There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something.'[16] But neither he nor the reader knows what she is a symbol of. She is listening to distant music, the strains of an old ballad, 'The Lass of Aughrim', sung by a tenor upstairs. Minutes later, she is still affected, a colour on her cheeks that arouses Gabriel. He is in love with her again, longing to share his passion with her, to 'forget the dull years of their existence together and remember only their moments of ecstasy'.[17] He imagines the moment when they will make love in the hotel later, but that moment never comes. They get to the hotel – travelling eastward, not westward, towards Europe and the continent, and away from all that he has dreamed of – and she is unaware of his arousal, blind to his desire. He is angry, vexed – he has to look out the window again to calm his nerves, to escape from the moment. He asks her what is wrong. It was the song, she said, that left her feeling so melancholy – a young boy she knew in Galway, Michael Furey, used to sing that song. She has been transported back to the west of Ireland, and has left Gabriel behind. He thinks, 'While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another.' The other man, he learns, is dead, having died for Gretta. 'I suppose you were in love with this Michael Furey,' he asks. 'I was great with him at the time,' she answers, using a Gaelic idiom to describe their close friendship.[18]

Finally, Gretta falls asleep, and there ends the domestic story of secret loves and desires, of angry men and melancholy women, of strong women and emasculated men. Gabriel is utterly deflated by the revelation that Gretta had been carrying in her heart all these years the story of a man who had died for her. He lies down beside her and begins to ruminate, on death, on love, on the distance between him and the wife he thought he knew. As he falls asleep, he thinks of Aunt Julia's frail health, how she too will be a shade like Michael Furey. He thinks too of his own inadequacy and the impossibility

of living up to Furey: 'Better to pass boldly,' he thinks, 'into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age.'[19] His sympathy for the dead, which contrasts so clearly with his earlier impatience for the living, carries him to the edge not only of sleep, but to 'that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead'.[20] Hearing some 'light taps' on the window, he turns towards it:

> It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.[21]

It is undoubtedly beautiful and affecting – the chiasmus of 'falling softly … softly falling' is mesmerising and lyrical, gently easing Gabriel and the reader out into the west. As he falls asleep, he resolves to set out on his journey, and reconnect with all that he has turned his back on. It is undoubtedly one of the most affecting passages in all of modern literature – pure loss of self, white-out, surrender to ghosts of all the world, and to the dreams and dramas of the living. But beneath this beautiful surface there is a problem. The story posed a very clear political challenge to Gabriel: Go west, young man; go to the Aran Islands with Molly Ivors and revive your culture; go with your wife to see her people; go visit the grave of Michael Furey and feel the passion of his death; turn your back on the compartmentalised world you have created and embrace its histories, its still-living remnants of the Gaelic past; turn your back on the language and mannerisms of the colonist and embrace the indigenous. All, in a way, impossible tasks. And yet he does begin the journey – this passage is his surrender to all that he has resisted throughout the story. But what type of surrender is it? We've seen him go on this imaginative journey westward before, as an escape from moments of profound anxiety and shame, but it has always been aborted and ultimately superseded by a journey eastward at the end of the night. What is the anxiety here? He is not just alienated from his wife – he is afraid of her. Gretta changes in these final scenes. She loses her urban affectations, and remembers her country roots. When she says that she was 'great' with Michael Furey, a 'vague terror' seizes Gabriel.[22] In that phrase, awkwardly translated from the Gaelic 'Bhí mé mór leis ag an am', or 'I was close to him at the time', and in Michael Furey's romantic quest to declare his undying love for Gretta at whatever cost to his life, there is a terrifying vista for Gabriel. What does he see? The return of the repressed past, suggests Kevin Whelan – the echoes of the famine that killed 1 million people, and that was a key element in the abandonment of the Gaelic language in most of the country over the course of the 19th century.[23] He encounters what we might call the colonial sublime – the terrifying shards of the past that are not yet and never will be fully past, and the constant presence, just beyond the light, of the darkness of colonial

HE ENCOUNTERS WHAT WE MIGHT CALL THE COLONIAL SUBLIME — THE TERRIFYING SHARDS OF THE PAST THAT ARE NOT YET AND *NEVER* WILL BE FULLY PAST, AND THE CONSTANT PRESENCE, JUST BEYOND THE LIGHT, OF THE DARKNESS OF COLONIAL HISTORY

history. Gretta and Michael Furey and Molly Ivors turn Gabriel that night to face the continued existence of a subjugated Gaelic past in the present. Maybe this is why he might fantasise about going but never actually leaves. He surrenders himself to writing, not to history, according to Seamus Deane, and the end of the story represents an aestheticisation of a political problem.[24]

Joyce poses a challenge here, and perhaps fails to answer it: how does literature do justice to the sublime nature of colonial modernity? How can we approach the representation of the violence of the past, and its invisibility in the present? How can Gabriel effectively set out westward from the capital/Capital that longs for Europe? What's clear is that the questions that the final paragraph poses are unanswerable in the terms of the story. There is an irresoluble ambiguity: does Gabriel set out west or not? And if he does, what is he in search of? We have some possible answers, but no way to adjudicate between them without more information. We could just leave it at that and bid Joyce goodbye, ending this essay on a suitably literary note. Joyce's mirror of Dublin, his double of the city, foregrounds one of the central tensions of modernity: the contest between the claims of history and the demands of the future. And the irresolubility is precisely the point – this is an aporia, a puzzle.

But the end of the story is not a dead end. What makes a 'great text'? Its capacity, I would say, to offer models and suggestions, to be constantly reread but also to be rewritten, misread, and read against itself. The proof that 'The Dead' is a great text and asks big questions is that it has an afterlife – whether heaven, hell or purgatory remains to be seen. The associations I'm going to draw here are neither exhaustive nor definitive, and I'm not going to go into detail, but to make some hints and allegations, some suggestions that allow us to think through what the afterlife of a literary text might look like. Joyce himself sets this in motion in his first published novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which he rewrites these final passages of 'The Dead' a number of times. They appear in *Ulysses* too, proving that Joyce thinks of the end of 'The Dead' as unfinished business. But if Joyce's story is itself richly allusive and suggestive, its continued existence in the world and its legacy to the world of letters is to be found through tangents and by-ways. We can hear haunting echoes of Joyce's story everywhere, but I would like to concentrate on just three – from Turkey, South Africa, and post-war France (or possibly Ireland).

'Snow was general all over Ireland' on the night that Gabriel learned of Gretta's lover.[25] It may have been general that night in Turkey, too, for January 1902 was an exceptionally cold month, at least in Western Anatolya, where Orhan Pamuk's novel, *Snow*, is set. On another day, a different traveller embarks on a different journey:

> As soon as the bus set off, our traveller glued his eyes to the window next to him. Perhaps hoping to see something new, he peered into the wretched little shops, bakeries and broken-down coffee-houses that lined the streets of Erzurum's outlying suburbs, and, as he did it, it began to snow. It was heavier and thicker than the snow he'd seen in Istanbul and Erzurum. If he hadn't been so tired, if he'd paid more attention to the snowflakes swirling out of the sky like feathers, he might have realised that he was travelling straight into a blizzard; he might have seen from the start that he had set out on a journey that would change his life for ever.[26]

This encounter with snow opens rather than closes the novel. Ka, the person referred to here, is setting out on a journey eastward, not westward, to the heartland of Islamic Turkey, not Gaelic Ireland. He is travelling to Kars, practically on the border with Armenia and one of the escape routes during the Armenian genocide, where a rash of suicides had occurred among teenage girls forced to abandon their headscarves in schools. They die not for love, but for shame, perhaps. It is, for Ka, a re-engagement with the deep roots of Islam in Turkey, a spiritual journey in search of the soul of the country from which he has been exiled. It is, in a way, what Gabriel Conroy would have found if indeed he had journeyed westward. And what Ka finds is unrest, modernisation and violence on the other side of the dark, mutinous waters. Pamuk's story is a resolute engagement with the ever-present ghosts of the past (which are neither ghosts nor past) in modern Turkey, a searching and troubling study that takes on what Joyce leaves untouched – what lies beyond.

There are other renderings of the final lines that indicate clear engagement with Gabriel's musings. Let's move a little closer to home now, and turn to JM Coetzee's *Foe*, also deeply invested in representing the difficulties of memory and history in colonial situations. This is how it ends, and I am sure you will see the links:

> His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face.[27]

I thought I had a monopoly on this particular association, but it appears that the critic Denis Donoghue beat me to it to by at least a couple of decades. In his review of the novel in *The New York Times* he wonders who speaks at the end of *Foe*: 'I take it as the voice of the poetic imagination, its sympathies expanding beyond all systems to reach the defeated, the silenced, in a gesture which I associate, perhaps arbitrarily, with Joyce's imagining at the end of "The Dead"'.[28] I think you'll agree that the connection is not arbitrary. Foe's relationship with Joyce's story is signalled by a passage two pages earlier:

> With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard. Gripped by the current, the boat bobs away, drawn south toward the realm of the whales and eternal ice. Around me on the waters are the petals cast by Friday. I stroke out towards the dark cliffs of the island, but something dull and heavy gropes at my leg, something caresses my arm. I am in the great bed of seaweed: the fronds rise and fall with the swell. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I duck my head under the water. Hauling myself hand over hand down the trunks, I descend, petals floating around me like a rain of snowflakes.[29]

The speaker's immolation in the waters, surrounded by snowflakes, their disintegration or decomposition that allows Friday's mouth to open and pour forth sound, or noise, that travels southward and northward, echoes, or is haunted by, Gabriel's reverie at the end of 'The Dead'. If Donoghue is right, and this speaker at the end of *Foe* reaches 'the defeated' and 'the silenced', then what does the speaker hear or channel? 'The faintest faraway roar' is uninterpreted and perhaps uninterpretable.

But that roar might actually be audible to us if we think about another of the literary afterlives of 'The Dead': Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. In the second act, or the first act for the second time, Didi and Gogo have a go at conversation:

> **ESTRAGON:** The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.
> **VLADIMIR:** What other? [*Pause.*] What other?
> **ESTRAGON:** Like billions of others.
> **VLADIMIR:** [*Sententious.*] To every man his little cross. [*He sighs.*] Till he dies. [*Afterthought.*] And is forgotten.
> **ESTRAGON:** In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.
> **VLADIMIR:** You're right, we're inexhaustible.
> **ESTRAGON:** It's so we won't think.
> **VLADIMIR:** We have that excuse.
> **ESTRAGON:** It's so we won't hear.
> **VLADIMIR:** We have our reasons.
> **ESTRAGON:** All the dead voices.[30]

'All the dead voices', billions of them, must be drowned out. The voices of the past, of violence, of other spaces and times, must be repressed, drowned out by words. Why? Because Didi and Gogo have already, in Act One, got a taste of what happens when the dead voices speak. Lucky's monologue, the stream of sense, half-sense and nonsense that emerges from his mouth, is indeed the voice of the dead, or the living dead:

> what is more for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis on on the beard the flames the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the labors abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones in a word I resume alas alas abandoned unfinished the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the skull alas the stones Cunard[31]

This is how he ends, with the repetition of the skull, the skull, the skull … and it is found in Connemara, heartland of the Gaelic language, where Michael Furey hails from. We return here to the Joycean sense of terror, the hint of the sublime, set in a bleak landscape that we know does not resemble the Macon country, but might very well resemble the barren bogs of Connemara. Didi and Gogo share Gabriel's terror over all the dead voices, the feeling of inadequacy to the world. There is a peculiarly Irish turn to this, for the declaration of independence in 1916 – a failed independence – invokes 'the name of the God and the dead generations'. It is an invocation that Beckett refuses, thinking along with Marx, that 'the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.'[32] Beckett's Godot is, among other things, a meditation on the inescapability of history, its constant repetition (first as tragedy, then as farce?) and its impossible demands. But while the issue for Joyce might be uniquely Irish, Pamuk, Coetzee and Beckett see that the representational challenge of the final passage of 'The Dead' can travel far, for it asks a question that resonates throughout the colonial world: how can the absences of history, that which is purposely repressed in the process of modernisation, be made present?

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